

Letters to Exiles

Text:

Jeremiah 29:1-14

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 Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan 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, 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. (ESV)

I Peter 1:1-9

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Introduction:

The theme of the Advent season is waiting; waiting for the Lord. We have seen that to wait is an act of faith. It means not taking matters into our own hands, but following the commands of our King during the time of his absence. It requires not growing weary in well-doing, but staying ready because we don't know the time of the Lord's return. We have asked and answered two questions about this waiting. First, we asked: "Why should we wait". The answer is because God is righteous. He has kept his word in the past and he will keep his promises to his people. In an uncertain world, the one thing we can and must count on is his promises. Secondly we asked: "What are we waiting for?" The answer to this

question is the revelation of God's righteousness. Only he can make us righteous, and only he can bring righteousness to the world. Since peace is the fruit of righteousness, we pray and wait for the coming of his kingdom which will be a righteous kingdom, hence a peaceable kingdom.

Today we ask a third question: "What should we be doing while we wait?" To answer that question I have again taken a text from both the Old and the New Testament. What these two texts have in common is that they are both letters written to exiles. An exile is someone who is temporarily forced to live away from his proper homeland. In the first case, it is the letter written by the prophet Jeremiah, who had remained in Jerusalem, to those who had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon. False prophets had risen up among them who were telling them that the exile would be very brief; that they should be preparing to return to Jerusalem. Jeremiah writes to remind them of what he had already told them before they left—the exile would not be short; it would last seventy years. This being the case, they needed to accept the fact that they would most likely live out their lives in Babylon; that they would never again see their beloved homeland. On the other hand, if they would not see it, their descendants would. God has not abandoned or forgotten them. They will return, but only after they have fulfilled the sentence that God has pronounced against them. This is the original meaning of the often misquoted words of verse 10: "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."

There is hope; God has not forgotten his people, but before that hope is realized there is to be a time of patient waiting, and in this time the prophet tells them that they should bloom where God has planted them; they should: "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, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." In latter words of Jesus, they should be "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth."

It is this idea of living in exile that provides the theme for Peter's First Epistle. The people to whom he is writing have not been literally displaced from their homelands. For the most part they are living in the land in which they were born. What has happened to them is that they have "been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead", and by virtue of their new birth they have become citizens of a new land. Their inheritance no longer lies in their ancestral land, but it is "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for them." Now when we read Jeremiah in light of the Gospel, we must understand Jeremiah 29:10 in light of I Peter 1:4. God's ultimate plans of good for us who are believers in Jesus Christ is an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, that awaits us in heaven. Judah's hope during the exile, the thing that sustained them during the hard times, was the assurance that they, or at least their descendants, would one day return to the land of their inheritance, their ancestral birthplace. Our hope, the thing that sustains us during the time of our exile on earth, is the hope of one day being called to our eternal home. We have not yet seen heaven, but Paul tells us that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). This being the case, like the exiles in Babylon we must ask ourselves: "How shall we pass the time of our exile?"

It is this image of the historic exile in Babylon that provides the background for Peter as he answers that question in his First Epistle. You may sum up everything in the book under one of two headings:

- You are God's child living as an exile on earth
- Therefore conduct yourself accordingly

We don't have time to look at all that Peter has to say. That would require a study of the entire epistle. What I want to do is to quickly point out a few key ideas that will guide you as you read the letter for yourself.

I. Remember who you are

The first thing we might notice is that while we are living as exiles we must not forget who we are and to whom we are ultimately accountable. This is what Peter says in 1:17-21:

“And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”

Notice what he says in verse 17: “Conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” The reason we must do this he says is because we have been “ransomed” by the “precious blood of Christ.” We belong to him and we will give an account to him. This must never be far from our thinking as we live out our lives on earth. We will not be judged by the standards of earth, but by the standards of heaven. Therefore, we must conduct ourselves in the fear of God; as those who will give an account of our actions.

II. Seek the Welfare of the City

This is what Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon, and Peter tells us essentially the same thing when he writes:

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be

subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (I Peter 2:12-16).

III. Be Ready to Suffer for Your King

Even when we are good citizens and seek the good of the city we will sometimes be maligned and even persecuted. This should not take us by surprise. When it happens we must follow in the steps of Jesus our master. This is what Peter writes:

“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (I Peter 3:13-18).