

“Peace-People for our Neighbourhoods”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
A Stewardship Reflection

Jeremiah 29:1-7

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Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

What an obscure and difficult-to-pronounce reading! It has many names which are unknown to us. It comes from a time long ago from us, and places far distant from us. It's about a piece of mail that was not written to us.

Yet, it has something vitally important to say for us today.

II

There is a clay tablet in a museum in Berlin. If they'd let you, you could easily hold the tablet in your hand. It's one of the thousands that archaeologists have found digging in the ruins of the ancient imperial city of Babylon. (That's in Iraq today.) This particular tablet records an ordinary allowance of cooking oil. The oil was for Jeconiah. Here's where it gets really interesting. He's the same Jeconiah as in today's Bible reading! Jeconiah, the king of Judah, getting his cooking oil allowance while living in Babylon!¹

What was that about?

Judah was a tiny nation. It was all that was left of God's People Israel.² It was barely independent, under the power of the mighty Babylonian empire. When you live next to a superpower, you have to be careful.

Jeconiah's father was the king of Judah. He was not careful. He declared independence from Babylon.³ Then he died. The prince Jeconiah was only 18! Now he was king. Babylon, meanwhile, was bearing down to teach little Judah a lesson. Jeconiah had only three months on the throne when he surrendered. That act saved Judah, for a while, but lost Jeconiah his crown. The Babylonians carted him off. They also took away the cream of Judah's leadership and its best talent to serve in Babylon.⁴

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoiachin's_Rations_Tablets

² After Solomon's reign ended in about 931, Israel's tribes fought a civil war that resulted in a permanent division of the nation. The northern 10 tribes retained the name "Israel," with its capital in Shechem. The other 2 tribes stayed loyal to the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem and were called "Judah." Israel was destroyed in 722 BC by the Assyrian empire and its peoples scattered. Judah continued for about another 135 years.

³ In 587-6 BC.

⁴ Jeconiah was also called Johoiachin. These events are recounted in 2nd Kings 24.

It could have been much worse. In Babylon, they were not slaves. They could live normal lives. They were even looked after, somewhat, with things like cooking oil.

But they were not home. They could not go home. They were refugees, deported from all they had known and treasured. It seemed God had forgotten them.

III

Meanwhile, there were still people in Judah. One was Jeremiah, a prophet of God. Long before, he was warning anyone who would listen — not many did — that this disaster of defeat and exile was going to happen. Now it had, and Jeremiah's work for God changed. God's People were full of despair. They did not need warnings anymore. Instead, Jeremiah spoke words of comfort and purpose.

That's what today's reading is. It is a letter he wrote to those exiles far away. It was a word from God they needed to hear.

They needed to hear why all this had happened. God had not forgotten them, but they had forgotten God. God's People had drifted from the life God was creating them for, the mission God was calling them to, their covenant relationship with God. All the warnings of prophets like Jeremiah had not worked. So now, yes, God was disciplining them with exile. But God had not given up on them.

They needed to settle in for the long haul. This was not going to end anytime soon.⁵ This strange place was their new home. So build, plant, invest, have families. Babylon was now their community. They were not going anywhere else for a long time, because that was where God wanted them to be.

IV

Then . . . well, this part is astonishing.⁶ Through the prophet, God says to God's People:

*Promote the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile.
Pray to the Lord for it, because in its shalom you will have shalom.*

“Shalom” is a precious word. It often gets translated as “peace,” but shalom means much more. When everyone flourishes, when all is whole and well, when there is justice and

⁵ In fact, it was soon to get worse. With Jeconiah deported, Judah's new king was his uncle Zedekiah. Although the Babylonians put him in power, ten years later he too rebelled against the empire. This time, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, killed thousands, despoiled the land, and deported many more. These events in 587-6 BC were the end of Judah as a nation, and deepened the “Babylonian Captivity” period in the history of God's People (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity).

⁶ These words “are so remarkable for their advice to the exiles that they are without parallel in the literature of antiquity (especially v. 7).” Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” in Frank E. Gaebelin (ed), The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 6:553.

delight, that is shalom. When each person's vital needs are met, and each person's gifts are used well, that is shalom.⁷ Shalom is God's design for creation and God's purpose for salvation.⁸ Shalom is "the way things ought to be."⁹

God tells this small community of God's People, a dislocated minority of diminished status and little security, that it has a purpose, a mission, work and responsibility. This is for itself, and for the larger community: Babylon! Their captors and enemies even. The mission of God's People is shalom for Babylon.

This God's word for us too. It's what we're about. Our mission as God's People is shalom. God uses us to bring shalom for our neighbourhoods, the places and relationships into which God is placing us. Shalom: flourishing, wholeness, wellness, justice and delight, where needs are met and gifts used.

It's so tempting to focus in ourselves. More so when we are under pressure and feeling insecure. Especially when we are in some sort of crisis. Particularly when it does not feel like home anymore. We are tempted to withdraw our gaze into our own needs, our own sustenance, our own life. Certainly that was a temptation — a very understandable temptation — for that group of Israelite exiles stuck in Babylon.

But God had more for them. God has more for us.

*Promote the shalom of the places where I am sending you.
Pray to the Lord for them, because in their shalom you will have shalom.*

V

Pray for them.

Here are some maps. These are of Elora-Salem and Fergus. This one shows all of the Centre Wellington. And this is of our whole region.

Within these area are most of our neighbourhoods.

I am inviting you to do this. This board will be at the back of our sanctuary. Over the next while, starting today, you can take a pin and mark where your home is. Use whichever of those maps is best for that. Your home centres one of your neighbourhoods.

Then, place another pin somewhere else where you spend a lot of time. It might be where you work or go to school. It might be a place where you play, like the community centre or

⁷ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁹ Ibid, 10.

dance studio. It could be where you volunteer. It might be a friend's place. It might be a pub! Any place where you are with people regularly is another of your neighbourhoods. Pick one of them, and mark it.

When you do this, I am asking you to commit to pray for those two neighbourhoods. That's it. Just pray. You don't have to act differently. You don't have to do anything new or out of the ordinary. Just pray. Every day, pray.

Barb and I have put together this prayer guide. You might find it helpful in your prayers. Or maybe not. As long as you pray.

*Promote the shalom of the places where I am sending you.
Pray to the Lord for them, because in their shalom you will have shalom.*

V

One more thing. When you pray, the One you are praying with, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is already in those places you are praying about. Of course we know that; God is everywhere. But that can be just an abstract thought. When you mark that neighbourhood, you are marking a place that is precious to God. God is already there, creating peace. When you pray for the people there, you are maybe starting something new for you. But it is not new for God. They are not new for God. You are getting to join in.

The fact is, that place of exile, Babylon, became where God's People started to know and experience God in new ways. Where they were desperately afraid of the absence of God, Jews instead discovered more of the presence of God. And, more of God's shalom.

Pray for the shalom of your neighbourhoods, and enjoy God's peace for you.

Amen.