

Make an Impact  
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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 Common English Bible

29 The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem.

4 The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. 7 Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

Psalms 66:1-12 Common English Bible

1 Shout joyfully to God, all the earth! 2 Sing praises to the glory of God's name! Make glorious his praise! 3 Say to God: "How awesome are your works! Because of your great strength, your enemies cringe before you. 4 All the earth worships you, sings praises to you, sings praises to your name!" Selah

5 Come and see God's deeds; his works for human beings are awesome: 6 He turned the sea into dry land so they could cross the river on foot. Right there we rejoiced in him! 7 God rules with power forever; keeps a good eye on the nations. So, don't let the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah

8 All you nations, bless our God! Let the sound of his praise be heard! 9 God preserved us among the living; he didn't let our feet slip a bit. 10 But you, God, have tested us— you've refined us like silver, 11 trapped us in a net, laid burdens on our backs, 12 let other people run right over our heads - we've been through fire and water. But you brought us out to freedom!

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Background of Jeremiah 29:1-7 ...

- God called Abraham to father a nation that would be different from all others in that they would worship God, not false gods; they would display God's glory

- years passed by; the nation of Israel wanted a king like other nations, though God's desire was to be their sole king

- God granted their request: Saul became king, then David, then Solomon, then Rehoboam; during Rehoboam's reign, the nation split into two kingdoms
- the people of God began to take on practices of other pagan nations and people; prior to this God gave them the Law through Moses and made a covenant with them that included blessings (if they remained true to God) and curses (if they abandoned God)
- God sends prophets to the people to warn them of coming judgment for their sin and for breaking the covenant and also gives them hope for future restoration
- Jeremiah is one of these prophets; by the time he spoke the words in our text, the ultimate punishment/curse for the nation's sin had arrived...they're exiled to Babylon (they're aliens)
- the situation they were facing was that they were in a foreign land, surrounded by nothing godly.
- Jeremiah writes to them to explain what they are to do in their situation as aliens in a strange land<sup>1</sup>

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Let's take a moment to think about those Israelites. They had been threatened by Assyria, then Egypt, and then Babylon. A continual progression of war and violence with different nations and powers before the Babylonians actually conquered Jerusalem, destroyed it and forced most of the Israelites, those of value (could work), to go to Babylon. They were exiled to a foreign land.

They had been experiencing fighting and violence for quite a while, but it was at least Judah, their home. A place where they had roots and familiarity. But then they're taken to Babylon - not knowing the language; living among people who worshiped idols and numerous earthly and celestial gods and goddesses, in the midst of people who were mostly hostile toward them - or at best, ambivalent - "live, die...we don't care, just don't take our jobs, deplete our resources or make life hard for us."

God was angry and frustrated with the Israelites. Jeremiah had warned them, and they didn't listen. So, God punished them. But Jeremiah's prophecy gave them hope, telling them that despite the punishment of exile in a foreign land, God was still promising a future of positivity and goodness.

Jeremiah said, "During your exile, you need to make a positive impact on this world. Yes, you'll be living in a land that is not yours, among strangers and those who will likely be hostile toward you, but you are to settle in and grow your families there."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/living-like-an-alien-jonathan-russell-sermon-on-kingdom-of-god-161806?ref=SermonSerps>

It's challenging don't you think.

Imagining living in such violence, on a daily basis, then being removed from your homeland, taken to a strange place and having before you a life that may or may not be hostile, that may or may not be oppressive, that may or may not be livable. And you're told....

"Buck up! Make the best of it. Put on a happy face!"

Even if you deserved your punishment, could you do it?

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We can't relate to that type of life; a life of constant aggression by other governments; a life of pain and violence by gangs or terrorist groups seeking power, control and dominance. We live in peace. Our homes and families are not threatened on a daily basis. If we can relate at all, it is with the Babylonians – the conquerors, the victors, the ones who had the power and called the shots.

In our modern times, residents of Afghanistan and Iraq have been experiencing war for almost two decades now. Bombs falling and destroying homes, business and entire neighborhoods. The sound of gunfire, as common as the sound of rustling leaves. Is it safe? Do we stay or do we go? If we go, where? Wherever we go, will we be welcomed? The fear of the unknown is so great. The U.S. has played a role in that reality – as one of the powerful parties, remote and safe as we are in our own homes.

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According to Amnesty International, residents of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, (the Northern Triangle of Central America) are currently living in "one of the most dangerous places on earth."<sup>2</sup> Constantly subjected to violence and/or death by corrupt police forces or rampant gangs, they make shocking and dangerous choices to leave their homelands, desperate to simply survive. There is no compelling reason to stay. No wonder the number of people fleeing these countries to Mexico and the United States has reached unprecedented levels.

How can we relate?

To listen to Jeremiah and take him seriously – we hear that God wants those exiled, those forced out of their homelands to "settle in" to foreign lands and communities. Build houses, plant gardens, get married and have kids – then help your kids find spouses. And then Jeremiah says that they are to promote the welfare of the city and those who have captured them?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amnestyusa.org/fleeing-for-our-lives-central-american-migrant-crisis/>

I can't imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites. I can't imagine what it must be like for Afghans and Iraqis in war-torn lands. I can't imagine what it must be like for Hondurans and Salvadorans fleeing everything they know to go to ... who knows where that might accept them – maybe!

We are in the Babylonian position – a powerful one in a powerful land. We are presented a situation in which we can accept exiles and refugees ... and affect IF or HOW they may build houses, plant gardens, integrate into our culture and promote our cities and towns.

