

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Ganas

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Scripture: Jeremiah 29:4-11

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon

⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

⁸ Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

¹¹ 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.

Transcript:

Bow your heads with me. Father in heaven, I want to thank you for today, Lord. Thank you for this time of worship, this time that we're handing over to you, Lord, to focus on you. Hear our hearts, lift our spirits, in your beautiful name. Amen.

Technology is not helping me. There we go. All right, [foreign language 00:00:29]. Say it with me. One, two, three, [foreign language 00:00:34]. All right. So back in the eighties, there was a movie called Stand and Deliver, a true story about a math teacher called Jaime Escalante, a leader that I looked up to. And this teacher believed in his students and he took, essentially he challenged his predominantly lower income Latino students from East LA, from barrios in East LA, to rise to a level of what they could be, not what either people thought them to be. Most immigrants and most Latinos in those areas would be restaurant workers and cleaning houses. And he said, "As long as you have the [foreign language 00:01:11] to learn, I will teach you." [foreign language 00:01:16], such a great Latino word. [foreign language 00:01:17].

[foreign language 00:01:21]. The direct English word translation for [foreign language 00:01:24] is desire, but it's more than that. There's something a little lost in translation. [foreign language 00:01:31] is like desire and passion, determination and resilience, all wrapped up into one. It's kind of like the English word oomph. If you've ever tried to explain the word oomph to a non-English speaker, you'll find yourselves like, "Give it some oomph, man." Like, what is oomph? It's like, give it your all, like give it 110%, like give it with power.

It's kind of like that. But [foreign language 00:01:54] is even bigger than that. And Jaime took low-testing students all the way up to where they could take the advanced placement calculus test. But he warned them that it wouldn't come without a lot of hard work, discipline, and focus in order to do so because they were going to face a lot of challenges. Not just in the classroom, but outside the classroom. So they had to choose to put in the hard work. He even made them sign a contract to take his classes. That's how serious he was about this commitment. That's why he said, "You need to have the," say it with me, "[foreign language 00:02:35] to do so."

We're in the current cur current sermon series called Lead, where we highlight that the church needs Christ-rooted leaders who have a vision for changing the world. But leaders in all categories face challenges, and it requires hard work to keep that desire up. Well, in kingdom work, that desire, that which gives you the [foreign language 00:03:02], only comes from one place, and that is God.

So we don't necessarily need people who are... Again, I'm going to use air quotes and be very American, "self leaders." We need leaders who choose to be only reliant on God, leaders who know that the source, the only place, the source of hope, strength, and stamina comes from is God. And today we're looking at the prophet Jeremiah, somebody who needed a lot of [foreign language 00:03:32] to do the work that God gave him. And as well, I'm going to give you two practical, physical steps today to keep you rooted in Christ because you are all leaders in your community. Whether you know it or not, some of you, you might be the only Christian that somebody knows. You might be the only connection to Christ that someone in your life knows. You are a leader.

And this is true of about a dozen or so of what we call spiritual disciplines. If you don't know what the word spiritual discipline means, let me give you the textbook definition, or one of the textbook definitions. Practices or habits and experiences that are designed to develop, grow, and strengthen certain qualities of spirit to build the, again, air quotes, "muscles" of one's character and expand the breadth of one's inner life.

Now if you're saying, like, "Man, I can't do something else. Now I've got to worry about spiritual disciplines? What kind of church is this?" Well, let me just calm you for a second. You're doing one of those spiritual disciplines right now. Worship is one of the spiritual disciplines. That's why you're here. So you already got one down. I'm just going to give you two more.

So, let's go back to Jeremiah. Today we highlighted Jeremiah 29:11. It says, "'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.'" Man, I don't know about you, but in my experience is this is not one of the most misquoted scriptures in the Bible? Because that's why I made sure that we read the beginning of that scripture to this point, because those plans sucked. Did you not hear it? God basically says, he just told him to buckle up, hunker down, plant a garden, eat some vegetables. You're going to be here for awhile. It's going to be 70 years. Don't decrease the number because in 70 years when I come back, there better be some of you. So make sure you have kids and marry them and all kinds of stuff. You're going to need those vegetables. Those plans sucked. "70 years, you're going to struggle." That's essentially what he said.

