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Jeremiah 29:11 ESV.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Living with a Future and a Hope.

There is a complex theological argument in Christianity that has to do with whether we earn gifts and rewards from God, or whether they are completely unearned things that we receive simply because we have faith. I'd like to step through this mildly complex, but very biblically based issue. I would like to suggest an opinion on my part as to what this all really means. The reason I want to talk about this is that occasionally in my role as a hospital chaplain, and on rare occasions, as a pastor, I am asked questions about this issue. Recently, I was talking to a patient who was a very gracious, kind, and deeply faithful person, and who had a serious, chronic medical condition, but who was not dying – and who had become concerned about her ability to serve God. I'll get back to her. She had had two children at a young age, and they were now entering adulthood at a time when she was facing challenges with her mobility and her ability to earn a living. She had no spouse or partner.

Let's start with Jeremiah, Chapter 29, verse 11:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

This is a very popular quote and is used often in sermons. Frequently this verse is taken way out of context by “feel good” Christian pastors to suggest that God simply showers goodness on people without making any demands of us. It is used to argue for various forms of Prosperity Christianity, where God paves the way for us to live with worldly success, and more or less, all we must do is let these blessings flow. This Jeremiah verse, out of context, makes us believe that God is sitting up in Heaven executing a personalized plan to make each of us happy.

But in truth, this quote, if we look at its biblical backstory and the context around the quote, reminds us that our relationship with God, our covenant with God, is two-way: if we have faith, that will lead us to live with forgiveness, grace, kindness, and faith. Then God will indeed bring us internal joy and help us thrive. Here is the backstory to this quote; we are quite familiar with it. The people of Israel have been worshipping the idols of their pagan neighbors and have forgotten the ways of their God. They have also become corrupt. And so, God has used the Babylonian Empire to punish them. Now, Jerusalem is destroyed, including the Temple, the people's homes, their farms, their businesses. Many of

them – the most influential citizens, for the most part – have been exiled to Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah, in this passage, isn't telling us that God is going to shower all of us with gifts simply because we exist. God, through the Prophet Jeremiah, is telling the exiles specifically to have hope. God may punish, but God does not abandon. God forgives. God restores. God's long-term plan is for his people to thrive – and everything that God does, including punishing his people - is part of this plan. They must return to their faith to have a future filled with happiness and to prosper as a culture, with land, progeny, and God's blessing.

Importantly, these are the two verses that come after the verse above:

¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

If we read verses 11 to 13 as a unit, in the context of the historical backstory presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, we see that God wants to give his people “*a future and a hope*”, but that to do this, the people of God must call upon God. They must pray to God. They must seek out and find God, and they must do so with all their hearts. Then – and only then – will God's blessings flow. We do inherit this mandate today. As followers of Christ, we believe in the same God as the Israelites. During our lives, we must be proactive. We have to accept God's invitation to join his kingdom and pursue this goal every day of our lives. Of

course, as Christians, we do not live for the Old Covenant promises of land, progeny and a blessing. That part has changed.

As Christians, there is a very important, subtle twist to this, one where we differentiate a life of joyful faith from a life of fearful guilt. This is where our theological argument today starts becoming a bit more complex. We don't literally earn God's blessings. We don't need to be paranoid and spend each day worrying about whether we are doing or thinking the right things for God to go ahead and bless us. It's not that we proactively do things in our lives for which, in return, God will bless us. Rather, God's blessings are a gift that is activated through faith. It is our faith alone that propels us into the Kingdom of God and keeps us there. Consider the book that is considered the primary biblical source that tells us that gifts from God, including eternal salvation, cannot be earned. It's more than that we don't have to earn gifts – nothing that we do can earn godly rewards. This is a central theme of the letter to the believers in Ephesus. Ephesus was a city on the coast of Asia Minor, now Turkey. It was the home church of the author of Revelation and the center of Christianity after the Romans destroyed the second Temple in 70 A.D. The letter called Ephesians was included in the New Testament canon since it was believed to have been written by Paul, largely because the author says he is Paul. We no longer believe Paul wrote this

letter, largely because the very complex language structures in the letter do not resemble Paul's typical straightforward, deliberate Greek. It also has a vocabulary that is not like Paul's. But this letter is ancient, written just after the life of Christ, and it remains a very orthodox Christian writing, one that reflects the teachings of Christ. The author of the letter, by claiming to be Paul, succeeded in making the letter hugely impactful. We also do not believe the author gained any personal profit by writing it. Here are verses 8 and 9 of Chapter 2:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

This is a passage that we can interpret without worrying about any context. The meaning is obvious. God's blessing, any gifts from God, eternal salvation, none of these things can be earned through human efforts or any good deeds or acts of kindness. God's grace was placed inside of us when we were born, and this grace brought us to faith, and it is faith that brings God's gifts. An important corollary to this is that we are foolish to brag or claim credit for what God gives us.

Let's look at the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 11:

"Have faith in God. ²³Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

This reinforces the notion that God gives to us freely, but it does point out that if we want to get God's forgiveness specifically, then our faith better be deep enough to lead us to be forgiving. There is something about the context of this quote that we must consider. This passage is much more subtle than most people realize. It does not mean that if we have faith and ask God for a Lamborghini, God will place it in our driveway overnight. What this says is that if we have true faith, and if we have a desperate need, and we turn to God, God will do whatever is best for us according to his very long-range plan. Thus, although God might not give us what we expect, our faith should lead us to feel the same sense of peace that we would have if our request was indeed immediately granted.

