

Jesus-Centered Family on Mission with Him
JCFoM Week 7
Jeremiah 29:1-14
2/19/23

Introduction

We are wrapping up the vision series that we've been in for the first little bit of 2023 together, remembering and exploring our vision as a church to be **a Jesus-centered family on mission with Him.**

This is not original to us, we think this is the best summation we have of what the early church, the very first Christians were seeking to live out together as followers of Jesus in the ancient world.

And these final two weeks are on the last 4 words of our vision statement – **on mission with Him. Which we said we can summarize what this means in one two-part statement:**

Living as ordinary everyday missionaries...for the good of Charlotte.

Last week – ordinary and everyday mission. That if you're a Christian, you're a missionary. God has sent you to your neighborhood, your office building, your gym, your friend groups to be a witness for His Kingdom. So everywhere you show up, you show up in prayer, ready, looking for opportunities to build relationships and share the gospel.

This week – for the good of Charlotte.

What does it mean to live and work for the good of our city?

What does it mean to have a heart posture that is eager to see Charlotte be a flourishing place for all people?

Grab a bible, go to **Jeremiah 29:1-14.**

We're going to dive right into the middle of a developing story today, so let me give you a little bit of the background.

God's people, the Israelites, for a couple of different reasons, have been taken out of their homeland and exiled in slavery under a king named Nebuchadnezzar in the foreign nation of Babylon. It's not a great place for them to be. They're longing to be able to leave and return home.

And in the previous 3 chapters leading up to Jeremiah 29, some false prophets, folks who wrongly claimed to speak for God have told the people – Don't worry about it. You're not going to be here long. 2 years max and God is going to come and take you back home. So just hunker down, survive, and then you can leave.

But God steps into that situation with a word through a prophet named Jeremiah and tells them something completely different. He has a different command for these people and, as we'll see today, for us about how they are to live in this new place they have found themselves.

Jeremiah 29. I want to walk through the text together, highlighting some things for us, and then we'll spend most of the time talking about how we apply it into our lives as we consider living for the good of Charlotte.

Walkthrough of Passage

V1-3 – sets up the context I just gave you, so we'll hop in with Jeremiah's prophecy starting in v4...

4 – “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

That’s a really key phrase – God has sent them there. God has seen fit, in His divine cosmic plan for His people, to take them to Babylon. They are there, a place not their home, for a reason, for a purpose. A lot of what we addressed last week – God always places his people in particular places for His kingdom mission. True then, true now.

So, they are to...

5-6 – Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

So God tells His people – contrary to what these other false prophets might be saying, you’re going to be here awhile. Build some houses, plant some gardens. Get married, have kids, let your kids get married. This is going to be a generational thing and then some. So settle in, dig some roots in this place.

Start making a home in this place that is not your home.

But, don’t just focus on establishing yourself, notice what he says next...

7 – But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

So listen Israelites, I have put you into this foreign nation. You’re there as a part of my divine plan and will. So, put down some roots, settle in BUT don’t just focus on yourselves, key of the passage – seek the **welfare** of the city.

The word translated as welfare there is the Hebrew word **shalom**. You can translate v 7 – **Seek the shalom of the city...for in its shalom you will find your shalom.**

SHALOM

We’ve talked about this idea of shalom before, but I think it’s worth taking a second to address here, because it’s the key to understanding this story and how it applies to us.

Shalom, or as it’s often translated “peace” or here “welfare”, is a term summarizing **God’s Design for universal flourishing or wholeness.**

As Hebrew scholars have long understood it, to be living in shalom means that everything is right, **everything is as it should be**, specifically in what theologians consider our 4 primary relationships – flourishing with God, flourishing with others, flourishing with creation, and flourishing with ourselves.

And as you trace the pattern of Scripture, you see that shalom is one of if not the overarching goal that God has for His people.

- Shalom was God’s original design all the way back in the garden. Adam and Eve, before sin entered the world, lived in shalom...in a flourishing relationship with God, with one another, with themselves, and with creation.

- Shalom is what's broken in Genesis 3 when they sin – they hide from God, they blame one another, they cover themselves in their shame, and creation starts to decay.
- Shalom is what God is returning the world to – the prophecy about Jesus in Isaiah 9 tells us that He will be the *prince of Shalom* and that of His *shalom* there will be no end.

One of the ancient Hebrew benedictions priests would speak over the people as they departed from temple worship (it's made popular by a 2020 worship song) says – “May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May Yahweh lift up his face to you and bring you shalom.”

This is God's design for His people – that we would live and seek shalom. Everything as it should be as the Kingdom of God rules and reigns over all. Wholeness and rightness between us and God, each other, creation, and ourselves.

That is what God is now telling His people to **seek** and **pray for** in this strange land where they now find themselves in exile. **Seek its shalom, seek its flourishing.**

8-9 – For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.

AKA - don't listen to these other prophets that keep saying you'll be home in 2 years. They don't speak for me.

10 – “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

Won't be 2 years, but it won't be forever. I'll come back in 70 years, and I'll restore you and take you back home.

11 – For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Everyone's 3rd favorite Bible verse. It's like - I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Do not judge lest you be judged. And Jeremiah 29:11 – God's got plans to prosper me, give me a future and a hope.

Next time you're going through a difficult season and someone quotes that to you just say with all the sarcasm you can muster – “You're right! God has got a plan for me...and I can't wait to see it happen in 70 YEARS.”

Jokes aside – we often use Jeremiah 29:11 to give someone hope that God will take them out of their difficult situation and circumstance. But here God says – I know my plans for you. I know the plans I have for your welfare (your shalom), and it is not in taking you out of the place you find yourself, but rather in you learning to work and pray for shalom in the midst of the place you find yourself.

You see the difference? “I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “and it's to stay here in the mess and hard and hurt and love Babylon and seek its flourishing for 70 more years.”

12-14 – Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

One day I will return you home. This is not your forever place. While you're here, seek its shalom, knowing that a future home awaits you as God's people.

Let's stop there.

Our Story is Like the Israelites

What does this story about an ancient people living as exiles in a foreign land 2,600 years ago have to say to us today?

Well on the one hand, I think it speaks directly to those of us who have found ourselves in Charlotte, a place that may or may not feel like home. For most of us in the room, Charlotte is not our original home, we are not from here. There's a small smattering handful, but most of us are from somewhere else.

And that's not unique to our church – CLT is a transplant city. Most studies say ~100 people have moved here every day for the past 5 years. You've probably heard the running joke that if you meet someone native to CLT you've met a unicorn. It's rare. Most people have come from somewhere else.

And while almost certainly none of us came as exiles under the oppression of a foreign king, I am sure some of us would rather be somewhere besides here. Some other place we consider home that is not the queen city. And so I think there's a word for us in that physical sense.

But there's also something for us here in an even deeper spiritual sense.

Phil 3:20 - 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our citizenship is in heaven. If you are a follower of Jesus, one of the things the Bible makes clear is that this place called earth is no longer your home. When you put your faith in Jesus, you have the guarantee of a new home – eternity with God.

Which means, if this is not our home, but the presence of God is our home, then what are we, spiritually speaking?

Exiles. People who live in a foreign land. Please who live in a land that is not our home.

And notice the 2nd part – and from heaven we await Christ. One day Christ will return and restore us to a new heavens and a new earth where we will live forever with God as His people.

SO:

- Just like the Israelites in Babylon, we too live in exile in a foreign land.
- Just like the Isarelites in Babylon, we have been sent here by God.
- Just like the Israelites who God promises to bring to their home, we too await our forever home with God.

Which means the call is the same – 2,600 years later. Across the ocean. In a vastly different culture.

God would say to us: Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.

Or let me put it even more clearly –

Citizens Church, work and pray for the flourishing of Charlotte, for God has put you here, and if it flourishes, you will flourish.

When we say we're a church on Mission with Jesus that's a huge part of what we mean – We are unashamedly about Charlotte being what God wants it to be.

God has put us here...

- A place full of life, and industry, and boom and hustle.
- But also a place full of brokenness, inequality, idolatry, grief, pain.

And he says to us, you're here because I have you here so while we're here, work and pray to see this place flourish in all of the ways God intends for all of the people who call it home.

Postures Towards the City

Now if that is God's challenge to us, I think it's worth considering how we as a church might fail to do that. What are some ways we might wrongly approach our city instead of seeking its welfare? In my experience, churches and individuals can take several wrong approaches when it comes to the city where they find themselves...

1. Hate the City

Or another way to think of it is being against the city. This can happen on a church-wide or individual level.

I think we have a pretty good idea of what this looks like on a church-wide level. These would be churches where sermons are 25% Bible and 75% yelling about what's on the news. A church that positions itself as - everything in here is safe and good and everything "out there" is evil, bad, and under the dominion of satan and bent on destroying what's in here.

The city is against us, we're the victim. So we're going to set everything up to buffer ourselves and insulate ourselves against all the bad out there. We'll step out into our city occasionally to be its savior from on high, but then we'll retreat back to the safety of our lives inside the church. That is a way we hate our city and posture and position ourselves against it.

You can hate the city on an individual level as well. Just constantly complaining or bemoaning about the fact that you're here. Charlotte is the worst – traffic is awful, housing is unaffordable, tons of crime, people are rude, it's hard to make friends. It's not Atlanta, or Greenville, or Raleigh. The minute I can I'm going to leave. I don't care if my theology of God's sovereignty means he has me here for a reason, I'd much rather complain I'm not somewhere else.

That is a way we hate the city. We position ourselves against it. Charlotte is at worst a thorn in our side and at best a problem to navigate around and avoid at all cost.

Instead of bringing shalom, working and praying for flourishing, we decide this place is too broken or just isn't cutting it and we'd rather go find shalom somewhere else.

2. Conform to the City

Our lives look exactly like everyone else around us who don't know Jesus in Charlotte.

We start valuing and chasing and revolving our lives around all of the things Charlotte values and chases and revolves around – comfort, success, financial prosperity and wealth, image management – what I would argue are some of the core idols, or false gods of our city we just embrace hook, line, and sinker.

So instead of Charlotte being an enemy to avoid, it becomes a friend to embrace and emulate. It's the posture of – well this is what everyone in the city does and we just slowly over time fold in to those cultural norms.

Cities have pulls. It was the late Dallas Willard who once wrote about how every culture you live in has aspects that will help your discipleship to Jesus and aspects that will hurt your discipleship to Jesus. And that is true of Charlotte. There are ways this city, and even your specific area of the city you live in or frequent, will train you against the ways of Jesus if you let it.

When we do that, we stop working for Charlotte's Godward shalom, and instead we think Charlotte has shalom that we need to get in on ourselves.

3. Use the City

Charlotte becomes a stepping stone in our ladder of life. We're here just for a couple of years to get an experience, or to move up in our career, or get a good comfortable home for our family, or just sort of take the best the city has to offer, and then we move on.

In other words – Charlotte exists to serve me - my comfort, my fun, my wealth building, my advancement. That is the posture of using the city.

If you find yourself thinking "I love Charlotte", and what you mean is – your favorite date spot, your favorite brewery, the whitewater center, hanging out in downtown Matthews, etc. etc. – not and so therefore I'm broken over what is broken in our city – that could be a sign you are viewing Charlotte as a tool for your pleasure, enjoyment, and comfort – not as a place God has called you to serve for its flourishing with God for all people.

And if our posture is using the city, we don't step into the brokenness looking to bring shalom to Charlotte, rather we ask how can Charlotte give shalom to me? How can I set up my life to get all of the best parts of the city and what it has to offer for my flourishing?

SO WE CAN – hate Charlotte, conform to Charlotte, use Charlotte...

For the City - "Seek the Welfare"

Or...we can step into the invitation of Jeremiah 29...

5-7 – Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In other words, the posture is not to hate the city, conform to the city, or use the city. But rather...

4. Serve the City

A posture of serving, caring, sacrificing so that God's design, his heart for shalom – might make its way out and more and more into the city of Charlotte. That Charlotte might be a place of flourishing for all people. Rich and poor. Majority and minority cultures. Men and women. Elderly and children.

A place where flourishing in the kingdom of God might spread.

