

## God's Welfare Plan Jeremiah 29:1-14

I love jazz, so much so that we named our middle son Myles after Miles Davis (I wanted to name him Coltrane but Korie was like slow your role). You can't really love jazz without loving John Coltrane who was originally from North Carolina. In the 1950s Coltrane was somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand he was extremely successful, so successful he ended up playing on the number one jazz album of all time- *Kind of Blue*. But at the same time Coltrane was empty and miserable, so much so that he became addicted to substances that in 1957 almost killed him. This became the tipping point of his life where many people say he came to Christ. Not long after this he would record his famous, *Love Supreme*- one of the greatest albums in history. Look at what he wrote in the liner notes of the album, "During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God a spiritual awakening which has led me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through his grace. ALL PRAISE TO GOD"- John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*. From this point on John made up his mind to not live for his purposes, but to use his gifts to advance God's purposes, God's mission here on earth. Not long after this album was released, Coltrane was playing one of the cuts off of this album, and when he finished those on the front row could hear him mumble, "Nunc Dimittis," which is from a Latin prayer whose opening lines was, "Lord let your servant depart in peace." Don't you see? Coltrane wasn't just playing music, he was using his music as an offering to God, and seen through this lens it was a means to bring a sense of shalom to his world.

John Coltrane shows us a counter-cultural truth: When we live for our own agenda and mission we don't find fulfillment but emptiness. But when we live for God's agenda, God's mission we catch the side effect of fulfillment along the way.

### *Historical Context:*

This was Israel's problem. See, God had called Israel to live on mission for him in the middle of the Promised Land where they would be surrounded by secular nations that did not worship their God. God's hope for his people was that they would live outside of themselves and live into his mission, but that didn't happen. Israel looked around and decided to do what the other nations were doing- live for themselves. They had veered off mission. After centuries of God pleading and warning and graciously sending prophets to get them back on mission, God finally sends Babylon to carry them off into exile. This is where the people of God are when we come to the book of Jeremiah. And yet it is here where God says to his people, I have not given up on you. I still have a mission for you- seek the welfare of the city, for in its welfare we will find our welfare. Live on mission.

Someone once said the problem with life is that it's oh so daily. There's classes to attend, books to read, exams to be taken, jobs to go to, mortgages to pay and vacations to take. And if we're not careful we can get so caught up in the dailiness of life that we lose perspective on why we are here. We're not here ultimately to take exams or pay

mortgages (as necessary as these things maybe), but we are here to live outside of ourselves and into God's mission for our lives.

(Well, what is this mission, and how do we engage in it? God is going to speak to us about the mission he has for all of us in Jeremiah 29:1-14. Let's read it...)

#### THE MISSION: JEREMIAH 29:7

So here is Israel who has just completely failed and as a result has ended up in exile in this foreign place called Babylon, and what does God do? He says these words, "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"- Jeremiah 29:7. In other words, God is saying, "I'm not through with you. You are exactly where I want you. I have a mission for you, and that is to be a blessing to Babylon". Amazing!

Now in order to get our arms around this we need to go back to Genesis 12:1-3- what's known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Pastor Tom Nelson says the Abrahamic Covenant helps us to palm our bibles- to get a grip on what God is doing throughout redemptive history. The essence of the AC is God saying that he is going to use his people- the Jews- to bring welfare or blessing to the whole world. This is the whole Bible. For example, it's the Jew, Joseph, who ultimately becomes second in command in Egypt, and through him blesses Egypt and the world through a famine. It's the Jew Daniel, during the Babylonian exile who helps to lead Gentile kings like Nebuchadnezzar and Darius to faith in God. And ultimately it's the God-Jew Jesus who will bring gospel blessing to the world when he died on the cross, was buried in a borrowed tomb and rose early Sunday morning. And then, he gave his followers the call to engage in the mission of bringing gospel blessings to the world. In other words, the Abrahamic Covenant continues to be fulfilled today through the people of God, his church, composed of Christ following Jew and Gentiles. We are called to be engaged in this mission of bringing gospel mission to the world!