He says, "And then after 70 years, when you essentially learn your lesson, because you wouldn't turn away from your evil ways, then I will come to visit you." They even had prosperity gospels at that time. There was some false prophet saying, "Oh, God, it's two years." They tried to Joel Osteen that action, but just, just... Call it and claim it. Two years, we'll be back. And Jeremiah was like, "No, yo. 70 years. You better eat those vegetables."

Jeremiah was a priest in the last decades before the fall of Jerusalem, where they were going to be carried off in exile. And for those who may not know what exile means, it's just a fancy word for being taken from their home, forced from their home. In this context, it was kind of like kidnapped.

We'll see how this goes in sanctuary, if they let me down. Let's see what happens here. Jeremiah's job, essentially what God told him was to tell the Israelites, "You best check yourself before you," say with me.

Wreck yourself.

"Wreck yourself." Oh, look out. Oh, now, y'all are sinners. Yeah, see, that's that's early '90s gangster rap. I know what y'all are doing. I'm glad you're in church. Don't worry, I'm a sinner too. We got grace for everybody here. Don't worry about that.

But that was his job, man. That was not cool. An interesting detail about Jeremiah is that when God called him, he was just a spring chicken. He was a young cat. He was a teenager. And he told God, like, "I can't do this. I'm too young." But God responded to him, and Jeremiah 1:7-8, it says, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth.' For to all to whom I send you, you shall go. And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid for them. For I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord."

So God's saying, "You ain't too young, bro. Don't worry about that. Just go where I tell you to go, say what I tell you to say, and I got you."

Now, we've said this here at Belle Pres over and over again. It doesn't matter how young you are. It doesn't matter how old you are. You can do kingdom work. The only requirement of you is to answer God's call. He'll take care of the rest. He's got you.

We see this in scripture as well. Abraham, in the book of Genesis, was almost 100 years old when God told him, "I will make my covenant with you, with your descendants. I will keep my promise." That cat wasn't a spring chicken. He wasn't a summer chicken. He wasn't even an autumn chicken. That was a winter chicken, and God was like, "I can use you." And here Jeremiah thinks he's too young to be used by God.

The funny thing about when Jeremiah was called, this conversation he's having with God saying, "I'm too young," was during the reign of King Josiah. King Josiah who became the king at what age? Eight. So there's anybody too young to be doing anything, it was King Josiah. But King Josiah, like Jeremiah, was passionate about bringing Israel back to God and to have them turn from their evil ways. Because with youth comes energy and comes passion.

God clearly here is showing that young people can be leaders in the kingdom of God, just as much as older, wiser people. And I think, this is just my personal opinion, the best combination is to take those young leaders and a couple of them with those older, wiser leaders to collaborate, because that's when things can get done.

We see that in the Bible, too. Moses and Joshua. Joshua was the successor of Moses. Joshua hung out with them, and then Joshua was the one who took them into the promised land. Oh, and another big one. I think Jesus, or... Jesus. He's not Jesus. I think Dr. Scott Dudley said this as well. He said, "Jesus also rolled deep with his disciples." Now, Jesus, wasn't a winter chicken. He was more of a summer chicken, but some of those disciples were pretty young. You're never too old and you're never too young to do kingdom work.

But I will tell you that it does require hard work and focus, and you have to be rooted in Christ, because struggles will happen. Sometimes those plans suck. And they did for Jeremiah. Jeremiah didn't have no fun job. He wasn't well-liked, his life was threatened. There was even a time where he thought about quitting or he mentioned quitting. We read it in Jeremiah 28. He was struggling. He says, "For wherever I speak, I cry out. I shout violence and destruction, for the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and a derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart, as it were, burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am wary with holding it in, and I cannot." So he's basically saying, "What if I just don't say anything anymore? What if I just don't mention God anymore? Just quit." But he says, "I can't, because the word of God is burning inside me and I have to share it."

My sisters and brothers in Christ, is the word of God burning inside you? See, Jeremiah had an intimate relationship with God, and it was the word of God that kept him focused, that burning word inside him that kept him focused. Through all the trials and tribulations that he had to face, he was reliant on God and nothing else. He was not a happy camper. That cat was running low on serotonin. He was not a

happy camper. One person who knew that song. I like it. But despite everything, he stayed true to God because he had the [foreign language 00:11:39] to do so.

