

The Covenant Pulpit



Jeremiah 29:4-14

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Jesus is at the outskirts of the city. Most likely it's a Sunday morning. Below him, Jerusalem shimmers in the spring sun.

For a thousand years this ancient city has stirred Jewish passions. At its summit sits the crown jewel of Judaism, its holiest spot: the great temple complex. Every Jew dreams of celebrating Passover in Jerusalem at least once in a lifetime. And during this Passover season the city is jam packed with more than a million visitors. Like an anthill, the temple mount swarms with pilgrims crawling over each other to bring their sacrifices to God. The atmosphere is supercharged with Messianic expectancy as huge crowds gather to welcome Jesus into the city. But he looks beneath the surface religiosity. Luke 19:41-44 says,

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The day will come when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side... They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.’”

Jesus knows that even now the religious establishment is engineering his crucifixion. Within days the “Hosannas” will turn to “Crucify him!” Beneath the religiosity is a rebellious rage that will explode against Rome some forty years later. A Roman army will lay siege to Jerusalem, dismantling the city stone by stone. The smoke of destruction will blot out the sun and turn the moon blood red for three days and nights. When the smoke clears, thousands of Jews will be nailed to crosses on the surrounding hills. Survivors of the holocaust will be hauled off in chains, and the city will become a desolate haunt of jackals and vultures.

No wonder Jesus weeps.

Have you ever wept for Naples? Most of us only see the surface of the city. The city serves a useful purpose. We pass through it for a season of our life, enjoy its amenities, consume its resources, and then move on. We like to say that Naples is a paradise. The beaches are like sugar, sunsets are breathtaking, gourmet eateries adorn lushly-landscaped boulevards, swank shopping abounds, and there are more golf courses and beautiful people per capita than almost anywhere else.

On the surface Naples really *is* paradise, full of goodies to be consumed. But, if you looked at Naples through the eyes of Jesus, this

city would break your heart. Jesus knew that Jerusalem needed him then, and Naples needs him today. And every city needs God's people. Here's a principle that we learn from Jeremiah:

The city is not here for us. We are here for the city.

Jeremiah is writing to God's people some 500 years before Christ. The Babylonian Empire has conquered Israel and destroyed Jerusalem. The survivors of that holocaust have been carried off in exile to Babylon. They are miserably-homesick, and desperately want to leave. False prophets are telling them to get their bags packed because God is about to take them home. But Jeremiah 29:4&5 says,

"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.'"

Some 2500 years later, I believe that this is a relevant word for Christians in Naples. If we are honest, we know that we don't ultimately belong to Naples or any other city on this earth. Notice in verse four that Jeremiah refers to God's people as *exiles*. To be in exile is to be a foreigner, living far from home, among strangers, in a place where you don't really belong. Truthfully, all God's people are exiles living in Babylon. Jesus said that we are to be *in* the world by not *of* the world. Philippians 3:20 says, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ." In a sense we are like our spiritual fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: nomads living in tents, aliens in a strange land, passing through this world on the way to our ultimate home.

So here's the question: how are we to live in a city that isn't our ultimate home? I see four models in the Scripture: 1) **a separate people**. Abraham lived in tents outside the Canaanite cities. Evangelical Christians often isolate themselves into little enclaves. Our churches can be like islands separated from the rest of the community, never making a noticeable impact on the wider community. 2) **A people who are consumers** like Abraham's nephew Lot. He saw that Sodom was a good place for business, so he moved into the city. His family consumed the resources of the city, but they didn't try to change the city. In the end, Sodom consumed them. 3) **A people who pray for the city**. Abraham never moved into Sodom, but he did pray for its salvation. From a distance, he cared about the fate of the city. 4) **A people who invest their lives for the transformation of the city**. As great as Abraham was, he was never like Jesus. Jesus did more than pray for the city

at a distance. He lived among its people and invested himself in their transformation. In the end he even let himself be crucified by the city.

