

Prayer for the City in Which You Live

Jeremiah 29:1-13

Summer Sermon Series on Prayer

Kenwood Baptist Church

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TEXT: Jeremiah 29:1-13

We continue this morning in our summer series on prayer, and it is very fitting and timely that this morning we turn our attention to the prayer for the city in which we live. Embedded in



Jeremiah 29 is a summons to pray for the area directly around us, where God has taken us. We have to overcome a mountain of resistance in order to care about the environment right around us. It is easy to care for your spouse or children, but the human heart, mine included, is self-centered by nature and struggles to burst out from these bounds and embrace a spiritual responsibility for the people that are around us by God's

sovereign design. The Bible affirms that the place where you live, and the place where I live, is the place that God has chosen for us to live. Genesis 11:8 says:

“So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth.”

Deuteronomy 32:8 says:

“When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He divided mankind, He fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.”

God disperses us across the land. The clearest passage of all is in Acts 17 where the apostle Paul announces to the Athenians that it is from one man Adam that God made every nation; that they should inhabit the whole earth; and God determines the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. That means that God desires you to be alive right now, and that God desires you to live where you live. In Acts 17:27, Paul says:

“God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”

Jeremiah 29 is a bold summons for us to pray for the city in which we live and to seek God's peace, God's blessing, for it. There is a temptation on this theme for all of us. It's a temptation I

see in four different directions: *indifference, cynicism, cloister, or retreat.*

All of us are tempted by *indifference*, to feel indifference towards the people around us. Worse is that we are inclined to feel a *cynicism*: “The world is going so poorly. Just look at what these people are doing.” I can't stand it when I hear Christians talk like that. It is not the way that God sees the world. Do we expect the world to live like redeemed people? No! When you read the newspaper, if you are feeling cynicism and indifference, close the newspaper and turn to the Scripture and start to see the world around you through God's eyes. Another reaction or temptation we have is to *cloister*, where we withdraw or move inside of a spiritual haven. We are never outside the walls of the church. Worse yet than to cloister is just a flat-out *retreat*, total isolation.

Jeremiah 29 pushes us, and it's a text we want to follow carefully. It challenges us from the prophet's vision to pray for the city, the community in which we live. Jeremiah 29 comes at a moment of great difficulty. God has stirred the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument of disciplining correction for God's own people, and he has carried the best elements of society into exile, in 597 BC. This is the time of Daniel and Ezekiel.. The royal family is all taken away from the society. A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar will return with his army to destroy God's house. The leadership of the society is taken. They're brought into this foreign land. They're placed there by God, and they face a fundamental decision in this strange environment: “What is the posture that I will adopt toward the society around me? Will I deride the society for its idolatry and sin? Will I stand at a distance? Will I hold myself back from my neighbors, or will I pursue the prophet Jeremiah's counsel?” Jeremiah's counsel is a radically different voice that urges God's people:

- Firstly, to build their lives into the place where God has brought them.
- Secondly, to pray for their city and society.
- Thirdly, to trust God for the accomplishment of His greater plans that will ultimately be realized in the lives of their children and grandchildren.

Let's follow these three movements in the passage, movements that ultimately take a posture of faith. I promise you that at the end of this passage, we will strike a verse that is close and familiar to us, but it is even more precious when read in its context.

Jeremiah 29:1 starts off saying:

“This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”

The Hebrew actually says it's a *book*. Jeremiah's oracles, or prophetic ministry, were often put

together in a booklet, or different lengths of documents, and sent. It is sent from Jeremiah who is in Jerusalem, but he sends this booklet or letter to the exiled community, to the leadership, priest, prophets, other people, and elders. He entrusts this letter to a group of people that he knows, and the letter goes forth. The contents of the letter begin in Jeremiah 29:4:

“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”

This is one of those very subtle grammatical shifts that is terrifying in the Bible, absolutely terrifying. Some of you may have already seen it. When we think of being taken into exile, we think it is Nebuchadnezzar that has taken us into exile; it is our sin that has taken us into exile. But Jeremiah 29:4 says who is the one who takes us into exile. Do you see it? God says, “I brought you into exile.” God is the one who knows the plans, places, times, and seasons, and God says, “I have brought you and placed you here.” That means that as believers in this sovereign God, we trust God for wherever He takes us, wherever He plants us. Jeremiah's counsel from the Lord is radically different from that of the false prophets of his day. He gives them a set of very concrete and direct imperatives and commands.

His first command is: ***Build your lives into the place where God has brought you.*** He says in Jeremiah 29:5:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.”

