

For I Know the Plans

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Preacher: Gabriel Wong

[0:00] All right. Hi everyone. So today we're going through this summer. We're going through the greatest hits of the Bible. And last week, as Alex mentioned earlier, we discussed acts to the early church where as a church were devoted not dabbling to the apostles teaching to fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer.

So we're devoted to the apostles teaching for one. And emphasis is not on the fact that it's the apostles teaching. That's what James said last week, but on the content of the teaching, which was Jesus. The focus is not on the messenger, but on the message, the word of God itself.

And so naturally I brought something with me today, a couch cushion. I know it's dark in here, but can anyone read what it says? It says, 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. Jeremiah 29, 11.

So our summer series is on the top hits of the Bible and boy is Jeremiah 29, 11, a top hit. It's the type of Bible verse that appears on fridge magnets and apparently couch cushions. It's the type of verse that you see on your Bible app verse of the day notification.

I was talking to Ellen the other day and she said she knows someone who has a Jeremiah 29 tattoo. That's, that's a common thing also. And now some of you are new to church and you've never heard of Jeremiah 29, 11 before you're feeling a bit out of the church.

[1:31] That's okay. That's okay. We'll fill you in. If you're new here, welcome. We're glad you're here. We'll be talking about this verse today, but also because of the popularity and use the conceptions of Jeremiah 29, 11.

It's also a verse that raises a lot of eyebrows. People say you have to take the verse in context. God doesn't always promise you health, wealth, and prosperity. We need to consider the context and that's true.

But some others say this verse was written to a different people at a different time. Are you a 2,600 year old Jew living in Babylon? You look more like a 29 year old Chinese guy in Hong Kong. And if not, then this verse doesn't apply to you at all. All right. Let's, we'll, we'll have to unpack that a little bit more. Okay. See, I can understand why Jeremiah 29, 11 is so popular. It's comforting. It's relevant to us.

I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord. We want what this verse promises. Who wouldn't want to prosper? Who wouldn't want to have hope in a future?

[2:41] Right? Cause life is tough. Sometimes it's confusing. When you lose your job and you're anxious about paying rent, you want to believe that God has a plan to prosper you.

And when you're agonizing, which university should I go to? UST or Manchester? You want to believe that God has a plan for you. Or if you're in your fifties on your bed thinking, what did I do with my life? Did I waste it?

You want to trust that there's a hope and a future. We're drawn to Jeremiah 29, 11, because we live in a broken world. We face problems one after another in our broken world. And we need to figure out how to make decisions in a chaotic, messy, and broken world.

That's why this verse is so attractive. And it's in the context of this broken, and it's in this broken world that we find ourselves right smack in the middle of the context of our Judean friends.

No, it's not the case that we were forcefully exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. And no, we weren't ripped out of our homes by King Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 BC.

[3:49] But we stand with the people of Judah when we are grieving and confused and wondering how do we live in this broken world. So Jeremiah 29, 11 applies to us, not less, but more when we understand the context that we, along with Judah, have sinned and we're living in exile in this broken world.

Today, we'll see in Jeremiah 29 that the Lord has a good plan for us. He has a good plan for exiles living in a broken world. And so again, we're a church devoted, not dabbling to the apostles' teachings.

So as is our custom, let's please stand as we read the word of God out of reverence. Let's stand as we read Jeremiah 29, verses 4 to 14. 4 to 14.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce.

Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

[5:04] For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you. And do not listen to the dreams that they dream.

For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name. I did not send them, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you.

And I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plants for welfare, not for evil, to give you a future and hope.

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. I will be found by you, declares the Lord. And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I've driven you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. This is the word of the Lord. Please take a seat. You may be seated. Right.

[6:11] I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. That's what Jeremiah 29, 11 says. But the question we have is, what is the Lord's plan for us? What's the Lord's plan for us?

That's something we wonder. And today we'll look at three aspects of the Lord's plan for us. Three aspects. The first aspect is that the Lord planned our exile in a broken world.

