

My City for Christ

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[0 : 00] Now we're going to read Scripture together and then look at that passage in relation to our topic this evening, which I'll say more about in a moment.

And our reading is from Jeremiah chapter 29 in the Old Testament. Jeremiah is a difficult book and it's mainly a book of Jeremiah the prophet bringing a message of judgment to the Old Testament people of God who had really rebelled against God and broken the covenant and were taken into exile to Babylon.

And this is part of the message that he brings from God to them while they're in Babylon. Jeremiah 29 will read verses 1 to 14. So well-known chapter, you'll definitely know at least one or two of the verses in this chapter and we'll be mentioning them probably.

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.

This was after King Jehoniah and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem.

[1 : 24] The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah, the son of Shaffan and Gamaria, the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah, king of Judah, sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

It said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. 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 these and do not decrease. 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.

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, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name.

[2 : 28] I did not send them, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, when seventy years are accomplished for, are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

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. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you.

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 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 where I sent you into exile. So as Thomas mentioned this morning, Thomas was doing a series in the evening about the church and the various pictures of the church, and he did that picture this morning in church.

So I am doing what we have been doing in the morning, this evening, just for this one week. And we have been looking at really about planning and prayer.

[3 : 41] And we have looked at different subjects and topics related to that both with regard to our own personal spiritual lives and to our lives in the church, and generally to the importance of planning our lives and committing what we plan to the Lord.

And I think last week I got it wrong in telling you the order of what was happening next. So, but anyway, this evening we are looking at our lives, our gospel lives in the city here in Edinburgh, and praying for that, and planning to pray in our lives for Edinburgh, the city we are part of.

And then next Sunday, hopefully, and this will be the correction from last week, next Sunday morning we are looking at the subject of praying, planning to pray about the whole issue of abortion in our society and the world we live in, and then the following week looking at planning and praying that the gospel would break into the LGBT community and how we can pray for that and love that community with the gospel and prayerfully consider the way forward there.

But this evening I want to look at the theme of my city for Christ. And I am going to use this passage in Jeremiah. Depending on your point of view, this place is blessed or cursed, and in the years I have lived here I have seen the best and worst, an air of sordid passion, a look of dirty grace, but not right in your face.

It is not that kind of place. That is the Proclaimers song, one of the verses of the Proclaimers song about Edinburgh, the streets of Edinburgh, and I think it is a magnificent description of the city of Edinburgh, an air of sordid passion, a look of dirty grace, but not right in your face.

[5 : 43] It is not that kind of place. The album is The Angry Cyclist. And one way or another, this is where we are.

This is where God has called us to live. We are in Edinburgh. We are right in the middle of Edinburgh here, in the city centre in the shadow of the castle.

And we are not, and you are not here individually or all of us together randomly. God has brought us here, this is where we are.

Now Edinburgh has been the capital of Scotland since the 15th century. It has got roughly half a million inhabitants, although it is growing all the time. It is a cultural and art centre.

We know that, don't we, especially at this time of year. It has a powerful and intriguing history. This itself is a world heritage site because of its significance, not the church specifically, but the church is on this whole area as a world heritage site.

[6 : 44] It is called the Athens of the North. It is a centre for commerce, for health, for politics and for tourism. Even for education, there is around 150,000 students and pupils in the city of Edinburgh.

35% of its population are in their 20s and 30s here in Edinburgh. The Spanish and Polish make up the most overseas residents in this city.

There are 20,000 new businesses registered in Edinburgh every year. Well, that was in 2017, I think probably about 19,000 of them close each year.

Well, the food shops seem to be certainly around here. And Leith Walk, there are just under 20,000 domestic properties. The busiest and most intensely inhabited part of the city.

Yet there are 3,500 homeless applications last year. 18% of all households live in material deprivation.

[7 : 48] 17,500 children in low income households. There's an underbelly to the city of Edinburgh that the city of Edinburgh doesn't often want to consider.

And it has an amazing spiritual history. You only need to look around you at the display that Christian heritage Edinburgh put on here. Or to go on one of Paul's tours to learn about the spiritual history of the city and what God has done.

