

# Seek the Peace of the City

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Date: 06 October 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] So the first reading is from Acts chapter 2 verse 42, and that's on page 911 of the Church Bible. And they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And all came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the Apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day, those who were being saved. And the second reading is Jeremiah chapter 29 from verse 1, and that is on page 656 of the Church Bible.

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.

[ 1 : 22 ] This was after King Jecuniah and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metalworkers had departed from Jerusalem.

The letter was sent by the hand of El-Asah, the son of Shappan, and Gemariah, 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 there 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.

[ 2 : 24 ] 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. I did not send them, declares the Lord. 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.

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 which I sent you into exile. Let's pray together. Lord, we just ask now that as we look at this passage for a few minutes, that your Holy Spirit would be with us.

[ 3 : 47 ] So Holy Spirit, living breath of God, come and speak to us now as we consider your Holy Word, especially from Jeremiah. So we ask for that help in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. We are finishing our vision and value series today. And the very last line of our vision statement says that we exist to seek the peace of the city.

Now we've been in Acts 2, 42 to 47 for a few weeks, and that really is the DNA heartbeat of who St. C's wants to be. And at the very end of 42 to 47, verse 47, it says that the first church in the first

century, right when the Holy Spirit had come down upon them, had favor with everyone in Jerusalem.

And that means that they didn't just share their stuff with Christians, but also non-Christians. They were kind not only to the Christians, but also to the non-Christians. And then it says that God then added to their number every single day, those who were coming, that were not part of them. They were believing, they were converting, they were coming to Christ. Now favor, that's the word. The best place, maybe in the whole Bible, I think to explain what it means to have favor with all is in Jeremiah 29.

[ 5 : 08 ] Very famous, seek the peace of the city, God says, to the exiles, to the Israelites in Babylon. And he says to them, don't just seek the peace of the believers, the welfare, seek the peace of Babylon, the whole city.

What's happening in this story in Jeremiah 29? What's the context? This is the sixth century BC, the 500s. And this is sometime around the year 597, 596.

Nebuchadnezzar has sacked Jerusalem for the second time, the great king of Babylon. He went in, he tore the place apart. He went into the temple, he stole the furniture out of the temple, he stole the altar and melted the gold around it to bring it back to the great city of Babylon, to use it.

When he did that, you can read all about this in First Kings 24. He brought back, and our text tells us this, the nobility, the craftsmen, and then First Kings 24 says, the mighty men of valor.

He left the poor people, and he left them in Jerusalem to work the land as slaves. So what he did was, he went to Jerusalem, he took all the people with high education, any type of skill, brought them to his great city because he wanted to use them to make his city even better, his empire.

[ 6 : 27 ] And he left everybody else as his slaves. And he had, he longed to assimilate the best of the best in the city of Jerusalem into the city of Babylon. Now today, if this was to happen, if Nebuchadnezzar was to come to Edinburgh in 2024, he would definitely not take the pastors.

He would take the robotics engineers. He would take the doctors. He would take the construction managers. He would take the military professionals, anybody who could actually add strength, wealth, capital to the great city.

That's what he did. And so we open up Jeremiah 29, and the Israelites are exiles. They are in the great city of Babylon, and they're not at home anymore.

And God writes a letter through the prophet Jeremiah, a scroll, to say essentially to the people, how do you live as a Christian in a pluralistic context?

How do you live as a Christian in a city, as a believer in the Lord, in a city where overwhelmingly most people do not believe what you believe in? How do you go into Babylon and live as a believer?

[ 7 : 37 ] And the answer that he gives to that question really is the heartbeat of our vision. It summarizes all of it. It brings it all together, and so that's why we're finishing our series with it. This is what he says.

He says, first, you gotta know that you're in exile. You are in exile. Secondly, he says, go and be a human. Third, seek the peace of the city.

Those three things is what God says to the Israelites in Babylon. First, he tells them, Jeremiah 29, it matters so much for us because God says, Christian, if you're a believer today, know that you are in exile in this world.

So here we've got the people of God, and they are dragged into Babylon. This man took everything from them, Nebuchadnezzar, this evil wicked king, to this evil wicked but truly great city.

So you know that the ancient city of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar city, is one of the seven wonders of the world, the hanging gardens of Babylon. We have a map of it from this exact century.

[ 8 : 38 ] It's in the British Museum in London on a clay tablet. You can go and see it. Absolutely massive urban center for its time. He's drug them into this place.

