

## For the City: *Living in the City of Exile*

Jeremiah 29:1-7

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on February 2, 2014

### Introduction

- ❖ *How many of you have had the experience of being a foreigner in another country?* Perhaps you were studying or working abroad. Perhaps you were on an overseas missions trip, or you're just well-travelled. Or maybe you're actually a fairly new immigrant to this country.
  - ▶ If you know what it's like, you know how difficult it can be. Different languages, different customs, different values, different beliefs and practices. Some of it intrigues you. Some of it confuses you. Some of it annoys you. There's this constant tension of feeling more and more at home in your adopted city, but every so often being reminded that this is not your home, that you're still a foreigner.
  
- ❖ I felt this tension when we lived in Vancouver. Now Canada is the least foreign country I could've moved to. We share the same language, and there's a lot of cross over in popular culture. But still I felt the pinch of living in another country with its own unique culture.
  - ▶ I love Vancouver, but do you know how hard it is to find a station that's broadcasting a football game or just reporting on anything but hockey? And one time I was craving Mexican food, so my wife and I went to the most popular Mexican restaurant in town. We sit down and we're handed a basket of chips and salsa. So good so far. But when I ask for a refill, the waitress says there's a charge! I told Theresa, "That's it, we're moving back." This is not home. No one charges for chips back home.
    - The longer I lived there the more I came to love the city of Vancouver but the more I realized how much of a Texan I am. Without a steady diet of football and Tex-Mex, I was languishing in a foreign land.
  
- ❖ Now I bring up this tension of living as foreigners in a big city because that's the context of this morning's passage. At this point in Israel's history, their kingdom had been divided and conquered. Judah, the southern kingdom, had been invaded by the Babylonians, and Jerusalem was sacked. The invaders not only plundered the city, they took into captivity a large company of exiles.
  - ▶ These displaced Jews ended up in Babylon. This big city. This pagan city. This hostile city. This religiously, culturally, morally diverse city. *What were these Jewish exiles to do? How were these foreigners to relate to this new city of residence? How do they stay faithful to their true identity while living in a city of exile?*
  
- ❖ That's really *our* question. Those are the questions we need to be asking. **In our day, the city is filled with people who feel like exiles.** They feel like they don't belong. And I'm not just talking about actual immigrants. It's everyone. In the city, conservatives feel like society has become so liberal. They feel like they no longer belong. But at the same time, in the city, liberals feel like society is still too conservative. They still feel like they're the exiles.
  - ▶ In the city, minorities feel like outsiders, but in the city, even those in the majority ethnicity feel out of place. Cities like Houston have become so diverse that even the majority feels like they've stepped into a brand new world.

- ❖ And as for Christians, cities can be places of refuge but also places of exile. Places of hostility. Places so out of sync with our values and beliefs. ***So how do we live faithfully as followers of Jesus, as citizens of a heavenly kingdom, while in a city of exile?***
- ❖ Last week we began a series called *For the City*, where we're asking ourselves: *What does it matter for our church to be located in an urban setting? How does our location, our place, give shape to our mission as a church?*
  - ▶ We talked of how our church was established over 38 years ago as a church in the city – merely in the city. As a commuter church reaching the immigrant Chinese who were arriving in center city Houston for schooling and training but eventually settling down in outlying suburbs like Clear Lake and Sugarland.
    - But now after 38 years, we've been faithful to plant community churches in the suburbs where the majority of immigrant Chinese have moved. We're at a point where we don't need to be a commuter church. ***Then what would it look like for us to be more of a community church?*** A church that engages its geographic community, which in our case is distinctly urban.
      - So the question is: ***What will it mean for us to be a city church?*** And not just a church *in* the city but a church *for* the city. A church that serves its city and seeks its good.
- ❖ This is why we chose Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian Exiles. **If Christians today look in the Old Testament for a model of cultural engagement – for how the people of God should relate to the culture-at-large – then the best model for us would be the Exiled Generation.** You wouldn't turn to the Wilderness Generation or the Age of Judges or the Age of Kings. Their context wouldn't fit ours.
  - ▶ But consider Israel in exile. They no longer existed as a nation-state. They were now a countercultural community existing within another nation-state, in a culture hostile to their beliefs. They settled in the land. They participated in the life of the city. Yet they never considered Babylon home. They anticipated the day God would bring them home to *their* city, a new Jerusalem raised from the ashes.
    - Just imagine the children and young people born in Babylonian captivity. They had never seen Jerusalem. They only heard stories. They had to take it by faith that there was a Jerusalem yet to come. That the only city they knew and loved was still not home. They had to trust when their parents said they were citizens of another kingdom and that their king had not forgotten them. That he's coming back for them. They had to live by faith and not by sight.
- ❖ *Do you see what this means?* We're in a similar situation. **The New Testament Church is, in a sense, in exile** (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1; Jas. 1:1). Like the tribes of Israel, the Church is scattered throughout the world among various nation-states. Like the exiles, we realize we're not in our homeland. We look forward to a city whose designer and builder is God (Heb. 11:14), to the new Jerusalem – not built up from ashes but brought down from heaven (Rev. 21:2).