#### *Seek the Welfare*

Yeh, but what exactly does this look like? The word *seek* means to look intently. And the word welfare is the Hebrew word shalom, which is peace. Peace to the Jew did not just mean the absence of fighting, it meant far more-comprehensive wholeness. Okay, but what does that mean? Well, look to Jesus. When Jesus came to earth he sought the welfare- the comprehensive wholeness of the world. He did this in two ways. One he called people to repent of their sins and to place their faith and trust in him. But secondly, he did this by healing people, feeding people and addressing their physical needs. So to engage in this mission of seeking the welfare of the city is to engage in both the spiritual and the sociological dimensions of a person's life. And God says to you and I that's our call, and I want you to seek it. Look for active ways to engage in this mission. Our agendas are secondary, God's agenda is primary.

Every time we share our faith with people we are seeking the welfare of the city. Every time we engage in projects like ServeRDU we are seeking the welfare of the city. When we engage the marginalized in ways that bring dignity

and hope we are seeking the welfare of the city. When we make disciples- producing reproducing followers of Jesus, we are living on mission and seeking the welfare of the city. This is why we were created and saved.

My pastor tells the time when he was in college and had to do a paper. He said he spent a lot of time on this paper, and when he turned it in he knew it was going to be an A. A few days later he got the paper and immediately flipped to the back where there was a huge red letter F, and the professor had written these words, “Ken, your research was amazing. Your bibliography well surpassed the minimum requirement of resources. It’s obvious you spent a lot of time. However, next time I would suggest you consult the syllabus. Great paper, wrong assignment.”

You know, at the end of the day it’s not about the letters behind our names, our zip code, what we drive or how much we know. If this is ultimately what we are after, we may get an A from the world, but an F with God, because this isn’t our assignment. The syllabus says our assignment is to seek the welfare of the city. Is that you?

#### **THE FOUNDATION OF MISSION- JEREMIAH 29:4**

So how did the people of God get to Babylon? Yes, their sin caused their demise, but verse 4 God says something interesting- he says that, “I’ve sent you there”. In other words, they are called by God to be right where they are. They are not in Babylon by accident, but by assignment. I love Acts 17 when Paul is preaching on Mars Hill to a group of Gentile philosophers. One of the things he says to them is that God has determined the very places we are to live. Will you think about that for a moment? What if we actually viewed where we live in the triangle as God’s assignment for our lives, God’s call?

And boy what a great assignment it is to live here in the Triangle. **Over 1 in 10 people in RDU were born outside the United States. RDU is 80% higher in our non-US born citizens than the rest of the United States. Of the foreign born people here, 43% are from Latin America, 34% from Asia and 9% from Africa.** What this means is that God is literally bringing the world to the triangle! So what this means is that no matter what you do for a living- doctor, teacher, barista, professor, landscaper, full time parent- this is your assignment, your mission field for this season of your life. And let’s remember this letter God sends to the exiles is not just for the prophets or priests, you know those in full time vocational ministry, it’s for everyone. God has assigned us here not just because it’s one of the best places in the country to live, but to use the gifts he’s given to us to be on mission in seeking the welfare of RDU.

One of my best friends in life happens to be one of the top record producers of all time. For years he served as the executive music producer of a show that if I said its name you would know it. We were talking once about how really hard it is to follow Jesus in Hollywood. But he said this television show was where God had called him- he saw it as his assignment. So he developed a strategy for how he was going to reach the people there. First he said I’m just going to produce the best music these people have ever heard. He felt like the moment you said “Christian,” in a space like Hollywood, it was equal to subpar work. So he just quietly went about his business and wowed people with his music. Over time the cast and crew began to engage him, and the conversations got deeper. They

began to open up and share their struggles with him, and he was able to talk to them about Jesus. He didn't see his work primarily as a means to just make money and pay bills, he saw his work as a calling, a vocation to advance God's mission. It's where he was called.

What about you? No I'm not talking about using company time to take 90 minute lunch breaks and do two hour bible studies. But do you see your work, your apartment complex or your cul de sac as a mission field to advance God's agenda. I love what the great D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said. He said that if a Christian moves out of a neighborhood or leaves a job and there isn't this palpable sense of loss, that person didn't live on mission. May we all embrace God's mission and live beyond ourselves and into our assignment.