Do not regard yourself as a temporary sojourning resident, but actually build a home there, stake your claim in the midst of the community that God has brought you into. Build this house and actually live there, plant a garden, and eat what it produces. We've got the first garden ever at the Palmer house this summer, and it has been exciting. We've got the first cucumbers ever coming out from the mysterious process of these plants. It's amazing. Watching these grow, the kids are excited, and I keep getting questions I cannot answer: “What's going to happen next? Why are the bees doing that?” But there are the cucumbers, and it's happening. It cannot be slowed down, and the garden is ripening, but it takes time. Fruit trees usually take four years to produce fruit that can be eaten. Jeremiah says: “Build a house, live there, plant a garden, and wait and eat what comes from your garden. Make your home there.”

William Holliday writes:

“Inevitably those who were exiled from their homeland would find themselves counting the days till they return, marking the time meanwhile. [Jeremiah says,] No, their stay in Babylon must not simply be negative, it must be positive; their home for the indefinite future must be in Babylon, and it is there that they must build their lives.”

There is a temptation to hold back from our community, and sometimes to drape that in super-

spiritual language like: "I'm a temporary resident of this world; my dwelling is in eternity." That's all true, but God has placed you and placed me in real places, in real time, for His greater purposes. Jeremiah continues, and he says in Jeremiah 29:6:

"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."

He tells them to go ahead and marry and have children, but not only for themselves. "Find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may have sons and daughters." He says not only invest and build your life where God has placed you, but build a family, children and grandchildren.

I was very happy on Friday to get a call from the man who prepares the hog for our annual Hog Roast, and he assured me that there would be plenty to go around this year. I was glad to hear that, but the real joy from the conversation is that Jack and his wife just had their first child, and he said they would be bringing something much better than their hog this year. They will be bringing their little son with them. I said to Jack, "One of my friends, John Patrick, has been to Kenwood a few times. He is a powerful apologist for the Christian faith, and John Patrick has said: 'Men become better people the day after their first child is born.'"

I said, "Jack, are you experiencing that?" and he said, "You know, I am. I'm finding that I care about a whole set of things that I never cared about before." Are you willing by this text to let God extend the boundaries of whom and what you care about, whom and what we care about as a community by the power of God?

Picking up the language of Genesis, Jeremiah goes on and says at the end of Jeremiah 29:6:

"Increase in number there; do not decrease."

His second command is: **Pray for your city.** Jeremiah continues in his counsel for this exiled community after stressing that they are to build their lives there, to invest, to eat, to build their family, and to really live there. He goes on and challenges them in Jeremiah 29:7:

"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 challenges this community to seek the welfare of Babylon. Don't miss that! One of the mistakes we often make as believers is that we say, "I care only about the good people." Well, guess what! Isn't it great that Jesus Christ cared about the bad people, about the lost people, about the idolatrous people? Jeremiah says to seek the peace, the *shalom*, of the city were I have carried you. This is the city, this is the king who will come in a few years and burn God's house down to the ground, and Jeremiah says, "If you want to follow God, then you actually need to seek the welfare and the well-being of this king and this society, and don't stand in it in

antithetical relationship to your environment. He then gives us this kingdom-oriented posture, and that is to pray for it, live in it, do not be conformed to it, do not drink in its values; but be present in it, live in it, build your life in it, increase there, and while you're in the midst of this place that God has brought you to, you are the only ones in the midst of that community that can pray that God would act in a mighty way in it. He sets that responsibility at the feet of this exiled community.

John Bright says:

“The injunction to pray for Babylon is remarkable. A command to pray for a hostile ruling power is otherwise unexampled in ancient literature.”

This is the only example in ancient Near Eastern literature that we have where people are instructed to pray for the well-being of a hostile surrounding power. Amazing! It's the same thing that happens in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 2:1-3,

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, . . .”

When Paul wrote this to Timothy, Nero was on the throne. He was probably the worst of the Julio-Claudian emperors, and the last, the man who would in the end cut Paul's head off. Paul said, “I want you to pray for him.” Is that our posture? Paul says this is good and pleases God, and notice why it pleases God in 1 Timothy 2:4-6:

“. . . who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men.”

Pray for your community, its leaders; pray that God would move in our neighborhoods and in our town, stretch the boundaries out that we might care for those around us in the places that God has planted us. This should be the case in our neighborhoods; it should be the case in our communities or our workplace or our academic or school setting, to be those people who pray for God's work around us.

John Calvin said:

“Our prayer must not be self-centered. It must arise not only because we feel our own need as a burden we must lay upon God, but also because we are so bound up in love for our fellow men that we feel their need as acutely as our own. To make intercession for men is the most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.”

To bring the needs of the community before God is shifting our mentality from *us* and *them* to

we. That is a big difference. I love going to the Days in the Park Festival in our neighboring community because God is the one that really opened that door. It's really a simple door that opened as a response to a question to a city leader. The question was so innocent. I was there. The question was asked to a community leader: "What could we do to serve you?" That's all. The question didn't emerge from hours and hours of strategic planning in the Kenwood conference room. It was just a question, "What can we do?" and we got this answer: "While we've always wanted this festival go three days, we never had the volunteers to do it." We replied, "What if we brought 30 volunteers?" He said, "Yes, that would do it." We've been doing it ever since.

