

A Church in the City

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- [0 : 0 0] This morning we are looking at this chapter and these verses in Jeremiah 29. Why this morning should we look at this part of the Bible?
- Well, I want to begin by quickly describing the context here in Jeremiah and what life was like for the people there and show how we, people who live in Edinburgh in 2009, are in a very similar situation facing the same kinds of questions.
- The issue in this chapter really is how should Christians live in a fragmented non-Christian society? That's what this chapter is all about.
- This is a book written in the Old Testament before Jesus was born. It's about an Israelite prophet called Jeremiah who is sent to speak to God's people, the Israelites. And the Israelites at this point have had a troubled recent past.
- They're living in their own country, Jerusalem is their city, with their own religion and cultural distinctives and language. And then this huge imperial army from Babylon appears and attacks Jerusalem and takes the bulk of the population as captives.
- [1 : 1 0] So everyone who's young, who's healthy, who is intelligent, who is skilled at a particular job, who's able to work, they're all taken off to Babylonia as exiles, as captives.
- And that's the point of which we find this chapter, chapter 29. The Israelites are now living in a big refugee camp outside the capital city of Babylon.
- The Babylonians were a huge empire. They were a world superpower in their day. And one of the reasons they became a world superpower, why they were so good at dominating other nations and cultures, was that they had a brilliant strategy for taking over and ruling over smaller nations.
- They knew that they could turn up at the front door of other countries and nations and had various options for how they were going to rule over them and subjugate them and deal with them.
- They could turn up, they could fight the people, win them, drive them all out of their lands and just take over and stay themselves. But the problem with doing that is that if you do that to a lot of people, if you turn up and throw them out of their homes and just leave them to go somewhere else, eventually they get really angry at you and they build up in number and they're going to come back and fight and retaliate.
- [2 : 2 4] So they didn't do that. There's another option that you could turn up, fight the Israelites and defeat them and say, well now you are our slaves and you're going to work for us, doing all the menial labour, all the jobs that we don't want to do.
- But the problem is that when you do that, people hate being made slaves and eventually there's an insurrection and they'll rebel against you and take over. The best option from a Babylonian perspective, and this is what they did, was to make people assimilate, to make them become exactly like you with your culture, with your language, with your religion, with your outlook on life.

If you turn up and you take all of the brightest and the best young people from nation X, from the nation of Israel, and you take them as captive to your city, you put them through your educational system, you give them new names that are Babylonian names, you make them think just like you do and then you send them back to the country that you've taken over.

All of the leaders there think the same way as you do. They're all exactly like you are. Think for example of the book of Daniel, another Old Testament book, if you've read it. Daniel and his friends are young, Israelite guys, they're all bright and healthy, future leaders, and they all get taken off into exile by the Babylonians and then they arrive in Babylon and all of a sudden, by the way Daniel, your name is now Balthashe-Azar.

You're not called Daniel anymore, you have a Babylonian name that means Bail is my God. You've got a Babylonian religion now imposed on you. They put them through three years of Babylon University, all these things to make them assimilate so that they can then send them back to Jerusalem as Babylonians.

[4 : 07] So we've got this Israelite community then, chapter 29, and they're living in exile just outside Babylon. They've been taken from their homes with this expectation from Babylon that they're going to assimilate, they're going to lose their religion, they're going to lose their culture, they're going to lose all of the things that make them who they are, and there are major temptations for them to do so because Babylon was a great city, a world-class city.

Its name means gateway to the gods, it's full of art and culture, it's got a strong economy. You can have a really good job here and a comfy life if you lose your faith, if you lose everything that makes you who you are and you become just like them.

But Israelites don't know how to handle this. At one level, Babylon is a fragmented society full of immigrants from different places, full of different religions, a pagan city, not a place where the one true God of Israel is worshiped or acknowledged.

So what do the Israelites do? How do they relate to the city that they've been taken to and that they're now living on the edge of as people who have a distinctive faith and religion?

How do they live as believers in a fragmented non-Christian city and society? And our situation in Edinburgh in 2009 is not that different. How many of us here in St. Seas were born and brought up in Edinburgh?