We'll first set the scene, the understanding that we live as exiles in a broken world. The words we just read are written by Jeremiah, a prophet.

An Old Testament prophet is someone who spoke the words of God. Jeremiah's words are God's words. That's why he starts off by saying, thus says the Lord, because it's God's words.

The verses we read are part of a letter that Jeremiah was writing to Judean exiles living in Babylon. He wrote to Judeans. The Judeans were a tribe of Israel, God's people who lived in and around Jerusalem, that area.

[7:13] And what happened was that the Judeans were attacked and exiled by Babylonians. Last month, we talked about in the book of Jonah about Assyrians, the Assyrian empire, a brutal empire with the values of ISIS, the brutal values of ISIS, but with the strength and power of America.

Now, Babylon was the next empire following the Syrians. And these Babylonians exiled the Judeans, exiled, meaning that they took them away from their home in Jerusalem and brought them, forced them to live in a foreign land.

That's what exiled means. Forcing someone out of their home and into a foreign land. And the Lord addresses these exiles in this letter, starting from verse four, which says, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. The Lord wants them to know something. Notice this. He says that I'm the one who sent you into exile. I sent you from Jerusalem. Yes, Babylon, this empire was the one who took you away, but this exile was ultimately my plan.

I did it. When we read Jeremiah 29, 11, let's remember this. The plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Those plans include exile.

[8:35] And why were they exiled? Because of generations of persistent disobedience to God. Jeremiah chapter one, earlier in this book, chapter one, verse 15, foretells that enemies will come and attack Judah.

And why? We see that God says, I will declare my judgments against them, against Judah, for all their evil in forsaken me, in turning away from me. Judah sinned in forsaking God, turning away from him and wanting nothing to do with God.

They turned away from God and their exile was the consequence, God's judgment for their evil. And now the same is true for us. That's the key to understanding Jeremiah 29, 11. You realize that there's something wrong in this world, don't you? When we turn on the news, we hear of wars, natural disasters, famine. We ourselves might struggle, be anxious about how to pay rent or have broken families, feel stress from work or school, anxiety, loneliness. And the Bible says that this wasn't how life was meant to be from the beginning. The struggles of life, both big and small, it's all since we live in a broken world because of our sin. [9 : 53] Sin separates us from God. And God's judgment for us is exile into a broken world, just like it was with Judah. We're exiled, separated from God's presence and have to deal with the consequences.

See, Jeremiah explains this more in chapter 2, verse 12. He says, Jeremiah here is describing Judah's idols.

We've talked about idols here quite a bit before. But again, sin is turning away from the Lord. The fountains of living water who created us, who gives us life and breath, who created us to have a relationship with him, to know him and enjoying him forever.

That's how we find life. But instead, we look to lesser things, which Jeremiah calls broken cisterns, our idols. A cistern is something, is a hole in the ground that you dig to store water.

And Jeremiah was talking about cracked, broken cisterns that can't hold water. Kind of like leaky water bottles. You pour water in a bottle, but there's a hole in the bottom and it all comes out. That's like the idols in our lives.

[11 : 14] We pour all our hopes, expectations of hope and future into them. But then find it all dripping out of the bottom. And then we find ourselves empty. Jeremiah is saying, your idols don't hold water.

These things that you're looking for, they can't hold water. We live in a broken world. And do you see how our world is broken, extra broken, when we're chasing broken cisterns?

When we reject the God that we're made to know, then it's no surprise that, unfortunately, we feel lonely. We feel disconnected and isolated.

If we build our lives upon a husband and wife, family, children, friends, they will inevitably disappoint us. There's holes in the bottom and our hopes and future, our expectations leak out.

Or maybe we're anxious if we're trusting our bank accounts. Instead of God who created everything and gives this all to us. Can you see the cracks in our career, our money, friends, family?

[12 : 18] All these idols, good things. But if we try to place our hopes and expectations in them, then we find our hopes and future dripping out the bottom.

