

“A City within a City” Scripture text: Jeremiah 29

Sermon for New Horizon URC on August 7, 2011, 2:30 p.m. by Pastor Rand Lankheet

Main points: 1. The city of man 2. The city of God (the church)

Introduction: The Bible begins with a garden, and ends with a city.

The human race starts in the Garden of Eden; it ends up with the Holy City, the new Jerusalem.

From a garden to a city. It's in the holy city, that we as God's people will live forever.

1. In the past, and in the present, God has established His people in *the great cities of the world*.

Think of ancient Rome, how the apostle Paul wrote one of the most powerful books of the NT, to the church of that city. The Roman church in the 2nd and 3rd centuries was largely a biblical church, a good and faithful church, despite times of intense persecution.

The Lord Jesus directed the missionaries Paul and Barnabas, and later Paul and Silas, to go to the major cities, of the Roman empire, preaching the gospel.

The Lord had them bypass the rural areas, and go to the larger urban centres. Because more people were found in the cities. Gospel preaching can reach more people, more quickly, in the cities, than out in the countryside. Indeed, in those cities, the early missionaries at times found great wickedness. But at other times, the city folk invited the missionaries to talk further about Jesus. So it happened in the major city of Ephesus; so also in Athens. As the Lord led the early missionaries, congregations of believers were soon established in all the major cities of the Roman empire.

-Look at Yahweh's message to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah writes down this message, and gives it to the people exiled to the city of Babylon. [Read 29:4-5, then vs. 7.

God's people were to seek the “peace and prosperity” of the wicked city of Babylon. That was God's command to his covenant people. To seek the shalom-peace of the city of Babylon... Shalom....

Now, this is somewhat unique command from God within the history of redemption. That God's people should seek the shalom peace of a large, pagan city.

-But, at the very least, it tells us that God is concerned for the large cities of our world today. That concern of the Lord is primarily for the sake of his people who are found in the big city.

God says in vs. 7, if the city prospers, so too, will the church prosper there.

“A rising tide lifts all ships.” True, isn't it? If a city is financially and socially prosperous, so too, the church in that city, can become financially and spiritually prosperous. As members of the church, give and tithe out of their prosperity, earned from within the city. So the church, also, grows and increases.

Oh, there are dangers along the way. A church, like a pagan city, can start to depend on its riches, and forsake its first love. And a church, in a pagan city, can easily compromise the gospel.

But, a church based on God's Word, preaching the full gospel of Jesus, can prosper more in a prospering city, than in a declining city. That's part of God's message to the people of that day.

Now, again, we have to be careful. When God's people are called upon to seek the shalom peace and prosperity of the city, any city, we must keep in mind the so-called “antithesis. 对立面”

That word “antithesis” was made popular by Dr. Abraham Kuyper, a hundred years ago.

Anti-....The antithesis is the contrast between the world and the church. The fact that God's people have a completely different understanding of truth, and where truth comes from, than the people of the world. We as church stand anti-thetically 正相反的 against the world.

As Jesus told his disciples, you are *in* the world, but you are not *of* the world.

The African church leader, St. Augustine, once wrote a very famous book, around 400 A.D. It's still in print, in English translation, entitled “The City of God.” Augustine spoke of the church as the city of God. The people that Christ has built together, as a church, as a holy city. He's reflecting the words of Peter, who refers to the church as a “holy city” [1 Pet 2:9].

In his context, Augustine was trying to explain that just because Rome, the city of man, was in decline, the city of God, was not in decline. That people shouldn't explain the fall of Rome, the city, as somehow caused by the church. No, said Augustine, these two cities, one of God, the other of man, are quite different from one another.

Yet, having said that, we must also keep in mind that in some sense, the Lord cares for the cities of this world. He created all people. Everyone carries the image of God in them. God takes no delight in the death of unbelieving people.

There is an aspect of biblical Christianity, Reformed Christianity, which drives us to care about the unbelieving world. To seek the peace and prosperity even of the great cities of this world. In our context, that would be the large city of Toronto, in which we live. And in which my church and your church is found—mine on the NW side of Toronto. Yours on the east side. We have to be careful how we apply Jeremiah chapter 29 to our city today. We are not exiles here, as were the Jews in Babylon. Yet, in some sense, the Bible says we as Christians live as strangers, foreigners, in the midst of our world. So in some respects, our situation is similar to the situation faced by the Jews in their Babylonian captivity.

We live in the city, but we are not of the city. Living in the city, I believe God would have us be seeking, praying for, working for, the shalom peace and prosperity of our city of Toronto.

Not just because God as Creator cares for his world. But, in addition, the gospel of Jesus can go further, and make more impact, if our streets are peaceable. If the citizens of Toronto are educated, and cared for. If the citizens, in general, have the basic necessities of life.

Try preaching the gospel in a war-torn area. Or try establishing a congregation in the midst of a famine. Or, try to build up the church in midst of political corruption. Yes, God will still bring in his chosen ones. But, God often uses the peace and prosperity of the secular world, to further his plans in growing and increasing his church.

God did that in the first century A.D. During the Pax Romana 罗马帝国统治下的和平, or the Pax Augustana. The peace established by Rome, particularly during the reign of Caesar Augustus. There were no major wars or internal rebellion in the Roman empire. The infrastructure was in place for the quick advance of the gospel...for roads and shipping routes, for letters to be written and sent, for sufficient finances in most congregations.

Out of the prosperity of the society, the church members were able not only to provide for their own needs, but out of their abundance, they provided for the needs of other congregations.