[5 : 34] Not that many of us. Most of us have come here for one reason or another through study or work and we've been brought to Edinburgh, maybe not in the same forceful circumstances as the Israelites.

We came here, we were quite happy when you got your university acceptance letter or when you got your job offer. But nonetheless, we are in a fragmented city, not a Christian society, where you have lots of different people groups and a basic disconnect between them all.

Think of how many international students, and we have so many of them in our city, who come and spend years here without ever getting to know anyone from Edinburgh. Or how many people from Edinburgh that don't know any international students?

I live in Gorgie in the west of Edinburgh, traditionally a strong working class area with a very distinctive identity, which has seen a large number of different people groups moving into Gorgie recently in the last few years and it's now got a big yuppie population, lots of young professionals, lots of students, a really big African community and they don't tend to integrate.

People don't know how to live among each other and a lot of the people that are Gorgie people feel like their community is being taken from them.

[6 : 53] We live in a fragmented city, so how do we as a Christian church in the middle of it, how do we think and live as Christians in a city like Edinburgh? And I want to suggest to you that from Jeremiah 29 we are in basically the same position as the Israelites.

We need to know how do we live in a big multicultural non-Christian city. And I think we have exactly the same options presented to us as the Israelites did.

Option number one is assimilation, and we're looking at verses one to six at this point. The story here, as we were just saying, is that the Israelites are basically stuck.

Their king and their leaders have gone into exile and the Israelites themselves are now in exile. Jerusalem where they've come from is empty, it's largely empty, it's in a really bad way.

There's nothing to go home to, they don't have that option. And they're camped outside Babylon under massive pressure from the Babylonians to move into the city and assimilate to become just like the Babylonians.

[7 : 55] They want them just to blend in, to lose all of their distinctives and as a people to decrease. The Babylonians were, if anyone here is brave enough to admit being a Star Trek fan, they were like the Borg in Star Trek.

The Borg are this cyborg race who fly around the galaxy in a huge Borg cube spaceship with this message, we are Borg, you will be assimilated, resistance is futile.

There's nothing you can do, you are about to become exactly like us. Everything that you were before is about to disappear, you are going to become exactly like us. We are Babylon, you will be assimilated, resistance is futile.

Edinburgh is kind of similar, you're free to live here and be a part of things as long as you assimilate. As long as you hold to particular code of sexual ethics, as long as you do not believe in any public way in the exclusivity of Christianity, as long as you don't take the Bible seriously, as long as you're willing to work seven days a week all the time, as long as you don't question secularism, you're welcome to come and live here.

As long as you become just like us, why would you give into this and choose to assimilate? Whether you are an Israelite in this chapter or whether you're a Christian who moves into Edinburgh and faces this challenge of assimilation, probably you would choose to assimilate if you decide that you are here in this city, primarily and above everything else, for your own benefit, for your own personal advancement.

[9 : 37] If you arrive in Babylon and you're an Israelite who decides to assimilate, knowing that it means, well, I'm going to lose my name, my birth name, I'm going to lose my language, I'm going to lose particularly my religion, you do that knowing that you do this and your people group decreases and you become Babylonian.

You do so making the decision that what you stand to gain as an individual completely outweighs the cost to your original identity and to your people group.

If you arrive in Edinburgh, let's say, to study and you arrive in your Christian and you're put under immediate pressure to assimilate, it happens at lots of levels. It happens at a social level. Oh, come on, everyone's going out clubbing.

Come on, everyone's getting drunk tonight. Come on, everyone sleeps together before they're married. Come on, everyone does these things. It also happens at an intellectual level. Come on, no one here actually believes the Bible's true.

Come on, no one here believes in Jesus. That stuff's all made up. It happens on a professional level in your workplace. Come on, everyone acts like that in this company. If you choose to assimilate, it's because you have come to the city for one reason, to look out for number one, to get ahead individually and the price you have to pay for personal gain.

[11 : 02] If that price is to portray what you believed when you arrived, where you come from, you'll pay because the most important thing is to get what I came to Edinburgh for.

