

Grace for the Day

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

Hope in Tough Times

By Rev. Peter Eng

Preamble

When will the bad news stop?

America is sinking in economic quicksand and sucking the world with it. Jobless rate in the US is set to rise to 8% by mid 2009. If the auto industry collapses, we can expect a 10% jobless rate. Some real estate experts predict a further drop of 37% from current property prices. America, the world leader in job generation is in recession. We would be ever-so-fortunate if the economy can begin recovery by mid 2009. This is the optimistic forecast.

Pessimism is to look at Japan in 1990 and Japan today. When Japan's asset bubble burst almost twenty years ago, the Nikkei dropped from 40,000 points to 8,000 points, it tested 13,000 points but is now back at 8,000 points. Japan has yet to recover from its burst asset bubble. What guarantee do we have that the US will recover and not go the way of Japan?

Reality is not some point between optimism and pessimism. Reality is to accept that things can turn out to be somewhere in between the two predictions, one or the other prediction or even better or worse than any of the predictions. When things turn out poorly, we often demand from God, "God where are you in this?"

Let us begin with a really tough scenario. All you have is the clothes on your back. You have lost your home, your homeland, all your possessions, and many members of your family, and even your language. Wouldn't you say the odds are stacked against you? Would you be tempted to say that God has abandoned you?

True Hope begins with Reality

It was under such dire circumstances that the word of God came to Jeremiah his prophet: *"I know my plans for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."* The power of these words reach out to everyone who suffers loss and wonders what to do next. They comfort and guide us who sometimes wonder if God has abandoned us.

These are words spoken to those exiled to Babylon. They weep for the death of their family. They weep because they will never see their home again. They weep at the shame that Jewish men are made eunuchs to serve Nebuchadnezzar. They weep because the temple is destroyed and there is no more place of worship. They weep because God's judgment has finally come and the house of David seems like no more. They cannot see the future, they cannot see reason to hope, they don't know what to do or where to go.

Some prophets give them the good news that their exile will be for only two years. They can put everything on hold and wait for their return. That is good. Jeremiah's prophecy is horrible. He says they will be in exile for seventy years! Jeremiah's prophecy gives them only despair.

However, false hope will only destroy us and our faith. It causes us to expect God to act in a certain way, and when he does not, we think he is not there, even though he has been shouting his message of truth and hope. How people choose false hope and still blame God!

Can we find hope even when the situation around us is bleak? Jeremiah calls the people to reality and to hope. We need his message for our day. Even the pessimists of our day do not

paint a picture more desperate than the exiles in Babylon. Let this strong medicine work for us as it did for them. Let the Holy Spirit of God speak to you as he spoke to the exiles.

God: "I know my plans for you."

Your life is not an uncertain existence tossed by currents too powerful to resist. Embrace the calamity and find God's blessing there. When God knows his plans for you, it is not cognitive knowledge. He is saying he remains master over your life. He is saying, "I know what I am doing even though you don't. You may be powerless, but I remain all powerful. You may be confused, but I am perfectly clear." In the midst of trouble, God is saying, "I know what I am doing with your life. Place your hope in me, not in false promises or in circumstances."

Even committed Christians hope and despair according to circumstances rather than to always find hope in the goodness of God. This is quite natural for us to feel this way. But to learn to hope in God is to trust him through adversity. That cannot be taught without adversity. That type of faith can only be acquired through adversity. This is why Jeremiah's message of hope in adversity is so relevant for us today.

God *"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you hope and a future."* The irony is that it all begins with embracing the reality that they will be exiled for seventy years. Jeremiah tells the people, "

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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."

Isn't that message amazing? Jeremiah is saying, **God will prosper you where you are!** You do not need changed circumstances to receive God's blessings. Your hope is not for things to turn around. God is ready to bless you right now.

