

Leaving Home to find God

When I arrived at Prairie Bible Institute as a new student, L. E. Maxwell, the founder and spiritual leader of the school spoke to us from today's passage in Jeremiah 29. He said "Just unpack your bags and settle in". We had life of serious study ahead of us for the next few years, he said, "and we'd had better just get used to it". We were to see our bible school years as a kind of "Babylonian Captivity".

It was a clever *devotional* use of Jeremiah 29; but the more I thought of it, if we students were "exiles" that meant PBI was *Babylon*. And I found there was, indeed, a deep *irony* in that – that a place so steeped in the Christian religion could be Babylon, a challenging place to live out one's faith. Right on the buckle of the bible-belt, one could have a sense of being in exile. One could feel *not at home*. Is it not ironic that sometimes the very depths of the *church* can be the place most challenging to faith?

But is it not also true of the journey of faith, that we all, at one point, *must leave home to find God?*

I when I arrived at PBI, had already been on that journey for quite some time. When I left home as a teenager, I left behind the beliefs I was raised with. It was a kind of irrelevant suburban Christianity that really had no guts to it. It was a "Sunday morning" church that I grew to despise because didn't seem to have any real connection to everyday life. Certainly not *my* life. It was a place you could go every Sunday and never develop a connection with those around you any more than you would with strangers in a shopping mall.

It seemed that the churches I grew up in, had taken a snapshot of the past and were trying to live in cracked and dog-eared black and white past. Church life was like looking through old photo albums, you know the ones, full of distant relatives, but no one knows who these people are anymore, yet they stare back from the brown and faded photos, silently pleading, "Don't forget us! Don't let us down!"

The message of the church was a lot like reading an old box of letters not addressed to me from people I never know. None of these people were alive anymore for a face to face conversation with, to really explain all this to me.

The overall impression I got from the church was that "Christianity" was really going on back in the days of Shakespeare, and today we were just trying to carry it on as best we could. Eventually that just didn't work for me anymore, so I left. I left behind the oppressive embrace of a church that had suffocated to death long ago.

I had to leave the church to find Jesus.

When I left, at first, there was this sinking feeling that I had gone over to the dark side. Reached the point of no-return. But soon found that outside the sphere of the church there were lots of people who were loving and honest and kind and just, and like me, never had anything to do with the church anymore. And it was "*out there*" among these people that I really began to question what it actually meant to "believe in God". Without a neatly pre-packaged Christianity, I really had to *think* for myself what it meant to live as a person of integrity in this world. Sometimes we have to go somewhere else to really discover who we are in Christ. So when I landed up in this Bible college, the irony was old Maxwell was right: Bible School was a very alien environment to me. It was *literally* . . .

The Babylonian Exile

What we have before us in the Bible in Jeremiah 29, is an exchange of letters between the prophet Jeremiah and the exiles in Babylon. These letters were written sometime shortly after 597

B.C. After the fall of the Jerusalem, Jeremiah the prophet was afforded police protection by the imperial officials. After many years being the “weeping prophet,” the despised figure, sulking around Jerusalem, shunned by the insiders of the king’s court, and temple priests, Jeremiah has finally gained some recognition as man of authentic spirituality, which sets him apart from the torrent of tom-fakery coming from the popular prophets who are a dime a dozen, both in Jerusalem, and in the exilic community.

Just to put this correspondence in chapter 29 into context, in the previous chapter Jeremiah was responding to the false prophet Hannaniah and his gaggle of look-a-like followers (you can see them all with the same beard, same walk, same version of the bible tucked under their arms). These guys are giving voice to an enduring temptation that comes to preachers whenever the life of God’s people is being challenged by the difficult circumstances. That temptation is to tell people to just *trust God* in the face of the terrible upheaval that have come to their lives. Everything will soon be put back exactly the way it was before. Don’t worry. God doesn’t want you in exile! Just believe for a miracle, they say. Among the devastated people of the exile, the “wealth, health and prosperity gospel is finding a strong following. In fact, in the second half of this 29th chapter, Jeremiah again responds to one of these “feel-good” prophets named Shemaiah, who is angry that Jeremiah is dare tell people that they are in Babylon for the long-term. “O, don’t speak that negative power into existence!”

False-prophets promise instant dramatic deliverance almost any day now, but God has got a different plan, revealed to Jeremiah. Get on with your life. Your going to be here for a while. But that’s a *difficult* truth for the exile. They are asking themselves . . .

Why go on?