They are exiles, and if you look down at verse seven, seek the peace of the city, the welfare, we'll come back to that, where I have sent you, God says. So the most important thing that God tells them is that you need to know that you're in Babylon and I put you there.

I put you in that wicked city. I put you in the throes of Nebuchadnezzar's hands. The exile that you're experiencing is because I've done that. I've given that to you.

Now, in the Old Testament, Israel is in exile because they basically became Babylonians in their own hearts in Jerusalem. They worshiped idols, and so God sent them to Babylon.

So he basically said, if you want to be Babylonian in your behavior, in your worship, I'll give you to Babylon. But in the rest of the Bible, the Bible takes that idea of Babylon, this metaphor, and uses it to describe exactly who we are as Christians in the new covenant era after Jesus Christ has come. [ 9 : 52 ] And so in the New Testament, we have the same exact language that you, if you're a believer today, you are living in exile just like the Israelites were in Babylon in the sixth century.

And the language that's been used for this is by many, many people, I'm certainly not the first to say this, is that the best way to think about the Christian life framed right out of the Old Testament is that we are resident aliens.

So the Israelites here were resident aliens, meaning what does it mean to be in exile? That means that you are, on the one hand, a resident. God says, verse seven, I put you there. He put you here in Edinburgh.

You're a resident, and yet at the same time, you're an alien because you are not yet in the home that you were made for. You're a resident alien, that's what it means to be in exile, and so in the New Testament, 1 Peter 2, 11, Peter says, church, we are sojourners and exiles in this world, picking up on this language, Hebrews 3, 14, here we have no lasting city, we await the city of God that is to come.

The book of Revelation, in some sense, frames the entire picture of salvation as the destruction of the Babylonian order of this world and the recovery or the bringing of the city of God into this world, and so St. Augustine, one of the most important Christian thinkers of the entire church history, fourth century, he said, he described this as saying, if you're a Christian, you are a citizen of the city of God living in the city of man, and the city of man, for him, was this word Babylon, and for him, that meant the Bible, for the Bible, that means, Babylon reigns in any city, any village, any town, any space, where sin, death, destruction, disaster, disease, disorder, chaos, brokenness resides. [ 11 : 49 ] Have you ever been to a place like that? Peter says, you are an exile, you're living in Babylon, your resident, God put you here, yet you're an alien, this is not yet the home that you were made for, the very presence of God in the city of God that is to come.

Babylon was a very wicked place, a very evil place, and so let me ask you, what do you expect God to write in this scroll to the Israelites in exile?

And here's what had happened, in the previous chapter, a man named Hananiah, and you read about this in verse eight and nine in our passage, Jeremiah 29, a man named Hananiah was a prophet who had said, listen, God is about to come and rescue us very quickly.

So the best thing we can do is hunker down, build a suburb where all the people of God live. You go out into Dalkeith or wherever, and you build a St. Columbus suburb, you have to be a member to purchase a house there.

That's how they were living, they were on the other side of the K-bar and a canal, and the prophets were saying, do not go into the city, God is gonna come and rescue you very soon and bring you back to the place you belong.

[ 12 : 57 ] And in verse eight and nine, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, don't listen to the prophets and the diviners who are among you and deceiving you and telling you they've dreamed dreams, they are telling you lies, they're prophesying in my name, meaning the guys who are saying, live outside the city, away from anybody who doesn't believe the exact same thing as you, don't participate in the city and just wait because God is coming to rescue you, those are the false prophets, they are telling lies to you.

What do you expect? Well, you expect exactly, if you have been brought to the wicked city of Babylon and you're a believer, I think we naturally, people have been doing this century after century after century, saying how do you live in a Babylonian pluralistic context?

Stay away, protect yourself, protect your kids, don't let their souls get corrupted by the city, stay as far as way as you possibly can, build a suburb and put all the Christians there, all the believers there and stay out of it.

And this has been said for centuries. So we started this series with the words of Thomas Guthrie, our founding minister, his face is right there in the foyer, right when you walk in the door, you see the statue, he wrote a book about this, he was talking about Edinburgh and Glasgow, and this is what he says, great cities, many have found to be great curses.

It has often been the case that an honest country lad and many an unsuspecting young woman with hopes of higher wages and the opportunities of fortune, whose feet once lightly danced upon the heather or bushed the dewy grass, has weirdly trodden in darkness and guilt and sin on these city

pavements.

[14:36] The rural is very good, stay away from the darkness of the city. That's what Guthrie, he was offering a caricature there, he actually loved Edinburgh. That's been, let me take you across the Atlantic, Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of my home country, the United States, he says, cities are pestilential, pest, can I say this?

