

Time of Grace Ministry
Pray For the Country
Jeremiah 29:1-10
October 22, 2017

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

Hello, I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek for Time of Grace. A couple of years ago, a member of my church asked if she could spend a few moments with me just to talk. And so we went to a place in the building where we could talk and she told me that her doctor had just informed her that she has cancer and he said there was nothing they could do and that the cancer was very aggressive; it wasn't very good news. So we sat and we talked and at the end of our discussion, we prayed. One of the things we prayed for was that God would have mercy on her and her daughter - she was a single mother - and take the cancer away. She said she felt better after we met, which was good.

And then the following week, after she met with her doctor, she felt even better because the doctor ran another test and didn't see any cancer. And then he ran another one because he didn't believe it and there was no cancer. And then he ran another test because he still didn't believe it but today, she is cancer free and the doctor has no explanation. But we do. Prayer is a powerful thing. It's a precious gift that God gives us. And today, on Time of Grace, Pastor Jeske is going to encourage us to use that very powerful gift that God has given us in one particular way: To pray for our country that is hurting in so many ways.

Pastor Mark Jeske

I don't think any of you have ever experienced a real artillery bombardment where some people with great, big, angry weapons are trying their best to kill you. But some people have – including the ones who risked and gave their lives to give birth to our country; including the ones who risked and gave their lives to end slavery in our country so that all of Americans could be free instead of only some.

You and I have only heard these loud noises banging away, which doesn't cause any harm. But some people, whose benefits you and I enjoy, heard noises like that much longer than just an hour and there were angry pieces of metal whizzing around that would tear their bodies to shreds.

You and I have never had to experience the disintegration of our country. We're able to live in a place that has not had shots fired, but there's been no artillery fired here in anger at our country since the guns of the Civil War fell silent in 1865. What a blessing! It's our gift to live in a time of peace within the borders of the United States. Thank you, Lord. But we should be mindful though because sometimes the most ungrateful people are the ones who are spoiled the most. The crabbiest, the most complaining people are the wealthiest and most comfortable. And today, I have one very simple mission with you today and that's to provide for yourself – and I'm talking to myself, too – to thank God for the gifts that we have by living here and now, but also to pray for our country as well, for there still are many missed opportunities that we could be

useful for. God is holding in his hands an armload of good things to do to intervene in our nation's story that he will release only if his people ask.

To witness the disintegration of your country is something – you might have heard of the famous St. Augustine or some people pronounce his name Augustine – it was his destiny to live four hundred years after the time of Christ. His ministry – he was kind of a wild guy, he had concubines and had children outside of wedlock. He became a Christian halfway through his life and then became a passionate leader of Christianity and a great writer and thinker and people for centuries after, even today, still read his stuff; he was that clear a thinker and writer. He lived and worked in Roman North Africa, what today is the country of Algeria. The city where he lived was called Hippo Regious, right on the Mediterranean coast and it was his destiny to live at a time when the barbarians were slamming into the pieces of the Roman Empire and the whole empire was collapsing.

Now, the Christians at that time thought this was crazy. They were persecuted for hundreds of years. Now finally accepted – in fact, we've become the official religion of the empire, we're spreading like crazy, what a great time, we will rule the world! We're going to bring Christianity to every corner of the globe. And just at that time, in the late 300s, the empire began to collapse and Augustine had to see it coming. A group of eastern European barbarians – the Romans called them that because they had beards – Romans shaved. These barbarians had barb; they had beards. And they came all the way from Eastern Europe; what is more or less today Poland. Their name has become synonymous with careless destruction. Do you know which tribe of people destroyed Roman North Africa? The Vandals; that was the name of this eastern European tribe, which migrated all the way through what is today Germany, all the way through France, all the way through Spain, with an army of 80,000 jumped across the Straits of Gibraltar, completely dominated northern Africa, and slammed into Hippo Regious where Augustine was now an old man. And as he was dying in the year 430, they laid siege to Hippo Regious and the city fell soon after. He had to watch the collapse of his government.

Now what Jeremiah had to say, I think, was of a special interest to Augustine and even though we're not at that particular point, we need to pay attention because what God said about the new government in which his people would be living – if it's true for them – how much more is that going to be true for you and me today? So hold onto that; that's my little question for you to be thinking about while you're hearing this.

If you'd like to turn with me to Jeremiah 29, we're going to read the first seven or eight or ten or so verses together. Jeremiah's nickname is the "weeping prophet" because so much of what he had to say was bad news for the people that were listening. All of his good news was far in the future. All of his bad news was right now. But Jeremiah was a weeping prophet also because his own heart was breaking. His message gave him no joy. In fact, he said, "My eyes are like a fountain gushing liquid out of them because I'm crying at what I have to say. The suffering of my fellow Israelites is like a heavy weight on me. I am miserable." He had a miserable ministry even while he was speaking God's truth. Because of the persistent rebellion and sin among the Israelite people, God was actually going to use the surrounding nations – first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians – as his hammer. Nebuchadnezzar, who had only contempt for God, was God's sledghammer. How heavy Jeremiah's heart must have felt.

Have you found the spot in chapter twenty-nine? “This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders.” Isn’t that a sad phrase, surviving elders? The ones that hadn’t been killed? “Among the exiles and to the priests, prophets, and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” As the crow flies, that’s about 500 miles but no crow in his right mind would fly straight unless he had little water bottles strapped to each leg because that’s over the great Arabian Desert; no human being could travel straight through there. And so everybody went around to jump to the oasis so you and your camels could drink water. So the real trip was more like eight or nine hundred miles and prisoners, slaves, captives, did not get the treat of riding on camels. So this was a journey of maybe 900 miles on foot; possibly chained or shackled to each other. What a miserable experience, but at least they were alive; at least they were alive.

This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother,” a vicious idolatrous woman named Nehushta, “court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, craftsman and the artisans had gone into exile in Jerusalem.” In other words, anybody who could contribute to the economy of Babylon and its immediate surroundings were deported to be put into the workforce out east, back east.

“He entrusted the letter to Elasah, son of Shaphan, and to Gemariah son of Kilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah had sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.” There obviously was no reliable mail service so the way this letter got delivered from Jerusalem to Babylon had to go by courier. So he sent it in the royal mail pouch. And here’s what the letter said: “This is what the Lord Almighty, God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” So whose idea was the exile? It was God’s idea! Pay attention. Here’s a little clue to your life, also. Sometimes God gets her done by spoiling you with loads of treats, loads of resources, and taking away obstacles in your life. Sometimes he gets her done by giving you stuff. Sometimes he gets her done by taking things away. Sometimes he gets his mission accomplished by putting big rocks in your path or by taking things away from you and this was one of those times. God used the exile. And here’s the crazy instruction: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” These Israelites are thinking, “What? We’re plotting how to escape from here. We don’t want to stay! We’re Israelites; we don’t want to be in Babylon. We want to get out of here.” Jeremiah’s saying, “Stay put. Build a life. Make a life for yourselves there.”

“Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage so they too may have sons and daughters.” In other words, your grandchildren are going to be living here, too. “Increase in number; don’t decrease.” That’s a little clue that there’s hope. God is much more interested in the future than the present.

“Also,” – now this must have killed them – “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I’ve carried you into exile.” What? They wished curses and plagues on Babylon. They wanted the lice of a thousand camels to rot out all the body parts of every Babylonian soldier. They wanted misery. They wanted Babylon to fall. They would do anything – they hated these Babylonians for what they did – they took everything away but their lives itself, destroyed what was left of their army, destroyed their government. It hadn’t happened yet – but soon it would happen. They’re going to peel all the gold out of their temple and then burn what they didn’t

steal down to the ground. Nebuchadnezzar himself was going to steal all the vessels used for worship in the temple and use them for his drinking celebrations. They wished plagues on Babylon and God said, “No, seek peace and prosperity for Babylon.”

“Pray to the Lord for it.” What? Yeah, “Pray to the Lord for it.” It was pretty much the same advice that Peter and Paul and Jesus himself said about how to look at the Roman government that was going to pronounce the death sentence on each of them. Christians should be the best citizens, whether they like their country or not. In fact, the movement of peoples is something that God works with and uses and loves because it cross-pollinates the world with his gospel message that people need to hear. And the more comfortable people are, the more likely they are to sit still; they will get rooted and stay put. God uses people movements to share the word. And you know what? Ultimately, they were going to come back. In 70 years, God decided that Babylon had enough time at the top of the heap of world powers and he passed the baton to the Persians. Cyrus and the Persians blew the Babylonians out of there so fast in 539; they simply crumbled and Persia became the overlords of the entire Middle East without having to fight a nasty string of major battles. It only took one conflict and it was over. Isn't that incredible?