Because only God can sustain you and satisfy you. Don't look to idols that can't hold water. And that's why we're in exile. We're exiles living in a broken world because of our sin.

Exiles because we're separated from God and now live in a broken world. That's the first aspect of the Lord's plan for us. To live as exiles. The second aspect of his plan is that his plan for us requires endurance and suffering.

His plan for us includes enduring through suffering. If we read Jeremiah 29, we see in verses 5 to 10, the reason behind the motivation why Jeremiah is writing this letter to the exiles.

He's addressing a particular situation. The problem is that false prophets were telling everybody in Babylon, these exiles, that this would be a short exile.

[13 : 23] It wouldn't be a big problem. In previous chapter, in Jeremiah 28, verse 11, a false prophet, Hananiah, was going around telling the exiles that Babylon would fall in two years.

It would only be two years in exiles. Babylon would fall. You'd be free to go home. Exile would only be two years. And Jeremiah writes this letter to correct those lies, those delusions.

He tells them in verse 10, when 70 years, 70, not two, 70 years are completed for Babylon. I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

The Lord says, no, it won't be two years. It's going to be 70 years. There are 70 years for Babylon. It's like, because people sometimes ask, what would you do if you had one more day to live?

Right? If you have one day left, you wouldn't waste it. You do what's most important. Now, one problem with this question is that there are good and useful things that we do now that we wouldn't do if you really had one day left.

[14 : 25] For example, I'm studying a master's. I'm trying to finish this up in the next few weeks. But if I have one day left to live, why bother? I'm not going to graduate anyways. Right? Or why

apply for a job that starts in two weeks' time so that you can save up money, put money in your MPF for decades later?

You wouldn't do that, right? Just enjoy life, spend all your money now, and have fun. That's the reasoning behind what Jeremiah is writing in verses 5 to 6. He's telling them, build houses and live in them.

Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. And give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. He's writing to tell these exiles, this is going to be a marathon, not a sprint. You need to unpack your bags a bit. Build houses, plant gardens. Marry, have kids. See, false prophets promised these people quick release from exile.

It'll just be two years. In verse 8 and 9, the Lord tells them, Do not let your prophets, do not let these false prophets who are among you deceive you. And do not listen to the dreams that they dream.

[15 : 30] For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name. I did not send them, declares the Lord. In other words, he's saying, there's no quick relief. That false hope that they're giving you, that they're preaching, is not from me.

You're going to be here a while. And you're going to have to deal with the consequences. Right? That's the purpose of this letter. To tell them that it's going to be a long time in Babylon. And they need to settle in.

But they'll need to, they'll be in captivity for a while. But not only that. In verse 7, the Lord tells them to seek the welfare of their captives, of the Babylonians. Their enemies.

These Babylonians were brutal to them. They were exiled. But this exile means siege and war and everything that went along with that, that came along with that at the time.

Fathers, mothers, children, you would see killed in front of you. Or your wives, your daughters, raped. The most holy temple that they had, destroyed also.

[16 : 27] Jeremiah writes this letter to get across to them this reality that they're going to be subject to these people. Maybe even brutal captives for 70 years.

And so the Lord's plan for them and for us requires patient endurance. Jeremiah 29, 11 doesn't promise quick relief from suffering. The Lord doesn't promise to take us out of hardship.

But this promise is that he will bring us through hardship. Some people look at the verse and say that God will give you health, wealth, and prosperity. Name it and claim it. If only you had more faith, you'd be healed.

If only you prayed more, then your depression would be cured. If only you believed, then you'd be rich. But this is false. Don't let these false prophets deceive you. Don't believe those lies. The Bible doesn't sugarcoat it.

That life is hard. Life is difficult. We are exiles in a broken world. And exiles should expect hardship. Those captured by Babylon should expect hardship.

[17 : 28] And so terrible as it is, we do feel isolated and lonely sometimes. And there's real pain we experience in the world. When families break down. When there's conflict.

