

July 2, 2017
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Peace in Chaos
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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PRAY FOR BABYLON'S WELFARE
Jeremiah 29:4-14

This is patriotic weekend, a time when most Americans take a vacation from work and responsibilities in order to celebrate our nation's freedom. Okay, in all honesty, this is the week when many Americans take time off from work. Celebrating freedom is not that big a deal these days. Maybe that is because many of the people represented by the current generation take our freedoms for granted. No doubt there are many people who wonder if we have any real freedoms left to celebrate.

Why the doubt, why the cynicism we see expressed by so many in our nation? An honest person will readily admit that there has been a concentrated effort on the part of certain kinds of people and groups to reinterpret if not rewrite the documents the founding father's wrote as they established this nation. We who believe the documents are sufficient to establish and maintain the amazing freedoms this nation has enjoyed also believe any attempts to reinterpret them or rewrite them erodes our freedoms.

The problem is a real problem and it is easy to explain. There are powerful individuals and groups of people organized around ideologies that stand in direct conflict with the ideologies of our founding fathers. The men who established this nation agreed that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (The Declaration of Independence of the United States)

The men who put their lives, livelihood, and reputations on the line to declare this independence unto freedom were by and large not a bunch of deacons from local Baptist churches. Most of them were

not even professing Christians. However, all of them held a high respect for God, His Word, and the Church. To deny the influence of the Judeo-Christian ideology on the founding of our nation, or the basis for our founding documents, is to be just plain dishonest.

That is the problem. The ideology that is so powerful in our culture today is a dishonest ideology. It rejects God, rejects the authority and teaching of the Bible, and replaces absolute truth with the relative truth of humanism. That is to be dishonest – which is also the story of history. Human history is a patchwork of one people group after another that God raises up only for that people group to reject God, which always results in the culture's disintegration.

The question that might be on many minds today is, "How are people who love God and trust His Word supposed to live in a culture that has soundly rejected God?" Those among us who are of a younger generation have experienced only the kind of culture that has rejected God. We who are older need to adapt to the new way. We wish there was still respect for God, His Word, and the Church, but that is only wishful thinking.

Or to draw the question more directly into the theme of our current series of sermons, "Are Christians able to live peaceable lives in cultures made chaotic by sin?" The answer according to God's messenger Jeremiah is, "Yes." We are not the first of God's people to find themselves in a culture that is anti-God. God's people from Judah suddenly found themselves living in an anti-God culture around the turn of the sixth century BC after Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem and carted a bunch of the "cream of the crop people" off to Babylon. False prophets, preachers who wanted to be popular with the people, were telling them not to worry because the mighty nation of Babylon was going to be overthrown and they would all return home to the freedoms they knew in former times in Judah.

God rebuked the false prophets through Preacher Jeremiah. God's instruction to His people was, "Settle down, invest in life where you are, seek the welfare of the pagans, pray for the pagan's success and enjoy your own welfare as God prospers them (Jeremiah 29:5-7). And no doubt the people who were living in Babylon, who received this instruction, were incredulous. It would be like God telling us to quit being so stirred up by the chaos of our pagan culture. He knows what is going on. He is still in control. Our duty is to live

life in light of God's Word, pray for those in authority over us, and do what we can to contribute to the peace of the nation. Sometimes, God's pathway to peace in a chaotic culture is just plain practical.

God's People Were in a Stressful Situation.

It will be beneficial for us to take a brief look at Judah's history that preceded this letter from Jeremiah. The foregoing events completely color the need for the letter. Many times through many different mouthpieces, God promised to judge His people through the nation of Babylon because of their unrepentance, sin, and rebellion. However, the nation of Babylon was hardly on the radar the first time God warned that they would be an instrument of judgment in His hand.

About one hundred years before the first deportation of Judeans by Babylon, Isaiah prophesied about the rise and fall of this world power. That message began: "*The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw*" (*Isaiah 13:1*). At the time God sent this message for His people to Preacher Isaiah, Assyria was the world powerhouse. They were virtually unstoppable in their subjugating of the surrounding nations. Assyria had the reputation for being a fierce and ruthless power. Even as Isaiah wrote these words, Assyria was poised to overrun the nation of Israel with its capital in Samaria.

Even King Hezekiah, ruler of the southern nation of Judah, had felt the lash of Assyria's whip when Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem for awhile. You will remember in the story in 2 Kings 19 how God miraculously delivered Hezekiah, Jerusalem, and the people of Judah.

