

## LONG DISTANCE LOVE

**Today's Text: Jeremiah Chaps 29, 30**

**Extracts:**

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive ... Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands... that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. ... For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope [Jer. 29: 4,5,6,7, 10, 11]*

*Sullivan Ballou was in the battle front during the American Civil War.<sup>1</sup> On 14 July 1861, a week before the battle at "First Manassas," he wrote a letter to his wife, Sarah. Among other things, he said, "My love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break....The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long.... Something whispers to me-perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar-that I shall return to my beloved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name." He never returned. He and his 27 comrades died in that battle.*

*Over 10 million couples worldwide are reported to be in long distance relationships.<sup>2</sup> They have been physically separated by war or career or other circumstances. How have they managed to keep up their love flame? You may currently be facing a similar situation and are anxious to know how to handle it. In today's lesson, we see the children of Israel in exile in Babylon. That involved their physical separation from the land of their birth, analogous to the separation of couples. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God wrote them a 'love' letter to strengthen them. Let us learn a few principles from it to guide us in handling problems associated with long distance love.*

<sup>1</sup> Story taken from "Romantic Love Letters," [www.theromantic.com/Loveletters/ballou.htm](http://www.theromantic.com/Loveletters/ballou.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Black, "Long Distance Lovers: Learn how to stay together while you're apart," [www.sblake.com/index.phtml](http://www.sblake.com/index.phtml)

## 1. Long distance love at a glance

In Greek mythology, there is the story of Penelope and her husband, Odysseus. They had hardly been married for one year when Odysseus went to war, the Trojan War. He was away for a very long time, without communicating with his wife. When it became doubtful if he was still alive, Penelope began to receive marriage proposals from numerous suitors. She still loved her husband; yet, she was not sure if he would ever return. So, she devised a way to ward off the proposals. She told all the men that she would consider their proposals as soon as she completed the robe that she was weaving for the funeral canopy of her father-in-law. So, each day, she worked on the robe, only to undo the work at night! That way, the work was never completed and her husband ultimately returned! That is the origin of the proverbial expression, *Penelope's web*, which means perpetually doing something that is never done.<sup>3</sup>

That story suggests that love is much more than intimacy between couples. God commands us to love Him with the heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves [Mk 12: 30, 31]. The closest neighbours may be husband and wife. According to their love of God, they are to love each other with their bodies (physical love) and their minds ('head' love) and their souls (spiritual love). Physical love addresses the question of sexual intimacy. For friendship, companionship and rational decisions having to do with child raising and budgeting, they have to use their heads. Issues of forgiveness, selflessness and faith in and fear of God are spiritual matters. Unless couples express love for each other in all the three areas, their love is incomplete and cannot last. For a fuller treatment of this subject, you may read, "Happily Married Everyday for Life," Volume 2, Number 15: 24 June 2001 [[www.bibleresourcecentre.com](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com)].

When couples live together, they may be able to share intimacy and companionship. I have used 'may' advisedly because there are many couples who live together physically but are thousands of miles apart emotionally! That could be due to problems such as alcoholism/drugs, impotence or economic/social pressures. However, for happily married couples who face physical separation, their biggest challenge is how to sustain their closeness. That is the main challenge for long distance love.

## 2. The challenges of long distance love

Within the context of modern communication systems, Penelope's case looks far-fetched. However, it demonstrates what couples in love can do for each other when they are apart. On the day of your wedding, you swore the following typical oath, in the presence of witnesses:

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<sup>3</sup> From *Bulfinch's Mythology*, [www.loggia.com/myth/penelope.html](http://www.loggia.com/myth/penelope.html)

*I [your name] do take you [spouse's name] as my lawfully wedded husband/wife for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.*

The word of God says that a vow voluntarily uttered is binding and *cannot* be broken [**Deut. 23: 21-22; Eccl. 5: 4-5**]. That is why God hates adultery and divorce because they represent a violation of the marriage vow. Any form of distance between a husband and wife is a major threat to their fidelity. That is why Paul wrote, “Do not deprive one another *except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control*” [**1 Cor. 7: 5**]. Here, we get the understanding that marital relations are central to marriage, the only morally acceptable way to God for procreation and pleasure. If both parties are physically apart, then, there is a problem.

In response to the demands of modern living, couples may find themselves living apart temporarily for the following reasons, among others:

a) *War*

Whether they are American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan or Nigerian soldiers on African Union service in Darfur, Sudan, husbands and wives have been forced to live apart for a season. Affected couples encounter temptations as they deal with loneliness. For example, it was when Uriah was in the war front that his wife, Bathsheba, had an adulterous affair with King David [**2 Sam. 11: 1-5**].

b) *Work or career*

Work or career may be another major source of physical separation between couples. One spouse may need to travel out quite frequently on business trips or state duties. Another may work with an international agency or a conglomerate that requires him or her to go on field posting or missions as an integral part of his or her career development. It might coincide with the time that it would not be convenient (on account of child-raising or schooling) to move the family from one station to the other. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, migrant workers are not allowed to come with their families but are given time off for home visits. During such trying times, couples will have to cope with separation. The book of Proverbs describes a young wife who enticed men into her house saying, “Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; ... for my husband is not at home. He has gone on a long journey” [**Prov. 7: 18, 19, 20**]. She could not deal with her sexual urges during her husband's long absence from home.

c) *Incarceration*

Another cause of physical separation may be incarceration, such as detention or imprisonment or life in exile. For example, Nelson Mandela was in prison for almost 30 years, during which time he lived away from his wife. Illegal aliens in America who left their spouses behind in their home countries are in a similar situation. For fear that they would not be allowed to return, they would dare not step out of America. Can you imagine what they and their spouses are passing through?