- ❖ ***But as we await the city that is to come (Heb. 13:14), how are we to relate to the city that is?*** What should be our attitude and approach? Especially since it's not Jerusalem we're living in but Babylon.
  - ▶ Our passage mentions three approaches to the city that have been promoted and practiced by God's people throughout church history. You find examples of churches, denominations, and individual believers living out these three models of cultural engagement. Let's take each into consideration.

### **Assimilating into the City as a Native**

- ❖ The first approach can be summed up in one word: *assimilation*. **This approach encourages Christians to fully assimilate into the city as a native of its culture.** This was the approach the Babylonians encouraged among the peoples and nations they conquered.
  - ▶ They were smart, really shrewd. Think about it: If you simply tried to expel a conquered people from of their homeland, they're just going to come back one day madder and stronger than ever. That strategy is going to come back and bite you.
- ❖ The Babylonians were shrewd. **Instead of expelling the Israelites from their homeland, they had a process of cultural assimilation.** They exported Israel's cultural elite and settled them in the heart of Babylonian culture, the capital city. We're talking about the political class, the religious class, the artists, the craftsmen – the culture makers.
  - ▶ Look at vv1-2. This a letter from Jeremiah writing 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. . . . the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers.*”
- ❖ **The purpose was to Babylon-ize them. To assimilate them into Babylonian culture.** If a Jew wanted to survive in big city Babylon, if he wanted to continue in his profession – to still be an artist or a businessman or a politician – then he had to pick up the language, learn the culture, adopt the customs, etc. In so doing, the Babylonians hoped their captives would eventually lose their unique identity as Jews and be thoroughly Babylonian.
  - ▶ Now while this was all taking place, back in Israel the poorest of the poor remained. And in place of the cultural elites, the Babylonians imported subjects from other conquered nations in order to create a huge melting pot of cultures. They hoped people would mix languages, mix religions, mix marriages, and eventually they would eradicate the cultural and spiritual identity of these conquered people.
- ❖ We see an example of this in the **book of Daniel** chapter one. Daniel and his friends were part of the Judah's culture elite, and it says they were transported to Babylon to live in the king's palace where they received a thoroughly Babylonian education. They learned the literature and language (1:4). They were even given a daily portion of the same food and drink that the king received (1:5). That's so smart. If you can get a foreigner to fall in love with the best foods of your culture, they're hooked. Assimilation will be a piece of cake.

- ❖ So that's how you conquer a people. You don't expel them. You don't try to kill them off. That never works. They just come back madder and stronger. **Instead you slowly but surely assimilate them into the dominate culture until they lose their very identity as a people.**
  - ▶ That's one approach to the city and its culture. To fully and uncritically embrace it as yours. To take on the posture of a native. To be both *in* the world and *of* the world, *in* the city and *of* the city.
  
