

SESSION 7 • LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Letters to the Exiles

Jeremiah 25 and 29 (with 28)

90 minutes • Win, Build, Send inductive format

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants discover how to live faithfully in Babylon. They watch Jeremiah name the exile's true length, seventy years, against a popular prophet promising two; they read the letter that tells the deportees to build houses, plant gardens, and seek the shalom of the enemy's city; and they recover the real Jeremiah 29:11, a promise deeper and stronger than the coffee mug version, addressed to people most of whom would die before it came true. Exile, they learn, is not the suspension of vocation. It is its arena.

Catholic Touchstone. Christians are to contribute to the good of the society where God has placed them (CCC 2239), and the expectation of a new earth, far from diminishing our concern for this one, spurs it on (CCC 1049). We are citizens of heaven living as faithful residents of Babylon.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- **Seventy years, stated twice.** In chapter 25, dated to the year Babylon's rise became undeniable, Jeremiah fixes the exile's span: "these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (25:11), after which Babylon itself will be judged (25:12). Chapter 29 repeats it to the deportees: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you" (29:10). Seventy years is a lifetime. The first hearers had to absorb that most of them would not come home.
- **The battle of timelines: chapter 28.** The prophet Hananiah publicly contradicts Jeremiah: within two years the exiles and the Temple vessels return (28:2-4). Two years versus seventy: one of these prophets is lying, and the popular one is Hananiah. Jeremiah's reply gives Israel a test: the prophet of peace is proven only "when the word of that prophet comes to pass" (28:9). Hananiah dies that year, as Jeremiah foretold (28:16-17). Give this as a compressed narrative; it sets up why the letter of chapter 29 was so unwelcome.
- **The letter.** Chapter 29 is an actual letter, carried by royal envoys to the first wave of deportees in Babylon (29:1-3). Its instructions are the opposite of everything the exiles wanted to hear: build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, multiply, and "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (29:5-7). Not resistance, not assimilation, not despair: rooted, fruitful, praying presence.
- **Shalom for Babylon.** The word translated "welfare" in 29:7 is *shalom*: peace, wholeness, flourishing. God commands His people to seek the shalom of the empire that had conquered, plundered, and deported them, and to pray for it, "for in its welfare you will find your welfare." This is the Old Testament's closest approach to "love your enemies," and it is addressed to victims.

- **The mug verse in its envelope.** Jeremiah 29:11 may be the most quoted and least contextualized verse in modern Christianity. Read it in its envelope: addressed to exiles (29:4), after the command to settle in Babylon (29:5-7), after the seventy-year timeline (29:10), before the promise of seeking and finding (29:12-14). The promise is real and glorious. It is also corporate, long-range, and runs straight through exile rather than around it. The session's job is to give the group a bigger 29:11 than the one they came in with.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. Build houses, plant gardens, be fruitful and multiply: many readers hear in the letter's commands an echo of Genesis, the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28) and Eden's planting (Genesis 2:8, 15), now sounding in enemy territory. Joseph modeled the vocation centuries earlier: exiled to a pagan empire, faithful under trial in it, a blessing to it (Genesis 39:5-12; 41:38-57). Daniel and his companions, carried off in an earlier deportation and already in Babylon when this letter arrived, lived it out at the imperial court (Daniel 1), serving Babylon's king without eating Babylon's defilement.

Fulfillment. The New Testament hands the letter to the Church. St. Peter addresses Christians as "exiles of the Dispersion" (1 Peter 1:1) and "aliens and exiles" whose good conduct among the Gentiles glorifies God (1 Peter 2:11-12): chapter 29 in apostolic form. Jesus prays not that the Father take His people out of the world but that He keep them in it, sent (John 17:15-18). Our commonwealth is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and precisely for that reason we can be the best citizens Babylon has. Your group will find the 1 Peter and Daniel texts themselves; the Daniel discovery is one of the best in the whole study.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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The Letter to Diognetus · *Anonymous, second century*

One of the earliest descriptions of Christians says they dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners: every foreign land is to them a fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land. They share the common life, and transcend it. An early Christian work, commonly dated to the second century, it reads like a commentary on Jeremiah 29: rooted enough to bless the city, detached enough to belong to God.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine · *The City of God, Book XIX*

St. Augustine taught that the City of God, on pilgrimage through history, does not despise the earthly peace but makes use of it, and even contributes to it, while it awaits the peace that has no end. He cites the very counsel of this letter: the captives were told to pray for Babylon, because in its peace was their peace. The Christian serves two cities honestly by loving one of them supremely.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Loyola · *A summary formula of his spirituality, handed down by his companions*