No matter what is responsible for the physical separation, there is an inevitable strain on the marriage. Modern communication gadgets, such as the e-mail and telephone, may help but they cannot make up for the loneliness. Frequent exchange of visits may help but they cannot substitute for companionship. Clearly, unless there is divine intervention, no human effort can sustain long distance love. Let us examine today's text for some such guidance.

**3. God expresses His love for the exiles in Babylon**

The children of Israel had been physically separated from their homeland when they were carried away to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar [Jer. 29: 1]. They were in fear and not at peace “and all faces turned pale” [Jer. 30: 5, 6]. They were in unfamiliar territory as slaves and exiles. They did not even have the freedom to worship their God the way they used to do back home. They were certainly lonely and disoriented. But as God's chosen people, in spite of their waywardness which led them into exile in the first place, God showed long distance love to them to assure them that there was no cause for concern, that all would be well. Here is what He asked Jeremiah to convey by letter to the exiles:

a) *It was only for a season*

God sent to tell the exiles, “After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place [home]. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you ... thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future hope” [Jer. 29: 10-11]. By giving the people the length of their separation from their homeland and the expected end, the people would certainly be able to bear their sufferings much better.

The spouse who is away from home is as lonely as the one who is at home. Therefore, they owe each other effective communication of hope and assurance of love. The communication has to be open and frank. It should convey a deep appreciation of what the other party is passing through and a comforting assurance. For example, Jerry Logan Glick, a Strategic Account Manager for Vividence, Inc., was one of the passengers on the *United Airlines Flight 93* that was hijacked by Islamic terrorists on

September 11, 2001. As soon as the attackers had taken control of the plane, Jerry phoned his wife, Liz, to alert her of the danger that he was facing. She connected him to 911 (America's emergency phone line) and shared her husband's ordeal. Before the plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, he assured her of his undying love and asked her to take care of their daughter, Emerson.<sup>4</sup> He had adequately prepared his wife for his death. That is true long distance love.

b) *He provided for their immediate needs*

Hope is good but it is not enough. It should be accompanied with provisions for *today* so that we can reach tomorrow. So, while waiting for their rescue in seventy years' time, God told the people to live a normal life by building houses and living in them and getting married and raising families [Jer. 29: 5, 6].

Couples in separate locations need to be busy where they are so as to deal with their loneliness and boredom. The wife (if she is the one left behind) will have to step up to the plate to manage the family's accounts and the children's schooling. The husband (if he is the one left behind) will have to learn how to cook and dress the children for school, pay attention to their home work and get them to bed on schedule. They have to be in touch with the ones away to update them on the situation at home. Those away will need to also update the ones at home on what and how they are doing, and to thank the other party for the great work they are doing at home. Both parties should express their love for each other and how they are missing each other. Such expressions could be very soothing! The e-mail or text message is not enough because there is much more in the voice than you may know. Therefore, while it is good to be cost-conscious, let it not dampen your expression of love for each other.

c) *He warned them to be spiritually alert*

God commanded the exiles to "seek the peace of the city where [He had] caused [them] to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace [they] will have peace" [Jer. 29: 7]. Moreover, they should be careful not to be misled by false prophets and diviners [vv. 8-9, 31-32], and He would chastise them whenever they went wrong [Jer. 30: 11-15]. He promised to make them His people and be their God [v. 22].

Long distance love cannot be sustained by human therapy but only by the power and grace of God. Many couples will lose heart and fall into temptation but they need the power of the Holy Spirit to resist Satan and his evil forces. Threats of infidelity and divorce are real. Innocent people

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<sup>4</sup> "Jeremy Glick (September 11 attack victim): From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy\\_Glick\\_%28September\\_11\\_attack\\_victim%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Glick_%28September_11_attack_victim%29)

could be hurt and there may be the need to ask for or grant forgiveness. Therefore, couples will need to put on the whole armour of God so that they can fight off the fiery darts of Satan and his wicked forces [**Eph. 6: 11-17**] that are hell-bent on destroying their marriage. When all else fails, only faith in and fear of God can keep the love flame burning for God-centred love “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things (and) endures all things” [**1 Cor. 13: 6, 7**].

#### **4. Conclusion: Spark up your long distance love with Jesus!**

Writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul said, “Husbands, love your wives, *just as* Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” [**Eph. 5: 25**]. The church (i.e., the body of believers) is the bride of Christ [**Rev. 19: 7**]. Therefore, as a member of that body, you are the bride of Christ.

On His ascension into Heaven, Jesus your groom told you that He was going on a long journey but that He would soon return. He did not give you an exact date but He gave you the signs of the time [**Matt. 24: 1-31; 36, 42**]. He promised, “I am with you *always*, even to the end of the age” [**Matt. 28: 20**]. In furtherance of that, He left you with another Comforter, the Holy Spirit forever [**Jn 14: 16, 26**]. Soon, He will return to take His bride [**Rev. 19: 7-9**], so that wherever He is, you will also be there [**Jn 14: 3**]. He has been gone for over two thousand years now but have you remained faithful to Him? Are you troubled and tired of waiting?

Jesus has warned, “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold, but he who endures to the end shall be saved” [**Matt. 24: 12- 13**]. Therefore, be patient. Don’t lose hope. Be prayerful. Remain faithful. Soon, very soon, your Groom will return and your long distance love will be duly rewarded!