- ❖ *You know where the Babylonians got that strategy, right? The god of Babylon is the god of this world. And he's shrewd like a serpent.* If he's going to conquer 21st-century, urban, American Christians, he knows that outright persecuting us and trying to kill us off is not going to work. It didn't work when he tried that on the early church or on other persecuted churches throughout history like the house church in China.
  - ▶ *So what's his preferred strategy?* Tempting Christians to assimilate into the dominate culture by dangling self-serving incentives in your face. If you want the best jobs, the most money, the greatest influence, the most fulfilling career, then you'll have to set aside any moral values the city finds offensive, you'll have to give up any convictions the city ridicules as ignorant or culturally regressive. You'll have to assimilate.
    - The Jews were told, "If you want to make it in Babylon, you'll have to become thoroughly Babylonian." Likewise, Christians are told today, "If you want to make it in the city, you'll have to be thoroughly acculturated to the city on all levels – intellectually, socially, culturally, and spiritually"
  
- ❖ Assimilation is *not* how you become *for* the city. Yes, I realize on one hand it feels like you're *for* the city since you're all for its culture – in the sense of being a strong advocate *for*. But in reality, assimilation is actually a very self-serving approach towards the city.
  - ▶ **Assimilation means I live in the city and engage it for my own sake.** I want the money, the influence, the status, the experience, and so I do what's necessary to fit in. I assimilate so that I can make a name for myself, to build a life for myself. That's self-serving. That's not really being *for* the city.

### **Withdrawing from the City as a Separatist**

- ❖ Now there's a second approach that's also found here in Jeremiah. It could be summed up with the word *withdrawal* or *separation*. **This approach says that Christians, who want to be faithful, must withdraw from the city and take on a separatist attitude towards its dominant culture.** This was the approach advanced by certain prophets during Israel's exile. They were feel-good prophets who only had positive messages for the people.
  
- ❖ In chapter 28 we're told there was one such prophet named Hananiah who went around telling the exiles not to worry. He said their captivity would only last two years, and then God would bring them back to their homeland (28:1-4).
  - ▶ There was no reason to engage the city, its people, or its culture. God's people had to stick together. Let's have nothing to do with the city. It's dirty. It's crowded. It's full of people who believe things we disagree with and do things we disapprove of.

- ❖ If assimilation was on one end of the spectrum, these guys swung to the opposite extreme. **They advocated cultural separation and promoted an attitude of isolationism, discouraging any real engagement with Babylon.** But Jeremiah confronted them and exposed them to be false prophets with false prophecies (29:8-9).
  - ▶ Later on in chapter 29 starting in v24, we're introduced to another false prophet named Shemaiah who accused Jeremiah of being a traitor, of being pro-Babylon. Jeremiah's letter was offensive to a cultural separatist like Shemaiah because his instructions for the exiles sounded so much *for* the city, *for* Babylon. He was convinced that Jeremiah was betraying his allegiance to God, to his people. No faithful Jew could be so *for* the city.
  
- ❖ Sadly, there are Christians arguing the same today. No faithful Christian can be for the city. Cities are cesspools of temptation and corruption. They're going to argue that allegiance to Christ calls for separation, for a posture of defensiveness.
  - ▶ If Christians have to engage the city – either because of work or schooling – then let's deal with the city so long as we have to. Let's get the money we need, the training we need, the education we need. **Let's use the city to get what we need, and then bring it back to benefit our people – to make my family or tight-knit faith community stronger or more stable.**
    - So ironically the native and the separatist have a lot more in common than they think. **They're both exploiting the city for their own gain.** Withdrawing from the city is just as self-serving as assimilating into it. It's just as far from being *for* the city.

### Serving the City as an Exile-in-Residence

- ❖ Thankfully there's a third approach, and it can be summed up with the word *service*. **This approach says that Christians in the city are called by God to be for the city by serving the city from the posture of an exile-in-residence.**
  - ▶ This is the approach we find in Jeremiah's letter. Let's read it again starting in v4, "*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.*" Let's stop right there because I bet as this letter was being read to the exiles, some of them couldn't get past the first sentence.
  