Yes, they’re survivors. They’ve *survived* an invasion and a war and a long dangerous journey of deportation. But now they are living in squalid labour camps, along the canals that surround the city. They are weeping “by the rivers of Babylon. . .”

In 22:10. Jeremiah gives voice to their despair:

*Do not weep for the dead or mourn his loss;
rather, weep bitterly for him who is **exiled**,
because he will **never** return
nor **see** his native land again.*

Life had lost it’s zest. Why keep going? They need reason to hope. But what Jeremiah will have to say will be a much different message from the “junk-food” preaching of the feel-good prophets. The judgment *has* happened. The exile *is* a reality. Deal with it. Things are not going to change for at least a generation. They are stuck in a strange land, forced to obey, for the most part, their Babylonian captors. They are surrounded by an unbelieving, pagan society. All the backdrop scenery against which they had lived out their faith had changed. Totally. The old patterns of life are no more. No Temple. How can they go on being themselves in such a circumstance? How can they remain the covenant people of the god of Israel now that they are cut off from everything they hold dear?

For them, exile is worse than death. There is a complete loss of identity, an alienation not only from their land but from their god. A whole generation will never see their native land again. The next generation will grow up slowly losing their grasp on the covenant relationship with Israel’s god.

Why go on?

But Jeremiah's letter is inspired by God, and in this letter, are important keys to their spiritual survival. *They have left home to find God.* And if they are to benefit from this experience, if they are to have FAITH in Babylon, then the first key is in . . .

Living in Community

Jeremiah addresses his letter first, of all, to "the elders among the exiles. . . the priests, the prophets. . ." " Leaders must bring a vision to the people. Leaders must give the community the sense that things are going somewhere. But in many ways now, these leaders have been broken. The cock-sure certainty they once had when they ruled Jerusalem is now gone. How can they keep this community of the people of God from fragmenting?

Perhaps, the irony of exile is that it has created the best conditions for their spiritual renewal, because the leaders, priests, prophets, alike are now much more in touch with the people than they were in Jerusalem. The Temple wall and palace wall and private places of privilege have been removed. The once proud elite of Jerusalem are now living in small huts along the canals of Babylon. Their leaders are forced by circumstances to live transparently before those who follow.

And this letter is addressed not only to the leaders but to "all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. . ." They are, first and foremost, *a community* but now what they need most is . . .

A Purpose

The exiles had been caught up in a whirlwind of historic events. These events are traumatic, but not random, but part of God's plan for them and the world. They thought their city was invincible – a mountain fortress; but when the enemy besieged, and starved them out, eventually they were humbled. But this brought them, in their relationship with God, to the point where they were forced to say, "*this is not working anymore.*" They found that in their spiritual lives, they were actually a lot like the city in which they boasted. They *thought* they were impervious: the people of the Sovereign God, his Temple in their midst. But when the supply routes were cut off, they soon began to starve.

Again, ironically, it was in the exile that the people of Israel began to gather and pay attention to the assorted scrolls they had brought with them from home. Those scrolls became precious. They began to study them and compile the scrolls and make copies of them. And during those years of exile these people brought into existence what we now call the Bible. It was during the Babylonian captivity, as they looked to the Scriptures, that they began to reopen the supply routes of the Spirit. They began to *feed their souls*.

When the authentic voices of people like Jeremiah finally began to be heard, when the shallow feel-good prophets were silenced, they began to rediscover who they were: Israel, the chosen people of God. And out of that came. . .

Passionate Worship

They looked back at the purposeless of life their worship life in Jerusalem: O they gathered, sang the psalms, did all the sacrifices, but this was like consuming empty calories with no nutrients. Jeremiah describes them as they march around chanting "The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord . . ." Their worship *appeared* to be genuine, when in fact, they were spiritually starving selves to death.

But now, out of the desperation of exile, they begin to see that roots of their disaster lay within themselves. There were things wrong in their *interior lives*. They had cut off their spiritual supply routes to their hearts. But now, as they begin to read and study the Word of God, these people realize they have been brought to Babylon *to discover their true destiny*.

Yet even the desire for spiritual renewal can become a selfish pursuit. The exiles still crave the fun-fests of Zion. There's something addictive about "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord . . ." It's easy. It doesn't require much of us. But like any addiction, it may feel good for a time, but ultimately it robs the soul.

But in *exile* they learn that *real* spiritual renewal begins when by making the connection between

. . .