But today, probably only between 4% and 5% of the population go to any church. And as part of Scotland, we recognise that since 2002, 300 new churches have been opened.

But 1,680 have closed. And we recognise therefore that the capital city is part of a nation that is in spiritual decline in many ways.

So my question, I have one question and one statement to make. The question is, does God have a plan for us in Edinburgh? And I want to look at that question by looking at this chapter in Jeremiah chapter 29.

[9 : 11] Where it speaks about another city, this city of Babylon. And it speaks about the people who are in exile in that city. And I think it's a much misunderstood passage.

And I wouldn't pretend to be able to explain all the differences and similarities between being the people of God in Babylon in the Old Testament and us as the people of God in Edinburgh in 2019.

But I can guarantee that there are some misunderstandings that we will unpack a little bit today.

Probably verse 11 is the most misunderstood verse, at least one of the most misunderstood verses in the text.

Where we all know that the text, 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.

Or plans to prosper you as in other translations also. It's the text that's on a thousand pastel shaded memes and sunrise posters, isn't it?

[10:13] Without realising necessarily the context within its scriptural position. Is this chapter a theology for us, for living in the city?

Well, I think there's parallels and comparisons. But it's not a straight interpretation between what happened to the God's people in the Old Testament and our position in the New.

It's not a yes and no answer, I don't think. Edinburgh is not Babylon, we recognise that. Nor do we have here, as some have taken it to be an exhaustive theology of the city and God's amazing plans for the city.

Verse 7 is a very significant verse for many theologians today, but seek the welfare of the city. I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf for if you prosper, if it prospers, you will prosper.

And verse 11, the one we've looked at is certainly not a sugarcoated promise about God promising His green light to all our plans. I think it's rather more nuanced and maybe a little more uncomfortable than that, but it is good.

[11:27] And these are great verses, and this is a great passage. And there are clearly principles within it that help us to understand our place in Edinburgh as Christians.

But can I just mention the main difference between this passage and our own situation? The main difference being that the Old Testament people of God here, as it's recorded in Jeremiah 29, they were in exile in Babylon as a judgment for their sin, okay?

They had been taken out of the promised land, and they were in exile under God's discipline and judgment for their sin, for their idolatry, for turning their back on the living God.

We also are called exiles, I'll mention that a little bit more later, but we are no longer under God's judgment, and we're not in the city because we're under God's judgment.

Our exile status is different to theirs. We are not exiles under judgment. We are exiles because judgment has already taken place in Jesus Christ.

[12:39] Their hope was built on what God was still to do in Christ. Our hope is built on what Christ has already done, and it gives us a different, therefore, angle and thought process as we look at the Old Testament.

But what are some of the principles we can take out of this chapter that you can apply, and I can apply in my own life, and in our own, both corporate and individual lives, of being in the city?

I think the first thing is that we can recognise that his plans are focused on shalom, on peace. In verse 7, it speaks about seeking the welfare of the city where I've sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare, you will also find your welfare.

And then verse 11, that famous verse says, I know the plans I have for you. Plans, declares that plans for welfare and not for evil. Now, the word for welfare that's used in these verses is the word of shalom, is the word of peace.

And God was wanting peace on Babylon, and God was promising peace to his own people. And we know that his own plans moving forward into the New Testament, into the gospel and into grace, are all based around his shalom, his peace.

[14:01] It is translated prosperity, and I think sometimes that has been taken as material prosperity. Well, welfare is probably not a bad interpretation. It's a very deep, wide-ranging word, but it really speaks of wholeness, completeness.

It comes when our broken and sinful hearts are healed, and we're reconciled to God. That's the core of shalom, that's the core of peace, as being right with God through the Redeemer, through Jesus Christ.

It's the spiritual blessings with all the life consequences of knowing Him and knowing His shalom. And all His plans are focused around that reconciliation and that peace.

That's how we are meant to be in Jesus Christ. In John chapter 14 verse 27, we have these words, peace. He speaks so much about this, shalom.

I leave you my peace, my shalom. I give you not as the world gives, do I give you, let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid just before Christ goes to the cross. He says this to His disciples, I give you my shalom, I give you my peace.

[15:13] And it's not simply to be equated with the absence of war, or as it's often translated, material prosperity. It's not as the world gives, the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ is found because

of the maelstrom of Calvary, the dis-peace that He experienced in Calvary.

And the separation and the dis-unification of Christ from the Father and the Spirit on the cross, with all the mystery of that, as He was working out our salvation so that we can know peace as we come to trust in Him, no refuge, no belonging, no home.

No as in K-N-O-W, no home rather than no home. So we can know what it is to be home, to know what it is to belong as it were in this city, and to know that peace and the family of peace that He brings.

So His plans for us in our lives and for this city are His shalom or spiritual. It's the gospel, it is the great commission, the good news of Jesus.

But His plans, secondly, will also be plans that bring tension into your life and into my life. Luke 12, 51 reminds us of that kind of paradox that He says, when He says He brings peace, do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?

[16:47] No, I tell you about rather divisions. So there's this paradox, isn't there, between the peace that He brings and the tension that His peace brings into our experience.

Now we can see that if we look at the context in which He gives the promise of verse 11, for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare, not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

I almost guarantee that this verse is not as simple or as comfortable as we want it to be. It's a brilliant kind of anthemic verse, but it's not a personal life career guarantee of blessing, a life of ease or prosperity financially or unbridled comfort.

He says, I know the plans I have for you. So what we have here is God saying, I have plans for you, and I know what these plans are. And for us, when He offers us His shalom, we know it's not the same kind of peace as the world offers, that there is tension within His shalom.

It involves suffering. Now how can we unpack that from this? Well, if we recognize the context, He is giving this promise in the context of God's people being in exile and saying, they're going to be in exile for the next 70 years.

[18:18] They're going to be slaves to the Babylonian oppressors for the next 70 years. This is where God wants you. This is where He plans for you.

This is the plans He has to prosper you, to give you His peace. And that's what He's saying to the people here. Now it's given, this promise is given in the light of false prophecy that is mentioned in the previous chapter, in chapter 28, verses 2 and 3, Hananiah, who is a false prophet, he comes to the people and he says, thus sees the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years, you will be back. I will bring you back to this place and all the vessels of the Lord's house, while Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took away from this place and carried into Babylon.

So there was a false prophecy that the people had their hope on, oh, two years, we'll be back in two years. Oh, isn't God great? It's going to be easy for us. We're only going to be in exile a couple of years and then we'll be back in our beloved home in Jerusalem.

But God gives them this promise, this promise of Shalom and this promise of settling down in Babylon, of building their homes and building their families and staying put for seventy years.

[19:37] It's not what they wanted. It's not what they planned. It meant suffering and it meant they weren't in their beloved Jerusalem.

And God's plans, God's Shalom for us also brings with it war. It brings war against sin. It brings war against selfishness and pride and doing our own thing and going our own way.

It means opposition. Sometimes it means tremendous difficulty and it will mean persecution. It involves waiting on God.

There's tension within God's plans for us. And it does involve, therefore, accepting where God has us today.

You know, the people of exile in Babylon, they had to confess, this is where God has us. This is where He has us for the next seventy years. It's not where we want to be.

[20:38] It's not part of our plans. It wasn't in my CV, but this is where He has me. And for us, often knowing God's Shalom in our lives also means accepting where He's placed us.

And here is where God is placed us, in Edinburgh. Now, we might not always be here. We know that because God does move us on. But it is where He's called us currently to be.

Now, sometimes I think many of us in our lives, physically and spiritually, we just long to be somewhere else. I can't be bothered with Edinburgh, it's particularly during the festival. And we can't really, we don't want to stay here. And maybe we don't want to be part of this church anymore. It's so dull and boring and we really want to move on. We can always be, we can find it easy in our Christian lives, always to be longing for something else, longing to be somewhere else, for things to be different.

And yet He's calling us and He's saying to us, not in some kind of fatalistic way, always looking for His guidance and wisdom in all that we do, He's saying to us, this is what I have you.

[21 : 46] This is where you're called. This is where I want you to serve and to seek, to build the kingdom of God and to grow the kingdom of God and to love the city of which you're a part.

This is what I have you. That's where my plans are for you in your life. So as plans are focused on Shalom, they often will bring tension into our lives.