Which brings me to the first spiritual discipline to keep you rooted in Christ, and that is sabbath. We read in Exodus 28. It says, "Remember the Sabbath day. Keep it holy." And then he goes on to say about not working. This is the fourth commandment of the 10 commandments. I'm pretty sure there's a reason why it's there. I mean, that's the reason why you're here today. In seven days, you shall keep it holy. That's the reason why you come back. Guess what? How many days ago, or from now you're going to be back here? Hopefully most of you are going to be back here. This is part of that sabbath, and that phrase means, air quotes, "holy." Part of that definition is separate. To keep it holy means to keep it separate.

So your sabbath is to be different than the other days of the week. God says not to work so that you can focus and connect with him by disconnecting from your other distractions. There was a time in this country, some of you might remember it, where on Sundays almost everything was closed. That was to help you assist with keeping a sabbath. But now today, with one button ordering and 24/7 newscasting, and on your phone you can stream movies and videos and social media or whatever it is, there's no more assistance. Now you have to make the choice to disconnect.

I challenge you to take the sabbath a little more seriously. Dedicate your day of worship completely to God. No more work emails after the service or during the service. I'm looking around to see if anybody's on it. No more rushing to watch football, no more binging on shows, no more shopping. Instead, dedicate your day to reading scripture, spend time in prayer, go to more than one worship service. We've got like 18 of them here. We've got ones that ain't even in English. Go to those.

I got to tell you something. I'm the Director of Worship Community, so I oversee our worship communities, and I've sat in these worship services in Chinese, and I don't understand anything. And also New Hope, where they speak in Kinyarwanda. I don't understand anything, but I can tell you, I can feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in those rooms. Just that alone. Or sit with your family undistracted.

Now, I'm about to say something crazy, so you better buckle up like God was telling them to eat their vegetables. How about, you plan this. Go tell your mom or whoever you need to tell. How about on a Sunday, you turn off your phone? Oh, Lord, he didn't just say to turn off my phone. Did pastor just say turn off his phone? He did just say turn off his phone. Man, that's it. We are leaving. I'm getting in the car. Leaving. Go get the tithe and offering out of the basket, we're leaving. I don't know what kind of cult you just brought me to, this John the Baptist, camel belt-wearing Essene cult. I'm out of here. Well, I want to hear the rest of the sermon. Well, fine. You stay, I'm leaving. You know what? Why don't you go to potluck? I guarantee you they're trying to give you locusts and honey over there. This is out of control.

Yeah, I said it. Turn off the phone. Pastor, how am I going to turn off my phone? My phone tells me where to go, tells me what to do. How am I going to watch the service without my phone? My phone's connected to my watch. It gives me my heart rate, tells me when to sleep. I'll tell you one thing your phone ain't telling you. Be still and know that I am the Lord. That it is not telling you. It might in your Bible app, if you ever opened it. Well, I can't. It's small and I've got to stretch it and yeah, whatever.

You need to have the fire of the word of God burning inside you to give you the [foreign language 00:15:19], because sometimes those plans suck. Sometimes your marriage does fall apart. You lose your job, you lose your house, you lose your lease, you lose your financial aid. Your health begins to decline, your relationships begin to deteriorate. You need that burning word of God inside you to help you get through that. Not only just you, but others. So you can show others that because you're rooted in Christ, you can face these things. Because after 70 years, God will keep his promise.

Which brings me to the second spiritual discipline that I want to give to you today, and that is of prayer and fasting. Pastor Rich talked about this last week in the book of Esther. Esther 4:16 is just one of them. "Go." This is Esther talking to Mordecai. "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Shushan and

hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do." because the point of fasting is to grow in a more intimate relationship with God, Christ. And the definition of biblical fasting is just refraining from eating, but it has to be coupled with prayer. Because if you just decide not to eat for a few days and not pray, you're just starving yourself. It needs to be coupled with prayer. Replace the time that you would be eating with prayer. So minimum at least an hour. I don't know. Some of you guys may be fast eaters, but let me tell you minimum, at least an hour of prayer.

And although scripture doesn't give us a direct command, anywhere in scripture you won't find it to say that you should fast on these days at this time, it's all throughout scripture. Esther is just one of those. Even Jesus himself told his disciples, I'm pretty sure in the book of Matthew it says, "When you fast," not if you fast. So Jesus himself was assuming that fasting was going to be part of their Christian walk. But somehow, this practice got lost a little bit in the shuffle of Westernized gospel, but not necessarily in other cultures. It's funny that in a culture that is good at overindulging, over-consuming, one that never wants to be without, one that does not like pain, somehow does not promote fasting as much as the Bible does. I just want you to reflect on our culture.

