

“Still in It for Life”
Sermon Thoughts, Notes, Outline
Jeremiah 29:4-9

⁴The Lord of Armies, the God of Israel, says this to all the exiles whom I have deported from Jerusalem to Babylon.

⁵Build houses and settle in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. ⁶Get married 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, and do not decrease in number. ⁷Seek the peace of the city where I have exiled you. Pray to the Lord for that city, because when it has peace and prosperity, you will have peace and prosperity.

⁸The Lord of Armies, the God of Israel, says this. Do not let the prophets and fortune tellers who are among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams they dream for you. ⁹For they prophesy falsely in my name, but I did not send them, declares the Lord. (EHV)

Verses 1-3 give the immediate context for this passage, and could be included in reading, but are probably dealt with more efficiently in a summary introduction which explains the situation the people of Judah and Jerusalem had found themselves in after being deported and resettled by the Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, in Babylonian territory. The Lord has Jeremiah write this letter because the natural inclination of the exiles will be to want to see their exile as a temporary setback and as something that will soon be corrected, allowing them to return home shortly. The reality, God wants them to know, is much different: Judah’s exile will last 70 years, and they should prepare themselves and behave accordingly.

The verses following our text include some wonderful gospel promises from God to his faithful people, but also the assurance that there will be harsh judgment for those who have not been faithful or heeded his Word — those who remained in Jerusalem when these earlier exiles were deported should not be envied.

Our focus in using this text, however, will not be so much on the message of judgment on sin or rescue for the remnant, but rather on the parallel situation of these Jews in exile, wondering how they should live in the land of their enemies, and of Christians in our society today who wonder how they should live in a nation or culture that increasingly seems to be hostile not only to their faith, but to life itself. The sermon will end up a bit more topical than textual.

A sermon that includes every point in this outline might end up on the long side. The pastor should feel free to adapt it as suits his style and his congregation’s situation. Similarly, specific life issues (abortion, medical directives, fertility treatments, euthanasia, etc.) that resonate particularly with the pastor or his congregation can be added, emphasized, and illustrated further as the pastor finds best.

Introduction:

(This will probably work best with an example from a popular and/or local sports team, if you can think of one. You could also use an imaginary game, dramatically described.)

It can make for some of the most exciting games you will ever experience. Two teams are facing off, fighting hard, with the outcome uncertain, when tragedy strikes: one team's star player goes down, one team's defense makes a mistake at the same time the other's offense does something incredible, a call goes wildly against one team and for the other, and suddenly it looks like the game is over and done — one team has the lead and seems to be running away with the game, and all hope is lost for the other team. And then something amazing happens with the losing team: they seem not to have understood that it was time to fold. Maybe the star player limps out onto the field and plays through his injury, or defense and offense just start making one incredible play after another, but the team starts clawing back the lead, showing they still have fight in them and are not going to give up until the game is over. And the commentators, in wonder and respect, tell everyone who's listening, "It may have looked like this was all over, but (Team) didn't get that memo; they're still in it and playing for the win!"

Dealing with life issues like abortion and assisted suicide in our society is hardly a game, but plenty of Christians live as though they are spectators watching a contest that is already all but over — that while our "team" isn't going to fold entirely, there's really no point in investing much of ourselves, our time, our money, or even our attention when the other side already has such a commanding lead. (Plenty of life's opponents also want Christians to think that way, and just leave the field to them in a forfeit.) Thinking that way is somewhat understandable: when we consider the millions of babies that have been aborted since the Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, and the hundreds of thousands aborted every year since; add up the number of states and jurisdictions that have not only legalized but promoted assisted suicide; and simply consider how hard it has become to get the pro-life message a hearing in our culture and media, it's not that hard to conclude that our attention might be better focused inward, on ourselves and our churches, and forget about speaking up, fighting for life, or trying to make any difference in our society today.

But when we listen to what the Lord has to say, instead of what the commentators who are clearly rooting for "the other team" have to say, we learn that he doesn't consider anything all over yet. He tells us it's time to invest, not disengage; time to work, and work harder, not sit back and lament the way things used to be; and time to be bold and determined, not to shrink away in fear or false resignation. This "contest" for life that we are in by virtue of being members of God's family and bearing the name of Christ on earth is not over until the Lord says it's over. We are **still in it — in it for life**.

I. See the Field as It Is

A. Background/Context of Reading

1. Judah's/Jerusalem's apostasy
2. The Lord's judgment: exile to Babylon

B. Parallels to our situation today

1. Two tendencies
 - a. Despair over losses, leading to resignation

- b. Ill-informed optimism, expecting things to turn in their favor any moment
 - c. Both lead to inactivity, even apathy — a refusal to invest or engage in the land they've been settled in
2. So, often, with Christians in our society today, looking at life issues, it's similar
- a. We look at how long abortion's been legal in our nation and despair of seeing it outlawed, especially seeing how so much of the culture is not only adamantly and vocally "pro-choice" but determined to silence pro-life voices wherever they can.
 - b. We despair to see the steady advance of things like assisted suicide through courts and legislatures in our country.
 - c. We despair to see how fellow Christians make decisions about things like birth control, fertility treatments, and end-of-life matters without even asking what God might have to say, just going ahead with whatever their peers and the media tell them is good and proper.
 - d. OR, some believers might more optimistically think that the tide will turn any day now — with the judges appointed by a pro-life President, with just a few strategic wins in Congress, with new laws to force the government or media to take our side, etc., everything's going to be fixed and put back the way it's supposed to be, so we can just sit back and watch it happen.
3. But God wants us to see the field as it really is
- a. First, he wants us to remember that we are not where we are because of some mistake or accident. Just as he was the one who exiled the Jews to Babylon, so, in his wisdom, he has guided and moved things so that we ended up where and when we are — in this place, country, and culture.
 - b. God reminds those with ill-informed optimism about a quick change that he sets the times for all things, and that he sees things we cannot.
 - i. We cannot presume that things will get better on the life front just because of a few judges, etc. (e.g. even if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the Supreme Court, the issue of abortion is just returned to the states, many of which will still have legal abortion regimes.)
 - ii. We can't even say, "Well, things can't get any worse than they are now," because they can, and do (e.g. advance of assisted suicide; situation in Canada, for instance, in which a hospice is punished for not cooperating with "medical aid in dying," or in the Netherlands, where an elderly dementia patient was held down and force-fed lethal drugs, because earlier in her life she had indicated she wanted to die if she

ever had such a cognitive decline) (and because we can hardly call our current situation “acceptable”)

- c. But to those who see only reason for despair, God shows a world that *will* respond to our engagement — ground, gardens, wombs, cities for the Jews; elections, opinions, policies, people for us.

II. Trust the Lord

- A. But most of all, what God wants us to see is that we can trust him.
- B. It should be obvious that the Creator of the Universe can be counted on to see his will done with us and in the world, but we’re not so good at that.
 - 1. The Jews in exile in Babylon were there because they had failed to trust the Lord — they’d had a generational problem with taking him for granted and giving their love and worship to false gods.
 - 2. Christians in America are increasingly doing the same kinds of things — taking God for granted (use examples?) and giving their love and worship to false gods (achievement, acceptance by peers, social media likes, political success, wealth, comfort, pleasure, etc.)
 - 3. And both “things will never get better” despair and an optimism that things will get better without involving God or his people show a failure to trust in him.
- C. But he can be trusted. You wouldn’t be here if he couldn’t be trusted.
 - 1. That he has the power to do what he says he will do is obvious from creation — and many things since
 - 2. Sadly, something else that is obvious if we dare to look is that God cannot trust us: we are sinners. Adam and Eve broke his trust at the beginning, and with our sins we have been showing ever since that no matter how sincerely we intend or promise to do only what he wills and not do what he forbids. Instead, we follow our own wills.
 - 3. What we deserve: death and hell
 - 4. But although the Lord is a just and holy God who cannot leave evil and rebellion unpunished, he is also a gracious and compassionate God. In love, he could not allow us all to go to hell without doing something to save us from our sins.
 - 5. So, he sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die on the cross as our Substitute, and then raised him from the dead, to give us the victory over not only our own sin, but over Satan and death itself.
 - 6. This was just what he promised to do, and he did it. Since he proved he can be counted on for the most important thing there is, we know he can be relied on for everything else: heaven, protection, providence, answered prayers, etc.
- D. Which means he can also be trusted for life — on all the life issues that are at stake in our culture today — trusted to equip, encourage, and empower us to see the state of the contest we are in against a culture of death and disrespect and to say, “We’re not giving up or giving in. We’re still in it — for life.”

III. Engage and Invest

- A. Clearly Christ does not call us to be mere spectators. The Lord didn't tell the Jews in Babylon it was fine for them to just watch others build houses and plant gardens, or to enjoy the work someone else did and call it their own; he told them to do it themselves.
- B. So, we believers today hear God telling us not to be satisfied with the status quo, or with a comfortable "let somebody else worry about that" inactivity. We hear him tell us to engage with our society and invest in the land we live in. We recognize that Christ has called us to be good citizens of our nation and community just as he has called us to our other vocations.
- C. What this looks like won't be exactly the same for every Christian. Some have the gifts, time, personality, and opportunity to serve on the "front lines" in the fight against abortion. Some will do their fighting with their checkbooks and at the ballot box.
- D. One thing most Christians have the power to do is to uphold God's design for marriage and the family and to happily demonstrate to the world that it not only still works but is actually the best model for happiness and prosperity. Just as the Lord told the Jews to get married, have children, have their children get married, and then have them have children of their own, so he tells us to do the same thing. There is no exception found in Scripture that says, "When life is hard, or when life is too good, or when society has advanced to certain point, then forget what God says about marriage and children." Instead, we are told, from the beginning of the Bible, straight on through, to marry when we have that opportunity and the married are told to have children when they have that opportunity. And this shows the skeptics in our society that we Christians really do value the things we say we value.
- E. Another way most believers are able to still be "in it" for life is to not back away from tough questions about things like fertility treatments, medical interventions, and end-of-life care — or to cede the field to others in our society who claim to have all the answers. You don't have to find answers all by yourself and, in fact, in many cases you shouldn't. God has given you pastors and other Christians who can counsel you, sharing his wisdom from Scripture and bringing it to bear on your particular situation. And even your pastors know they can take the really tough questions to people like those at Christian Life Resources.
- F. Of course, the way that every believer is able to get "in it" in the fight for life is by calling in help: praying. In 1 Timothy 2, the Apostle Paul urges Christians that, "petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all those who are in authority, in order that we might live a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and dignity." Rather than merely complain about presidents, senators, judges, and bureaucrats who do not respect life as they should — as God intends them to do, as his representatives — we can bring the power of the Almighty to bear and pray that he gives them wisdom and moves them to make good decisions. This is not only for our good, but for the good of all our society. If the Jews were to pray for the good of Babylon, where they were in

exile, how much more will we pray for the good of our nation, which we love and is the home we choose.

- G. Yet there will be voices telling us to stay out of it — out of politics, out of other people’s choices, out of any kind of conflict over life issues.
1. Some of those voices come from within us. They offer excuses: “I’m not pregnant, so what do I care about abortion?”; “I’ll worry about whether doctors killing patients who want to die is a good thing if I ever face that situation myself” “Other people care about this more than I do, so I’ll let them handle it; I’ve got better things on my mind”; and, “Oh, I don’t know, it’s just all so ... depressing; I don’t want to think about it, let alone do anything about it.” Don’t fool yourself; not caring about life is not an option God has given us. In fact, in Proverbs 31 we are explicitly told, “Speak up for those who cannot speak. Speak for the rights of all those who are defenseless. Speak up, judge fairly, and defend the oppressed and needy.”
 2. Of course, other voices telling us to just stay out of everything are trying to deceive us, just like the false prophets Jeremiah warned against. They tell us that since Christians are supposed to be all about love, then love for women facing a problematic pregnancy means we should let them kill their babies. They tell us that God can’t possibly want anyone to suffer, so an early death, by one’s own hand or with the help of a doctor, should be an option for everyone who decides life has just become too hard. Do not let them deceive you. Do not listen to their lies — the Lord has not sent them.
- H. But at the same time, as Christians we do not want to meet deception with derision, arguments with anger, or deviance with violence. God told us to seek the peace of our land, and we are called to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. So, while we will certainly face opposition and have enemies, we don’t work to make them. We want to win people to our side — heart by heart, mind by mind, soul for soul — which is done with loving persuasion, not with hostile confrontation, because our fight for life is a fight for people — our neighbors, our fellow citizens, men, women, and children God loves, and Jesus died to save. We want them to have life and, through the gospel, have life more abundantly.

Conclusion:

In our Gospel today, Jesus diagnosed in just a few words what it is that goes wrong with Christians who sit down on their job as witnesses in society and who look at the sad and sinful state of the world and just say, “Oh, what’s the point?!” and give up — and give in. He said, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.” He made a similar point with the believers in Laodicea in our reading from Revelation 3: in living out their faith as his disciples and representatives, those people were no longer hot, they were merely lukewarm — and he was “about to spit them out of [his] mouth.”

We’ve spoken already about all the things we want to do in this land God has settled us in as his people, how we serve our neighbors by being salt and light, and how we should devote ourselves to prayer for our nation, its people, and its leaders. But there is one more prayer that is worth

praying today and every day — and perhaps the weather of a chilly winter might help us remember: We pray that the Lord would make our love grow *warmer* and warmer all the time, despite the increase of wickedness and despite our fleshly preference for chilling out and just watching the world go by. After all, we're in this for life because of God's love for us, and it's his love in us that makes all the difference — for life, and for the world.