

DEVOTIONAL 3

Jeremiah 29:4-7

by Matt Humphrey

"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry 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 number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, 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." – JEREMIAH 29: 4 – 7

It is confusing and difficult to live well in the world today. So many problems; so many challenges! This is especially true when we consider the creation groaning under the strains of pollution, extinction, and destruction. How are Christians to live faithfully to God and engage the world around them? Should we expect our efforts to make the world a better place to make any difference? In Jeremiah 29, we find a remarkable word from the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles living in Babylon. Jerusalem had been destroyed, King Josiah's efforts to turn the hearts of the people back to Yahweh in repentance were ignored, the people of God were scattered across the land in diaspora. This was a confusing time for the people of God. They had lost their land – the land promised to their ancestor Abraham; they had lost Jerusalem and their temple – the place of worship and encounter with their God; they had lost confidence in God's presence and protection.

Their question must have been simple but urgent: how do we trust God when we have seen our entire livelihood fall apart and are now living in a strange and foreign land?

Jeremiah's instructions to the exiles took many by surprise. "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters... Increase in number there, do not decrease."

"Ugh!" they must have thought, "We're going to be here for a while!" After all, building houses and planting gardens takes time! You don't waste such precious energy if you only plan to be there for a handful of years.

Similarly, they were told to "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you." Seeking the peace of the city involves a certain posture towards it – a posture which would

not have been the most natural to a persecuted and enslaved people who had been ousted from their homeland. Furthermore, they were to seek the prosperity of the city where they were living. Why? "For if it prospers, you too will prosper."

In seeking not merely the peace but also the prosperity of the city, the people are called into relationships with these foreign people in this foreign place to have a vested interest in its success and ultimate fortune.

The NASB translates verse 7: "For in its welfare, you will have welfare." This points us to a basic ecological fact: the welfare of human communities is dependent on the welfare of the non-human community, the Creation. In seeking the welfare of the city in which the people were called into exile, they were being oriented towards a faithful and godly way of life. Similarly, in seeking the welfare of the places where we live – not just our cities but the rivers and soil, the air and water – we are oriented towards faithfulness and righteousness before God and before our neighbours. We invest more deeply in relationships and in the community when we recognize our welfare is tied into them. We are led to "Build houses and settle down, to plant gardens and eat what they produce." We are oriented, in other words, away from the fears and concerns which consume us and towards a deeper love of neighbour and of Creation.

Prayer: May we seek the welfare of our place, and find our own welfare in it. Amen.