I own a condo in Singapore. Not too long ago, when times were good, there was an attempt to sell off the condo in a collective sale. Mom manages the condo for me and does a great job. But now that I have emigrated to the US, it makes sense to sell off the property so mom does not have to manage it anymore. In

addition, a collective sale of the condo would make very good economic sense for all of us as a family. How I wish! Think of the joy of not owing any more money. Think of the college fees I can afford to pay. Think of how I can serve the Lord and just live off investments.

There is no collective sale. I remain engaged in the normal struggles of life. But the Lord has taught me that my hope is not built on a collective sale. My peace and prosperity is based on the goodness of God exactly where I am, even without the collective sale.

Russell Conwell, founder of Temple University, tells the story "Acres of Diamond." Ali Hafed, a wealthy farmer who lived along the Indus River in Persia, owned a large estate. One day an itinerant Buddhist monk told him about diamonds; that a diamond the size of his thumbnail could buy up a whole county. Ali sold his farm, placed his family with a neighbor and went in search of diamonds. He searched diligently and kept going till he reached Barcelona, Spain. His money was gone, he was in rags, and his dream was dashed. As he stood looking out at sea the tidal wave rolling through the Pillars of Hercules beckoned to his despair. This afflicted soul cast himself into the wave and found peace only in death.

The Buddhist monk returned to find a new owner of the estate. He had discovered a shiny pebble that the monk explained was a diamond. Together they dug, and found acres of diamond everywhere on the farm. This is the Golconda Mine from which magnificent diamonds were found.

Conwell does not stop his story in a far away land. He tells of a farm owner around Philadelphia who sold his farm for \$833 and went to work for his cousin's coal-oil plant in Canada. The new owner found a foul well on the farm where the cattle would not drink. He found oil. Thus did the US begin producing oil in Titusville.

We can be so fixated that God will bless us in another place that we forget God can bless us where we are. God can bless the Jewish exiles in Babylon no less than he can bless them in Jerusalem.

Are we looking for God's blessings in the wrong places? We can look for happiness in marriage when God wants to give us happiness in

singlehood and we never find that happiness. We can look for happiness in children when God wants to give us happiness without children. We can look for happiness in a divorce when that happiness is in the marriage. We look for happiness in a new job when God's store of happiness for us is in our current job.

Somehow, the grass on the other side is greener. We keep searching for greener grass that we don't eat the grass we have at our feet.

Jeremiah's message strikes a deep chord in me. I had not planned to emigrate to the US. Circumstances led me to apply for permanent residency and circumstances caused all of us to stay on. I had looked forward to returning to Singapore, but the Lord seems to tell me:

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ... 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."

Wherever we find ourselves, God's arm is not too short that he cannot reach us to comfort us, to guide us, and to bless us. Our future begins with the reality of our present. Our present reality together with our unique gifting is exactly where God wants us to be. I would characterize my own spiritual service to God as being under-employed. I don't know God's plan for me, but he knows. And that is enough.

Living out God's plan for us does not imply everything will fall into place as though our life is charmed. The challenges the exiles face building homes and planting crops in Babylon would be greater, not less, than the same tasks in Judah. God's blessing does not remove the normal vicissitudes of life. He does not take away the mean or nasty people who make it their mission to hurt us. We continue to need wisdom and patience.

The difference is this. Whereas we think we need to be on a different track to find God's blessings, he tells us the path we are now treading is exactly where we will find our blessing. On this path, we do what it takes for prosperity and peace. The wonderful promise we have is that our labor will produce results, and our results will be protected from harm.

We long for a special something to happen to raise us out of our troubles. But God is trying to

bless us where we are – if we will receive it. We can be so busy looking for that alternate universe where all is pink and rosy that we miss God's uncompromised best for us starting right here.

Reality is not a constant. Our reality today is that the markets may or may not recover. Our plans should reflect both possibilities. When our hope is in God and not in market recovery – or not – we receive God's blessing as we see more clearly and act more wisely. We will chart a path of prosperity, hope and a future regardless of whether the market recovers in seven months, seven years or seventy years.

First reality. Then let the full impact of God's promise sink deep into our soul and lift us up: *"I know my plans for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.