St. Ignatius formed his companions to seek and find God in all things: not only in the chapel but in the classroom, the kitchen, the marketplace, the ordinary duties of the day. That is exile spirituality matured into mission. If God can be found in Babylon, then no posting, no job, no city, and no season of waiting is spiritually wasted time.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 2239** · it is the duty of citizens to contribute, along with civil authority, to the good of society in truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom; love of country and service of it flow from gratitude.
- **CCC 1049** · far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectation of a new earth should spur us on: the body of the new human family growing here foreshadows the age to come.
- **CCC 2632** · Christian petition is centered on the desire and search for the Kingdom; and in intercession, the prayer of Christ's Body pleads for the needs of others, even of enemies (CCC 2635), which is how the exiles prayed for Babylon.

THREAD WATCH

THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY · NEVER APPEARS IN PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

Thread 1 • Build and Plant: MAJOR DEVELOPMENT. Look at 29:5 and 29:28: build houses, plant gardens. The two hope verbs of 1:10, the verbs of the sealed guesses, appear tonight as commands, handed to the exiles, activated in Babylon of all places. The demolition verbs have done their work; the building verbs have begun, quietly, in enemy territory, in ordinary life. If a participant catches it, and someone finally might, honor it warmly ("great eyes, hold that thought") and move on without one more word. Next session the seals are opened. Everything is in position.

Thread 2 • The Prophet Like Jeremiah. Quiet note for your pocket: chapter 25 hands the nations "the cup of the wine of wrath" from the LORD's hand (25:15). Remember who later prays about a cup, in a garden, and drinks it. Say nothing.

Thread 3 • The Watched Word. The word now works across generations and geography: a letter outlives its bearer, and the Daniel discovery (Q7) shows the word still working decades later in a reader Jeremiah never met, reckoning the seventy years from the books. The word travels farther than the prophet. Session 10 is next for this thread.

SESSION GOALS

1. Participants can retell the Hananiah confrontation and state Jeremiah's test of the prophet of peace.
2. Participants discover the letter's commands and can articulate the third way between resistance and assimilation: rooted, fruitful, praying presence.
3. Participants hear the personalized-promise reading of 29:11 at full strength and can give the contextual reading that makes the verse stronger, not weaker.

4. Participants find Daniel reading Jeremiah and 1 Peter addressing exiles, and can name their own Babylon.

5. Participants choose one concrete act of seeking their city's shalom this week, and one prayer of intercession for it.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

Opening prayer and Win: 15 minutes. Build: 55 minutes. Send and Live It This Week: 15 minutes. Closing prayer, memory verse, and the announcement: 5 minutes.

If you are running long: compress the chapter 25 material (Q1) to the leader summary and cut Question 9 (John 17). Never cut the 29:11 steelman or the Daniel discovery. And do not skip the closing announcement: tell the group to come next week without fail, because the sealed guesses come out. Say it with a smile and refuse all questions.

Letters to the Exiles

Jeremiah 25 and 29 (with 28)

OPENING PRAYER

"Father, You have planted each of us in a time and a place we did not choose, among people who do not always share our hope. Teach us tonight how to live there: rooted without surrendering, faithful without retreating, seeking the peace of our city because we belong first to Yours. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." (Opening Prayer)

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

W1. Have you ever had to wait much longer for something than you were promised or expected: a diagnosis, a job, a relationship, a move? What did the waiting do to you?

W2. Where in your life do you most feel like a foreigner: a place where your faith makes you the odd one out? How do you usually handle it: fight it, hide it, or leave?

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY (55 MIN)

READ JEREMIAH 25:8-12 ALOUD. (IF SHORT ON TIME, LEADER SUMMARIZES: IN THE YEAR BABYLON'S RISE BECAME UNDENIABLE, JEREMIAH FIXED THE EXILE'S LENGTH: SEVENTY YEARS, AND THEN BABYLON ITSELF WOULD ANSWER TO GOD.)

1. Two numbers matter in this prophecy: seventy years of servitude (25:11), and then judgment on Babylon itself (25:12). What do each of those numbers tell the exiles about God?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Seventy years tells them the exile is real, measured, and bounded: not a random catastrophe but a sentence with a term, under God's control from the first day. The judgment on Babylon tells them the instrument of discipline is not the new master of history: God wields empires and then holds them accountable (25:12). Both numbers preach the same sermon: even in the worst chapter, no one is holding the pen but God.