And haven't we all come here to get something, to get a degree, to get a career, to get a name, to get loved, to get away from home, to get friends who think you're great?

Should Christians assimilate into non-Christian culture, society? Should we lose all of the distinctives of our faith, things that stick out like a sore thumb in Edinburgh in 2009, in order to make personal advancements here in this city?

And what God says through Jeremiah is no. Look at what he commands in verses 4 to 6, when he says, build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Do you see how it builds up in these verses?

God says, get a routine here, get a lifestyle, get married, have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But look at the end, the end of verse 6 is, increase in number there.

[12 : 12] Do not decrease. You shouldn't decrease by blending in. You should maintain all of your precious distinctives. And increase as a people, grow in number.

God would say exactly the same thing to us. In our situation, having come to Edinburgh with all its pressure for us to conform and assimilate, we should buy flats, we should get married here, we should start families and have our children in Edinburgh schools.

But not as a people group who have blended in and lost everything that is true to us. Just to fit into post-Christian Edinburgh's secular values, we are Christians who should increase in number as Christians here in Edinburgh.

So option number one is assimilation, and it's not an acceptable option for Christians. But if we're not going to assimilate, if we're not going to just lose everything about ourselves and blend in, what do we do? What's the option?

Should we be really standoffish and not integrate and maintain what we believe by enclosing ourselves in a bubble? And that's the second option that we're going to consider, tribalism, in verses eight and nine.

[13 : 28] It's the next option after assimilation. This is the option for the Israelites to stay in their refugee camp outside of Babylon and decide, well, we really don't like the Babylonians, and we don't really want to mix with them and their non-Christian values.

So we're going to carry on here, not mixing with Babylon or with its people or its culture. We'll keep ourselves pure and holy, and we'll venture into the city only when it suits us, when we need to gain something from them.

We'll take, but we'll never give. We'll build up money and we'll get rich. We don't care at all for them. We don't want to blend in. So we're only going to care for the interests of our own little tribe.

And in Jeremiah's context, there are various prophets that are actually among the Israelite people who are claiming that this is the message God is giving them. God has given me a dream where he says, we have to stay in our camp.

We should not go into the city. We have to just look for our own interests. What does God say to them? In verses eight and nine. Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says, do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you.

[14 : 41] Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them. If you move into a big multicultural, non-Christian city, where the culture is different from your home culture, wherever you've come from and you don't want to assimilate, you look for ghettos.

You look for little bubbles where everyone is just like you, just like it was at home, where you don't have to assimilate or have any involvement with local culture. You hang out with other expats and expat clubs.

You go to an ethnic church where everyone there is of the same people group that you came from, but it's not the people group of the city. And you do that being in the city only for as long as you absolutely have to be until you can go home.

When you've got what you came to get, you leave. If you arrive in Edinburgh and you're a Christian and you don't want to assimilate, this is the easiest and most obvious option to withdraw from the pagan culture that we have and live in a holy huddle.

And you have minimal contact with non-Christians. You have very few friends who are non-Christians. You take from Edinburgh. You use it to serve the best interests of your tribe, but you give nothing back.

[16 : 04] Your prayers are for your church, the people back home, never for the wider city that you live in, never for the salvation of your unbelieving neighbors.

Is it acceptable for Christians, for us as a church, to adopt a tribal mentality here in Edinburgh? And God's word says no, a huge resounding no.

God does not want us to do that. Why not? Why does He not want us to be a tribe that only loves itself, that only cares for its own interests?

Well, look at the option. Not the option really, it's the command. It's the only way to be for Christians. Our third point is not assimilate or be tribal, but the third point is to love the city.

Love the city that you're in. Number seven, God commands them. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

[17 : 08] God, through Jeremiah, tells the Israelites that they're to do something that's completely different from either blending in or standing out.

Maybe not standing out, the best sense, because we do stand out as Christians, but we're not standing out as a tribe that are being obstinate, being separate. God tells them that if you go for assimilation, you're only seeking personal benefit.