When loved ones pass away. That is the sad reality of living in a broken world. And I know some of us here may be hurting.

I don't know what all of you here are experiencing. But yeah, I want to acknowledge that pain. That there is real pain in this world. And I can't say what God's exact purpose is for your pain.

He doesn't explain the details entirely to Judah here. But we know that suffering, at least, is part of his plan. And suffering isn't the end. We are living in a broken world.

But this isn't what it was meant to be. This world is broken by sin. But it won't be like this. When Jesus returns, it makes all things new. And we know that God does have purposes for suffering.

[18 : 27] He uses suffering to remind us that this world is not our home. That we need him. I don't know how exactly God is writing your story in pain.

But I know that, at least in my life, God used suffering to draw me to him. In university, I've mentioned this before, but I went through a messy and painful breakup.

And now it's a small thing, maybe in hindsight, compared to what we experience in life, what some of you go through. But still, God used this tough time to wake me up.

And those were some of the toughest times for me when I felt heartbroken, confused, and betrayed. But it was in those times that I knew, not just in my head, but I felt in my heart that I really needed God.

I couldn't find the strength to wake up in the morning unless I turned to him. To start the day, I needed God. I needed to pray. I needed to read a psalm. I needed to sing worship songs.
[19 : 29] And it was in those times that I experienced this intimacy with God that I've never really felt before. Like, I felt in my bones that God is better than anything else that life has to offer.

It was through suffering that he taught me this. I could have a good career, but that wouldn't make me happy. I could be in a relationship, but that can end in a moment. I realized that those were all broken cisterns with cracks that can't hold my hopes and expectations.

They can't compare to the nearness, the unshakable joy, the hope that I had. In knowing God. And it's in those lows that God ignited in my heart a fire for him that only grows stronger to this day. And when I look back at those times, at those, yeah, in those times in university, they're painful. But I wouldn't trade the world for it compared to what I gained.

That's what I learned in hindsight. And now some of you are going through something a lot worse than this tiny problem I have. I don't know the exact problems, the exact plans that God has for you right now.

[20 : 31] But I at least can testify about what God did for me. Looking back, I know that in my suffering, he had a plan for me. His plan was for welfare, not for evil.

To give me a hope and a future that can't be shaken. That's my story. And so the Lord's plan requires endurance and suffering. That's the second aspect of the Lord's plan for us.

Lastly, his plan is to bring exiles back home. God wants to bring exiles back home. That's the third aspect of his plan for us. We saw in verse 10 that the Lord gave the exiles a promise.

That after 70 years of power, Babylon will fall and the Lord will bring exiles back to Jerusalem. He says, I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

That's the plan that the Lord says in verse 10. That's mentioned later in verse 11, in Jeremiah 29, 11. His plan is to bring these Judean exiles back home. The Lord also says in verse 14, that I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

[21 : 38] He promises to bring them home to Jerusalem. But I think there's something more here that God is trying to do. The Lord not only brings exiles back home to Jerusalem. He's trying to bring them back home to him.

He wants to bring the exiles back home to him. Jerusalem was home to them because that's the land that the Lord gave them. It was the promised land. Jerusalem was also home to them because that's where the Lord dwelt.

That's where his temple was, where they could come meet there and enter in his presence. To be, to enter his presence at the temple in Jerusalem. So the Lord brings them back to Jerusalem, but ultimately he's drawing them to him.

See our sin, the breakdown of our relationship with God. That's what caused in the first place, our exile. That's why we suffer in this broken world. So likewise, God's plan for us ultimately is to restore this relationship, to bring us back out of exile to him.

Let's see this reading from verse 12. I'm reading from verse 12. It says that, Then you will call upon me and come to me and pray to me and I will answer. Sorry. You come to me and pray to me and I will hear you.

[22 : 51] You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord. And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. The Lord promises to restore our relationship with him. He promises that he'll listen when we call upon him.

He promises that we'll find him when we seek him with all our hearts. The plan of God to restore exiled sinners to him is really the storyline of the whole Bible.

