

## Called into Exile

The 1990's was probably the greatest decade of Christian subculture memorabilia. From buying "Christian" mints to "Christian" cross-over shirts like "A Breadcrumbs and Fish," looking like the popular clothing store "Abercrombie and Fitch." Many professing Christians ate this up hook-line-and-sinker. We thought it was awesome that Christianity could be cool. Another thing was revealed about us as all these items were being sold. We were focused on personal, individual interpretation of the Bible – and we didn't know what the Bible actually says.

Now, how do I come to that conclusion? Well, some of you may remember friendship bracelets or friendship necklaces. The necklace would have a charm on it. And the charm looked broken. It'd have a phrase, but you could only read the phrase when the two charms came together. So, if you had a good friend, you'd buy these necklaces and one friend would take one half, while you had the other, reminding you of your good friend. Great idea. But, I remember a "Christian" friendship necklace where there was a Bible phrase on it that said, "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another."<sup>1</sup>

That sounds entirely appropriate, right? But it's not. The context of those words reveal that they are not friendly at all. Laban speaks these words to Jacob, and he's essentially saying, "God's watching you! Don't take advantage of me." Well, when you understand the context, it may make you want to take off that friendship necklace. But, as I said, it reveals something about many people's Bible interpretation. I've found in my life, and in others, that many times we're so focused on finding a little Bible verse nugget in our Bible reading where we can apply it personally, that we have become lazy and we have missed the context of Bible passages. And, this is true with the chapter we're studying today, too.

As you notice, I'm not preaching from Romans today. I'm doing that for a couple of reasons. First, this past week was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. We celebrated the privileges that we have in this country, and that's appropriate. However, as Christians, how are we to view ourselves in this fallen world? How are we to think of ourselves as citizens of America? This is a question that has confounded Christians since the first century. But another reason I'm preaching on this is because today, we're having a special focus on thanking God for the progress of the new building. At the end of the service today, we will be going outside to thank God and pray for the process. Did you know that our view of ourselves as Christians affects how we think about our interaction with our nation and also how we think about church buildings?

What I want to do today is help us to see how the Scriptures call us as local church to live and think about ourselves in a fallen world. And, as such, how even this view in Scriptures shapes our thinking about a new building. This is a tremendous challenge for me to break down into a sermon. I pray that God brings this all together and that we are together strengthened as we think about God's teaching this morning. So, the main premise of the sermon this morning is that **Christians are exiles in this world who seek to reveal God's Kingdom principles with their local churches and their interaction with the world.**

So, if you have your Bibles here, turn to Jeremiah 29. In Jeremiah 29, we have another popularly misunderstood Bible verse. Verse 11 says, "<sup>11</sup>**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,**

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: King James Version](#), Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), Ge 31:49.

**plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”<sup>2</sup>** So, imagine with me that you’re reading through your Bible in a year, and you are reading through Jeremiah. The book is confusing. You’re not sure all that’s going on. Jeremiah seems to be pretty sad and discouraged throughout a lot of it. You wish he was a little happier, but you tell yourself this is the Bible, so you can’t put him down. You’re increasing in discouragement because you just don’t get it. And then you get to chapter 29 and you read verse 11. Yes! There’s a verse you can hold on to. “God has plans for me,” you think. “They’re good plans to give me a hope-filled future!” Then you memorize the verse, write it out and it’s your life verse. You have successfully individualized the verse and you have no idea the context of these words.

Now, let me say this on the outset. God does have a good and glorious plan for all of his children. But, if you think this verse just means that, you’re barely skimming the surface of the depth and breadth of meaning. So, let’s read verses 4-14 together. Before we read, let’s pray together.

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*<sup>4</sup> “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord. <sup>10</sup> “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup>*

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In trying to figure out what a given verse is saying, you have to ask yourself the basic questions you were told when in elementary school. “Who, what, when, where and why?” So, who is speaking and to whom is he speaking? What is being addressed? When is this taking place? Why is he saying what he’s saying?

As we ask these questions, you can probably quickly come to a conclusion. God is speaking. And, God is speaking not to an individual, but to the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel is no longer in Israel. Instead, they’re in exile and they’re confused. How do they live in exile? How do they live when they’re not *home*? In this context, we have the promise of verse 11. God has plans for the Jewish people. He doesn’t plan to crush them in Babylon. Instead, he has a purpose to reveal his power in bringing them out of exile and giving them a hopeful future. Thoughts of God’s intent and the guaranteed future, should shape how they live in the present.