But also we see His plan involves an exile mentality. And that's where there's parallels, but also for a different reason between this and our own situation.

1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 11 says, beloved, I urge you, and Peter would have known this kind of old testament background, sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

And also Hebrews 11 and then Hebrews 30, for He was looking forward to the city that is foundation, whose designer and builder is God, speaking of Abraham.

[22 : 48] And then in Hebrews 13, again, it says, here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. So there's a sense in which here we are exiles also, Peter calls us as Christians, those who are in exiles, because we have another city that we're looking forward to.

There's always a future hope for us. This is not ultimately our home. We're citizens of heaven. And that's what we're looking forward to in our Christian lives. We are here for the shortest of times before in the light of eternity.

And therefore, like God's Old Testament people, we are also called to be different. And we are always called to be different, to be exiles within the city, within our communities.

And the danger sometimes for us is that there's a danger of us wanting to be so much part of the city and all its blessings, so integrated, so belonging to the city.

They were just like everyone else in the city, we're indistinguishable. A huge challenge for us is to live as exiles in the city and in the community in which we live.

[23 : 59] The courage to be God's ordinary people. There's always that tension, therefore, in the way we live as Christians. But that tension, and as we live out that tension, will always be best for Edinburgh.

It will always be the best thing for Edinburgh when we live that way. It will be best for this city. You know, within God's city, within our city here, we, like them, are to seek its welfare.

The city of Sentient Exile pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare, you will find welfare. Take wives and sons and daughters, get married, bear sons and daughters, multiply, do not decrease, increase.

We are, that was given to the Old Testament covenant people. We are God's New Testament covenant people. We are to seek growth and distinctiveness.

We're to grow as Christians with an individually, a corporately. We're to grow by people coming to faith.

[25 : 05] And we are, therefore, in the same way seeking the good of the city and the world around us. Because we love that city. We serve the city.

We love our neighbors and we love our enemies. That's the extent of the New Testament command. That's what God wants us to do, to live like Jesus did.

And this, in this city, people need Jesus. People need the shalom of Jesus. They need the hope of the gospel.

And we can bring that to them as we live our lives with a genuine commitment. We're not asked to be monastic or isolated or disinterested in people or in culture.

We're to be living out our lives among the people with the shalom of Jesus and seeking to bring that into their lives. So it involves an exile mentality.

[26 : 01] As plans bring tension and as plans are focused on shalom. The second point I want to make relates to the theme of these sermons, which is planning and prayer.

God's plan ignites prayer. Knowing God's plans, knowing God's will, knowing God's call on us in our lives, each of us have God's calling in our lives in this city.

And whatever way and wherever we are, we're called by God to live out the shalom of God in this place.

God's plan invites prayer. Verse 12, he talks about the promise in verse 11. And he says, then you will call on me and come and pray to me and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

I will be found by you. And then he also says earlier on that they are to pray for the city and seek its welfare. Pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

[27 : 04] I think there's a great, there's a great truth there that reminds us that our lives and the life of this city, our lives as Christians and our church life is intertwined with this city and the life of this city.

God's plan invites, ignites prayer. He knows that he is hope and a future for this people. It's not what they expect.

It's not in the time that they expect, it's not in the way that they expect, but they entrust themselves to God and pray to him for his will to be done. And prayer for us, it always motivated by knowing that God is a purpose and a plan for us and that we are part of his sovereign plan.

We are driven to pray to the great plan in God. It doesn't make us prayerless. It doesn't make us sit back and say, well, let's see God unfold his plans. It drives us to pray because we pray about the calling we have and part of the call for me for us all over these days and as we enter this year, academic year, whatever you call it, semester, to pray as exiles in Edinburgh and to pray for the city, to live out his shalom within the city in our lives, to pray with a kingdom perspective, to pray for the church in the city, for St. Columba's, to pray for the covenant family that is the church here that we might grow and plan and develop and know God's will and do God's will, that you would see your part in that as called under God and by God as Thomas was saying this morning with the specific gifts that you have, that we would be looking to make disciples longing for his kingdom to come through our life and our work in the kingdom to plead for a conversions that he would turn the most unlikely people to himself in

Salvation. I was thinking about that this morning and I was thinking about the women of Samaria and I was thinking about Zacchaeus and thinking that they were probably the two of the most unlikely people that anyone would have chosen in that time to become believers.

