

Don't Waste the Waiting!

1. Warm up: On Sunday we talked about how much of life we spend waiting for something, and what the Bible can teach us about how to wait well. Pastor Robert began by sharing a story about an impatient driver behind him who rudely honked the horn a mere few seconds after a light turned green. Tell us about a recent time (large or small) when you were very impatient with someone or experienced someone being impatient with you.
2. Generally speaking, when are you most apt to be impatient?
3. Robert used the example of Rollen Stewart, who first famously held up the John 3:16 poster at major sporting events, as an example of our tendency to use particular verses out of context or in ways that twists their original intent. What's a Bible verse that you've heard thrown around and uses carelessly?
4. Jeremiah 29:11 is a verse that gets quoted quite often. That verse declares, "'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" But that wonderful promise must be understood in the context of verses 4 through 10. Let's read the passage, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. What does God require the Israelites to *do* while they are waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled, and what might verses 4 through 10 teach us about our responsibility during seasons when we are waiting on God?"
 - b. Many of us may have felt like exiles in our lives. If you are black in this country, you know exile. If you're a woman or LGBTQ+ or differently abled, etc, you know exile. The Israelites knew what it felt like to be exiles – living in a strange land, disconnected from what was familiar, without the rights and security of full citizenship, and trying to survive in a hostile environment. Have you ever experienced a season when you felt like an exile – like you didn't belong, you were unwelcome, displaced, or simply trying to find your place in an environment that wasn't friendly to you? What did that experience feel like, and how did your faith help you navigate it?
5. The Israelites entered Babylon believing their exile would be temporary and relatively short. False prophets like Hananiah gave them hope that their circumstances would change quickly. But Jeremiah delivered the difficult truth: this would not be a short season. It would last 70 years. When in your own life have you entered a situation believing, "This will be over soon," only to discover that it would last much longer than you expected? Perhaps it was a health diagnosis you thought would be a quick fix, a financial struggle, a difficult relationship, a career setback, grief, or another unexpected circumstance. How did you respond when you realized that your "temporary" situation was becoming a long-term season? What did that experience teach you about patience, faith, and trusting when God's timeline is different from yours?
6. God tells the Israelites to build houses, settle down, plant gardens, raise families, and seek the peace and prosperity of the very city where they had been exiled. This must

have felt completely foreign – perhaps even contradictory. They were living in Babylon against their will, yet God was calling them to invest in a place they never expected to call home. Often God calls us to do something that feels foreign, uncomfortable, or even contrary to what we thought we should be doing. Have you ever experienced that? How did it feel? How did you respond? And what did you learn about trusting God when God's instructions don't make sense to you at first?

7. Jeremiah's message to the Israelites is difficult because God tells them to accept that their exile will last longer than they expected and to live faithfully within circumstances they cannot immediately change. Yet acceptance can sometimes feel like surrender. We naturally want to resist injustice, fight oppression, and push back against anything that seeks to keep us bound. How do we distinguish between accepting a reality we cannot immediately change and simply giving up? How can we remain faithful, resist oppression, and work toward change while also accepting that some circumstances may take longer to change than we want? Where is the balance between saying, "I accept where I am right now," and saying, "I refuse to believe this is where I have to remain forever?"
8. We were reminded on Sunday that, "Faith is not closing your eyes to reality. Faith is opening your eyes to reality and still believing that God is bigger than what you see." Bishop Yvette Flunder's story offers a powerful picture of what it can mean to experience exile within the very community you once called home. Raised in the Church of God in Christ tradition and successful as a gospel recording artist, she experienced rejection from the church she loved after coming out. Those were difficult and painful days. Yet her story reminds us that human rejection does not equal divine abandonment. She refused to confuse the rejection of people with the absence of God and went on to found City of Refuge Church in 1991.
 - a. Have you ever experienced a dark season when circumstances – or the rejection of other people – tempted you to feel as though God was absent? What did that experience feel like, and how did you hold on to your faith?
 - b. Do you agree with the statement, "Just because your circumstances tell you that you've lost doesn't mean God has left the table"? What does it mean to believe that God is still present, even when everything around you seems to suggest otherwise?
9. God didn't promise Israel that Babylon wouldn't be difficult. Instead, God promised not to abandon them in Babylon. The same God who said, "I know the plans I have for you," was the God who told them to build, plant, grow, and live faithfully while they waited. Don't waste the waiting—because when God is your partner, even adversity can become the environment in which God strengthens you. Is there an area of your life where you currently feel defeated, challenged, displaced, or as though God has allowed you to end up in a place you never expected to be? Could God still be calling you to build, plant, serve, grow, and thrive right where you are? What would it look like for you to stop simply waiting for God to change your circumstances and begin asking, "God, how can I thrive and fulfill Your purpose for me right here?"

Jeremiah, chapter 29, verses 4 through 14

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

¹⁰ This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."