

**“Living as an Exile”**  
**Jeremiah 29:1-11**  
**July 10, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

As we continue in our series on a theology of work, we want to ask an important question in the next two sermons. How should we think about our work in the world, knowing that this world will be destroyed? Medical people work on bodies that will eventually die. Architects design buildings that will not last forever. Government employees serve governments that will end. Some Christians give a separatist answer to this question, claiming that any work we do outside the church is akin to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Other Christians claim that with the right kind of effort, we can transform culture and Christianize the world. The Bible’s answer is different from either of these two options.

Jeremiah 29 provides a helpful answer to our question by supplying us with the category of being an exile. Our passage contains a letter Jeremiah wrote to the exiles living in Babylon. This letter was written to the first of the three groups exiled to Babylon, in about the year 597 BC, a group that included Daniel. Because of Israel’s sin, God had judged the nation by sending the Babylonian army to conquer them, after which they took many of the leading citizens, and particularly the most promising youth, into exile in Babylon. There were Jewish false prophets who were saying that their exile would last less than two years (28:3). This would have been a popular message, because the Jews hated their Babylonian conquerors. They wanted to return to the Promised Land as soon as possible. Jeremiah’s message would not have been so popular. The exile, he said, would last seventy years, meaning that many who received his letter would die in Babylon and never see Israel again. So to answer our question of how we should think about our work in a world that will be destroyed, we can summarize it by saying that we are to think as exiles. Let’s explore this idea more carefully.

**I. Accept Your Role as an Exile**

What is an exile? It is a person living outside his homeland, not because he wants to, but because he must. It is a person without power living among those very different from him who have the power. It’s not just Jeremiah’s readers who were exiles, but the New Testament says that all Christians are exiles too. In Peter’s first epistle, he addresses the Christians to whom he is writing as **“elect exiles”** (1 Peter 1:1). Christians are living outside our homeland, which is the kingdom of God. We are living in another kingdom, the kingdom of this world. We’ll explore in our next two points the implication of this identity to our

work life, but we need first to understand the prominence of this idea in the Bible.

David VanDrunen has written a very helpful book titled *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*. He refers to these two kingdoms as the "common kingdom" and the "redemptive kingdom." These two kingdoms were each established by means of a covenant. The common kingdom was established through God's covenant with Noah following the great flood. A covenant is essentially a promise made by God, and in the Noahic covenant God promises to every person who will ever live, both believers and unbelievers, that the natural and social order will be preserved. God made several promises in this covenant. **"While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease"** (Gen. 8:22). Note that this promise is not permanent, but in effect as long as "the earth remains." Marriage and procreation will continue (9:1, 7). Social order will be protected by the administration of justice. **"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed"** (9:6). But note that the sign of the covenant, the rainbow, is different than the later signs of redemptive covenants. Those signs include circumcision and the Passover in the Old Testament, and baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. All of those signs communicate a truth at the heart of the redemptive covenant: cleansing from sin by the shedding of blood.

God established the redemptive kingdom through his covenant with Abraham. This covenant with Abraham continues into the New Testament, seen in the fact that those who believe in Christ are considered children of Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:7). VanDrunen summarizes this covenant as follows:

The Abrahamic covenant bears the opposite features: it concerns *religious faith and worship* (rather than ordinary cultural activities), it embraces a *holy people* that is *distinguished* from the rest of the human race (rather than the human race in common), it *bestows the benefits of salvation* upon this holy people (rather than preserving the natural and social order), and it is established *forever and ever* (rather than temporarily)... Here God sets apart a people who, because of their faith and obedience toward him, are radically distinguished from their neighbors and given a different eternal destiny (life with Christ in the world-to-come). pp. 82-83

As Christians, we are citizens of both the common kingdom and the redemptive kingdom. But as is made clear both by Jeremiah and in the New Testament, we are exiles and strangers in the common kingdom and have our true home in the redemptive kingdom, whose expression in our current age is found in the Church.

## II. Engage Fully with This World

One of the great values of this passage is to help us answer the question of how God wants us to behave in the common kingdom, where we live as exiles. We are to do the equivalent of what Jeremiah tells the Jewish exiles. **“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”** (29:5-6). Note that the activities described here all require patience. The building of houses, the planting of gardens and the forming of new families are not accomplished in a day. All require long-term outlooks, patience, and hard work over a long period of time. Get used to the challenges of living as a stranger in a land where those with power don’t agree with you.

Jeremiah then goes further. **“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). The Babylonians were cruel, violent and idolatrous. They had destroyed Israel’s prized possession, the temple in Jerusalem, killed many Jews and taken many others, against their will, into exile. They had brought great pain and suffering upon Israel. Psalm 137 gives us an insight into the emotions of these exiles. **“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”** (Ps. 137:1-3). And here Jeremiah tells them to seek the welfare of their tormentors and pray for them.

To put this in the language of our previous point, he is telling the citizens of the redemptive kingdom to seek the welfare of the common kingdom. And God tells them through Jeremiah that it is in their best interests to do so. “In its welfare you will find your welfare.” They are not to rebel against their captors. They are not to seek to convert Babylon into a new Holy Land. They are not to isolate themselves into a Jewish ghetto, but to express fully their citizenship in the common kingdom. As God’s people, we have a dual citizenship, with responsibilities in both kingdoms.

I note how this message is reinforced in the New Testament. For example, Paul tells Timothy to teach the churches to engage with the common kingdom in this way. **“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way”** (1 Tim. 2:1-2). In other words, the redemptive kingdom is part of the larger common kingdom, and the ability of the redemptive kingdom, the Church, to function as it should depends on the stability and thriving of the common kingdom.

Paul elsewhere describes our role in the common kingdom as one marked by a peaceful and quiet life. He told the Thessalonians **“to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one”** (1 Thess. 4:11-12). In his second letter, he spoke similarly. **“For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living”** (2 Thess. 3:11-12).

We can learn something in this regard from Abraham’s son, Isaac. Though a citizen of the redemptive kingdom, he lived as a sojourner among those of the common kingdom. In Genesis 26, we read that he lived among the Philistines. But when he became rich and powerful by God’s blessing, the Philistines grew envious of him, and Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, demanded that he depart from them. And he went, departing to a remote part of Philistia where his father had lived. Abraham had dug wells in that region, but the Philistines, in their jealousy, had filled in the wells. Isaac now re-dug those same wells, but the Philistines quarreled with him about his rights to the first well he dug. What did Isaac do? He moved on to dig another well, which they quarreled over again. Finally, he dug a well they didn’t quarrel over. We see in this incident, one of the few recorded of Isaac, his determination to live in peace with the citizens of the common kingdom. He illustrates what Paul would write centuries later. **“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”** (Romans 12:18). So we are to engage fully with this world, the common kingdom, because we are citizens of it and called to seek its good.

### **III. Remain Detached from This World**

Though we are citizens of two kingdoms, Jeremiah makes it very clear where our primary allegiance lies. He prophesied this word from God. **“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. 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”** (29:10-11). He is saying to them, “Your time of exile will end. Your future lies in the redemptive kingdom, back in Israel. So don’t let your long sojourn in Babylon turn your heart away from your true home. The day would come when they would leave the houses they had built and the gardens they had nurtured. But they would leave them because they were going to their true home.

Why did the Babylonians bring the most gifted youth from Israel to Babylon? They did so for the purpose of assimilation. They wanted not only to

conquer their enemies militarily, but culturally and religiously as well. This is always one of the challenges we face as we live as citizens of both kingdoms. God calls us to be good citizens, seeking the welfare of our communities and our nation. But we are always to remember that our ultimate citizenship is in God's kingdom. Our culture and our values are to be true to the heavenly kingdom.

Let me mention one application of this point. To realize that our future is with the redemptive kingdom and not the common kingdom protects us from despair when things aren't going well in the common kingdom. The relevance of this can be seen if we replace the phrase "common kingdom" with "America." Though we are called to be good citizens of America and seek its welfare in any way we can, we need to recognize that it is part of the common kingdom. God doesn't promise to Christianize America. It never has been part of the redemptive kingdom, and it never will be. There are times when our efforts in this nation will result in the successful promotion of the values of God's redemptive kingdom, and other times when those same values will be rejected. In the latter case, don't forget that our ultimate home is in the redemptive kingdom. The Jews in Babylon never saw the Babylonian nation as a whole become worshipers of the true God. And before the seventy years of exile were complete, Babylon ceased to exist, being conquered by the Persians. Nations and empires come and go, but the kingdom of God, which is the Church in our era, will last forever.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let's ask again our original question. How should we think about our work in the common kingdom, knowing that only the redemptive kingdom will last? A couple of answers are in order. First, we work hard to bring good in our common kingdom work because God asks us to. Though he doesn't have to give us reasons, he does, and that brings me to the second answer to our question. It benefits the Church when the common kingdom prospers and fulfills its God-given purpose. This is taught in verse 7 where Jeremiah writes, **"for in its welfare you will find your welfare."** Paul taught the same thing in 1 Timothy 2, where he says that we are to pray for civil authorities **"that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."** Apparently, the church has greater opportunities for fruitful ministry during times of stability within the common kingdom. Among this fruit is the salvation of those who are citizens only of a kingdom that will perish. Only the redemptive kingdom can bring forgiveness, eternal life and a bright, secure future. It does so through its King, our Lord Jesus.