We might think that we're done with this issue, that my sermon is over.

But no. Theology can be a complex thing. Perhaps there are indeed things that we can learn by what we do in life. One of the most impactful books in the New Testament, perhaps second only to the Gospels and Paul's letter to the Romans, is 1 Corinthians, a letter that we know Paul wrote. This is from Chapter 3:

¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

The foundation we build on is our faith in God and the teachings of Jesus. Gold, silver, and precious stones are works we do in life that result from our faith.

Wood, hay, and straw are works that are shallow or selfish. They are superficial and lack any eternal significance. Note, the following in this quote: *“for the Day will disclose it”*. *“The Day”*, with the word Day capitalized, refers to the day of Judgement. In other words, these special gifts don’t come to us until after we have died, until after we have earned eternal salvation. These are special rewards that come to us in the afterlife. This is Paul’s way of saying that God will indeed evaluate our earthly lives at some point, and so we need to remember this.

Later in 1 Corinthians, in Chapter 9, Paul writes this:

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul is again saying that we can receive rewards for our actions. But note that he is talking about *“imperishable”* rewards. This refers to ones that are spiritual and eternal, not things that we can make use of in a practical way in this life. God will look at our lives one day. It is our faith that decides if we live in his kingdom forever, but what we do in our lives will indeed be acknowledged.

The second to the last verse in 1 Corinthians, in Chapter 16, says this. It is part of Paul's final greeting to his readers in Corinth, a city not in Asia Minor, but in ancient southern Greece:

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

The Greek word that Paul uses for grace in this verse is “*charis*”, a word that we see repeatedly in the New Testament. It translates literally to unearned favor or kindness, and it emphasizes that the things we get in this world are unearned. They come through God's grace, not through our efforts.

But wait, our theological argument isn't over. There is solid New Testament evidence that there are some spiritual gifts, nontangible things that are given to us in this life. Still, we see that they are not earned. This is from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12:

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

There is a lot here, and I won't interpret all of it. Paul makes the point that we all serve as believers, but we serve in different ways. We serve the same purpose,

the “*common good*”. Our skills, given us to God, are different, but they are spiritually equal, and they are used to serve God’s people. We don’t necessarily have the gift of evangelism. Some of us offer wisdom, others heal, others can prophesize, some are linguists. Finally, God gives these gifts in whatever way will best serve. It is important to remember that the focus here is on serving the greater Church, and in this way, serving humanity. Paul is concerned with people using their gifts in ways that ultimately help people spiritually.

In sum, there is a fine point being made here in this passage. While we don’t earn these gifts, they are not awarded equally to all people. However, God doesn’t shower us with these gifts just to make us happy. God does this to serve the common good, the Church, his purpose, not to give us individual satisfaction.

So, let’s summarize. God gives us gifts in this life, but they are unearned with respect to our actions, our deeds, our works. They are freely given in response to our faith. There is nothing we can do to actively earn these gifts. We thus have no business being proud of what we have in life or what we accomplish. It is all through God. However, there is nothing wrong with turning to God with our needs. God will listen. God will do whatever makes sense, given our desires and his plans for us. We can thus rest with joy, knowing that God is taking care of us. Next, God will acknowledge and in a spiritual fashion reward us for the lives

we lead, but that happens after we die, after we are judged. It has nothing to do with our destiny to spend eternity in his kingdom. And there are things that feel like earthly gifts. We have skills and abilities, and we are driven to do things. But God blesses us this way so that we can serve his purpose, so that we can serve the Church, so that we can be God's active agents on this planet. Our job is to use these gifts that we have in this life to bring others into the Kingdom.

Let's get back to the woman with the advancing medical condition, something that would ultimately lead to significant disability. We'll call her Alison. I'm being vague about her condition and changing some details to protect her privacy. I always do this. Alison had two children, one of whom was starting college and one who would soon finish college. She wanted them to have good lives, and she raised them to have faith and to be optimistic. To use the words of Jeremiah, she wanted her two children to live with "*a future and a hope*". She had taught them that they needed to always serve. They could seek out professions, worldly things like houses and cars, and have children of their own if they wanted. But they had to remain selfless and always find ways to help people in need. She worked in a foodbank, mentored children who needed guidance, taught Sunday School, always donated a chunk of her time, assets, and energy to living her faith. But the problem was that she was now sick. She was tired. If she

wanted to live as long as possible and be as healthy as possible, she had to focus on herself, and it was making serving a hard thing to do. Her big question was if this meant that her life was over. Did God put us here to serve as long as we can, but only as long as we can? What should she do? I asked her if she thought that God would begrudge her looking after herself after spending her life honoring her faith by looking after others? She said no, of course not. But she didn't want to live in a selfish way. I sensed that after so many years of caring for others, she was looking for validation for her need to care for herself. I pulled out my phone and read her a passage from Chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians. I told her that this letter is one of the key books of the New Testament that tells us about our responsibility to look after ourselves.

¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

She said that yes, she knows that her body belongs to God and that that she must care for it accordingly. Then she smiled and said that maybe she would call her two kids and tell them that she needed help - and let them start serving. Then I offered a prayer of peace and freedom from anxiety, and for Alison to live knowing that she has a future, and to live with hope. I asked God to remind her that these are things that she certainly deserved. I never saw her again.