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Je 29:11.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Je 29:4–14.

Now, you could think, “What’s wrong with individualizing this and just thinking that God has great plans for me?” Well, if you do that, you miss the bigger picture of Scripture. You see, this passage we read shows us how God called the Jewish people *to live as exiles*.

You see, the Jewish people were used to living a certain way in their homeland. If people were in their territory, they’d fight them. There was war. That was God’s land with God’s city, Jerusalem. His power must be revealed. Well, when you live that way, you could think that while in exile, they were to overthrow Babylon and war against Nebuchadnezzar. But that’s not what God says. Instead, in verse 7, God says, **“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.”** This is the basic principle God gives to the Jewish people living in exile. **While the Jewish people were to wait for the hopeful future, they were to seek the welfare of Babylon and pray for it, remembering that they are exiles.**

At this point, you could say, “Well, if that’s what these verses mean, is there any application for us?” Well, I’m glad you ask that question. There is application, and the application applies not merely to us as individuals, but to us as Christians – and even to us within local churches. So, this morning, what I want to do is take verse 7 in particular and to show how the New Testament emphasizes these truths to apply to local churches like ours.

### 1. We are exiles and sojourners in this world.

We might gloss over the phrase “in which you have been called into exile,” but that phrase is extremely important to understanding the entire passage – and it’s also very important to helping us as Christians today in seeing how to live in the world around us. You see, the New Testament picks up on this idea of being exiles, and in 1 Peter 2:11-12, the apostle Peter writes, **“11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”**<sup>4</sup> Earlier in the same letter, Peter calls his readers to “conduct [themselves] with fear throughout the time of [their] exile. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Not only does Peter emphasize this, but the author of Hebrews talks about this idea, too. In Hebrews 11:13-14, the author is talking about people like Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham. These individuals lived before national boundaries were established for Israel. And the author says, **“13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.”**<sup>6</sup>

When you read these verses, you should connect them to Jeremiah 29. When Peter and the author of Hebrews say that we are exiles and sojourners, they’re saying that we’re called to live in this world in similar ways as God called the Jewish people in Babylon. Sadly, I think many of us Christians can miss this extremely important truth.

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<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), 1 Pe 2:11–12.

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), 1 Pe 1:17.

<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 11:13–14.

This can be seen throughout the last 2,000 years of church history. Every year, I go through an overview of Church History with a group of guys. And, it's always intriguing to me how people throughout time have related to government. The first 200-300 years, Christians were hated by government. So, there was only a relationship of governmental oppression. But then came Constantine. Through Constantine, Christianity was elevated, and Christians were not oppressed. Some Christians rejected this new-found fame and believed they had to resist creaturely comforts so they resorted to hiding out in what became known as monasteries. Other Christians embraced this popularity and sought for governmental affirmation. Centuries went by and then we had a "Holy Roman Empire." Then we saw how Roman Catholicism sought to take control over kings. You continued to see Christians vying for political power and control. And this never ended well.

Then came pilgrims to America. Many sought religious freedom. But, ironically, instead of religious freedom, some simply sought to have *their* religion as supreme. So, you had certain areas where they sought to have citizens who were only Christians with their own beliefs, but problems came by the second generation when children did not accept their same beliefs. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when there were debates about whether children should partake of communion, this all was a part of a broader viewpoint of aligning the political territory with the local churches. And some Christians viewed the land kind of like how Jews would have viewed themselves in the promised Land.

This problem continues today. **Many Christians view themselves as if they're supposed to be like Jews living in the Promised Land. However, the New Testament teaches that we are supposed to live like Jews living in Babylon.** And, isn't this what Jesus was alluding to even in his prayer for us in John 17:15-16? Jesus prayed, <sup>15</sup> "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

Those of us who are followers of Jesus are *not of this world*. Meaning, like what the author of Hebrews states, our homeland isn't this world as we know it. Which means, as Peter says, we are sojourners. We are on our way somewhere. But we're not simply sojourning. We are like Jewish exiles, awaiting to be set free.