And the Persians told the Jews they could go home; they didn't see any need to keep these slave laborers there. They weren't afraid of Judah anymore and only a few went back; maybe ten percent, possibly even less. So a lot of these people stayed and that may explain one of the mysteries of the New Testament - how when there was a bright light above the cradle of the baby Jesus, how were some easterners still believers in God's word? And when tipped off prophetically that the bright light represented – or indicated – the birth of Israel's Messiah, they packed up and made this journey in reverse. They did the same journey that the Jewish exiles did, only they went in reverse: from the east, from the Babylon region, all the way, they headed west and found the baby Jesus. Isn't that incredible?

“Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Do you know what this means? When God invites you to pray for something, it means he's holding blessings in his arms, waiting – waiting for what? Waiting for the believers to ask him to release him like he's a bomber with his bomb racks full of good things and this bomb bay doors open up only when people pray. “I want to do good things for Babylon because you're there but I'm going to wait until you ask.” Pray.

If God invites people to pray for their enslaving country, how about us? How much more out of incredible gratitude do you and I have the solemn obligation, but even better than that, an opportunity to intercede for our country and invite God to do this very thing? Imagine God above our country with his arms full of presents and gifts. The things that we crave and need like security from warfare and invasion, internal security. In our country I think people that live here fear violence on the streets far more than they fear violence of invasion.

How about continued fertility for our farms. We not only feed much of our country, but we are farmers in a granary for the world, as well. We are net food exporters. What a wonderful purpose and mission to use our vast farmlands to help countries that are net importers of food who cannot feed their own populations for any one of fifty reasons. Pray that God will release his rain flow; release the fertility of herds, the fertility of fields. Pray that the great wealth that

this country is amassing may not just make us selfish, piggish and greedy, but that we will see that we've been blessed to be a blessing. That we will use the enormous military power that seems to have fallen to us to exercise where sometimes our country's been called the "last superpower," the only remaining superpower. Well, it's hard to live life at the top of the military chain. How do you use that power wisely and well so that you don't become a new colonial empire all over again, but instead you use that to bring prosperity, security, and peace to other places? How do you use our military power well? What a riddle! Lord, release wisdom upon our political and military leaders. This is a big deal. "Pray to the Lord."

"Yes, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Don't listen to the dreams you encourage them to have,'" because the liars in God's name would be telling the reverse of Jeremiah. They would be saying, "Resist. We have our temple. We will always be a nation. We can act any way we want. The days of Solomon are coming back," and they were making that up because it's the message people wanted to hear. "They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them.' This is what I do say: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.'" But in the meantime, you are going to be living in Babylon and God used people like Ezekiel and Daniel, not with their most powerful ministry back in the land of Israel, but used them at the place to which they had been transplanted and he blessed them so that they would be a blessing to Babylon and so that Babylon in this way could be instruments of God's plan to advance his plan of salvation.

The exiles kept the word of God alive and some of the beautiful psalms – Psalm 137 – was actually written in Babylon. And it did its purpose. Before the Israelites went into exile, one story, one chapter of Scripture after another gives the accounts of the worship of Baal. It's like the Israelites were addicted to worshipping Baal and Ashurah, his sister wife, and putting up the totem poles of Ashurah, the fertility symbols of Ashurah. We don't hear those stories about when the Israelites came back. Maybe they'd been cured of that. This seventy year spanking finally registered in their thought centers and the Israelites did return and a faithful remnant was preserved and there were faithful people ready to receive the Savior when God gave Israel its ability to fulfill its main destiny, the main reason for which he created it, which was to fulfill his promises to Abraham to make this nation a blessing to every nation on earth through the birth of their Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus. The word was kept alive that all people are disconnected from God and need to be reconnected in faith; accountable and guilty because of their many sins. Even Nebuchadnezzar – the book of Daniel tells how he was busted down from his lofty throne – in fact, reduced to a raving slobbering animal with his hair all unkempt and unshaven while God gave him a timeout from his rule and then allowed his sanity to return as a way to show his accountability, but also the fact that there was mercy and forgiveness which trumps God's judgment. These messages our world today must hear as well.

