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Seek the Welfare of the City

Jeremiah 29:1-9

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

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon instructs the Jews how to be faithful witnesses in the midst of an unbelieving society. While there are many different theories about how the Church should relate to the world, this text makes plain the difficult but fruitful way of life that God's people must embrace if they are to be salt and light.

Too Long in Exile

1 These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 2 This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. 3 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: 4 " Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Like Jesus who wept over Jerusalem, Jeremiah was a "weeping prophet" who lamented over the unfaithfulness of Israel that resulted in the exile.

- A boy prophet who began to teach under a boy king (Josiah), Jeremiah bore the burden of announcing the destruction of Jerusalem.
- He writes to the *survivors* of the Jews in Babylon. The siege of Jerusalem was horrific as was the journey east to Babylon that followed.
- Though coming off a brawl with a false prophet (28:12) and various death threats from his countrymen (26:8), Jeremiah manages to navigate the political situation and get a letter off to the exiles who were on the brink of extermination.
- He kicks off the letter saying that it was God who sent them into exile which reminds them to distinguish between the one who *brings* the trial, Nebuchadnezzar, from the one who *sent* it, God.

Cultivation – Invest in the Culture

5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 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. 7 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.

The Israelites are told to invest themselves in Babylon through real estate, construction,

business, farming, marriage, kids, grandkids, politics and whatever else would benefit the city and nation. God gives the dominion mandate for Israel to identify their well being with that of the world's superpower, to make the famous hanging gardens of Babylon *their* gardens, and to the extent they did so, He would bless them.

While many Jews wanted to remain on the outskirts of Babylon or even back in Judah, God wanted them to go into the city and live among the people. Why?

- Because God loves *people*, and that's where they are.
- The city is generally where the most *effective* people are, those with the most influence. If you capture the city, you've influenced the region (Col. 1:6, 23) because cultural norms are set and exported from the cities.
- The New Jerusalem *is* a city, and we have come to it (Heb. 12:22). The Christian Church has always thrived in cities. Where did Paul go at the end of his life? By 300AD half of all metropolitan people were Christians and 90% of people in the country were "pagans." A *paganus* is a rustic from the *pagus*, the country, and a heathen is someone who lives on the heath.

Build – Obviously if people are going to be involved in real estate they'll have to be starting businesses, getting jobs, participating in the economy. We can derive the principle that doing business well with unbelievers is a great witness as well as a way to prosper the city.

Marry – Jews who were planning on leaving as soon as possible, likely under distress and persecution, would not want to have romantic relationships complicating everything. Faithful, thriving marriages are radical in our culture.

Multiply – Jeremiah knows that the Jews will be in Babylon for 70 years, and one of the primary ways to bless a nation is with fruitful families. He mentions three generations.

Seek the Welfare of the City -- God doesn't tell the Jews to go into "full time ministry" but rather to seek the *shalom* of the city. The word "shalom" occurs over 250 times in the OT, and means much more than the absence of strife—completeness, rest, harmony, prosperity, blessing. It usually describes a state of fulfillment that results from God's presence. The applications are as various as our talents.

Beware of False and Off-Mission Leaders

8For 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, 9for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

Leaders among the people would tell them not to invest in and serve the city—form a ghetto culture, escape back to Jerusalem, avoid the pagans. Eventually God would restore the exiles to Judah but only after 70 years when another pagan nation, the Medes, would rise and crush Babylon. But blessing in Babylon meant blessing *for* Babylon, and the Jews would have to reject leaders who would take them off the mission. Seeking the welfare of the city draws people to Christ and grows the church.

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