Five hundred years before Christ, Jeremiah is calling God's people to do the same in Babylon. And 2500 hundred years later, he is calling us to do the same in Naples. Nothing could be more relevant to Covenant's vision of *Building a Bridge to the Future* than when Jeremiah calls us to the city:

1. Give it up for the city. More than anything these Jewish exiles want to go home. Exile is a lonely place. At first you go through the tourist stage. New sights and sounds are exotic and exciting. But then reality sets in. You don't understand the language. The local customs are strange, frustrating, and even bizarre. You begin to long for the familiar. You miss your family and friends back home. You ache to eat home cooking. I remember how difficult it was to live in New York City. It was so radically different than Oklahoma and Texas where we had spent the last 27 years. Surrounded by millions of people, we felt utterly alone. I have visited some 50 countries in the world, and have always been glad to set foot again on American soil. Even you who enjoy this paradise called Naples will welcome the end of the season. Ultimately, your hearts turn to home up North. Maybe some of you can relate to a Psalm written by one of those anonymous exiles in Babylon:

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered you (O Jerusalem). There on the poplars we hung our harps...How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4)

Some of us long for heaven in the same way they longed for Jerusalem. The mess in our world gets pretty depressing. Maybe you can relate to a friend of mine who said, "The older I get, the more I feel like a stranger in my own country." It would be easy to stay separate from the culture like the Patriarchs, or just consume the resources of the city like Lot's family, or pray for the city from a safe distance like Abraham did. But Jeremiah calls us to do what Jesus did: to give it up for the city. He tells us four ways to do that:

1) **Identify with the city.** In verse five he says, "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce." Tents are for nomads who are just passing through. Land is purchased, houses are built, and gardens planted by people who plan to stay awhile. A homeowner has a stake in the community's future. A home and a garden make you visible to your neighbors. It also says that you are one of them.

John 1:14 says of Jesus, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." God took on flesh. He looked like us, hung out with us, talked

our language, shared our sorrows, and joined in our celebrations. John goes on to say, "We have seen his glory..." Jesus made himself visible. And Jesus said to his disciples, "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5: 16) If we are the salt of the earth, then we need to get out of the salt shaker. If we are the light of the world, then we need to get out from under the basket.

In our *Bridge to the Future* campaign we are building a new house. We want to say to Naples that we are identifying with a growing and changing community. We aren't content to mark time in a campus that was last improved in 1980. We want to build a spiritual garden that will grow families that will nourish generations yet to come.

2) **Impact the city's future.** Jeremiah goes on in verse six to say, "Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in numbers there; do not decrease." In troubling times people are afraid to bring children into the world. These exiles didn't want to bring children up in a pagan city like Babylon. They figured that would wait until they returned to Jerusalem before they got married and had kids. But God is saying something profound: his people change a city through their children.

The world is experiencing the biggest baby boom in history. There will be 8 billion people on planet earth by the year 2020. America will be the third largest nation with almost half a billion people. But the birth rate among Christians in Europe and the U.S. has declined. In Great Britain the second most popular name among babies is now Mohammed. In Europe, the Islamic population is exploding because Muslims are having more babies. In India the birth rate is down among Christians and Hindus, but exploding among Muslims who average 6-8 children per family. India is now the second largest Muslim nation in the world. There is a baby boom in the United States, but it is mostly among immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. A recent article in the *New York Times* had this tag line: "...the *Garcias* are catching up with the *Joneses*..." For the first time Hispanic names are now among the top ten most popular given to newborn children. And, for the first time, the name Mohammed has appeared in the top fifty names given to American children, and it's climbing up the charts.

Jeremiah is telling God's people to fill the city with their children. I want to celebrate those young parents in our church (and there are several of them) who are committed to having large families. These parents are willing to put in the time, and give up some of the luxuries of life, to raise a generation of

kingdom kids who will change the world. But all of us can get involved in strengthening our families, and reaching out to children from homes where moms and dads don't yet have a vision to build Christian kids. The driving motive of our *Bridge to the Future* campaign is to create an environment that will impact the next generation to transform the future.

3) **Invest in the city's prosperity.** Jeremiah goes on to say in verse seven, "Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have called you." It would be easy for these exiled Jews to resent the Babylonians, and even to wish for bad things to happen to Babylon. But God calls Babylon, "...the city to which I have called you." We are never anywhere by accident. If you are in Naples today, you are here by divine appointment. God has put you here to be salt and light, not consumers of the resources. Verse seven says, "...seek the peace and prosperity of the city..." That word *seek* is an active and energetic word. It calls us to passionate action.

It would be easy to say, "Okay, I'm about making Naples prosperous. I invest in the economy. I bought a house and a golf membership here. I eat at the restaurants, and shop at the stores, and pay my taxes." That's good. Without your investment, this community would wither and die. But there's so much more. Lot's family also contributed to economy of Sodom, but only as to make a living and to consume its resources. In the end, they didn't invest spiritually. They didn't change the government, or the schools, or the culture. They took without giving back where it mattered most. Last week, I made a bold challenge: not only invest significantly in a home up north and a home in Naples, and a golf club up north and one down here, but also invest significantly in a church up north and one down here. I am so grateful for so many of you who *do* give yourself to Naples' "peace and prosperity." Our *Bridge to the Future* campaign is a wonderful way to invest in the "peace and prosperity" of this area.