If God could say to the Israelites to pray for their enslaving country so that he could be even more generous with them so that if Babylon prospered they would prosper, we can do no less. And I invite you today to itemize the reasons why you are grateful to live in the country you do. And this is not to say you're special and all the people who come from other lands have nothing either. They all have gifts from God that they need to take inventory of those as well. But you are here with me right now and this is our moment to thank our Lord for how he has blessed us

in this place. Itemize the reasons and thank God for why you appreciate the gift of being here and the sacrifices of others that it took and the shoulders that we stand on to be able to enjoy the civilization that we do today. But pray to God, as well. Pray for security, pray for prosperity, pray for the freedoms that we need. There are places around the world where you cannot go public with your Christian faith. You cannot freely build a church. You cannot freely carry on a public ministry. You cannot freely evangelize, print Christian literature, broadcast Christian materials. And pray that we who have been blessed may be a blessing. Pray that we who have received so much from the other side of the globe may cheerfully give back through evangelism and mission work so that all may know their Creator. All may know their Savior and all may know their Counselor and Sanctifier who lives within.

These are things to be thinking about today. And the next time you hear the bombardment of fireworks reflect on how grateful you are never to have experienced what real bombardment was like, those union soldiers in Gettysburg to receive the 100-gun confederate bombardment for those hours before the assault or the bombardment on Omaha Beach for the D-Day landings. But what you have been given is the ability to use God's amazing gifts to help carry out God's amazing blessings.

Pastor Jeremy Mattek

Pastor Jeske just encouraged us to use our prayers to bless our country; to ask God to care for our country. There are so many different examples of prayer in the Bible and one of the more famous ones is Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane the night that he was betrayed, the night before he would be crucified. The night Jesus knew exactly what was coming the next day. And his prayer, you may recall, was that he not have to go through with it. He said, "Dear Father, please take this cup from me. I don't want this to happen. I don't want to go through with this. Too painful. Too hard."

And do you remember how God answered that prayer? He said, "No." He said no to his son. For one reason: Because he wanted to say yes to every time we cry out to him. Yes to our needs of forgiveness. Yes to our need of hope. Yes to our need of strength. Yes to all the needs that we walk with as we go through life. And that garden, and on that cross, we see exactly how God chooses to answer every one of our prayers, whether he answers with a particular yes or no or later, he always answers in a way that serves you and that serves me. And as we take our prayers to God on behalf of our country, you can be confident that God is going to answer those prayers, too, in the same way.

Let's pray together.

Dear Father in Heaven, we pause today to thank you for the gift of prayer; to thank you for the power of prayer. What you are able to accomplish and what you do accomplish that we could never accomplish on our own when we place our needs in your hands. We thank you for the many promises that come along with the power of prayer; promises that you are always listening, promises that you are always attentive to our needs, promises that you will always answer our prayers in the very best ways that meet our needs.

Today, we offer prayers on behalf of our country. Lord, our country is just like every other on earth. It's full of sinners, it's full of sin. It's full of corruption, it's full of hate, it's full of troubles; it's full of a lot of pain. We've tried for centuries, the human race has, to fix all these things on our own. But we play them in your hands knowing that you can do immeasurably more than any of us could, than all of us could together. We ask you to watch over our country. Give wisdom and diligence and honest hearts to all those who are in position of leadership. Give wisdom and diligence and honest hearts also to all of its citizens. Give us a spirit of unity so that we work together, serving one another in love, in the same way that we have been served in love by our Lord Jesus. In his name we pray, Amen.

I'm Pastor Jeremy Mattek for Time of Grace and it all starts now.



TIME OF GRACE

Grace_{notes}

guides for personal Bible study

Pray for the Country

Jeremiah 29:1-10: ¹“This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²(This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: ⁴This 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. ⁶Marry 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. ⁷Also, 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.’ ⁸Yes, 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. ⁹They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD. ¹⁰This 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.’”

Points to Ponder

1. Why would God want his people to make homes for themselves in their exiled country?
2. What types of citizens did God expect the Israelites to be in this foreign land? How does he feel about us today whether we like our country or not?

3. In what ways has God used history to further the spread of the gospel message?
4. Itemize the reasons why you are grateful to live in the country that you do and thank God for them.
5. Each time there is an election season in our country, what can we remember about our powerful God in relation to how a particular election turns out?

At Jeremiah's time, Israel was disintegrating and many of its people were living in exile. Yet God told the people that he would bless them wherever they were, and he told them to pray for the country they were living in. He expects the same of us today. We can pray for our country and ask for God's blessings of security, fertility, prosperity, wisdom of our leaders, etc. God can and will use history to carry out his will and the spread of the gospel message.

What else does God say?

Psalm 33:12: Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance.

Daniel 2:21: He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.