When we read the Old Testament and don't understand why it's relevant, it's probably because we need to see it in connection with God's plan to bring exiles back home.

And how does God do this? He does it by sending his son, Jesus. In order to bring us home, Jesus left his home in heaven. He came down, was born as a man and died for our sins.

[23 : 53] Jesus endured suffering in exile, just like we did. He died, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us back to God. We were made for a relationship with God, to know him and enjoy him.

And Jesus restored our relationship with God by dying on the cross, paying the penalty for our sins, reconciling us to him, for all who believe in him. Jesus rose from the dead and he'll be coming back one day to make all things new.

To fix this broken world, where there'll be no more pain, no more tears. No more sin and no more suffering. We will dwell forever in the presence of God.

Because if the promise of Jeremiah 29, 11 was just money, family, career, these things that we're looking for, then we don't need Jesus. If you look around in the world, people have these things. God does give health, wealth, and prosperity to all sorts of people, even people who don't deserve it. As sinners, we don't deserve Jeremiah 29, 11.

[24 : 57] We don't deserve welfare. We deserve evil because of our evil. We deserve exile and separation from God. But Jesus took that on himself, all the evil that we deserved, and gives us welfare, peace, prosperity instead.

Through him, we have a hope and a future. And because of Jesus, we have the promise in verse 13 that if we seek the Lord, we will find him when we seek him with all our hearts.

We can seek God and find him. But how do we do that? Right? There's some of you here who are seeking God. You recognize that this world is broken. That this life, if that's all there is, that would just be terrible.

You've been chasing after the bells and whistles of Babylon, but found that they're broken cisterns. You know you were made for more than this, but you don't know where to start. Or maybe you've tried seeking God before.

You've gone to church. You've prayed. But it didn't work. God didn't cure your depression. God didn't cure your loneliness. You didn't find him. You tried seeking God and it didn't work.

[26 : 00] Well, I invite you nevertheless to try again, to try and seek him. Because verse 12 says, you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you.

He promises that he hears us when we call upon him and pray to him. So I can't promise how or when he will answer. As we saw earlier, we do need patient endurance.

You may not get your answer immediately. But God promises, the Bible says that he will hear you. He wants to be found by you. That's why he sent his son to die for you.

How would he not hear you when you pray? And so we can pray. Prayer is just talking to God. My journey to knowing God began with prayer. And as I look around here, I know that for a lot of you here who know God, that began with prayer.

It began with seeking him. We can pray, God, show me yourself. If you're there, show yourself to me. Even if you don't believe him, you can take that small step.

[27 : 04] Just one step at a time to seek him. And he'll answer your prayers. God hears your prayers just as he heard mine and others around this room. And I can't guarantee that how God will answer in the next week, next month, next year.

But God says he will hear you. How else do we seek God? It says here, you'll seek me and you'll find me when you seek me with all our heart.

We seek him with our whole heart. Now to close, I was struck this past week as I was preparing to preach today. And to be honest, I had a pretty tough time preparing.

As I told some of you, I was really wrestling with the text. I spent a lot of effort thinking through what to say. Wrote up a bunch of stuff. Had to scrap it. Because I didn't think that's what God was saying. And it was kind of demotivating. Like I spent all this effort. Why is this such hard work? Why is it so difficult? Why is sermon preparation so hard? And I began to doubt myself.

[28 : 07] Like what if this doesn't get better and I'm terrible at this? You know how some people say, don't quit your day job. Well, I just done that. I'm leaving my job in two weeks to devote myself to serving the church.

And it's like, why is this so hard? Like why, what if I can't do this? Did I throw away my career for nothing? Did I figure out God's plan for me correctly? And I was praying yesterday morning.

And I felt God just say to me, you will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart. Just seek me. Of course, this is difficult work.

We live in a broken world. Of course, it's going to be hard. It's hard because of sin. And there's decisions that you need to make. There's plans to carry out. But above all, just seek me.