If you go for tribalism, you're only seeking benefit for people who are just like you. But with neither of those, are you loving your enemy? With neither of those, are you loving your neighbor?

Look at what God tells them to seek, not seeking personal benefit or tribal benefit. God tells them to seek the peace and the prosperity of the city.

Now, that probably doesn't shock us instantly in the way that it would have in their context, because like we said before, I assume I hope came to Edinburgh willingly.

[18 : 09] No one had a... not a gun, but a spear at your head or a sword saying, come with me, young man, to Babylon. We came here because we wanted to, because we like it.

The Israelites weren't like that. They'd been brought to the city by an invading army, an army who had rejected the one true God and who were building a non-Christian society.

And God says, well, what are you to look for in that society? How should you live among it? And God tells them to seek and work for the peace and the prosperity of that city.

That is completely counterintuitive to them. God doesn't say abandon your faith as you climb the greasy ladder of career advancement. Give everything for your own personal gain.

God doesn't say, enclose your faith, on the other hand, in the pursuit of tribal success, but never share the gospel. God wants them because of their faith, which they shouldn't lose or enclose to work for the good of this entire city, of all of its different immigrant populations, of its native population.

[19 : 21] Everyone needs to hear this truth. And it's because of that that God wants them to be in the city for the good of others. For the good of others on an individual level, my life for your benefit, for the good of others on a collective level, our lives as a church for your benefit.

God says, you are here so that someone will be praying to me on behalf of this city, because it's not praying for itself. We've got this word here, these words peace and prosperity.

Originally it's the word shalom. Look for the shalom of the city. It's a word you'll hear if you go to Israel. People speaking modern Hebrew, shalom, peace. When we think of peace, we just think, well that means that there's no war there.

It's not a war zone, therefore there is peace. So just now in Edinburgh there's peace, we're not in a war zone. The Hebrew word shalom means so much more. It doesn't just mean that there's no war happening around you.

No one is firing guns. It means the total flourishing of life in every respect. Everything everywhere is flourishing, going well, growing.

[20 : 34] Edinburgh, true, it's not a war zone, but is there much shalom here in our city? Is Edinburgh flourishing in every way?

Is Edinburgh a safe place for children without pedophiles? Sadly not, as we've seen in the news this week. Are families staying together or falling apart in Edinburgh?

Are people collapsing into debt in Edinburgh or not? Do people know their purpose in lives beyond enduring a rubbish week at work in order to have a wasted weekend?

Are different communities integrating? I could go on and on with examples, but at the core of it, do the majority of people in Edinburgh know their maker? Is there shalom here?

I don't think so. And God has put us here to pray and work for the shalom of the whole of Edinburgh, for the total flourishing of life in every area.

[21 : 36] Because if Edinburgh prospers, we prosper. We're here to work for a great city for everyone who lives here. Not just a great city for myself so that I can have a comfy life.

Not just a great city for our tribe, for our church, for our ethnic group, for whoever we belong to, but a great city for everyone. And that's what God wants the Israelites to do.

And that's what God wants us to do here in Edinburgh as well. We're in the same situation. How do we do that? How do you live in that kind of a way where you're not here for individual gain and you're not even here just for the gain of others who are just like you?

How do you do that? How do you live with the kind of assurance that lets you act like this, that lets you live like this, that lets you live for those with whom you fundamentally disagree, people who don't look or love or live like you do?

That's what God told the Israelites to do. And He gave them an astounding reason to obey, because they already knew who they were in Him.

[22 : 50] Look at verses... Well, look at verse 11, so that you can have a hopeful future.

You don't need to do that, because I know the plans that I have made for you. I've got your future marked out, and it's optimistic.

Then look at verses 12 and down to 14, which is directed to the tribalists, to people who despise their city, and they want to remain separate as though to try and save their own religion and identity and culture.

To them, God says in these verses, don't remain separate from Babylon as though you have to save yourselves. I will save you. I have already marked out when I will come back and take you from the city of man and move you to the city of God.