- ❖ They were thinking, "Wait, what? Who did the letter say sent us here? Because I distinctly remember the Babylonians dragging me and my family out of Jerusalem. Did you read that right? Did you say God sent us here?" You bet. That's what Jeremiah is saying, yet at the same time, in v1, he's comfortable saying that king Nebuchadnezzar was the one who took them into exile. There's no contradiction. What the king intended for evil; God intended for good (cf. Gen. 50:20).
  - ▶ *Do you see the implication here? Yes, because of Israel's persistent idolatry, the exile was a consequence of sin, but simultaneously exile was a mission of God.* He has a purpose. He has a mission for his people.

- ❖ And it'll take some time. This exile won't be over in two years but in seventy, says God in v10. Then I'll bring you back home. But until they're to build a house, plant a garden, settle down. Get married. Marry off your kids. "*Multiply there and do not decrease.*" (v6)
  - ▶ **In other words, God wants the Israelites to grow and remain as a distinct people.** He doesn't expect the Jewish people to decrease while in exile – to assimilate into the larger culture to the point that they're no longer distinguishable as Jews. No, he wants them to maintain their distinct identity. And notice how this is accomplished primarily through the family. Through parents bearing children and then rearing them and teaching them from a particular worldview and spiritual identity.
  
- ❖ **But this is not a cultural withdrawal. This is not a holy huddle.** Look in v7, God also calls them to, "*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.*"
  - ▶ So when in Babylon, they're not to simply do as the Babylonians do. Yet at the same time, they're not to shelter away in their own spiritual and cultural ghetto. No, they are to use their gifts, their talent, and their resources to seek the welfare (the common good) of the city, while never forgetting that this is not home.
    - **Settle down in the city but don't settle for the city.** You reside in one country, but your primary allegiance is to another. You're an exile-in-residence, a resident alien. So love your city of residence, pray for it, seek its welfare. But don't forget your real home is a city that is to come.
  
- ❖ St. Augustine wrote a famous book called *The City of God* where he says that when you're born again – when you become a Christian – you have a dual citizenship. You're a citizen of some country, of some earthly city, but now you become a citizen of the city of God. Now how do you identify them? ***How do you know who's a citizen of the city of God?***
  - ▶ **They tend to be the best citizens in the city of man.** Why? Because they don't assimilate into the city just to make a name for themselves. And they don't exploit the city just to serve their own family or faith community. No, the citizens of the "city that is to come" will engage the "city that is" for the city's sake. Not their own sake or their family's sake or their church's sake but the city's sake.
  
- ❖ **Jeremiah says to seek the city's welfare. Some translations say it's peace and prosperity. It's the Hebrew word *shalom*.** It means peace but not just in terms of the absence of hostility or violence. It means the presence of wholeness – of physical wholeness, social wholeness, economic wholeness, spiritual wholeness<sup>1</sup>. That's *shalom*.
  - ▶ To seek this means, on one level, working for the **physical *shalom*** of your city. When Christians use their training and professions to mend broken bodies, to alleviate pain and suffering, to treat mental illness or substance addictions, they're seeking the city's *shalom*. You don't have to be in the medical profession to do this. Feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely and shut it, that's contributing to physical *shalom*.

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<sup>1</sup> I get these categories from Tim Keller's sermon "The Meaning of the City", preached October 5, 2003.

- ❖ Christians are also called to seek and to pray for the **social *shalom*** of their cities. That means exposing and addressing societal evils and injustices in the city like racism, bigotry, sex trafficking, abortion, etc. Working toward reconciliations and healing. That's how you contribute to a city's social *shalom*.
  - ▶ There's also the **economic *shalom*** of a city. The prosperity of all its inhabitants. Seeking this means you build a career in the city not to build up your resume or your nest egg – but to build up the city, to contribute to its prosperity. And this will necessarily involve acts of mercy and generosity to serve the needs of city's poor and destitute. All of this contributes to economic *shalom*.
  
