

“Participating in His Providence”

“ ‘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’.”

Jeremiah 29:11

Each of the three top-tweeted Bible verses reveals that God *initiates* our *relationship* with Him and *invites* and *empowers* our *response* to Him.

Yesterday, we looked into *our sufficiency in the all-sufficiency of God* in Christ. (Phil 4:13) We also looked into *our affirming God’s affirmation of us* in Christ. (John 3:16) This morning we look into *our participation* in God’s *providence*, assured that His love in Christ reaches out to us, even *from everlasting to everlasting*.

In this morning’s text, Jeremiah the prophet conveys God’s providential words to Israelites in Babylonian captivity. There’s good news: “ ‘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’.” (Jeremiah 29:11) Well, it’s easy to see why folks today are so favorably disposed to use this text – *without its context* – and frame it to footnote all their fondest fantasies.

But there’s good reason Jeremiah is called “the *weeping* prophet”. He deeply experienced the pain of fellow Israelites in captivity for their sins. And he suffered pain in their pushing back against his preaching the truth. And, as far as it’s even *humanly* possible, he identified with and anguished over *God’s* grief over this wayward people. Jeremiah’s head was so clogged with tears that he wished his eyes were great fountains to relieve such great grief.

As *we* attempt to look into this text from Jeremiah’s prophecy, we’d be wise to begin our thoughts on God’s *providence* by recalling the sage advice of John Owen: “There is and always was, much about God’s providential management of this world, that even the most improved reason of mere men cannot reach into.”

In *attempting* to look into *God’s providence*, humility is surely the only appropriate *starting point*. And humility is surely the only appropriate way *to wend our way* through such inquiry. Finally, humility is surely the only appropriate way *to conclude* our inquiry – *humility under the everlasting sovereign grace of the God of all providence*.

These words of caution are especially important if we’re *stuck* in a *systematic* theology of *whatever* stripe, for in such cramped and crowded quarters, we easily mistake *that trap* for the *whole truth* or *fruit* of the Spirit.

Owen’s contemporary, John Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, parodied the distracting pastime of pretended precision and presumptuous posturing about the mystery of God’s providence and purposes. Milton observed: “Others apart sat on a hill retired / In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high / Of Providence, foreknowledge, will and fate / Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute / And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.”

All through history, self-styled know-it-alls have been quick to *define* and *deride* what the humble apostle Paul preached of the “unsearchable riches of God’s grace in Christ”. (Eph 3:8) So it must be with us, that with humbled readiness for *God’s* revelation, we turn to his Word in hope of learning even *something* of what God’s providence *may* mean for us, for awe-inspired Christian living with all seriousness of purpose.

Now, actually, there is *literally* no *single* biblical term for “providence” as the term is commonly used of *God’s* providence. Yet, throughout the Bible, the theme of God’s *sovereign*

control and sovereign care over all of creation is evident – from the most stellar spectacle in space to God’s deep concern for *human welfare* and for the life of even the smallest sparrow.

David was awestruck as he stared up into those ancient night skies that displayed but the footlights of billions of light years far beyond his vision, if not beyond his Spirit-stirred imagination. He saw the stars that, with the naked eye, *he could* see and *we can* see. But what they are, as *we* know them now, he could not conceive. Yet *he* knew, what *we* so easily miss, knowing them only as *we* do. He knew that they were *God’s* stars. So he sang to God of, “*Your* heavens, the work of *Your* fingers, the moon and the stars, which *You* have *ordained!* What are *we*, that *You* are *mindful of us*, and *care for us!*” (Ps 8:3f)

Jesus would one day tell his followers that even the hairs of their heads were all numbered and that not one sparrow falls to the ground *apart* from the Father’s *awareness and care*. (Matt 10:29)

And, it’s in him, Jesus the Christ, God’s one and only Son, that God’s *providential care* is *centered*. In Christ, who *created* a universe fine-tuned for *us*, and through whose death and resurrection, life “more abundant” is *provided* here and now, redeemed, and hereafter and forevermore, *eternal* beyond our imagination in new heavens and a new earth. This summary is but a quick peek into the incomprehensible panorama of God’s providence.

The promise of the Lord’s provision for his exiled people was announced through Jeremiah some twenty-six centuries ago. The words the prophet conveyed *represented* not only *their* future and *their* welfare, but the Lord’s provision for *the Babylonians, too*. And they conveyed the Lord’s provisions for *all of creation*, going *back from before*, as it were, the creation of time and space, heavens and earth, and going *forward* through all eternity into these *new* heavens and *new* earth, redeemed and made whole by God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

However, the providence in this *favored* verse of Jeremiah 29:11, is but part of the longer revelation of God’s providence throughout Jeremiah’s prophecy. *Not* surprisingly, as we’ve indicated, it’s but *this most obviously welcomed bit* of the overall revelation of God’s providence that’s the one that’s become such “a favorite” on Twitter.