Last year, the mayor of Deer Park came to meet with me in my office after the festival just to thank me for our involvement. All the money goes to help this park. It's a place to have all kinds of conversations with people and just to be there. It's kind of easy to say, "Would you like to fill out a survey and enter a raffle for a \$100 gift card to Best Buy?" No one that I asked said, "I'm not interested in that. Take your silly survey and go back to that conference room!" No one said that. I love seeing children walk up to the Kenwood booth and see their faces when they see *Free Face Painting*. They are so excited. I like to see the parents' faces get excited when they see the word *free*, and I think to myself, "There's no other booth like this booth." I love talking with the parents or adults. It's a very easy way to just get to know them. I think 95% of those people probably aren't here right now, so those are conversations we wouldn't otherwise be able to have. One mom said, "I haven't been to church in a long time. Maybe I need to start going again." I gave a card to two little twin six-year-old boys about our upcoming hog roast, and I showed him a picture of what it looks like when we put the hog into the roaster. One of the boys said, "We've got plans for this Sunday." and I said, "Well, it's a few weeks out." He looked me right the eye and said, "Can you give me directions?" I love that all of the music on stage. The genres of music may not be our favorite, but they're belted out and wailed out right above the Kenwood Baptist Church sign. I love that.

Maybe my most meaningful exchange this year was with the pastor of another church that came and actually set up a booth on the opposite side of the park. This was their first year to participate and the first time another church has come. The pastor said they had had doubts about participating in some of the activities going on, but since we have been there many years he felt empowered by us to feel like they could come too. I said, "Well, I'll pray for everyone on our side, and you pray for everyone on this side." I thought maybe this was the first year that everyone at the festival will discover they are being prayed for from both sides. I pray that we can hear Jeremiah's word to care. I pray that we would grow strong in caring for the doors that God has opened in this direction, and I pray that He would make us faithful and that He would say, "You been faithful over here, now let Me open doors in the other 330° around Kenwood."

Wouldn't that be great? Pray for the place where God has brought you.

His third command is: **Trust God for the accomplishment of His greater purpose.** Trust God with the results. Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 29:10:

"This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back to this place.'"

Then in Jeremiah 29:11, this treasure verse, God says:

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

God says, "I know what I'm doing with you." We get worried that if we were to start caring about our community, what would happen to us? If I start giving away my resources for the benefit of the people around us, I have fewer resources. God says, "I know what I'm doing with you. I know the plans I have for you, and they are plans to prosper you," the NIV says. The Hebrew says they are plans for shalom, plans for peace, and not for calamity; plans to give you a future and a hope. This great mysterious thing happens at the end of Jeremiah's letter.

When we start caring for our environment, our community, what actually changes first is our own heart. Watch out! Look what happens when you start building your life and caring about the context God has placed you in, praying for it. We see what happens in Jeremiah 29:12:

"Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you."

In Jeremiah 29:13, Jeremiah says:

"You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart."

W. S. Bowd, an English devotional writer, said:

"Prayer is weakness [our weakness] leaning on [God's] omnipotence."

I hope you can embrace your weakness, your limitations, together with me, and pray that God would move for our surrounding environment, and in so doing, that He would then move in our hearts that we would be faithful in whatever opportunities He gives, and that He would extend that radius all around. We need a place to stand. Archimedes said:

"Give me a place to stand, and I can move the earth."

We do need a place to stand from which heaven and earth are connected to reach out. This is a place where heaven and earth are connected, where God did not withhold His one and only Son, where He did not respond with cynicism or indifference, but sent His one and only Son into the world so that lost, sinful, idolaters like us might find redemption.

As we come to this table, this is not the table of Kenwood Baptist Church. It is the table of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, then partake of this spot where heaven and earth are connected. If you don't have any plans this afternoon, you should just go to the festival, talk with people, point them to the petting zoo or simply welcome them. Go with your own soul filled with the love of God in Jesus Christ represented here at this table. Would you pray with me?

Oh Lord, You are awesome. Father, I thank You that You are not like us. I thank You, Lord, that You give; Your kingdom extends. I thank You for the places in the context that You have placed us, our families, our workplace, our communities. Help us, Lord, to follow You, to build our lives there, to pray for these settings. Nourish us now with the broken body and shed blood of the Lord Jesus, who on the night in which He was betrayed, took bread in the presence of His disciples and broke it and said: "This is My body, broken for you." He took the cup and said, "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood poured out for you." Lord, we give You thanks for Your amazing seeking grace, and we are in awe of You. We ask Your blessing now.

In Christ's Name. Amen.