Assyria was the power to be dealt with until about the mid-seventh century. But in a very short time, the nation that grew from the city of Babylon became the most powerful nation in the world. By 626 BC, it was powerful enough to threaten Assyria. In 612 BC, Nabopolassar, father of Nebuchadnezzar, overthrew Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the new king of Babylon (due to his father's death), defeated the mighty nation of Egypt at the battle of Carchemish. You will remember that as kind of a harbinger of future events, Josiah, the beloved king of Judah, was killed when he interfered with the King of Egypt who was on his way to the battle. About that same time, Nebuchadnezzar sacked the

Philistine city of Ashkelon, only about 30 miles from Jerusalem, and God's people started to get nervous.

Over and over God spoke through His messengers to warn His people in Judah that they must repent of their sins or He would send Babylon to destroy them. This was especially the burden of Jeremiah. He preached and illustrated the same message over and over for 50 years.

Finally, in the waning years of Jeremiah's ministry, God kept His promise. The opening words of the book called Daniel tells the story. *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god (Daniel 1:1-2)*. This exile took place in 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar having just defeated Egypt.

Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Jerusalem was precipitated by Pharaoh Necho appointing Josiah's son Jehoiakim as king of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar changed that when he besieged Jerusalem and took some of the chief young men like Daniel, Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael captive to Babylon. A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar came back and besieged Jerusalem again in 597 BC. He took King Jehoiakim and his mother the queen captive and appointed Zedekiah as king. He also took many other chief citizens of Jerusalem captive. These are the people Jeremiah wrote to – exiles in Babylon.

The final blow would come in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar leveled the city. Zedekiah had betrayed him and allied Judah with Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar showed up, burned the temple, destroyed the city, and took most people captive back to Babylon as well as stealing the temple furnishings. God kept His promise.

In the context of that historical setting, God sent a message for Jeremiah to send to the exiles in Babylon outlining His plan for His people to enjoy peace. Human wisdom balked at God's will. That resistance was demonstrated by a false prophet named Hananiah who claimed to speak the Lord's will. He said, "*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon*

took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, declares the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon” (Jeremiah 28:2-4). Hananiah spoke that message to Jeremiah at the temple in Jerusalem.

Other false prophets (i.e. popular preachers) were preaching the same message in Babylon. Jeremiah pointed out the problem in this letter: *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 (Jeremiah 29:8-9).*

In response to that false prophesying, Jeremiah countered with this letter of instruction from the Lord. He pointed out that God’s will for the people in exile was actually rather simple and practical. All of this instruction is given in light of the fact that Jeremiah knew the people would be in Babylon for a long time. At another time he had declared, *This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11).*

The people needed to realize that it was God’s will for them to live where they were. *Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon (v.4).* The exiles did not get exiled accidentally. God put the very individuals where He wanted them to be for that time. Therefore, maybe it would be good to know God’s will and do it. In keeping with God’s will, this was the plan: 1) Settle in and live life. God told His people to *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 (vv.5-6).*

We can almost hear the people protesting against this instruction. “But this isn’t the Promised Land! God intended for us to stay in the inherited land God had given.” That was right. But now, because the sins of many generations impacted the current generation of God’s people, they forfeited the blessings of the inheritance. God’s will was now expressed in the consequences of sin.

Not only did God intend for the people to live in Babylon, but He expected them to do what is good for the nation where they lived. *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 (v.7).* This would have been a bitter pill to swallow. Babylonians were Gentiles not Jews. They were not God’s chosen people. God’s chosen people were supposed to rule over the Gentiles. To do that which benefitted their captors would have cut across the grain of everything the Jews believed and practiced. But God promised that the people’s welfare was contingent upon the nation’s welfare.

How could such a plan as doing good for the enemy be useful? It was God’s plan and God’s plans are sovereign like Him. That was God’s plan in spite of the fact that the plan might not even apply to the people who received the instruction. *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” (v.10).* Oh wow! God said that His people were going to be in Babylon for two generations. God promised to send exiles back to Jerusalem. But most of the adults who had been taken captive would be dead before then. And how many of the kids would want to move back to Jerusalem having become Babylonians in practice?

The plan probably didn’t make much sense to the people who were paying the consequences for the sins. Yes, but God’s plans still express God’s will which is always good. *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope (v.11).* Though He disciplined His people, God still loved them. God always has good plans for His people.

And if God’s people will follow God’s plan, the result is confidence and peace. *“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” (vv.12-14).* With these promises, God’s people should

have been able to live a fairly tranquil life in a culture that was not their own. It was all a matter of trusting God enough to obey Him.

God's People Are in a Stressful Situation.