2. Leader, tell the Hananiah story from chapter 28 in two minutes: a rival prophet publicly promises the exile ends in two years; Jeremiah answers that the prophet of peace is proven only when his word comes true (28:9); Hananiah dies that year (28:16-17). Now the question: why would two years be the more dangerous message than seventy, even though it sounds kinder?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because a two-year exile requires nothing: no houses, no gardens, no roots, no engagement with Babylon, just bags packed by the door and life on hold. Seventy years demands everything: settle, build, raise children, bless the city. False hope is not merely wrong; it is paralyzing. It keeps people camped in the waiting room of a life God is asking them to actually live. Ask the group: where has a “two more years and this will all be over” story kept you from building anything?

READ JEREMIAH 29:1-7 ALOUD. THIS IS AN ACTUAL LETTER, CARRIED SIX HUNDRED MILES TO THE DEPORTEES.

3. List the commands of verses 5-6. What kind of activities are these, and what timeline do they assume? What two easier responses to exile do they rule out?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce; marry; have children; arrange marriages for those children; multiply, do not decrease (29:5-6). Ordinary, generational, rooted activities: you do not plant a garden for a two-year stay, and you do not plan your grandchildren’s weddings from a waiting room. The letter rules out both easy postures: resistance (life as sabotage and bitterness) and despair (life on indefinite hold). And notice the echo: be fruitful, multiply, plant. God reissues Eden’s mandate in Babylon. Exile does not suspend vocation; it relocates it.

4. Verse 7 goes further than anyone expected: “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf.” The word is shalom: peace, flourishing. Remember who had just besieged Jerusalem, stripped the Temple, and marched them off to Babylon. What is God asking of these people, and what reason does He give?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He asks victims to seek and pray for the flourishing of their conquerors’ city, “for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7). This is the Old Testament’s closest approach to “love your enemies,” and it comes with a startling piece of realism: God has bound His people’s good to the good of the pagan city around them. Christians do not flourish by their city’s ruin. Also notice the quiet theology in “where I have sent you”: Babylon thinks it deported them; God says I sent you. The exiles are secretly missionaries.

DIG DEEPER · CITIZENS OF TWO CITIES

The Church carries this letter in her pocket. It is the duty of Christians to contribute to the good of the society where God has placed them (CCC 2239), and the hope of a new earth, far from excusing us from this one, spurs our work in it (CCC 1049). We are not tourists in our cities and workplaces, and not their captives either. We are sent.

Steelman: Is Jeremiah 29:11 a Personal Promise to Me?

BUILD THE CASE AT FULL STRENGTH: PRESENT THIS AS WARMLY AS THE FRIEND WHO HAS IT FRAMED ON THEIR WALL

The case: “For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’ This verse carried me through the hardest year of my life. God’s character does not change; if He had good plans for Israel, He has good plans for me. Scripture itself says everything written beforehand was written for our instruction and hope (Romans 15:4). All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable (2 Timothy 3:16). Are you really going to tell people that the most hope-filled verse in the Old Testament is not for them? Context is important, but you can bury a living promise under so much context that no one can hear God speak through it anymore.” Present this with real warmth. Millions of sincere Christians hold it, it contains much truth, and mocking the coffee mug loses the room and deserves to.

5. First press, and be fair to both sides: read the envelope around the verse. Who is addressed in 29:4? What comes immediately before the promise in 29:10? What must the first hearers have realized about themselves and this promise?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Addressed: “all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon” (29:4).
Immediately before: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you” (29:10). Do the arithmetic the first hearers had to do: most adults reading this letter would be dead before the plans for welfare arrived. The promise was true, and it was corporate and long-range: God’s good plans for His people ran through a lifetime of exile, not around it. The verse was never a promise of a smooth individual road. It was something better: a promise that the hard road has a destination.

6. Second press, in the other direction: is the popular instinct entirely wrong? Read 29:12-14, the rest of the sentence. What in the promise really does reach across the centuries to every believer, and how does the Church read Israel’s promises?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (29:12-13). That is for everyone, everywhere, forever; Jesus repeats it almost verbatim: seek and you will find. And the Church does read Israel’s story as truly ours: written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11; Romans 15:4). So the honest resolution: our friend’s instinct is right, the verse truly instructs and steadies us; the mug’s timeline is wrong. What Christians may draw from it with certainty is confidence in God’s providence and His good purposes, not a personal guarantee of temporal welfare; and like the exiles’ hope, His purposes may run through Babylon, through seventy years, through a life that ends before the harvest. Deeper than the mug. Stronger, too: this version survives suffering instead of being refuted by it.

