

How do you live in the midst of a culture that despises your religion?

A couple weeks ago we sang Psalm 137 –

“how shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?”

We need to remember that our *home* is the heavenly Jerusalem.

Our citizenship is in heaven.

Any earthly citizenship must be used for the benefit of the heavenly city.

As the Epistle to Diognetus put it,
for the Christian,

“every foreign land is a home land – and every home land is a foreign land.”

Or as Jeremiah said:

“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.”

In other words,

pray for the peace of Babylon!

Of course, Shemaiah (and others of the exiles) would prefer singing Psalm 137 –

“Blessed be the one who dashes their children’s heads against the rock!”

How can we pray for the peace of Babylon?

Don’t we long for Babylon to be destroyed?

Yes – and no.

Or, more precisely, No, and Yes!

For 70 years, *no* we do not long for Babylon to be destroyed.

We pray for its peace.

But when the time comes for Babylon to be destroyed

we will rejoice in its destruction!

Let’s look at how this works:

Introduction: The Letter to Babylon (v1-3)

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.

Notice first who takes Jeremiah's letter –

it is Zedekiah's two ambassadors to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon:

1) Elasah the son of Shaphan –

in chapter 26 we heard about Ahikam, the son of Shaphan,
who protected Jeremiah from the anger of King Jehoiakim.
Now another son of Shaphan serves as courier for Jeremiah.

2) Gemariah the son of Hilkiah –

Hilkiah was the name of the high priest under King Josiah –
so it is likely that this is the son of the high priest Hilakiah.

Shaphan and Hilakiah were now both dead,

so probably Gemariah's brother was high priest,
and Elasah's brother is chief scribe

(we'll hear about another son of Shaphan who serves as scribe in ch 36).

Ambassadors in those days were trusted palace officials,

so it would make sense to send the brothers of the high priest and the chief scribe.

Shaphan and Hilakiah had served the faithful king, Josiah.

Now their sons are attempting to negotiate the challenging times that followed.

Three sons of Josiah – and one grandson – have sat on the throne of David,
all in a span of 15 years.

Shallum was taken captive to Egypt – and is now probably dead.

Jehoiakim died in the siege of 597.

His son, Jeconiah, was taken captive to Babylon three months later.

And now his uncle Zedekiah, the third son of Josiah sits on the throne.

We are not told what mission Zedekiah gave to these messengers,

but plainly their arrival in Babylon will cause the exiles to get their hopes up.

If Nebuchadnezzar is engaging in negotiations with Zedekiah,

maybe we will be able to go home *soon*.

God calls Jeremiah to *crush* their hopes.

If your hope is focused on what you will get in this life –

then God wants me to crush your hopes!

Because God has a *better* plan!

1. How Do You Live When You Are in Exile? (v4-14)

a. You Are Not Coming Home Yet, So Seek the Welfare of Babylon (v4-7)

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: 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.

God had called Jeremiah to tear down *and to build up*;
to uproot *and to plant*.

So far, Jeremiah has mostly done the tearing down and uprooting.
Now he begins to plant.
Now we begin to move from judgment to hope.

But *not* as quickly as the Exiles would like to hear it!

Twice in verses 4-7 God says
“I have sent you into exile.”

Don’t blame Nebuchadnezzar.
I did this.

The LXX even goes so far as to delete the name of Nebuchadnezzar from this chapter.
You know, that king over there in Babylon – whatever his name was...

His name isn’t important!

Yahweh Sabaoth – the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel –
now *there* is a name that matters!

“I have sent you into exile.”

Now in order for this to sink in,
let me remind you what has happened.

The people who are hearing this letter endured a siege in 597 –
a siege that resulted in the death of their king –
a siege that saw countless of their friends and relatives killed,
and the rest of the leadership of Jerusalem marched off to Babylon.

They had to walk nearly a thousand miles.
Remember that the kingdom of Judah
was approximately the size of St. Joe and LaPorte counties put together.
And now you have walk to Dallas, Texas – or Orlando, Florida.

And God says, “I have sent you into exile.”

This is my doing.

I realize that we *don't* like to think that *God* is the one who brings *bad stuff* into our lives.

But I want you to think about the alternative:

if it was just Nebuchadnezzar –

then that means that God failed to protect you;

if it was just cancer –

then that means that God couldn't (or worse, wouldn't)
do anything about it.

A friend of mine lost his daughter in a car accident.

He says that the sovereignty of God brings comfort to him –

because that must mean that God had something *better* in mind.