Pestilential, there it is, to the morals, the health, and the liberties of all men. The more you pack people into a space like a city with Babylonian hearts, sinful hearts, the more Babylonian it tends to get.

And that's why you would expect God to say, look, you're doing the right thing, stay where you are, honk her down, protect your family. And in verse four to seven, God says, unroll the scroll Jeremiah and say this to the people, go into the city of Babylon, build houses and live in them.

And he says, don't stay out, the more you seek the welfare of the center of that city, the more you will find peace in your life. Love Babylon until she becomes lovely, that's what he said.

Love the city in its most unlovable places until it becomes lovable, wow, exactly our calling.

Secondly, let's get specific.

[15:55] What does he say even more specific than that, okay? What's the command in verse four? And we're focused on verse four to seven today. He says, go into the city, don't stay outside the city. And he basically just says, be a normal person.

That's the first thing. Verse four, thus says the Lord of hosts to the exiles. Verse five, build houses, live in them, plant gardens, eat their produce, take wives, get married, have sons and daughters, tell your sons and daughters to get married as well, and stick around, you're gonna be here for a while.

So bed in, get married, have children, eat, work, plant gardens, vineyards, invest in the local real estate, build a house, stick around, live in it, that's what he says.

Now the expectation again, as I've just said, is not only be separate to protect yourself, but what we could do is send the best, the holiest people into the city, send the holiest people into Babylon, the missionaries, they can handle it, you know?

The normal people among us won't be able to do it, but the missionaries, those are the ones that will be able to do it. And that's not at all what we get. Instead he says, get in there, get stuck in, invest in the local real estate, and then if you could summarize the whole of it, he says, be a human being right in the heart of the city, before the place that God has put you by being a human.

[17:21] Now listen again, where is God quoting from in Jeremiah 29 verse five? He says, people of the Lord, go into this place, build plant gardens, cultivate those gardens, eat from the fruit of the vine, be fruitful, and multiply.

This is a quote from Genesis chapter one. This is exactly the three-fold command that God gave in Genesis one when he first created Adam and Eve, and he said to Adam and Eve, build, plant a garden, organize that garden, and be fruitful and multiply.

And you see what he's saying? He's saying, you need to go to the wicked city of Babylon and treat it like you are cultivating the Garden of Eden. You need to love it that much, the place that much. You need to go all the way in. What does it mean to be a Christian in a pluralistic context? It means to glorify God first by being the image of God you are, and what does it mean to be the image of God you are?

Step one, go to work. Go to work, get a job, build a house, buy a house, rent a house, live here, be a human in the way that we all share, all the same things that we all have to do, make a meal, plant a garden, cultivate a space, make something more beautiful than it used to be.

[18:44] That's what God gives the command to the first human beings, and then he repeats it here in the midst of this Babylonian exile. Go to parent-teacher conferences, go to football matches.

This is my week, this past week. What does it look like to be a Christian? Well, step one, as it's been famously said by another pastor, what does it look like to be a Christian and a pilot?

Land the plane, do great work, be a human being, be a normal person, that's the very first thing we're told here. So sometimes we operate with a clergy laity distinction, even though as Protestants we don't actually believe that in our theology.

So we don't think there is a clergy and a laity. No, there's no, we're all priests. And instead we think that way, we think, I do normal secular work and the ministers, they do the holy stuff, the elders, the deacons.

Oh no, not the ministers, the elders, they can note the missionaries. They do the holy work, not even them. The missionaries who go to the hardest places in the world. Those are the big time ones. And the Bible does not accept that distinction.

[ 19 : 57 ] And it says, no, you've been given a vocation and called to do God-glorifying work as a normal human in the normal ways that humans have to live. So glorify the Lord as you pick fruit from the trees in your back garden and make meals out of it.

That's the very first thing he says. You remember Eric Liddle, 100 years ago, the Flying Scotsman, 1924, Paris, the great sprinter, Scottish sprinter, what did he say?

When he went to the Olympics, he said, I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And so when I run, I feel the pleasures of God on my face.

Go to work, do what God has called you to do in your life, and glorify God every step of the way of it and feel the pleasures of the Lord and what he's called you to do. That's why here at St. Columbus, actually we tend to put less, we try to put less on the schedule in our local church than sometimes it's often done in ministry, because God says, know your neighbors, go to work, do great work, plant a garden, these are the ways, these are the first steps in glorifying the Lord, being the person that he made you to be.