So God can and will use the peace and prosperity of a secular city like Toronto, to advance the gospel of Jesus today. And to grow and increase our own congregation. If we are willing. That then, is about the city of man...the human context in which the church is placed.

2. Let's note a few things about that city of God, the Church, which lives within the city of man.

Now, in Jeremiah's day, after many of the Jews were deported to Babylon, some false prophets were saying that the exile would be short. Only a year or two.

That's what's behind the rebuke of the man Shemaiah, in vs. 24 f. Shemaiah and others were saying that the exile to Babylon would be quite short. That Jeremiah was completely wrong and shouldn't be listened to. In chapter 28:3, we read of a false prophet who was telling the people that the exile would last only two years. So the bad leaders were advising the Jews in Babylon to sit still; to be in a kind of waiting pattern. No sense settling down, getting married, establishing families there in Babylon. Just wait for the quick return, back to Judah, back to Jerusalem.

But the true prophet, Jeremiah, was being told the truth by the LORD. The LORD was telling Jeremiah that the Babylonian exile would last for 70 years. That's a long time. Thus, says Jeremiah to the Jews in Babylon, live your lives as you normally would. Be productive. Vs. 5—build houses, plant gardens. Vs. 6—get married and give your children in marriage. Have children. Populate the city, with your covenant children.

It was critically important, in that day especially, that God's people wouldn't diminish 减少 in numbers. Or that they would intermarry with pagan people. Rather, says the LORD, raise up covenant children. Believing children. And have those children marry and have children. So that when the 70 years are over, and the time comes to return, there will be a good population of people returning. The land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem then would desperately need a large number of people to return, to rebuild, to re-establish themselves.

And, of course, in the history of redemption...we know that the Jewish people had to continue. And they had to grow...so that eventually there would be a Mary, and a Joseph, each trusting in the promises of God to send a Saviour. That someday there would be a town of Bethlehem and a city of Jerusalem.

So, you see, ultimately, this is not about the continuation of one ethnic people. This, ultimately, was about the producing of that son, the son of Israel, that son of Abraham, that son of David...producing Jesus, from that once exiled people. That He would be our Saviour.

Grow in numbers, says the LORD. Stay strong numerically. We can apply that today: +
So—As church, as Jesus people, **be productive** in the city.

2.B. Be discerning 有辨识能力的. [Read vss. 8-9.

Again, the LORD warns the people that there will be contrary voices, even in the so-called church, even among the visible churches. There will be false prophets. There will be those saying.... go in this direction, go in that direction. They will say that they know the Lord's will for you. But, says the Lord, they are not really leaders. They are not really pastors, true preachers of the gospel. So be very discerning.

2.C. Then, thirdly, be praying and seeking the LORD. [Read vss. 10-13a.

Again, we put these words in their redemptive-historical context. These words aren't blank promises for any Christian today, who wants to become rich. These verses are so easily abused by false teachers today, who are part of the prosperity movement. Based on these verses from Jeremiah 29, and other verses, those teachers say it is God's plan to make every Christian financially prosperous.

Let me urge you to remember, the context and the people to whom these promises were made. At that time, this was a very sinful and rebellious people. From the book of Jeremiah, we learn that they had been carrying on affairs with other men's wives. They were robbing the widows of their property. They were bowing down to the false gods of Baal and Asherah. Last week, from chapter 19, we read that some Jews were even burning their children in the fire, as part of their pagan rituals. These are the people now being severely punished by the Lord. Thousands had been killed by the Babylonian army. Thousands were left, starving and forced to scavenge through the deserted streets of Jerusalem. Thousands more were brought as captives to Babylon. They were being severely punished for their sin.

So don't jump to the verses about blessing and prosperity. First hear the rebuke of the Lord. The warning of His Word. And the terrible chastisements 惩罚 He rightly inflicts upon His rebellious people. Then, yes, indeed, if you hear the Lord's voice. If you truly humble yourself and repent of your sin. Then, yes, after years of suffering....maybe not 70 years....but a time of chastisement for your sins and you better learning the Lord's ways. Then, yes, if you then are truly, sincerely praying, repenting of your sin, truly seeking the Lord, according to his word...then, yes, the Lord will have mercy upon you in Jesus Christ. And you will enter into prosperity, covenant blessing.

But it won't necessarily be a prosperity of finances. In Jesus Christ, it's more likely that God will give you the riches of His shalom-peace: that means a greater contentment in life, even if it is with a modest amount of money. God blesses you and me as his covenant people, with the riches of the gospel and the sacraments, God blesses us with the joy of a congregation, committed to His Word. Right here. That we may worship him according to His Word. We are prosperous in the love, agape 大爱(基督对人类之爱) love, of our God in Christ. And the agape, love of Christian brothers and sisters in the Lord. That, ultimately, is the biggest part of our prosperity from the Lord. //

Conclusion: We will prosper, under God's blessing.

And at the same time we are to seek the prosperity of the city in which God places us. A big part of seeking the shalom-peace of the city is to lovingly bring the gospel of peace to the city. To the people of the city. The Christians in the city of Rome made Rome a better city, in those first centuries. By bringing the gospel....and living the gospel.

The later Christians in Wittenberg and in Geneva, and from there to London and Amsterdam, made those cities, in their early days at least, much better cities.

-And let us not forget the city of Toronto. We send out missionaries to the world....good. Yes!

But let us send our preachers and missionaries also into Toronto, into her streets and communities. And let us as a church always seek the shalom-peace and prosperity of Toronto.

And to that, all God's people said: AMEN.