In the middle of the pain it's hard to imagine how it could be “better.”

After watching your friends die, and walking a thousand miles to Babylon,

the city that has *always* been opposed to God! –

it's hard to see how this is part of God's “great plan”!

Indeed, when you are hanging on a cross,

bearing the sin of the world on your shoulders,

it is entirely appropriate to say,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!”

And we've heard that throughout Jeremiah!

The message of hope that we hear in chapter 29

comes after the misery and pain of 28 chapters!

But there is a message of hope!

God says that he has a plan.

And right now, exile is where God has called you to be.

Now, let's be clear:

Babylon is not Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is your true home.

But you cannot live in Jerusalem right now.

God calls you to live in Babylon.

And not just “live” there, but to seek the *welfare* of Babylon.

The *peace* of Babylon.

The word is “shalom.”

Seek the *shalom* – the peace – the well-being of Babylon.

For in its peace you will find your peace.

You are to do in Babylon all the things that you would do in the Promised Land:

“build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit;

take wives and have sons and daughters...
multiply there, and do not decrease.”

God has turned the world upside down!

All your life you have prayed for the peace of Jerusalem –
so say the Psalms (Psalm 122:6) –
but now Jeremiah says “pray for the peace of Babylon!”

The history of salvation moves from Babylon to Jerusalem.

In Genesis there is the tower of Babel –
and then Abraham is called to *leave* the region of Babylon
and come to the Promised Land.
Abraham himself will be called to offer Isaac on the same mountain
where Jerusalem will later be built.

All of God’s promises to Abraham were fulfilled in David and Solomon.
At least, that’s what Israel had thought.
But as the sons of David did not practice righteousness and justice –
and as the temple in Jerusalem was defiled by idols –
the day had come when God would push the “rewind button”
on the history of salvation.

And now redemptive history runs backwards
as God sends his people into exile in Babylon –
except for those who voluntarily return to Egypt
(yeah, like that’s a better idea!)

From the beginning of the Bible,
Babylon is the city that is most diametrically opposed to the LORD.

But now your peace will be found in the peace of Babylon!
Your welfare – your well-being – is tied to the well-being of Babylon.

The New Testament will regularly identify “Babylon” as the city of man –
the earthly city – the kingdoms of this age.

The power structures of this age are properly called “Babylon.”
This doesn’t mean that Christians cannot serve in government!
After all, Daniel and his friends served the governments of Babylon and Persia!

Just remember that the government of the United States –
the government of South Bend –
the government of every earthly city –
is properly called “Babylon.”

You should pray for the peace of Babylon.

You should seek the welfare – the well-being – of the city where God has placed you.
But never forget that it is Babylon!

It is *not* the city of God.

Yes, at *present* it is the city where God's people live –
and so therefore we pray for the peace of Babylon.
But the future of God's people is *always* Jerusalem.

But so long as you live in Babylon –
for so long as you live in this age –
as sojourners and exiles in Babylon –
pray for the peace of Babylon.

This is why Paul teaches us to pray for rulers.
Remember how Paul says it?

“I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings
be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions,
that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life,
godly and dignified in every way.” (1 Tim 2:1-2)

And Paul goes on to say that we pray for rulers in this way
because God desires all people to be saved
and to come to the knowledge of the truth –
which happens more easily
when rulers allow Christians to live a peaceful and quiet life.

Pray for the peace of Babylon – for the well-being of Babylon.
But do not put your hope in Babylon!

You see, this is the irony of Jeremiah 29:
what is the lie that the prophets believe?

b. Do Not Be Deceived by the Prophets Who Prophecy Lies (v8-9)

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

The prophets are saying that Nebuchadnezzar will restore Jerusalem.
Nebuchadnezzar will end the exile.
Nebuchadnezzar will let us go home!
Ironic, eh?

Jeremiah is allegedly the one who has “sold out” to Nebuchadnezzar,
because Jeremiah has told the people not to resist Nebuchadnezzar.
But now the very prophets who rejected the word of Jeremiah
are telling Israel to put their hope in Nebuchadnezzar!

This happens all the time!
If you confuse America with Jerusalem –

and so you think that God's purposes for the salvation of the world
are bound up with America –
then you will always be looking for a political salvation.
But if you recognize that America (and China, and Iran, and Germany, and Russia)
and all the nations of the earth,
are Babylon –
then you may seek the welfare of the city,
without expecting Babylon to save you!