Now at the same time, and before we move to the final point, at the same time, be a human, don't feel guilty about it. And he's telling them, but inconvenience yourself.

[ 21 : 21 ] So he's saying, what does he say? Verse seven, seek the welfare of the city, it's literally the word peace in Hebrew. He says, seek the peace of the city to which I've sent you.

He doesn't say, seek your personal peace in the city, but seek the peace of the city that I've sent you. Meaning, don't go to the city, don't go to the place where God has put you, where people are to say, this is the place I can do my best by building my biggest retirement portfolio possible.

He says, no, actually this is going to inconvenience you, because he's not saying build your personal prosperity. That's not step number one, he says, no, at all costs seek the peace, the prosperity, the welfare of the place I've put you.

So in other words, he's saying, do all that, be a normal person, go to work, but get outside of yourself as you do it. Inconvenience yourself, it has to cost, it has to be harder.

I bet you that it was more expensive to live in the heart of Babylon than outside of it. Real estate in the middle is a lot more expensive than the outside. And he says, and go, get stuck in wherever God has put you, with the people God has sent you to, be in them and of them and for them, and that's going to mean losses.

[ 22 : 37 ] That's going to mean inconveniences, that's going to mean a lack of comfort. Let me put it this way. Edinburgh is growing very fast at the moment.

I was out yesterday walking around, I know it was a Saturday, but there were so many people in the Old Town, Princess Street, George Street yesterday, when I was out. I moved to the city 11 years ago, the first time, and I just remembered that there were less people.

There are more people, it's just an empirical experience, but it's also proven statistically. And that just simply means, friends, that we need more Christians, more Christians in the city, because more people are coming to the city all the time.

And we've got to keep up with that. We've got to have more Christians where more people are. So let me ask you to pray in your life right now, a couple things. One, where has God called you very specifically?

And are you for that place totally? And two, let me ask you, especially if you're a university student or a younger person in the room, but this could be for anybody.

[ 23 : 43 ] Would you pray and consider sticking around, being here long term, asking, is God calling me to stay in a place that does feel a little more inconvenient to live?

For the heart of the city, for the citywide movement of the gospel that we long for. Thirdly and finally, He tells us then more specifically, seek the peace of the city.

So verse four, five and six, be in Babylon, be in the city for the place God has put you. But then in verse seven, just to focus on that as we close, there is the conjunction right at the beginning of verse seven.

If you look down, you'll see it, but seek the peace of the city where I've sent you. Now, why does he have to stick the but there, the although nevertheless there, why is there a contrast?

Build houses, invest in the real estate, get stuck in, plant a garden, beautify the spaces God has put you into His glory, but also seek the peace of the city.

[ 24 : 44 ] You see, the reason that that negative conjunction is there is because He's saying, to really seek the peace of the city, there can't just be a go into the city and be part of it as normal.

There can't just be an utter assimilation into Babylon. Now, the but is there because there has to be confrontation. There can't just be assimilation.

And so in other words, he's saying, if you're really gonna go into a city like Edinburgh and seek its true peace, it will not just mean being a regular person like everybody else, it will mean confrontation and the denial of total assimilation.

It will be to confront the idols of the culture. It will be to say no in every place that God says, you must say no. It will be to expose things about the city that are not right and not healthy and not good.

Now, he uses the word shalom. And shalom is such a wide ranging term. It means peace, shalom. It's a word that probably everybody that, even though you never studied Hebrew, you know that word shalom, peace.

[ 25 : 46 ] This is what Philip Reichen says about it, quoting from a scholar named Clifford Green. More than the absence of conflict and death, this rich term fills out the word community by embracing wellbeing, contentment, wholeness, health, prosperity, safety, and rest.

Shalom means ordered harmony and happiness. It means that everything is right with the city of Babylon. Complete perfection is what the word actually entails.

Now, the first thing that that means is go into the city, be a person, a human, Genesis one, and do good works. Seek the peace of the city, do good works. So it is good in the name of the Lord Jesus to go out and to help prevent crime.

It is good in the name of the Lord Jesus to pick up litter that you did not throw in the ground. It is good in the name of the Lord Jesus to be kind to the stranger that is mean and rude to you on the street because you do not know the shame, the guilt, and the circumstances that are underneath that meanness.

And so you might turn their anger and break its cycle in that moment. It is good in your local neighborhood, in your local school, in your local university to let the train of gossip that's running through the year you're in to stop with you.

[ 27 : 04 ] That's seeking the peace of the city. It's good to show compassionate mercy to those who are materially poor and to feed people. All contained in shalom, all contained in seeking the justice, the peace of the city.