Do you agree with these statements? I'm sure, if you're a Christian, you say "yes." It's difficult to disagree with these clear truths. But, let me press this a little bit. Think about the song, "God Bless America." It's a prayer that God would bless this nation. And, biblically speaking, it is right for us to *pray* for the nations in which we live. I'll talk about that in a little bit. But there's a line that I have to be careful with my own heart while I'm singing the song. A couple of times, there's lyrics that say, "God bless America, My home sweet home. . . ." Now, of course I reside in America, and I get the idea of the words. It's like when I have visited other countries and when returning to America, I've been so grateful to be *home*. But, in saying that, I have to preach to my heart when that song plays. Theologically, in thinking about the exile mindset, America is Babylon. It is my home in one sense because God has placed me here. But it's also not my home because the writer of Hebrews says I'm seeking a homeland whose builder and maker is God. Therefore, in Holland, MI, I am not ultimately seeking to dig my roots down here. My calling is to build up treasure in Heaven and to seek first the Kingdom of God.

This is part of what it means to be an exile and sojourner. But, at this point, I've mostly focused on how we are individually exiles and sojourners. The implication of Peter is that we are communal exiles. In other words, we're not alone in our sojourning.

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<sup>7</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Jn 17:15–16.

First Peter 1:1-2 speaks to his readers as being “**elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,** <sup>2</sup> **according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ. . .**”<sup>8</sup>

The term “dispersion” was an Old Testament term referring to being displaced. Then the term “elect” and “exiles” are both Old Testament terms as well. “Elect” was used to refer to the nation of Israel. They were the “elect” nation, God’s chosen nation. And they were displaced and exiled. Peter uses these words now for Christians.

Keep in mind, Peter is writing to groups of Christians in various areas. That means, he’s writing to “local gatherings of believers.” And, “local gathering” means “local churches.” So, these churches are dispersed in various areas. When Peter writes this way, he emphasizes that God is no longer primarily working through a nation of Israel under the old covenant, but instead, under the new covenant he’s working through *the Church*, and through local churches in particular. Therefore, Christians aren’t seeking to build one nation that is Christian. No. Instead, no matter where Christians lives, they recognize they’re in Babylon. And, as such, **the local churches are embassies for the Kingdom of God.**

This leads me to the second point:

## **2. We are to seek the welfare of the area in which we live.**

When we hear that America is Babylon, you might think, “That means we have to hate it!” At least, that’s the feel I get when I hear America is Babylon. Or, I could think, “Are you saying you hate America and that you want to seek its destruction?”

If you have any of these thoughts when you hear “America is Babylon,” then you have missed God’s call to the Jews who were actually in Babylon. Let me read Jeremiah 29:7 again: <sup>7</sup>**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.** <sup>9</sup>

Seek the welfare of the place we’re exiled? How can this be? We think if Babylon is an enemy, then we hate them. But remember Jesus’ words? We are to love our enemies? Why? Because Jesus loved us and made us his friends!

So, think back even to the example of Daniel in his exile. How great was Nebuchadnezzar as a ruler? Well, until he repented, he wasn’t great. And yet Daniel aligned himself in Nebuchadnezzar’s regime. He didn’t simply *not rock the boat*. Daniel was a right-hand man. He was salt and light, and Daniel knew that Babylon wasn’t his home.

This is the calling for Christians wherever they live. Some think they have to make America sound more “Christian” in order to love it. But why? America is not my homeland! There’s a day when Jesus will return and the Bible says that all kingdoms will perish, and then Jesus will bring in the New Creation and New Jerusalem! Knowing this doesn’t lead me to hate America. Instead, because of Christ, I am

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<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), 1 Pe 1:1–2.

<sup>9</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Je 29:7.

concerned for the welfare of this nation. This term “welfare” is the Hebrew word “shalom.” It means “peace,” and “wholeness.”

If I believe my country is basically good, then there’s no need to seek for its wholeness. But, if I believe that my country – no matter how moral or immoral – is “Babylon,” then as people who have been transformed by Christ, we remember that we ultimately don’t live for this country. We don’t deceive ourselves into thinking that this is Jesus’ country. And, because Jesus has shown kindness to us who were his enemies, then we should want our cities to experience God’s peace, too!

And, as embassies of God’s Kingdom, we are told how we primarily seek this welfare. This leads me to the next point this morning:

### **3. We seek the country’s welfare by depending on Jesus and living distinctly as Christians.**

Jeremiah 29:7 says that we are to pray for the country’s welfare first. And, if we understand welfare as *peace and wholeness*, then we’re not simply praying that we all make a lot of money or that people are more moral than they were in yesteryear. Shalom refers to a wholeness of what was intended for humanity. We are to pray that citizens of Babylon become citizens of God’s Kingdom. And, there are no policies that can give people citizenship into Heaven.