You can be a Daniel – serving in high political office in Babylon –
indeed, when Jeremiah's letter arrived in Babylon
it is likely that Daniel would have been one of the first to read it –
since he was attached to the court of Nebuchadnezzar at this time!

Why does Daniel live the way he does?
Because he understands and believes Jeremiah's letter.
(And Daniel 9 makes reference to the "books of Jeremiah" –
so plainly Daniel is familiar with Jeremiah's letters!).

The apostles take the same sort of approach to living in the Roman empire –
even going as far as comparing Rome to Babylon!

And this is why verse 11 is one of the most well-beloved verses in the book of Jeremiah:

c. "I Know the Plans I Have for You" – in Seventy Years (v10-14)

¹⁰ "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. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare^[b] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

We recognize that this speaks to the current situation of the church!

In verse 11, Jeremiah returns to the theme of *shalom*.

"I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for *shalom* and not for evil,
to give you a future and a hope."

God's purpose for his people is *not* "disaster" but "peace."
Not "evil" but "well-being."

Notice that what comes first is *God's* plan and purpose
which then result in Israel calling upon the LORD.

God's purpose will not be thwarted.

God's gift of *shalom* cannot be earned.

But *shalom* is also the calling to which we are called.

As Paul says,

"suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..." (Romans 5:3-5)

Okay, so far I've high-lighted the *parallel* between Jeremiah 29 and us today.
But I also need to point out the difference:

Pay attention to verses 12-14:

¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ 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.

Yes, there are similarities between the exiles in Babylon and us.
But there is a *huge* difference!

The exiles must wait 70 years until God will hear them.
Only then may they draw near to God in his holy sanctuary.

You, on the other hand, may draw near to God *right now*.
The difference between the Exiles and the Church is *Jesus*.
In the ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father
we now have an advocate who has entered the Holy of Holies.
The King has passed through exile and death
and he has been exalted to the right hand of God,
triumphing over sin, death, and the devil.

Your fortunes have *already* been restored!
The exile is over!
At least, it is over for Jesus – and therefore (by faith) for us!
But by *sight* the exile is not yet over.

We do not yet see all things under Jesus' feet.

2. How Should You Think about the “Lucky” Ones Who Are Not in Exile? (v15-23)

a. The Remnant in Jerusalem Will Be Destroyed (v15-19)

¹⁵ “Because you have said, ‘The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon,’ ¹⁶ thus says the LORD concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who dwell in this city, your kinsmen who did not go out with you into exile: ¹⁷ ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten. ¹⁸ I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹ because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the LORD, that I persistently sent to you by my servants the prophets, but you would not listen, declares the LORD.’

Verses 16-20 are especially interesting.

As we've gone through Jeremiah,

I have frequently made reference to the two texts of Jeremiah –
the Babylonian text (sent with Seraiah, the brother of Baruch – see chapter 51),
and the Alexandrian text (taken with Jeremiah and Baruch).

Chapter 29 contains an interesting example of the difference.

What we have in our English Bibles is the Babylonian text.

The Alexandrian text is pretty much the same –
except it omits verses 16-20.

This is curious because this is quoting a letter that Jeremiah wrote years before.

It appears that Jeremiah omitted this from the manuscript that he took to Egypt.

Why?

Look down at verses 16-20.

This is where Jeremiah tells the *Babylonian exiles*
that God will make the Jerusalem remnant a horror.

But the Alexandrian manuscript is written for the *Jerusalem remnant*.

It appears that Jeremiah (or Baruch) left out verses 16-20

because this information is *not necessary* for the Jerusalem remnant.

Think about what this does to the chapter!

In the Alexandrian manuscript, the entire focus is on the Babylonian exiles.

The Babylonian exiles are exhorted to seek the welfare of the city –
and warned not to listen to false prophets.

The effect of the text *for the Jerusalem remnant*
is a parallel exhortation:

if you are going to Alexandria (in Egypt)

then you, too, need to seek the welfare of the city.

But in the Babylonian manuscript, there is also a condemnation of the Jerusalem remnant,
which is then applied to the Babylonian exiles:

do not be like the Jerusalem remnant!

In other words, both manuscripts use the other group as a warning to the intended audience.

Both manuscripts faithfully apply the message of Jeremiah to God's people.

And that is now *my task* – as I seek to apply the message of Jeremiah faithfully to *you*.

Because Jesus is now the King who sits on the throne of David.

He endured exile – he became “a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach” –
for the joy set before him – he endured the cross, scorning its shame.