One illustration I found out recently that there is a plumbing company in Edinburgh that not only will come and fix your drains, fix your pipes, fix your toilets, but will give tours of the history of plumbing in the city of Edinburgh as well.

And I am eager to get signed up for this. One of the plumbing, piece of plumbing history that probably everybody in here knows that I think I have right, is to say that Princess Street Gardens was once Norlock, right?

And in Norlock from the 18th century forward, it was basically the sewage system for the city. And boy, what does it look like to seek the peace of the city? Whatever person said in a meeting in 1760 and said, we need to turn this sewage dump into Princess Street Gardens, that was shalom.

That was seeking the peace of the city, right? That's what it means. And yet, just a 30 second family discussion for the Christians in the room.

[ 28 : 20 ] Evangelicals have often fought and are fighting sometimes about, is it the call of the church to go seek the peace of the city with good works, with showing mercy, with doing justice, with loving kindness to people?

Or is it the mission of the church to preach the gospel, to take the great commission seriously, to share the story of Jesus with people? And the answer in Jeremiah 29 and Acts chapter two is yes. These are not in conflict. Seek the holistic peace of the city, do good works, and the only way the city of Edinburgh or Babylon would ever find real peace.

True peace is the fact that that conjunction is negative. Build houses, but seek the peace. And if you're gonna seek the real peace, you gotta confront. Meaning the idols of the culture have to be exposed with love, gentleness, kindness, and faithfulness.

And you have to tell somebody about Jesus if they're really gonna find true shalom, true peace, in the midst of a great city like the city of Edinburgh. What are you being asked to do? You're being asked to love people who don't agree with you.

[ 29 : 30 ] What were the Israelites being asked to do in Babylon? Love your enemies.

Nebuchadnezzar, who ripped you away from your home, you go and love him until he is lovely.

Inconvenience yourself. Lose some of your personal property. Lose some of your space to be for the place that God has put you. What does that sound like? You know, there is one, there is one person in human history who was willing to lose comforts, who was willing to give away his utter personal peace in the heavenly bodies, in the heavenly realm.

The one who can offer true shalom to the city and to you, he came down from heaven, boy, and I bet it was very spacious. And he incarnated himself, he became flesh.

And Philippians chapter two says that in that act, he humbly accepted the truth. Chapter two says that in that act, he humiliated himself to the point of great loss.

What are you being asked to do? You're being asked to love Edinburgh like Jesus loves you. And the only way that you're gonna have the power to do that in your life is to say today, is to say every morning, I am the Babylon that he came for.

[ 30 : 53 ] You see, the calling here is tonight, go out into the wicked city, because you're the good guy. The calling here is to see every single one of us is the Babylon Jesus came for.

I'm the Babylonian heart he died for. You're the Babylonian heart he died for. And it's only in that reality that we'll find the power to live like this for Edinburgh.

Let me close with these words. The last thing we're told here in verse seven is Christians believing Israelites, pray to the Lord on behalf of Babylon, on behalf of Edinburgh.

For in its peace, you will find peace. This is repeated in 1 Timothy chapter two, where Paul says, pray to the Lord for everybody in Rome, in all the places in the Roman Empire, even the kings, he says, all types of people, because if they were to find peace, you too, church, will find peace.

So this is the principle that a rising tide raises all the ships, right? He's saying pray for, what are they being asked to do? Pray for Nebuchadnezzar, that wicked man who destroyed your life, because if he could come to repent and believe, boy, you could find peace in the city, and what happened?

[ 32 : 11 ] Nebuchadnezzar came to repentance and belief, later in the story. And so you're being asked, the priesthood of all believers, pray for the place that God has put you.

If you don't like your boss, pray for your boss. If you don't like your neighbor, pray for your neighbor, because the first way that you will be drawn in love to somebody is by praying for them, even when you really don't like them.

That's what's being asked of us here, because Jesus has loved our Babylonian hearts, be the chaplain, be the priest, pray and seek the place, the peace of the place that God has put you.

May the Lord bless the city, may the Lord bless our church as we seek the peace of Edinburgh, and may God give us in all the churches of the city, a city-wide movement of the gospel.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you for this great passage, and we ask, Lord, that we would find, we would find in the midst of our Babylonian hearts the grace that comes from outside of us.

[ 33 : 17 ] Jesus is grace for Babylonians, and that we would turn and seek to make this city lovely. And so we pray for that in Jesus' name, amen.