4) **Intercede for the city's peace and prosperity.** He goes on to say, "Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." The greatest way that we can invest in the future is to invest spiritually. Abraham prayed fervently for Sodom. Jesus prayed for Jerusalem. The great revival that shook New York City more than a hundred years ago began when a man named Hadley, leaned against a lamppost and cried out, "O Lord, give me New York, or I die!" Others began to pray in little groups across the city until revival broke out. St. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:1&2, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." I don't know how God will lead

you to invest in this city. Or what ministries he has in store for you. Or how he wants you to invest in this *Bridge to the Future* plan. I do know that he wants you to pray for the city. I believe he wants you to pray how you can best invest in its future. He will give you the clear answer about what you should give as you remember the promise at the end of verse seven: "... because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

2. Don't fall for the "we're-not-here-for-long-so-it-doesn't-matter" mentality. In verses 8&9 God begins with a warning: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you..." Prophets are telling the exiles that God is about to deliver them. In short, they are going home to Jerusalem soon. But God knows that he will keep them there for at least 70 years of exile. Sometimes we don't invest in the city because we think that we are only here for a season. One of the greatest hindrances to the influence of Evangelical Christianity in American history was the "rapture-at-any-moment" mentality. D.L. Moody was one of the greatest soul winners in our history. But he made a damaging statement that has haunted American Evangelicalism: "The world is a sinking ocean liner, and God has given me a lifeboat to get as many people off as I can before it goes under." So Fundamentalists were content to wait for the *Rapture* of the Church while getting as many souls saved as possible. Because they feared being contaminated by worldliness, they isolated themselves from cultural involvement. At the other extreme was the so-called *Social Gospel*. Liberal Christians weren't so concerned about saving souls as they were changing society. In short, they got their welding kits went down below to patch up the holes in the sinking ocean liner. Neither extreme was right.

The world is a sinking ship. One day Jesus will create a new heaven and earth. But, when the *Titanic* sunk in the Atlantic, not everyone rushed to get on the lifeboats. There were Christians on board who tried to make a difference for those left on the ship. Down in the lower decks third and fourth class passengers—mostly immigrants coming to America—were locked inside by the ship's stewards and couldn't get out. Some Christians went down and tried to break the locks. Pastors stayed up on deck and ministered to people who were going to die. Brave men gave up their seats on the lifeboats. Old men comforted little children. The orchestra played hymns to encourage people who were in their last moments of life. We are called to invest our lives in the city however long we are here before the Lord moves us on to another place, and finally to the *New Jerusalem*.

3) A good investment strategy requires a long term perspective. I can almost hear the groans from the exiles when they hear Jeremiah's prophecy. Babylon is the most beautiful and powerful city on earth. But the very word

Babylon is synonymous with corruption and evil. What hope is there for a small group of Jews to invest their lives in such an impossible place? Sometimes we wonder if an investment in the lives of children not yet born will make a difference. We are tempted to invest our best in what brings instant gratification or quick and tangible results. We postmodern Americans have almost destroyed our economy with such shortsightedness.

But, in verse 10, God is calling them to take the long term perspective: “This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promises to bring you back to this place.’” Someone has quipped, tongue-in-cheek, “God is not an American. He never does things as quickly as we would like.” He takes his time to accomplish his purposes for Babylon and for his people. This *Bridge to the Future* is a long-term investment. Most of us will never be here to see its returns. Some of us won’t even see the new campus completed. We are investing in generations yet to come, and a city that is being shaped by God’s long range purposes.

But we can bank on this promise from God in verse eleven: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...’” As we move forward as God’s people, we don’t know what he will do. We don’t have a clue about how much money will be pledged to our vision for the future. We don’t know when our campus will be completed, or what impact it will have on the city, or even if Jesus is going to return tomorrow. We only know that we should build, and grow a spiritual garden, and invest in the future of our city, and intercede for its salvation.

But we are certain about the One who holds the future. Verse eleven says, “For I know the plans I have for you...” And we know that we can’t sit still, content to mark time. In the words of verse seven, we have to seek the “peace and prosperity” of the city. And so we have made a plan, and we move boldly forward because our God says us that he has “...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...” We know that the city is not here for us. We are here for the city.