Some have wrongly assumed that this means that because Jesus endured this,
therefore we don't have to!

It would be more accurate to say that because Jesus endured this

therefore we follow him –
with the confidence that because *Jesus* was raised from the dead,
we too will be raised up to newness of life!

There is a joy that we find in the midst of suffering!
But it is still suffering!

We walk by *faith* – not by sight.

Unless of course, we are false prophets!
John will speak of the false prophets in his day –
that they went out from us because they were not of us.
There are false prophets in the church today.
And you identify them today the same way that Jeremiah did!

b. The Curse upon the False Prophets (v20-23)

²⁰ *Hear the word of the LORD, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon:*
²¹ *Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab the son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name: Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he shall strike them down before your eyes.* ²² *Because of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: “The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire,”* ²³ *because they have done an outrageous thing in Israel, they have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and they have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them. I am the one who knows, and I am witness, declares the LORD.”*

Verses 20-23 give us a couple of easy signals:

“they have committed adultery with their neighbors’ wives,
and they have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them.”

An adulterer is a false prophet.

Jeremiah could have added other similar sins

(think about the list that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 6:9 –

“Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters,
nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves,
nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers
will inherit the kingdom of God.”)

A man who does such things cannot be a pastor.

I have heard some people say that such a man can *sympathize* with sinners better.

No.

Jesus sympathizes with us – because he was tempted in all ways as we are –
yet without sin!

We sympathize best with sinners when we persevere –

when we endure – through temptation.

But it is not enough to avoid temptation.

A preacher must guard his life *and his doctrine*.

3. The Peril of Making People Trust in Lies (v24-32)

a. Shemaiah's Letter to the Priests in Jerusalem (v24-28)

²⁴ *To Shemaiah of Nehelam you shall say: ²⁵ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: You have sent letters in your name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest, and to all the priests, saying, ²⁶ 'The LORD has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to have charge in the house of the LORD over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and neck irons. ²⁷ Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who is prophesying to you? ²⁸ For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, "Your exile will be long; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce."'"*

Verses 24-32 summarize the ongoing correspondence between the exiles in Babylon and the remnant in Jerusalem.

Shemaiah was one of the leading prophets of the exiles in Babylon.

When Jeremiah's letter came to the exiles, he was furious!

And so he wrote to the high priest, Zephaniah,

demanding that Zephaniah lock up Jeremiah.

And so Zephaniah read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet.

Perhaps Zephaniah was sympathetic to Jeremiah –

or maybe he just wanted to give everyone a fair hearing.

Either way:

b. Jeremiah's Reply (v29-32)

²⁹ *Zephaniah the priest read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. ³⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ³¹ "Send to all the exiles, saying, 'Thus says the LORD concerning Shemaiah of Nehelam: Because Shemaiah had prophesied to you when I did not send him, and has made you trust in a lie, ³² therefore thus says the LORD: Behold, I will punish Shemaiah of Nehelam and his descendants. He shall not have anyone living among this people, and he shall not see the good that I will do to my people, declares the LORD, for he has spoken rebellion against the LORD.'*

We don't know anything more about Shemaiah.

What happened to him and his family?

We have no idea.

And that's the point.

Jeremiah the prophet is known throughout all history as a faithful prophet of the LORD.

The only thing we know about Shemaiah the prophet

is that he was *wrong*.

Shemaiah is upset with Jeremiah because Jeremiah has “sold out” to Babylon.
Ironically, Shemaiah’s hope rests on the good favor of Babylon –
in order to send the exiles home.

And there will be times when the church has “sold out” to Babylon.
There is always a danger that we will get too comfortable –
that we will forget our true home.

But there is another – perhaps greater – danger.
And that is that we will fail to obey Jesus.
Jesus calls us to “seek the welfare of the city.”

Christians should be chief among the benefactors of the cities where they live.
Think of what Hope Ministries has done for downtown South Bend.

We saw in Matthew 25 that Jesus *focuses* his attention on
“the least of these my brothers” –
because we are to focus first on our fellow Christians –
but if we seek the peace – the well-being – of the city where we live,
then we will “do good to *all men* – especially those of the household of faith.”

I like Christopher Wright’s comment:

“Jeremiah was under no illusions.
Babylon itself stood under God’s judgment and its time would come.
But that was true of all nations and all the earth, *and it still is*.
The role of God’s people in the midst of such reality is still to pray for
and seek the welfare of the people they live among,
even when we are aware that people in every nation and culture
stand under God’s judgment.” (p295)

And so let us pray: