



SHALOM OF THE CITY: HOW TO FOSTER PEACE AND PROSPERITY IN TODAY'S WORLD

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The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming,
“The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”

Psalm 92:12-15

INTRODUCTION

Picture a vast tent city on the edge of the greatest metropolis in the world. The refugees who live there have been forced from their homeland by an invading army. They have seen their city sacked, their families murdered, and their sacred place of worship destroyed.

The exiles have lost everything that was important to them. Their future is uncertain and each day is clouded with ambiguity—with little meaning or purpose beyond survival. They wait, day after day, hoping they will awaken from the nightmare that has become their life.

The time is the 5th century B.C. The city is the great city of Babylon, the capital of the ancient empire ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar. And the exiles are the best and the brightest of what had been Israel.

Historically, Nebuchadnezzar had a unique strategy for keeping countries that he conquered from rising up against him. He would round up all the leaders, particularly the finest and brightest young men and women, and take them back to Babylon. Unlike many rulers of his time, he did not enslave them, but wanted them to assimilate into the culture of Babylon.

But these Israelite captives refuse to assimilate; instead they camp together on the outskirts of the city. False prophets in the camp tell the exiles not to go down into the city of Babylon, that God was planning to raise up a great army that would come and deliver them from the Babylonians. So there they wait. The psalmist gives us some insight into their state of mind in the lament of Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" (Psalm 137:1, NIV)

One day a letter is brought to the exiles in Babylon from their homeland. It is from the prophet Jeremiah, who was left behind. The letter radically changes the Jewish people's perception of how they should live in this alien land. Part of the letter reads,

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare" (Jer. 29:4-7, NIV).

In his letter, Jeremiah is telling the exiles that not only does God still love them but he has an important plan for their lives. He reminds them in this passage that even though their situation has drastically changed since they left Jerusalem, their mission as God's people remains the same. They are to fulfill man's original calling (Gen. 1:28) to fill the earth with God's images and subdue the earth by making it useful for human beings' benefit and enjoyment.

This passage from Jeremiah speaks to us today as well. *We* are the Jewish exiles in Babylon living in what sometimes feels like enemy territory. God's admonition to the Israelites through Jeremiah has the potential to radically change the perception of how Christians should live and work in the 21st century. As author Flannery O'Connor suggests, there are still "Christ-haunted"¹ places in our country, but we no longer live in a Christian-friendly culture; in fact, in many ways, our current culture is antithetical to Christianity.

Seminary professor Carl R. Trueman summarizes the feelings of many of today's Christians when he writes:

We live in a time of exile. At least those of us do who hold to traditional Christian beliefs. The strident rhetoric of scientism has made belief in the supernatural look ridiculous. The Pill, no-fault divorce, and now gay marriage have made traditional sexual ethics look outmoded at best and hateful at worst. The Western public square is no longer a place where Christians feel they belong with any degree of comfort.²

The apostle Peter also suggests that we have always been exiles:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul (1 Pet. 2:11, ESV).

Peter continues with his instruction to the church in the verses that follow (1 Pet. 2:12-17), telling his readers how to live as exiles among the Gentiles and how to interact with those in positions of “human authority” and political institutions.

Both Jeremiah and Peter show us that there is a way we can live and have great influence, even when we feel like exiles. The key to understanding this is found in part of the Jeremiah passage above: “work for the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jer. 29:7, NLV).

The Hebrew word that is translated as “peace and prosperity” is the word *shalom*. *Merriam-Webster* defines *shalom* as a Jewish greeting. In our English Bibles, the word *shalom* is usually translated as *peace*, but we will see that this word has a far more comprehensive meaning than the English word *peace* or a simple greeting. The true meaning of *shalom* has the power to transform your world and the world around you. Our goal in this short booklet is to answer three critically important questions that will keep us from being assimilated into the culture of the “Babylon” we find ourselves in today:

- What is *shalom*?
- Why is *shalom* important to God and why should it be important to us?
- How do we work for “the *shalom* of the city” where God has placed us?

Answering these questions around this ancient, biblical idea of *shalom* will enable us as followers of Christ, even as “exiles,” to live a purposeful life beyond just surviving, living life as God intended it to be—full of significance, joy, and flourishing.

¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

² Carl R. Trueman, “A Church for Exiles: Why Reformed Christianity Provides the Best Basis for Faith Today,” <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/08/a-church-for-exiles> (accessed Sept. 20, 2017).