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The Bible tells us how to be good stewards towards refugees, aliens and exiles:

“When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God” – Lev. 19:33-44 (CEB)

“I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’ “Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ “Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’ – Matt. 25:35-40 (CEB)

How are we doing?

From the time that Congress created the refugee acceptance program in 1980 until around 2000, the US's policy toward accepting refugees was quite robust. We were accepting upwards of 100,000 or more refugees per year, while all other countries in the world combined were accepting only half as many.<sup>3</sup> The numbers took a significant dip around 2000, but still matched and or continued to exceed all other countries. Starting in 2017, for the first time, the US began accepting about half as many refugees than all other countries, around 30,000. In 2020, the Trump Administration is dropping that number to 18,000 – about ¼ of all other countries.

“For the first time this year, the Trump administration is creating a new system that sets aside the majority of slots for different kinds of refugees... If one category doesn't hit its limit, it's not clear that those slots will be transferred to another category. The...administration would devote

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/07/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/ft\\_19-10-07\\_refugees\\_us-trailed-world-refugee-resettlement-2017-2018/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/07/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/ft_19-10-07_refugees_us-trailed-world-refugee-resettlement-2017-2018/)

5,000 spaces to people with a fear of religious persecution, 4,000 spaces to Iraqis who aided U.S. forces in that country and 1,500 spaces to people from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras...Only 7,500 slots have been set aside for a general pool of refugees from around the world.”<sup>4</sup>

The Trump administration cites as the reasons for the drastic decreases are because the current U.S. refugee program “poses national security risks,” ...”the U.S. continues to deal with a surge of Central American families claiming asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border and [there is] a ballooning number of [asylum] claims [stalling] in immigration courts.”<sup>5</sup> For Mexico and the U.S., the focus has become one of border enforcement rather than humanitarian protection.

I know that many people support this plan saying, “the U.S. has been carrying the load for far too long. It’s about time that other countries begin to help.” And there is some truth to this, I won’t deny that. There are economic, as well as national factors at play in this discussion, but I challenge us to not forget our Christian identity as we face this crisis and engage in this discussion.

We need to remember the words of God in Leviticus and of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew that dictate how to treat aliens. We need to remember the Israelites that were exiled into Babylon and what Jeremiah instructed them to do.

By forcing other countries to “pull their weight” and denying more and more refugees and asylum seekers into our country, we can’t ignore the reality that it will negatively affect people desperate to escape violence and murder.

In September 2015, we learned of the tragic consequences of fleeing refugees; Alan Kurdi was 3 years old. We saw a photo of him – actually his dead body, lying in the surf of the Mediterranean Sea. He was Kurdish. His family was escaping the civil war in Syria. They were in Turkey trying to “settle in,” but weren’t welcomed. Not being able to “buck up” or “make the best of it,” they were trying to get to Europe, Greece specifically. Once in Europe, they hoped to join family in Canada. But because of repeated bureaucratic errors by both governments, as well as innocent application errors made by the families, Alan’s parents succumbed to desperation. They paid thousands of dollars to illegal transporters to get on a rubber raft that held too many people in waters that were too rough. The outcome was horrifying.

Four months ago, Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez (25), his wife Tania, and their 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, were attempting to cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. in the Rio Grande River when they were swept up in its currents. Oscar and Valeria drowned. We saw the pictures. They were heart-wrenching. Valeria was inside Oscar’s shirt; her arm slung around his neck. Tania survived. Oscar, Tania and Valeria were from El Salvador. They had made their way

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/11/trump-refugee-decrease-immigration-044186>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-to-reduce-cap-on-refugees-allowed-into-u-s-to-record-low-18-000-11569533121>

to the US-Mexico border and had been staying at a migrant camp along the border for over two months. As U.S. policies toward refugees continued to change and become increasingly unfriendly, they became afraid that they wouldn't be granted asylum, so their desperation led them to take drastic action.

These are only two cases of millions of refugees and exiles from all over the world. There are more refugees in the world today than there were at the end of World War II. We must ask ourselves, is it more important to take a political stance which we know will lead to pain and death or would we rather work toward better policies, improving our laws and programs, as well as working with other nations, to find solutions that will help these exiles and refugees? As Christians, I believe that we are more than capable of protecting our country AND helping exiles and refugees.

We can't say "buck up" and "make the best of it" to refugees, then ignore their pleas and sabotage their attempts when they come knocking at our door.

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Scripture tells us that because of the Israelites' continual defiance and sin against God, God coordinated the Babylonia conquest of Jerusalem and the exile of Israelites to Babylon. Through Jeremiah's prophecies, the Israelites were warned of the impending subjugation and that it would last for a while, approximately a generation. But the prophecy also offered hope; hope through positive instructions. As refugees, exiles in a foreign land, God did not want or expect the Israelites to become pagans, but to become a part of that community so they could hopefully turn the pagans to God.

What opportunities are we missing when we don't welcome strangers into our land and at least allow them the opportunity to make a positive impact? Exiled refugees are instructed by God to buck up and make the best of things. Wherever you are – live to your fullest. Wherever you are and with whomever you reside – work for justice.

Jeremiah's prophecy from God tells refugees a message that those in power must listen to as well – be in community.

Live a good life. Make it so that everyone can flourish. Don't just erect houses, but build homes, with gardens, children and great-grandchildren...full of love and shalom. Our task – and I'm speaking about the exiled and the conquerors – is to make an impact on the world in which we live; to minister to the people God puts in our path and to share the Gospel.

Amen