7. Live discovery. This letter had readers Jeremiah never met. Decades later, in Babylon, an old man is reading the prophet's words and doing the math. It is in Daniel 9, in the first few verses. Find what Daniel is reading and what he does next.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Daniel 9:2-3: "I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years which, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet... namely, seventy years," and he turns immediately to prayer and fasting. Savor what your group just found: a book of the Bible reading another book of the Bible. Daniel, already living in Babylon when this letter arrived, spends his life serving Babylon's court faithfully, exactly as the letter taught, and near the end he perceives "in the books" the seventy years God had spoken through Jeremiah and turns them into prayer. The word outlived its prophet, crossed an empire, and was still working in a reader decades later. And notice what the approaching deadline produces: not passivity, but prayer.

8. Live discovery. The New Testament addresses one of its letters to people it calls exiles, and tells them how to live among their pagan neighbors. It is at the start of 1 Peter, and again in chapter 2. Find both.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"To the exiles of the Dispersion" (1 Peter 1:1), and: "Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles... Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Peter 2:11-12). St. Peter hands Jeremiah's letter to the Church. Christians are the new exiles: resident, contributing, visibly good for the city, and never fully at home. The strategy is unchanged in twenty-six centuries: build, plant, bless, pray, and let the neighbors notice.

9. (Cut if short on time.) The night before He died, Jesus prayed about His people's relationship to the world. Read John 17:15-18. What does He explicitly not ask for, and what does He ask instead?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one... As you did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:15, 18). No evacuation; protection and sending. Jesus prays Jeremiah's letter over the Church: in Babylon, kept, and sent. Any spirituality built on escape from the world has to argue with the explicit prayer of Christ.

10. Bring it home. Name your Babylon honestly: the workplace, campus, industry, or city where you feel most like an exile. Applying tonight's letter, what does "build, plant, and seek its shalom" actually look like there, this month?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Let the group do the work here; press past vague answers to concrete ones. Building and planting: doing your work excellently, making commitments, investing in the institution instead of merely

enduring it. Seeking shalom: solving a problem that is not your job, honoring the people no one honors, being the reason something flourishes. Praying for it: by name, regularly, especially for the people who make it feel like exile. The letter's scandal is its ordinariness: God's plan for His people in Babylon looked like houses, gardens, weddings, and prayer.

SEND · CLOSING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

S1. What would change in your Monday if you crossed out “stuck here” and wrote what 29:7 writes: “sent here”?

S2. Is there a “Hananiah” message you have been preferring to God’s actual timeline: a two-year story that keeps you from planting anything?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Do one deliberate act of shalom-seeking in your Babylon this week: solve a problem that is not yours, honor someone unhonored, or improve something you could have just endured.
- Pray for your city, campus, or workplace by name every day this week, including one person there who makes it feel like exile.
- Write “sent, not stuck” somewhere you will see it on Monday morning, and read Jeremiah 29:12-13 before you walk in the door.

CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENT

LEADER: SAY THIS AT THE VERY END, AND REFUSE ALL FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Next week, do not miss. Bring nothing but your Bible. The sealed guesses come out. That is all I am going to say.

CLOSING PRAYER

"Father, You have sent us where we are: to our cities, our jobs, our neighborhoods, our Babylons. Give us the long faithfulness of the exiles: to build and plant where we would rather pack and wait, to seek the shalom of places that do not love You yet, and to trust Your plans across timelines longer than our patience. We will call upon You, and You will hear us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." (Closing Prayer)

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7, RSV2CE)

Every Passage in This Session

Jeremiah 25 and 29 (with 28)

Primary Text

- Jeremiah 25:8-12 · seventy years; Babylon judged after (Q1, compressible)
- Jeremiah 28:1-17 · Hananiah's two years; the test; his death (Q2, leader narrative)
- Jeremiah 29:1-7 · the letter: build, plant, marry, seek shalom (Q3-Q4, memory verse)
- Jeremiah 29:10-14 · seventy years; the plans; seek and find (steelman Q5-Q6)

Old Testament Roots

- Genesis 1:28; 2:8, 15 · the creation mandate reissued in Babylon (Q3)
- Genesis 39:5-12; 41:38-57 · Joseph, faithful exile, blessing to the empire (leader background)
- Daniel 1 · faithful service at the pagan court (leader background)
- Daniel 9:2-3 · Daniel reads Jeremiah (live discovery, Q7)

New Testament Fulfillment

- 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11-12 · exiles of the Dispersion (live discovery, Q8)
- John 17:15-18 · kept in the world, sent into it (Q9, cuttable)
- Philippians 3:20 · our commonwealth in heaven (leader background)
- Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11 · how Israel's promises are ours (steelman Q6)

Catechism

- CCC 2239 · the citizen's duty to the good of society
- CCC 1049 · hope for the new earth spurs work on this one
- CCC 2632; 2635 · petition centered on the Kingdom; intercession even for enemies