Now, many of you maybe have never done this, and I just want to present this to you. What if you decided to simply dedicate yourself to prayer for an hour a day for three days? An hour a day. Just that alone, I guarantee your life probably would be different. Now, couple that with not eating for three days. That's a whole other level, because you have to mentally prepare yourself. You become so hyper-aware of your body and of your mind, of not eating. It changes you.

Now, I know not everyone can physically water fast. I understand that. Medical conditions or whatever it may be, but there are other alternatives to water fasting. There's juice fasting and soup fasting, and there's other stuff out there. And maybe some of you can't see yourself praying for an hour, for those long periods of time. Well, there's alternatives to that, too. You can journal, you can prayer journal. You can journal as long as the focus is on God. You can read scripture for an hour a day. I know probably all of y'all are reading scripture for an hour a day already, but maybe you bump it up to two hours. Or here's another one. You can just sit in silence and listen to the Holy Spirit. Be still and know that I am the Lord.

When I struggle myself as being a, air quotes, "leader," I turn to fasting. Because it's a hard reset. It reminds me how much I need God and how much God is with me. The best that I can say is that supernatural things happen. I can't go into all the details because we don't have time, but there is health benefits. There's mental health benefits. And biggest of all, there are spiritual health benefits. Fasting teaches you patience and perseverance. So I would challenge you. Talk to your All In group leaders. See if you can plan a fast for this summer, or maybe this fall, or just come and talk to a pastor.

So I want to leave you with finishing the story of Stand and Deliver. If you haven't seen the movie, spoiler alert, but even if you know the end, it's still a great movie to go watch. Well, in 1982, 18 of Jaime Escalante's students did end up taking the AP calculus test and they passed with flying colors. But then they were accused of cheating because the educational testing service found that their scores to be suspicious because they all made the same math errors.

And Jaime Escalante stood up for his students and said, "That's not true." And so 12 of the students decided to retake the test and passed. And some of them even did better than the time before, to get all their scores reinstated. With [Arabic 00:20:14], Jaime and his students proved the system wrong, that Latino kids could be more than just restaurant workers and custodians.

And I just want to say something about these jobs of restaurant workers or landscapers. They're noble jobs, any job you show up to and work hard, that's noble. It's not the level of job. It's the assumption that that's the job that they could only do, or that's really what they're going to amount to. That is called prejudice. That's the same as saying that all Chinese people or all Asians are good at math, or saying that all Jews are good with money, or saying that all Black people are good athletes and can dance, or

saying all Presbyterians can't really move during worship. That's not right. Although that may be true for some of the people in that group, but to assume that that's all that those people can do, that's prejudice.

His students, some of his students did go on to be engineers. They did go on to work in the science field and the tech industry. Jaime said that if you put in the hard work, and they had the [foreign language 00:21:28], there was hope for their future.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, you are spiritual leaders in your community, whether you know it or not. You need to keep that burning word of God kindled inside you. These are two spiritual disciplines to help you do that because you can't kindle the fire inside somebody else if you don't have any fire inside you to give.

Bow your heads with me. Father in heaven, thank you so much for this day, Lord. Thank you for your spirit working through all of these services here in Belle Pres. Not just in Belle Pres, in churches across the world, Lord. We dedicate this time to you. We thank you for the blessings. Forgive us for our sins, for we know not what we do, Lord. But we can face it, and with it, we experience your grace, which leads to your mercy, or your mercy that leads to your grace, Lord. Thank you so much for being there for us, even when the plans suck. In your beautiful name, we all said, "Amen."

Discussion Questions:

Read Jeremiah 29:1-23 and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Ice Breaker Question:

- If you could give a piece of advice to your younger self, what would it be?

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions -- Read Jeremiah 29:1-23 together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following

- Through the letter of Jeremiah, what did God ask the Israelites to do? Then they were to seek the welfare of the community, how can we seek the welfare of the community God has sent us?
- Jeremiah had to have an intimate relationship with God to continue the mission. We too need an intimate relationship with God and mentioned in the sermon was fasting and prayer to nurture that relationship. If you have practiced fasting from food in order to pray and get closer to God, what did you learn or experience? If you haven't tried fasting with prayer, what might cause you to try it?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.