[29 : 21] Who are the people that are most unlikely to become believers in your own mind and your neighbors, your colleagues, your friends?

Who is it? And seek God and know that as we seek Him and as we pray to Him, He says, you know, I will listen, I will hear you, I will hear you.

He longs for us to be praying because He hears us and we plead for people to return to Him and to come to Him and recognize our well-being and His and our well-being and the well-being of the city are intertwined as we seek Him and as we long for Him.

We recognize as believers that it is only grace that separates us from those who don't believe in the city. People we think might never become Christians who have at the moment no desire to know Him.

Pray for Shalom, that they would come to know the Shalom, the peace, the wholeness, the forgiveness, the grace of God in their lives. Witness to them. Remember your calling among them.

[30 : 30] Your calling, where you are placed, the people you know. Name them before God in prayer. Pray for them before God, our neighbors, our enemies, our civic leaders, our colleagues, our fellow students.

Remember there's one hope, there's one guaranteed future as we call in Him. Pray about our calling and pray through our suffering.

That's what He was calling the people to do in the Old Testament. They certainly didn't expect to be there for 70 years. Remember that His ways are not our ways. We wouldn't choose the path we live ordinarily, most of us I suspect.

His plans are not our plans. His plans do involve for us a degree of suffering in our lives, one way or another, developing grace, patience, reliance, dealing with the sinful, selfish desires that we often have.

Allow Him to mold our hearts through the difficult experiences that we go through, knowing that they are part of His plans for our welfare.

[31 : 38] Not for evil, but to give us future and a hope. Maybe it isn't promising the glitzy career for us, the promotion, the job satisfaction, the dream life.

You may be of a rubbish job, you may be always of a rubbish job, but do your rubbish job to the glory of God and recognize Him through it, the patience and grace and the prayer.

And prayer because He loves the city, praying for the city. I don't know if it's a theology of the city and how God regards cities, but I do know He loves where the people are, urban or rural.

I know that and He wants us to reach out to them. I like Jonah's verse, Jonah 11, 4, 11, should I not pity Nineveh, God says to Jonah and his grumpiness, that great city which are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle, what a magnificent verse.

For Matthew 23, 27, or Jesus, over that city to which the people returned from Babylonian exile, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent, how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen, gather your brethren and the wings, and you would not pay us and love and astonishing desire for that city that rejected Him.

[33 : 14] And also Paul's promise, which those in the congregation will have heard me ad nauseam speaking about, I have many people in this city promise that it was God's guidance, one of a very significant part of God's guidance to bring in me here in 2001, many people in this city.

So it's just a rallying call this evening today to make a fresh life of prayer as you plan your life, as you plan your individual life, as you plan your life in this city, that the gospel plays a central part, that sharing the shalom of Jesus matters to you, that you look at people and say they need Jesus, they really need Jesus, because I really need Jesus.

And see yourself as part of this covenant community growing, developing, maturing and waiting prayerfully on God and acting on His behalf.

An air of sordid passion, a look of dirty grace, but not right in your face, it's not that kind of place. Let's pray that beautiful and generous grace, not dirty grace, will mark our lives and be a characteristic of the city that we love, and may we pray your will be done in Edinburgh as it is in heaven.

Amen, let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to know your shalom. We pray if there's anyone in church here this evening who doesn't know the peace of forgiveness and the grace of God in their hearts, that they would come to see their need of Jesus even at this moment, and would call on you as the living Savior, the Redeemer, and the one who loves to hear our cries for mercy.

[35 : 10] We pray that you would give us courage and boldness to remind people of their need for Jesus. May we be able to keep it as simple as that. And give us a great love and a prayerful concern for this city, and for our neighbors, for our colleagues, for the people we work alongside.

Help us to name them before you, and plead for opportunities to both live out the shalom of Jesus Christ, and also the message of the good news, sharing it with them in a respectful and gracious and courageous way.

Help us Lord to do so, independence on you, and with great prayerful concern and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.