Even the *most immediate* context of Jeremiah 29:11 tends to be overlooked by those who pick and choose a favorite Bible verse. Favorite Bible verses tend to be those *we’d* have written ourselves. It’s always the *hard* sayings that *don’t* conform to *our* immediate desires that we *neglect* or *rationalize away*. We favor those that seem to conform to our shortsighted fantasies of our best interest.

But can *confirmation bias* give us any more *reality-based* comfort than being one’s own attorney and having a fool for a client? Hard sayings can be *hard* because of *hard heartedness*, but hard-heartedness can never get us closer to reality. Realistically received, hard sayings can reveal unbidden blessings.

The disobedient Israelites were in exile in Babylon, being *providentially disciplined* under God’s *providential care*. Naturally, they didn’t like it. Neither did God. And they didn’t like most of what God’s faithful prophet needed to tell them. They preferred the more “convenient” promises of a people-pleasing *false* prophet named Hananiah. Isn’t that what we’re prone to prefer. Or are we savvy enough to distrust people-pleasers? Hananiah told them that their captivity would soon be over. How nice. But, not so fast, Hananiah, not so fast!

We too must beware that our selfish agendas can distort our discernment when choosing between advisors we *want* to hear and advisors we *need* to hear. We must ask quite frankly, whose lies, fake promises and escapist fantasies do *we* prefer to the hard truth of hard reality

from honest prophets? As false prophets always do, Hananiah told them what they *wanted* to hear. Jeremiah told them what they *needed* to hear. And Jeremiah suffered for it.

Should we *want* to hear, what we *need* to hear? Don't we need whatever clarity that's necessary for being in touch with reality? Is it wise to listen to liars? Isn't it about that which we're *not* telling ourselves, even *refusing* to tell ourselves, but really do *need* to hear, that we need to hear from *another* what we're *not* hearing *from ourselves*?

Increasingly, even with a free press and freedom of association, Americans limit our listening and our hearing to our own echo chambers – whether on the Left or on the Right, in the mass media or on social media, in secular universities or at Fundamentalist colleges. People want so-called “safe spaces”. So they set themselves up to listen only to *their* idols. But they then hear only what they ventriloquize *into* their idols. Who, then, is the *dummy*?

It's all so self-sabotaging to even one's own assumed agenda for, as John Stuart Mill wisely warned: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of *that*. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. . . . Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of *adversaries* from *his own* teachers, presented as *they* state them, accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them . . . he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form.”

How much such wisdom is needed in *our* self-servingly *closed* systems! But, how much *more* is *God's wisdom* needed amidst the racket of false prophets and flattering pundits! That was the case, too, back there in ancient Babylonian captivity.

So, where better than in captivity in Babylon could the Israelites learn up-close, at first-hand, that *false* gods were no match for the Lord!

The tweeted verse says: “ ‘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*’.” (Jer 29:11) “Prosper!” “Hope!” “No harm!” “Gift”!

But note: These *plans* are *the Lord's* plans, the *Planner* is *the Lord* who sees the bigger, the biggest, picture. His plans spring from the wellsprings of the His omniscient, omnipotent and truly inscrutable *love*. *God's* providence, *God's* plans, *God's* powers and *God's* purposes don't arise out of the thin air of self-blinded blunderers. Is that so hard to comprehend?

And they connect to the *full* prophecy that can't be cut and pasted to suit the selfish, shortsighted purposes of some tweeted mantra by those who don't and can't see the whole story.

And yes, of course, God's plans and purposes, His providence, can and does involve challenges, even hardships, and certainly what's *unknown* to captives *and* captors, but none of it blindsides God.

Even the *labeling* of “upsides” and “downsides” to a “mixed bag”, must await revisioning that will be made, even by those who were too ignorant and shortsightedly selfish to have all of the data and foresight to anticipate *what was what* in even our *experienced mixed-bag* of God's plans put into action in their lives, for our good.

So, stupidly skipping surrounding verses to squat on verse 11 alone, just as those ancient captives wished to do and just as we so easily do, cherry-picking Twitter folks squeeze their way past what they surmise doesn't suit them and then slip and fall in their spin of what, at first, *seemed* to suit them. No wonder so many fail to spot their own blind spots – so evident to others! Since verses 5, 6, 7 and 10 are the most *immediate context* of the tweeted verse 11, and, as such, fill in some of the fuller picture of God's providential plan to *prosper* the recipients, to

give them *hope* and a *future*, and *not to harm them*, it's imperative that they, *and we*, attend to this context.

Across those six verses that precede 29:11, Jeremiah relays God's will that the Israelites *get used to being* in Babylon, for God wants them to *settle in* and *set up their lives there*, in exile (Jer 29:5-6) He says they're to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you. Pray for its welfare", He says, "for if it prospers, you too will prosper." (29:7)

This is yet another reason why it's "better to give than receive". "Haves" can give; "have-nots" can but receive. Giving reveals independence and power; receiving reveals *dependence* and *lack of power*. Giving, perhaps, sets up a giver's expected compensation; receiving sets up a receiver's expected obligation.

And so, in the reciprocity of which Jeremiah speaks, is it the captive or the captor who has an upper hand in God's plan? And wouldn't Israelites still be under the love of their sovereign Lord? Wouldn't Babylonians still have only their deaf idols to turn to?

But the Israelites are to do *more* than merely accommodate to their pagan oppressors. In God's loving providence, the Israelites are to roll up their sleeves and actively seek Babylon's well-being, its peace, indeed, its *shalom*! In doing so, by God's providence, *shalom* will be theirs as well.

Doesn't this sound like what, centuries later, Jesus would be saying during another Jewish experience of pagan rule: "If a Roman soldier demands that you carry his gear a mile, carry it two miles." (Matt 5:41) Again, who was in the position to be more generous, a Jew under the Lord or a pagan soldier under Caesar? And Jesus added: "*Love your enemies*; do *good* to them that *hate* you." (Matt 5:44) Love lives on, beyond the second mile.

This spring, Mark Galli, editor of *Christianity Today*, picked up on Jesus' recommendation to carry that soldier's gear a *second* mile and applied it to today's dispute over baking wedding cakes for same-sex couples. Said Galli: "Jesus told his disciples – to put it into today's terms – that when asked to bake a cake for a gay wedding, we might offer to bake two (Matt. 5:41)." This gracious application, by Galli, is a surprisingly good one!

But, it didn't go over very well with many *CT* readers or with the Religious Right's activists. The vice-president of the so-called American Family Association sent out a totally disconnected blast at Galli and *Christianity Today* for thus, "doom[ing] generations of children to instruction in sodomy" and failing to fight "the homosexual movement [that's] rooted in ... Darwinian atheism." Is this VP unaware of Jeremiah's call for God's people *in exile* – as AFA folks posture themselves held hostage by modern pagans – to show *shalom* to captors?

The *truth* and the *realism* of the Golden Rule and all the amazing good that's been wrought by Christians' leading Golden Rule lives for captives and captors, over the long history of the persecution of Christians, won't and can't be fully known until Judgement Day and beyond.

Jeremiah preached the Lord's providential will that Babylon's oppressed seek their oppressor's welfare and help their oppressor to prosper. This was as unwelcomed a call to ancient Israelites in captivity, as is God's continuing call to us, to seek the welfare, prosperity and peace of all with whom *we*, by God's providence, happen to live, even in disagreement, let alone, in persecution.

It's why EC has always contributed our entire worship service offering to *other* Christian ministries, regardless of their stand on LGBT matters. On this 500th anniversary of John Foxe, our offering goes to the Voice of the Martyrs.

Surely, we can identify with those Israelite captives who couldn't (wouldn't?) identify with their captors, for how well do we identify with those on the Religious Right who can't (won't?)

identify with others who're more like them than they can afford to admit, for we, ourselves, are more like them than we care to admit.

We're all in this fallen world together – even if we, by God's grace, may, in some ways, have a bit better insight into some things about which we've had existential motivation to cope, while having a bit less insight into other things that are challenges for others. Yet, we Christians are all called to spread God's *shalom*. And, in and by God's *shalom*, we surely can afford to do so.

And what *else* is, as Paul Harvey used to say, “the rest of the story” – the *fuller* prophecy from Jeremiah to the captives – that somehow doesn't make it into a favored tweet these days? Some of that fuller picture is found at Jeremiah 29:10 – the verse that *immediately precedes* the tweeted verse. This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed in Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my promise to bring you home.” *Seventy years?! “... My promise to bring you home.” Seventy years?!*

Was the number only a symbol, as in Jewish culture's 7 and 70 x 7 *could* suggest – a “full” or “complete” period of time? Whether literal or figurative, it was, for them, discouraging that *the current generation may not be going home!*

Yet, God had told them that they had some things to *learn* during their captivity. They're to *learn* to treat even their *enemy* as they, themselves, wish to be treated – that *they, too*, might *prosper* – as was their wish.