You will find me when you seek me with all your heart. You want to know what the plans I have for you? I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. They are for you to run home to your

father's arms.

[29:07] That's where you find your welfare. That's where you find your peace and prosperity. Seek me with all your heart. Those are the plans I have for you. And I was reminded myself that I was seeking my worth in how productive I am.

How good I am at doing certain things. The approval of others. And maybe even seeking the approval of God. Placing my worth in how well I can accomplish things. And I was reminded that these are all just broken cisterns.

I felt the Lord saying to me, you're accepted by me. Just seek me. That's my plan for you. Seek me. That's my plan to bring you home. And while you've been away in exile, I've come to you.

I've sent Jesus to come seek, find you. Even when you weren't looking for me. I sent my son to you. For him to go into exile and suffering. To endure that. To bring you home.

And while you're away, while you're still living in this broken world. I don't leave you alone. I've sent my spirit. To make his home in you. So that God himself is dwelling in me.

[30:13] And I just need to seek him. I think of Psalm 27 that says, One thing I've asked of the Lord that I will seek after. That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. And I prayed. Lord, just give me this heart. I know that's your plan for me. I want to find you.

So in everything you do, seek the Lord with all your heart and you will find him. And don't take that to mean that you need to quit your job and be a pastor or pursue full-time ministry. That's the path that I feel that God is leading me for now.

But for you, it could be to build houses, plant gardens, remain at your job, doing whatever it is that you're currently doing. That could be the Lord's plan for you. That could be his calling. But in everything you do, seek him with all your heart.

That's his plan for you. It's his plan to bring you home out of exile and into his open arms. So what's the Lord's plan for us in Jeremiah 29, 11?

[31:19] That he planned our exile from the beginning because of our sin. He planned for us to patiently endure suffering in a broken world. And ultimately, the Lord's plan is to bring us home to him through Christ.

So let's seek him. Because when we seek him, not just his plans, but the Lord. Seek the Lord. We will find him when we seek him with all our hearts. So let's pray for that heart.

Let's pray together. God, we want to know you. We know that you are better than anything that life has to offer, as Cuban prayed earlier.

And if we don't know that, we pray that you'd give us his heart. For those who haven't turned to you today, we trust in your plans. And we pray that you would make yourself known to them. We thank you that you sent Jesus into this broken world, leaving his home to bring us with him back to you. And God, as we wrestle with the real pain and suffering in this life, when we make decisions, above all, let us seek you.

[32:35] Spirit, guide us in the way we should go. We trust your plans. Knowing that because Jesus died and rose for us, your plans are to prosper, not to harm us, to give you future and a hope.

Thank you that we have this in Jesus. We pray this in his name. Amen. Let's give a round of applause to Gabe. Thanks for giving us the word this morning.

So I think Gabe was challenging us just now to seek God's face, seek his will in things. And I couldn't think of a better time to do that than right now. So what I want to do is actually invite everyone, whether it's to bow your head, to close your eyes, to stand, to kneel with hands open. Would we just seek God's face right now? Julian will play a little bit of background music for us. But just for a couple of minutes, just want you to ponder kind of two things. One is, what are those broken cisterns that we may be holding in our lives?

Is it the family? Is it the, you know, the good job that we have, the house over our head? I recognize what I'm saying may be very challenging, especially in the context of Hong Kong to say those things.

[33:46] But, you know, have we held those things, those broken cisterns above who God is in our lives? And then the second thing I'd just invite you to pray into is, you know, just asking God, what is, what is actually true prosperity and welfare look like?

What does it look like in, through the lens of God's eyes, not through the lens of, you know, Hong Kong, the city, or maybe what you've been taught culturally growing up. But what does it truly

mean? Just ask God.

If it's new to you, just ask God, like, God, what does it truly mean to prosper and to be your child and to know that? There's true presence and prosperity, just being in your presence and that alone is enough.

So if you just take a moment to just spend some time to pray and then in a moment we'll close with a response song.