#### THE FUNDAMENTAL OF MISSION- JEREMIAH 29:5-6

But how do we do this? I get what mission is- to bring shalom- comprehensive wholeness. And I get the call, that where I live and what I do are the means to the mission. But exactly how do I do this? Look at verses 5-6. All of these verbs are imperatives/commands: **BUILD** houses and **LIVE** in them/**PLANT** gardens and **EAT/TAKE** wives. **HAVE** sons and daughters/**GIVE** your daughters in marriage. **MULTIPLY** there. You know what all these words convey? Ownership. This is interesting because Psalms 137 says that Israel sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept. They are on the outskirts of town. So God says, No, I want you to move into Babylon proper and settle down. Own the place. Own the assignment. I've called you here. This is the mission, now own it.

This principle of ownership and mission is so important. Mission without ownership is careless colonialism, where we don't really have a heart for the place or the people, but we feel like we've got to recruit them into our thing. That's not good. But ownership without mission is consumerism. So that if while I'm here in the Triangle I don't live on mission, but for my own agenda that's selfish consumerism. Real gospel influence is mission and ownership.

Martin Luther King got this. In the mid 1960s right after the huge wins of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, King turned his attention to poverty, injustice and the city of Chicago. King wanted to see real gains made in urban communities that were being mistreated. So what does he do? King actually moves to Chicago, rents an apartment and moves his family in. **IN THE HOOD!** King understood that mission without ownership blunts influence.

I don't know how long God has you here, but while you're here, own this place and God's mission. Some of you maybe are just here for college, and maybe have plans to go elsewhere when you graduate- that's fine. But while you're here put down roots, join a church, be all in. Same for those in med school, graduate school or if work just sent you here for a season, along with all of us. See yourself as the chaplain of your apartment complex, dormitory, neighborhood or work. Real gospel influence happens where there's ownership and mission in tension.

#### THE FUEL OF MISSION- JEREMIAH 29:11

Yeh, but what keeps mission going? What fuels mission? There's going to be many days and times where we won't want to live intentionally missional. What then? Look at verse 11... To these people who have thumbed their noses at God for years, and generations, God gives them a shot of grace. He says, I have plans for you, plans to give you a future and a hope. You know what we call that? We call that grace. And I don't think it's any accident that he connects this grace filled promise with their mission, because grace fuels mission. When we really see and understand that we were Jesus' mission field, we undeserving sinners, and he gave up everything, even his life for us, this becomes the fuel to follow missionally in his steps.

We've read or seen Les Mis. The protagonist, Jean Val Jean is a stunning man. We see him running a city with care and compassion. He has a huge heart for the marginalized. He cares for an orphan girl, bringing shalom everywhere he goes. Where did this come from? You know. In the beginning he's caught stealing from the bishop. The authorities are called and we all know he's going to jail. But then in a stunning act of grace, the Bishop sets him free, sparing his life. After the authorities leave the bishop says that with this act he has set him free, and Jean Val Jean will never be the same. He lives on mission, and what fueled his mission was the grace of the bishop.

#### Gospel Conclusion

Jesus lived all of this. He lived a life that prioritized the mission of God. Like MLK moved into the slums of Chicago, Jesus moved into the chaos of this world, putting on flesh and dwelling among us. He was a carpenter from Nazareth who brought shalom calling people to repent of their sins and follow him. But he also brought shalom by ministering to the marginalized. Jesus both lived on mission and with ownership, setting us an example.

And don't you see? We are all Israel- having gotten off mission, stuck in our sins, worshipping the idols of this world. And like Israel's sins got them into bondage, so our sins lead us into spiritual bondage. And just like God promises in this passage a future deliverance from their captors, our deliverance was prophesied years in advance- a Messiah was coming. It was fulfilled when Jesus came and died and rose again setting us free. And now having been set free by the grace of God, he has given us a mission- to bring shalom. This grace is to fuel the mission.