And maybe *such a strongly resisted lesson* can't be learned *overnight*. Is this a lesson that can be *quickly* learned today by homophobic Christians who say that gay Christians are *oppressing* them? Can it be learned overnight or might it take a little longer? *It is* taking a little longer – even a *lot* longer, according to the impatient who have yet to learn God's patience. Is this a lesson that can be quickly learned today by *gay* Christians who say they're *oppressed* by homophobic Christians? Can it be learned overnight or might it take a little longer? *It is* taking a little longer – a *lot* longer, according to the impatient who have yet to learn God's patience.

John Owen's pastoral wisdom comes out in his rhetorically asking that we contemplate, in the *bigger* picture, the *not so obvious* lesson to be learned. Owen wrote: “Did you never run for shelter in a storm and find fruit which you did not expect? Did you never go to God for safety, driven by outward storms, and there find unexpected fruit?”

Understandably, of course, *unexpected* fruit is to be found in precisely the circumstances we try to *avoid*. And, when we actually choose *not* to go even *near* such circumstances, let alone *through* them, we really shouldn't complain about finding no *unexpected* fruit.

But, might it make sense that, we *get* to go through circumstances that, on the flimsy basis of our fortune-telling fantasies, we *want* to avoid and *try* to avoid, yet on the basis of *God's wise and caring providence*, we *need* to go through, *with* him, to get closer *to* him and *his* wise and loving will *for* us?

Who here has experienced circumstances which, in fantasized unmixed-bag anticipation, were not at all wanted, and yet, in their more fully grasped mixed-bag revelation of experience in and after the fact, were not to be missed? Who here has experienced circumstances which, in an unmixed-bag fantasy were very much *wanted*, even *lusted* after, and yet, in their mixed-bag revelation of experience, were found to have been much better *missed*?

There are many everyday examples of God's wise ways with us and all. But I often go back to a most memorable expression of this from the very worst years of the AIDS epidemic – the mid and late 1980s.

Many of you never met the gay couple I have in mind. Observed from a distance, “they had it all”, as those on the outside of others' lives foolishly tend to think. They did, though, have a

long and loving relationship, flow-producing and financially successful careers, even some celebrity. But, then, all of a sudden, after a happy celebration on a moonlit cruise on a private yacht in New York harbor, they discovered a dreaded mark of KS and were then diagnosed with AIDS, which was, at that time, an onrushing death sentence. But, on that night, they did not have what they'd later come to know as the most precious gift of their lives. From their secular routines, little Zen altars for one, a casual atheism for the other, and along with several good years of rational psychotherapy, this diagnosis forced them to look much deeper. And, with that inquiry and counseling they soon came to a living faith in Christ. The healthier one became actively involved in EC and he gave their testimony at one of our EC meetings. He told me that AIDS was *the worst and the best* thing that ever happened to him. His partner, who was the first to die, testified, through faint whispering that was all he had left at the end, "How do they cope with this without God!"

Of course, God's providence is not always by way of a dreaded captivity or a terminal illness, but often it is, and certainly at last, it can be. Yet, as William Cowper penned, it's by God's moving "in a *mysterious* way, [that] His wonders [are performed]".

Rosalind Rinker was a keynoter at our first EC summer retreat in the West, in 1980, and at our third retreat in the East, in 1982. *Christianity Today* named Ros, the author who was most influential with evangelicals in the second half of the 20th century than any other. She often said, so encouragingly yet so simply, "God speaks to us through our desires. Then as we lay them at his feet, he helps us sort them out and quiets our hearts to accept what he has already prepared."

Think of it in your own life. You can trace what means so very much to you today, maybe even rather directly, back to what was very difficult some time ago.

We can't say where we'd be today apart from the road we've been on, but we *can* say that what we *value* today is a result of where we've been and what we've come through. Maybe we haven't all quite defined it this way, *but this is God's providence*.

God's providence works through genetics, formative years, families, friends, personality, intelligence, talents, what you find comes easy and what you find you really can't do. God's providence is in all the roadblocks, mistakes, hardships and even through "the dark night of the soul" that wakes us up to the Light of the world. God's providence moves through *answered* prayers as well as through all the prayers that, as Dorothy L. Sayers thanked God, were *never* answered on *her* foolish terms.

The word of our Lord came to Jeremiah at the beginning of his call, and, by providential extension, the word of the Lord comes, as well, to us: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart." (Jer 1:5) And then, deep into Jeremiah's difficult and tear-filled ministry, this was the Lord's word to him, and, by providential extension, to us as well: "I *have* loved you with an *everlasting* love" (Jer 31:3). Amen

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