- ❖ And most important of all, to seek the city's *shalom* is to seek **spiritual *shalom*** for all its inhabitants. Christians recognize that sin is the underlying cause behind the absence of physical, social, and economic *shalom* in our city, but we know that sin has incurred an even greater problem, a greater pain, a greater suffering and that's the alienation it's caused between mankind and its Creator. Human sin incurs divine wrath. **This is why spiritual *shalom*, peace with God, is the greatest need in our cities.**
  - ▶ Well this is a *shalom* that the church is uniquely positioned and commissioned to bring. Because only the church has the gospel – a message of peace. This good news of God's grace towards sinners demonstrated through the sacrifice of his own Son. **On the cross, God restored *shalom* with us by breaking *shalom* with his Son.** Jesus willingly bore our sins and chose alienation in death so that we might have reconciliation in life. This is an act of love and mercy and the crowning moment of God's grand plan to rescue and redeem a people for himself.
  
- ❖ The point is the city's *shalom* is all-encompassing. It covers all dimensions. It's about seeking maximal human flourishing in our cities – physically, socially, economically, and spiritually.
  - ▶ Now look back at the end of v7 and notice God's rationale for seeking the city's *shalom*. He says, "*for in its welfare [shalom] you will find your welfare [shalom].*" Remember, God's end goal was still to save and preserve a people for his own glory (even though he sent them into exile), and it appears that seeking and contributing to the welfare of a godless, pagan city was part of that plan.
  
- ❖ What this means for the church today is that the call for Christians to engage our city, to seek and to pray for its *shalom*, is totally compatible with our mission to make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Christ.
  - ▶ This morning we're the church gathered, but on the other six days of the week we scatter throughout this city contributing to its prosperity, giving shape to its culture, ministering to its needy, advocating for its voiceless, fighting for its oppressed, etc.
    - **These kinds of ministries are *not* a distraction from a church's evangelism and discipleship.** Rather, they're a boon, a benefit, to our mission to evangelize and disciple by strengthening the influence we have in the city and adorning the gospel when we proclaim it. *Do you see the connection?* For in the city's welfare we'll find our welfare.

## Find a Ministry (in the City)

- ❖ Let me conclude with an application. This year I want to challenge each of you to find a ministry – a ministry where you can use your spiritual gifts and talents and influence and resources to begin serving.
  - ▶ But here's the catch. **It needs to be a ministry *outside* the church and *in* the city.** I don't mean to belittle or ignore the needs within the formal, established ministries of our church. I pray God leads many of you to fill them. But today I challenge you to find a ministry in the city.
  
- ❖ **This will require you to first identify the needs of the city.** Study your city, your neighborhood, your campus, your workplace, and ask God to show you where *shalom* is missing, whether it be physical, social, economic or spiritual. Ask yourself, “Where do I see God's *shalom* absent and wanting?” In the next few weeks we'll commence our annual Compassion Project, and perhaps God will direct you to one of the highlighted causes.
  - ▶ **Once you identify, then pray.** Jeremiah says to pray to the Lord on behalf of the city. Before you start, you might need weeks or months of prayer. You should probably invite your family or your small group to join you in prayer.
  
- ❖ **Then when the Lord opens the door, go and seek the city's *shalom*. Don't wait for the pastors or church leaders to initiate a new ministry of the church.** You *are* the church. We'll initiate and oversee ministry that happens when the church gathers. That's our job.
  - ▶ But throughout the week, ministry should be happening all over the city wherever the church is scattered. But that's the kind of ministry you'll have to initiate and oversee. Your pastors want to hear about it. We want to celebrate it, pray for it, and support it. We want to equip you through the ministry of the Word, but then immediately send you back out to serve the city and seek its *shalom*.
    - So go to God this week with this prayer: *Lord, where is your shalom missing in this city, in the context where you've placed me? And how are you preparing me and calling me to serve this city for its good and your glory?*