Action and belief

Jeremiah had already spent a lifetime calling them to this. They hadn't listened. As far as ministry success goes, Jeremiah had totally sucked. After years of faithful preaching, he really had nothing to show. Nobody bought his books. Nobody invited him to speak. But *now* as he writes to them as *exiles*, they will finally open up to what he had been telling them all along, Back in **4:2** we read:

"*if* in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,' (none of this temple of the Lord temple of the Lord, temple of the Lord jazz) "*if* in a truthful, just and righteous way *then the nations* will invoke blessings by him and in him they will boast."

This will be their *purpose* in Babylon. They will be a truthful witness to the living God. Their focus in Babylon must not simply be on their own spiritual lives, but also on their witness to larger world that God wants to reach through the transformed lives of a renewed and forgiven people. They have been brought to Babylon for *this*. And *if* they begin to live out of that truth and that justice in a righteous way *then the nations* – the people in Babylon will begin to follow the God of Israel. It's the ACTION that backs up the belief.

And if action meets belief, they will find God's purpose and be renewed and empowered to fulfill it.

So how does a heart-broken humbled exile community *go about* that, practically speaking? How can they live out their faith in Babylon? Where do they begin? Well, that's what Jeremiah's letter is all about. He gives them a few pointers that will help them to be people of authentic faith and dispel among their Babylonian neighbours of any delusions and false stereotypes they may have regarding who they are So he says first of all you need to . . .

Make an Investment

"Build houses and settle down . . ." But this goes far beyond buying real estate. Everywhere we look around here they're building houses. Right now we're seeing a lot of development. But is it smart development? Is it environmentally sound? Sustainable? Is there enough *affordable* housing? Is it the kind of development that invests back into the community? People of faith make that kind of investment.

They are to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which they have been carried into exile. God does speak in times of prosperity and peace. But a society can amuse itself to death during secure times, not heeding the warning signs. The exiles were not to allow that to happen in Babylon. They were to "pray to the LORD for it"

Each one of us is living in a less than ideal situation. And we can always come up with some reason to disengage, withdraw, isolate ourselves. But our calling in Christ is to make a positive contribution to the society in which we live, despite its shortcomings. So what Jeremiah says to the exiles is, in effect . . .

Become “worldly”

I know, that could be taken the wrong way. But Jeremiah says, “plant gardens and eat what they produce.” When you plant a garden, a lot happens. People see you at work. People see you carrying pails. They hear you turning on the sprinkler in the morning. You have dirt on your pants. You’re reliable. Real. Soon conversations begin to take place over the fence. Advice is dispensed. Wisdom imparted. Helping hands are extended. Soon you have more than you need of something – let’s say eggplants, so you share them. In return, not because they need to but because they have lots, you receive from others – let’s say plums or grapes or whatever. When people plant gardens side by side, they begin to live connectedly. And it’s that kind of “worldly” that Jeremiah wants then to become.

He tells them to “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. Increase in number there; do not decrease. “ Faith is sustained by *relationships* that support us from cradle to grave. A vital faith is not just a set of religious doctrines passed on, but a life lived together.

What would emerge among the exiles by the rivers of Babylon would be a grassroots theology. There would emerge by the rivers of Babylon a different way of being the people of God, a mind set appropriate to *that* place and *that* time. Spiritual formation is a worldly process. It engages the whole community.

Today, this might be what is being called the “emerging church,” The emerging church is simply a church that isn’t planted from some exotic seeds imported from somewhere else, not growing out of some programme that was developed somewhere else and used. But the church that we see all over the world emerging from localized, community-based conversations, formal and informal, informed and uninformed. So . . .

Welcome to Babylon

In our day, in a secular nation, we are called to be like the exiles Jeremiah addressed. Christianity is not, and was never meant to ever be, a sub-culture or counter-culture, struggling on the fringes or always picking a fight in the public square. On the contrary. Christians have always been witnesses, often brought against their will, into the public arena, into circumstances where the nature of their faith is such that they say, like Martin Luther 500 years ago “Here I stand, I can do nothing else, so help me God.”

Any attempt to create a “walled city”, a micro-managed church culture, is doomed to fail. Because it denies the integrity of creation which give to each of us a place where our faithfulness can touch the greater humanity. Culture is not to be denied or escaped, but ENGAGED.

As Christians we have no option about living in a largely non-christian culture. Yet we do have the choice of living responsibly as people of faith in that culture. That responsibility can be overwhelming at times because of misconceptions and delusions people have concerning Christianity. Changing that won’t happen overnight.

So let’s start *unpacking*.