A couple weeks ago, I asked some friends on their thoughts for this sermon this morning, and one person said to me, “I’m concerned that Christians are more willing to talk about their political stances than they are the gospel.” This person was not saying that policies don’t matter, but as Christians, we must remember the mission Jesus gave to us: make disciples. I wonder sometimes if we still are thinking that God calls us to view our nation like the Jewish people living in Israel. Ventura, we are not living in the New Jerusalem yet. We live in Babylon! Therefore, Jesus tells us the Spirit does not work through an individual nation of this world to bring salvation. No! He works through Jesus-followers as they love others and proclaim the good news of Jesus wherever they live.

As we’ve been learning in Romans, the word “gospel” was a military term referring to a nation’s victory over the enemy. Jesus is the King who through his death brings victory! He came to a globe of enemies, and those enemies killed him in what was supposedly his own nation, Israel. And yet, at his death, he took the punishment that enemies deserved. Then, he rose from the dead and conquered death so that his enemies could live and be reconciled. Now, he calls all people to turn to him and trust him for reconciliation with God. This is the gospel. This is the good news of King Jesus!

And now, all who trust Jesus are now citizens of Jesus’ Kingdom! But this is all miraculous and we cannot save anyone. So, God calls us *first* to pray! We should pray individually as exiles and corporately as exiles. And we shouldn’t just pray that morals change so that we can be more comfortable and pretend that this world is our home and that our neighbors are “Christian enough.” No. We are to pray that lives are transformed to follow King Jesus.

After praying, we are given a commission to live within this world self-sacrificially. Some will say “Only preach the gospel. That’s all that matters.” But that’s like saying a plane can fly with only one wing on one side. We need two wings! We need to preach the gospel and then love our neighbor. Or, as we’re told elsewhere in Scripture. We are to have faith working through love. Therefore, we are called to love and sacrifice for our neighbors. We are to serve and care. This looks different for different people. Some

are involved in politics. Others get to know their neighbors better and show the love of Christ. But the point is that we want God's glory to be both known and seen.

This doesn't just happen on an individual level, but on a corporate level. In Acts 2, within Jerusalem, part of their testimony to the world was how they related to one another. The society around them saw how they interacted and sacrificed for each other. And, within the local church, people saw a love unlike what they had. It was public. It was noticeable. And so, in Acts 2, we read that the people gave themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to breaking of bread and prayers.

As they grew in these things, they grew in knowing how to love one another and love their neighbor – and the end of chapter 2 says that more people were being added day by day. When Christians live distinctly from this world, and remain in the world, God transfers people from a Babylon citizenship to a Heavenly citizenship. Do you believe that? It's through ordinary living, by faith in Jesus, depending on him to glory in him, and when God has his children worshipping him together, that a contrast is seen by the world and the message of the gospel is more clearly spoken and even received by people.

Ventura, this is what God has privileged us to do. In our individual lives and in our life corporately, we have been privileged to proclaim the gospel. Let's confess that we are exiles and sojourners. Let's make it plain that we are ambassadors and that our local church is an embassy of the Kingdom. Let's live loving lives in this world and point to a greater world because we genuinely do have a greater home!

As a result, here in Holland, we love our neighbor and want people to hear the great news of King Jesus! **As a training grounds of disciple-making disciples, we seek to pursue Jesus together. And, may our prayer always be that we know our citizenship is in Heaven. May our prayer be that we live faithful lives to Christ in all we do. May our prayer always be that we know and be faithful to the gospel. And, even as we look to God giving us a new auditorium, may our prayer be that God transfers people's citizenships in the years to come!**

In just a moment, I'm going to ask that we make our way outside around the area where the new auditorium will be. We will spend some time in prayer and then we are going to sing three verses of "Solid Rock." I chose that song because I wanted that as a reminder that Jesus is our assurance. A new building is not what we trust in. Being American citizens is not what we trust in. Being citizens in Heaven because of Jesus is a glorious hope. And, Jesus is our hope!

Because our Savior died for us, rose again and is coming again, we pray to live this way. Truly, God has good plans for us. And someday, we will make it home and we will be with our Father forever and ever.