We don't just focus on building our life in the city, but we give ourselves away to build the city itself as a place of life for all people.

We intertwine our heart in this city so that wherever shalom is not being experienced, we step in. Charlotte's problems and pain points become our problems and pain points.

- So the education disparity in Charlotte, where 60% of 3rd graders in our city are below literacy standards, is not just a CMS problem, it's an us problem.
- The issue of race relations in our city, 2nd to last for 40 major US cities in trust between races, that's not just a CLT issue, it becomes an us issue.
- 500+ children in foster care becomes not just a need for Mecklenburg County DSS, but a need for us.

Because until our city is a place of shalom for all people, we cannot claim it as a place of shalom for us.

That's the burden God puts on Israel. You're in a place that is not your home. You didn't even choose to be there – I sent you there. And I sent you there to seek its flourishing. To seek its shalom.

Practicals

But that's a tall order, so let me just end with a couple of practical next steps, what this might look like for you. To get this out of the "ra-ra" let's go serve and love our city, and into the day to day stuff of life. I've got a bunch, we'll hit them very quickly.

LIVING FOR THE GOOD OF CHARLOTTE:

1. Pray

We'll talk about this more in a few weeks during our prayer series, when we learn to pray "God's Kingdom Come", but it's worth mentioning how Jeremiah emphasizes the role prayer to God will have on this city of Babylon. It's honestly a phrase I haven't really caught before, even though I've referenced this passage often. I usually just stop at – seek the welfare of the city. The work of action and love, which we'll get to in a minute. But Jeremiah also includes prayer.

Pray to the Lord on its behalf. Meaning, one of the best ways we can be for our city is to see the specific ways it's broken. The specific brokenness of even the immediate places around us - our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our schools – to look at those needs, not ignore them, and then bring them before our God who can enact change in bigger and more powerful ways than we ever can.

Prayer Walking in Uptown.

2. Learn

One of the first steps a missionary takes when they get to the mission field – some foreign place or city where they're sent to take the gospel is to learn. They learn the language and they learn the culture.

If we're missionaries sent by God to this city, what would it look like for us to learn CLT's language and CLT's culture?

History? Values? Dreams? Fears? Ethos? City as a whole + specific populations within the city.

Start asking – where is the shalom of God not present in our city?

3. Serve Small

Once you start studying, praying, looking at the needs around you...it's going to be easy to get overwhelmed. To be paralyzed by the sheer number of ways you could step in and serve in our city.

So let me just free you up – serve small. Pick one area of need in our city and do one thing. If you don't know where to start, come talk to me, talk to Dan who has connections to various ministries in our city, talk to David Chauhan who oversees our partnership here with the Dowd. They're constantly looking for after school tutors, volunteers to help with food distribution, there's so many ways to step in and do something.

Ryan + Sarah - Foster Child Advocates.

CGs + Serve Partner.

4. Point to Jesus

Don't be a savior, point to the Savior. You're not descending from on high ready to save those in need. You've got problems too. You've got needs too. You've got issues too. You're simply seeking to be the hands and feet of Jesus, seeking the flourishing of areas in our city that do not currently live into the shalom of God.

We're still "on mission WITH HIM" in this. He goes before us into the brokenness, we join him ready to pray and serve.

5. Put down roots

For some of us, the call of faithfulness to seek the welfare of Charlotte is to make our home here.

God tells the Israelites – settle in. You've got 70 years here, so start serving and building things that will last. And I think it's worth some of us asking the Holy Spirit if that might be our call for this place. To stop living with one foot in and one foot out. To be ready to commit to a place for the long haul.

I think that might be what God is calling some of you to do. Is to say – I'm just gonna commit to this place. Give it my next 20, 30, 40, 70 years, start serving and building things that will last.

We're going to give you space to wrestle with all of this with others and the Lord this week in your Community Groups.

Conclusion to Series

Let me close with this – this is our vision. This is what we're going for as a church. We tried to be as clear as possible over the past 7 weeks about what we think God is calling us to be: **A Jesus-centered Family on Mission with Him.**

Invitation to join in, wrestle with where you haven't been stepping into this.

2 years in, Lord willing decades to go.

Pray.