Jeremiah 29.11 is a verse that Christians often love to share with each other as an encouragement, because they are such encouraging words to tell another believer that God says, I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

[24 : 30] These are wonderful words, but you know how to make them wonderful in technicolor. Learn where they fit in their context, learn why God said these words.

If you're here in Edinburgh you can resolutely live for your own personal gain and your own personal advancement where you will sacrifice anything to fit in and get what you want for yourself in life.

If that is us, we have no right to claim this promise. If we are here in Edinburgh, on the other hand, to live solely for the benefit of our tribe, that's people of the same ethnic group, people of the same social class, people of the same religion.

It's interesting how often those things all go together where you get a church that is of one social class and one ethnic group, where everyone is basically the same.

If we're only here for people just like ourselves, we also have no claim on this promise. Those to whom this promise is given, to whom this promise applies, for whom this promise is truly wonderful, are those who, because of the gospel of Jesus, are in their communities to work for the shalom of the entire city, to see the lives of their enemies, their neighbors flourish in every way.

[26 : 08] Those who can claim this promise are people who go against everything that seems natural to work for yourself or just to work for your tribe. Jeremiah 29-11 is their assurance that they can afford to risk everything, that they can afford to step out on a limb and risk everything because their prosperity and their security, because their hope and their future has already been planned out by God.

If you're willing to do that, if you love your enemies, if you want their salvation, if you want Edinburgh's shalom, if you want it to flourish in every way, this promise is absolutely yours.

This promise is amazing, it's outstanding. This promise is the encouragement to you that you can afford to carry on sacrificing yourself for others and that we can afford as a church to sacrifice ourselves for those around us who are not like us.

We can carry on and do that because God knows the plans He has for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future.

I want to conclude at this point. We were saying at the beginning that this passage is all about how Christians should live in fragmented, non-Christian societies like ours.

[27 : 39] And the simple answer is this. In those societies, Christians live for others. As an individual Christian, you live for others.

We're not here for our own gain, we're here for the gain of others. And as a Christian community, as a church, we are here for others. We're not here to build a little empire for ourselves. We're here to see the kingdom of God spread throughout Edinburgh.

That's why we shouldn't be people who assimilate. We shouldn't be people who build up a tribe in their mentality. And the reason for that is the Gospel itself.

In the Gospel, the God, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, individually and collectively, has loved his enemies, has given up everything for the shalom, for the blessing, for the peace and the prosperity of an anti-God world.

And if we get that, if it's the Gospel itself that hits home, doesn't... don't things like just assimilating and blending in, becoming like everyone else, being really obstinate and refusing to have any contact with the non-Christians around you, don't those ways of thinking, they become so unnatural to us when the Gospel hits home.

[29 : 08] When we start to realize we are here to live for others because Jesus Christ has lived and died for us. And it's when we get the Gospel, and then we start to get, because of the Gospel, what we're here for, and the costs that that brings to our lives, the sacrifices that we have to make, that is when Jeremiah 29 lights up, and when it becomes not just words, not an empty promise, but you realize why you need that promise in the first place, why you have to be told and reassured that God knows the plans he has for us, plans to prosper us, not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future.

That is when Jeremiah 29 verse 11 becomes not just reassuring, but deeply reassuring. Let's pray together.

Lord our Father, we thank You for what You have called us to be and to do. You have called us together to be a church. You have called us individually to be Christians.

Lord, forgive us for how we so often assimilate and we just blend in. We become exactly like the non-Christian culture around us.

We mimic its values. We aren't distinctive. Forgive us also for how often and how naturally it comes to us to be tribal and to stand outside Babylon, to refuse to give ourselves for it, to have little interest that we have in praying for the city around us, and working for its good.

[30 : 51] Lord, please forgive us for both of these things and because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, help us instead to love the city that You have brought us to. We thank You that while You call us to make great personal and collective sacrifice for this, that with that call You also give us one of the most wonderful promises in Scripture, the promise that You know the plans You have for us.

We thank You that You have made those plans, that You have planned to prosper us and not to harm us. And we thank You that You are the reason that we have hope and that You are the reason that we have a future.

So Lord, we bless Your name for this in Christ. Amen.