The instruction in Jeremiah's letter to God's people living in a difficult culture should be very helpful to us who live in a pagan, chaotic nation. Like the environment of Babylon, there is no fear of God in our nation. The people of America clearly rejected God's self-revelation through creation. Our peers have also rejected God's self-revelation through His Word, the Bible. God, belief in God, obedience to God, and, therefore, fear of God is irrelevant in our day. In fact, expressing love and trust in God is a frightening thing to some people. And the very suggestion of the need to fear God is soundly rejected even by people who claim to be born again.

The consequences of rejecting God are growing. In my teen generation, the consequences of rejecting God were comparatively simple. We learned about this thing called a generation gap. It came to be expected that teens and their parents would not communicate because we were on different pages. Life had changed dramatically with the introduction of new music genres and mass communication like television. The result was that Moms and Dads just didn't understand Elvis, or the Beatles, or Rock and Roll. And so parents passed off such things as a "stage" their teens went through.

But the generation gap was not a stage. It was the evidence of teen rebellion. The real problem was rebellion against authority. Teens disobeyed their parents which led to disobedience to authorities at school and then in government. And so we had sit-ins and campus riots leading to five students being shot on the campus at Kent State. There were also the expressions of rebellion against authority in the well known and fearful, destructive riots in Los Angeles and Detroit.

In that generation, we also experienced the sexual revolution. Sex education in high school, which was supposed to help, was practiced in the back seat of cars—the cars teens had to have in order to enjoy "independence." Woodstock and the like was a very serious warning that the culture had veered off track. Few people, especially leaders, seemed to connect the dots between the rejection of God and the cultural sins of the sixties.

Those simple consequences of sin from a past generation have matured into outright chaos bordering on anarchy. Our nation truly teeters on the brink of anarchy. The political and ideological divide is so deep that serious thinkers are fearful of civil war. Love for God is not tolerated or worse. Not that many years ago, public expression of love for God in simple things like displays of Scripture, celebration of the Savior's birth, prayer and Scripture reading was normal and expected. All those expressions have been curtailed. In many places and situations those expressions are now considered illegal and subject to fines or law suits.

Every aspect of our culture declares that we are a pagan nation with no better relationship with our Creator than the cultures of ancient Assyria, Babylon, or Rome.

What would God have us, who live in a Babylon-kind of culture, do? God would have us live where He put us according to His instruction. That means that we need to acknowledge that God determines who is in charge in the culture where we live. Does that mean that we the people are really not in charge through the election process? No. Paul explained, *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing (Romans 13:1-6).*

From these verses we understand that God desires an orderly society. God has designed and ordained the principle of government to enforce orderliness. That being true, we should then conclude that chaos is of Satan. The less a society knows God and the less they fellowship with Him, the more the society will be influenced by

Satan. The more a society is influenced by Satan, the more chaotic it will become.

God has given us governing officials from the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court down to local leaders and police officers to maintain an orderly society. These real men and women are God's ministers who are supposed to express God's authority.

Second, as we live where God placed us, He expects us to be subject to the rulers He puts in charge. Peter told us: *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:13-17).*

It is good to admit that governing officials are God's ordained ministers. But because God chooses them and puts them in authority, we must submit to them. That means "obey the laws." That means show respect and not using our "freedom" as an opportunity to do evil surreptitiously.

And in that same context, as we live where God has placed us, we must, if necessary, suffer well. Peter, who just told Christians to obey the authorities God has ordained also wrote, *Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil (1 Peter 3:13-17).*

Sometimes obedience to God demands disobedience to rulers who are supposed to be enforcing Godly principles. When the wicked are in charge, they can cause a conflict with obedience to God. How do we respond? We obey God and if necessary suffer like Jesus did.

But even when that happens, we should always explain why we must do what we must do with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience (v.16).

And maybe the most important principle for living a peaceful life in the culture where God has placed us is to live in light of eternity. Paul instructed the Corinthian believers, *This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:29-32).*

Having a spouse, mourning, rejoicing, and doing business are all typically part of this life. God commends these things as part of living for the welfare of the culture. But ultimately, our hope is not in the things of this life that are passing away. We are to live in light of the fact that we are strangers passing through.

Recognizing that God establishes governing authorities, submitting to them, living and answering with respect, and living in light of eternity should lay a foundation so that we can live with confidence. Listen again to the promise God gave to the exiles in Babylon: *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 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" (Jeremiah 29:11-14).*

God is in control. God has a plan and He is working it out. In the process, we are free to call upon Him (v.12), pray to Him (v.12), seek Him, and find Him (v.13). When we live like that, we will know that our real fortune is in heaven with Him where moth and rust do not damage it (v.14). Remember that in the end, our loving Heavenly

Father will call us to Himself and out of this exile in a chaotic world
plagued by sin (v.14).

Song: