

Seeking the Best for our Enemy

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[0 : 00] Now will you turn back with me to the passage we read in Jeremiah chapter 29, looking especially at verses 4 to 7.

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

I wonder what Jeremiah would have said if he thought that when he wrote this letter that is described here in this chapter, that it would be read in Garavast in 2013.

Over 2,500 years since Jeremiah sent this letter from Jerusalem where he was to Babylon. The situation of course behind the letter is that by this time what the Lord had threatened to bring upon the people of Judah had actually happened. The prophets had warned them that God would bring judgment upon them, his covenant curses, if they continued to disobey him and go after the foreign gods that they had imported into their practices.

And when Nebuchadnezzar came and with his army, with his forces destroyed the temple and carried many of the people away to Babylon, you can see here in verse 2 how many of these were skilled men, craftsmen, metal workers, and understandably they would be of considerable help and importance to the Babylonians in the way that they would be used in Babylon.

[2 : 07] He brought them from Jerusalem to Babylon and as the prophets had warned, that would be an exile which would last for 70 years until they would begin to come back after that period.

That is a letter written to a people who were then surrounded by a pagan culture. Living in Babylon was not easy for them.

Not only were they there as prisoners, although they were not kept in jail, of course most of them, nevertheless they were still prisoners in the sense that they were totally under the control and the mastery of the Babylonians.

And living in that pagan culture, they had another problem. They had false prophets among them. Jeremiah knew that.

He had faced them in his ministry prior to this exile taking place. And he had had to continue to be faithful to the Lord against the teaching of the many false prophets that lived in Judah.

[3 : 20] And in fact, if we had went through to the end of the chapter from verse 24 there, he included in the letter a reference to Shemaiah and how he had sought to undermine the authority of Jeremiah and his credibility back in Jerusalem.

Because he had written, this man who was a false prophet, a leader of the false prophets, he had written back to Jerusalem to those in charge there and had said to them, why haven't you put this madman in custody?

Because he's deceiving the people. That's what they were saying about him. He has sent to us in Babylon saying, your exile will be long. Build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce.

Because you see, the false prophets were very different to Jeremiah. They did not have the mind of the Lord. They just gave their own opinion. And their own opinion said that the situation would not last too long.

It was just a temporary, short-lived crisis. Two or three years, perhaps. Maybe one or two years, some of them would say. And that's why Jeremiah had such a difficulty facing them.

[4 : 37] Because the message of the false prophets was much easier to accept than the message of Jeremiah. That's how it always is.

The true gospel for our natural hearts is always more difficult for us to accept and receive than the false gospel of the false prophets.

This is a very relevant passage for our own circumstances, as we find ourselves tonight in a very similar situation to the times of Jeremiah.

Because not only are we surrounded by a culture and teaching that is contrary to the gospel, not only do we find ourselves in the midst of a people who are determined to drive out religion, and who would, if they had their way, come to put secularist thinking in its place.

But we also have a situation where false prophets are found in the church, where people say in the name of God things which are contrary to Scripture.

[5 : 48] Things which we know are not in accordance with the will of God, because it's been made plain to us in the Scripture, some of the things that are essential to human behavior, and to human relationships, and other aspects of human life, where these are denied, where these are altered, where these are changed, where there is a more acceptable teaching to our natural hearts given out.

That's false prophecy. It doesn't matter where you find it. It doesn't matter in which denomination it is. It doesn't matter in whose name it is. It is false. And we live in days when we have to take account of that, and seek, as Jeremiah is doing here, to ask ourselves questions such as, how do we live in that environment?

How will God want us gospel people to live surrounded by that ungodliness, that anti-gospel mentality, and that inward false teaching that you find within the church already?

You remember it's similar in the New Testament. These are not new things. Of course it's not new, because it was there in Jeremiah's day, it was there in Paul's day as well.

One of the things he said to the Galatians when he wrote to them, was how he amazed, how astonished he was as he begins that letter. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him, who called you in the grace of Christ, and are turning to a different gospel.

[7 : 26] In many respects, the problem for the Galatians was one of teaching and understanding what was foundational to salvation. They were adding to Christ other practices which they said are essential, in the works of the law, for us to be saved, for us to be accepted with God.

Then you go to Jude, and we saw not so long ago, how he wrote his short letter to people who were facing false teaching, and surrounded by that in their own circumstances.

And Jude referred to the false teachers as those who are turning the grace of God into sensuality, or lasciviousness, in the old version of it.

That's where we're at today. These are the circumstances you and I face and are set in. How do we live in that?

What are our priorities in that? What does the Bible tell us about facing these conditions, and living for God in these circumstances, in that environment?

[8 : 36] Well, this letter that Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon will help us greatly answer these questions. Because, for a start, firstly, we have to live for the following generations.

You see, these false prophets, as we said, were saying, don't worry about things, this is not going to last long. This is not like what Jeremiah and others have been saying, where there's a whole generation going to be spent away from Jerusalem under the regime of Babylon.

This will just take one or two years and everything then will be sorted. That's what Jeremiah called prophesying peace, peace, when there is no peace.

And wherever you find any teaching that undermines the gospel to the extent that it gives a false impression of what human life is like, what human behavior is, essentially, at the root of it, what the gospel of salvation is, what salvation itself is, wherever you find that turned into a different kind of behavior than what God accepts, into a different kind of message than God has sent, you will find yourself in the same circumstances as Jeremiah in his day.

It's a false teaching, it's a false promise, it is saying, peace to people's souls where there is no peace.

[10 : 12] By the time they came back from Babylon, the adult members of the community that were taken away as exiles would be dead. So they had to think of the future.

From Jeremiah's letter they were given to think about their future not in the short term, but in the long term. It would not do for them simply to say, let's just sit this out, let's just wait until this is over and then we can get back to the business of serving God and being the kind of people we should be, could be, and should be in covenant with God.

They were not to think about doing the minimum of things that they would ordinarily have done back in Jerusalem until this crisis was over. What God was saying to them through this letter of Jeremiah is live in Babylon as if you were in Jerusalem.

Live your lives by multiplying there, by taking sons for your daughters, giving your daughters in marriage, build houses there, live in them, plant gardens, eat their produce.

Because you're going to be there a long time. And being there a long time you have to think of what you're going to hand on to your children when they come back from Babylon.

[11 : 33] And that's the challenge for ourselves as well. We were thinking this morning of changes in our lives and the many changes that we experience in the course of our lifetime if we are spared to live up to 70 or 80 years of age.

The challenge for us tonight as well is in the midst of the change, in the midst of all the changes that have brought such conditions as we are actually living in. Against all the assaults of secularism and humanism.

Against every kind of false teaching within the church itself as well. You and I have to always ask ourselves what are we building for our children?

What are we building for these young people that are in the church now? What are we going to hand on to them? Are we going to give them an advantage or a disadvantage in what we actually provide by handing on to them a legacy a spiritual legacy an ecclesiastical legacy that they themselves can build on?

That's what Jeremiah was saying to these people. Don't just think of yourselves in the meantime. Don't just live for these next few years. Live for 70 years from now.

[12 : 52] Live for when this exile is over. Live for your children and grandchildren's future. Now that's an important point for ourselves as well.

It doesn't of course mean that we don't pray and seek earnestly that God would change these conditions that we face today quickly, rapidly, if it were to be that God would come with great power and bless the gospel and come to multiply conversions and bring many people into his church and change the climate and the thinking of our day, so be it.

We would rejoice with that. But there's no evidence of it as yet. And as long as things go the way they're going, the more the darkness becomes obvious.

The more the departure from the word of God becomes obvious. The more the resulting behavior from that departure becomes obvious, you and I have to seek not just to live for these few years that God is giving us, but to live in a way that asks ourselves, what are our children going to inherit? What am I going to pass on to them? What am I going to stress for them are the most important issues of life? What is it to do with the church itself that's most important?

[14 : 24] what is it to do with the gospel that they must give priority to? What am I teaching them about the world and why it's in the mess it's in? What am I saying to them in regard to how they themselves must take responsibilities and come to take over from me when I'm no longer here?

that's what Jeremiah was saying in this letter, that's what you and I must also bring before the Lord and put to ourselves.

We live for the following generations. We think of what we're passing on to them. We think of their well-being and whatever happens in the next 10, 20 years if we're spared.

Let's make sure that what we're giving our children is the truth of God. And it's backed up by a life that honors that truth for ourselves.

And that helps them to distinguish between right and wrong. Between what's important and what's secondary. Between what is basic and foundational and what is not.

[15 : 39] Secondly, this letter of Jeremiah spoke about seeking the best for their enemies.

It's a remarkable verse, verse 7. But seek the welfare, the well-being, of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, or for it, for in its welfare you will find welfare.

Just think of what that means. Babylon is the enemy. Babylon has caused devastation in Jerusalem. Babylon has flattened the temple of God.

Babylon has desecrated that temple. The powers of Babylon have taken away the vessels that were used in that temple and taken them to Babylon for the use of these pagan people.

Babylon has taken many of the people from Jerusalem to Babylon and are holding them there virtually as slave labor. here is Jeremiah saying you pray for Babylon.

[16:50] You pray for the welfare of Babylon. You pray for its well-being because in its well-being you have your well-being.

The temptation of course for them was to think ill of the Babylonians. They had very good reason to think ill of them. how would you and I like to be transported 800 miles from your homeland and deposited in a large pagan city with a very different culture with an entirely hostile religion to the one that you valued and you knew was the truth.

And then be told you and your descendants will not leave here for 70 years. So you have to make the best of it. How do you make the best of it? Well one of the things.

Yes you live for the future but meantime you pray for the welfare of the city to which I, God, have taken you captive. That's the temptation that they would think ill of Babylon when you go to the likes of the Psalms.

For example Psalm 137. We sing Psalm 137 sometimes but we don't often sing the last part of it because they're very difficult words to sing.

[18:12] It talks about the way that there is rejoicing over the destruction the violent destruction of Babylon's children.

It's the vengeance of the Lord and what it means in respect to carrying out that terrible judgment. How happy they will be he says who do this. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and does this to them.

That's the spirit of vengeance. It's a very difficult thing to actually follow in your thinking but it's very understandable. And you sing it only with that sense of its awfulness and that sense of the injustice that was done to the people who could say such things in a song of praise.

Yes we understand how the Jewish people, how the people of Judah could think such sentiments and say such things because they had so many cruelties done to them.

[19:28] And it didn't end there. It's kept on down through the years. Yes you can understand places tonight like Syria where the Christian people in Syria are so incredibly abused.

Other places too like Nigeria. Nigeria but one of the things that we're sure about or we're told about by those that are in the know in these circumstances is that when our own country and others are setting out to arm rebels in the lives of Syria one of the effects of that whatever you think about it politically one of the effects of that one of the consequences of that is that more Christians will be killed that more churches will be burned down that more will be done against committed Christian people because those who have the power have a hostile regime behind them.

What do we do in these circumstances? What do we do in our own circumstances when increasingly around us you have a hostile message that's directed against the gospel against your Christian witness against what you want for your children against what you want taught in our schools against the kind of things that you want to set before our young people by way of moral standards and personal spiritual understanding?

What do you do with an enemy that is determined to wipe out the gospel? If you call it Babylon yes call it Babylon that's where we are we're in Babylon we're in exile it's not the church especially the believing faithful church in our land that has the majority power over people's thinking over decisions that are taken with regard to human life whether it's before birth or during our lifetime or at the end of our course in this world every single thing that you find from abortion to euthanasia that's being promoted in our land comes from hostility to God and that hostility to God is a hostility that you live amongst and the Lord himself in his prayer in John 17 did not pray that God would take the disciples out of this world he says that clearly in that great prayer I am not praying that thou shouldst take them out of the world but that they be kept or that you should keep them from the evil the Lord knew they were going to meet with the evil with the evil one as using so many evil people so many evil wicked designs and plans and strategies and policies it's very tempting to ask for their destruction it's very tempting to have an ill will towards them to think the worst for them and of them God will not allow us to do that it's the very opposite what he's saying here through Jeremiah's letter is you seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile however difficult for these people of Judah and Babylon they had to seek the good of Babylon they had to pray for that city they had to pray for its well-being and interestingly the word well-being or welfare that's used there is that

great Hebrew word shalom and as you know that word shalom that we've come across so often in the Old Testament that word shalom means more than just peace it means more than the absence of war or peace it means actually the entire well-being of a person or a people where things morally and spiritually are taken account of and where that entire well-being under the blessing of

[23 : 51] God comes to be theirs pray for the shalom of the city to which I have sent you in exile for in the shalom of that city you will find your shalom now today you and I are faced with that we don't sit passively waiting for all of this to change waiting for an end to this exile we have to be busy for God faithful to God and as part of that we have to pray for the well-being of our nation in which God has set us you remember Jonah and many people ask questions as to why Jonah ran away from the ministry that God had given to him to go to Nineveh that great pagan city of Assyria and preach there a message of repentance he turned round from that and he fled why did

Jonah flee well it wasn't because he was afraid of preaching it wasn't because he was afraid of the Ninevites he turned and he fled because he couldn't get his head round the fact that God wanted to bless his enemies that God was sending him on a message that would bring shalom to Nineveh that would bring his blessing to a people who had cruelly and for many years overrun so many other people in the world and yet that's what God was saying to him go to Nineveh that great city and that's what God taught Jonah when he sat down and complained about his lot God said to him should I not have mercy on that great city of so many thousands of people who know not their right hand from their left and here is what

God is saying to us as well we are to seek the best for our people for our nation for the Babylon in which God has set us difficult though it is that's how it must be yes we oppose the sins and the evils of our time and we do that openly and we do that wholeheartedly and we do that without reserve we don't compromise with what is wrong with what is sinful with what is evil with what is ungodly with what is anti gospel we don't compromise we stand for the truth as God has revealed it to us and we have to continue to do that and how much that awakens more hostility and more anger against us as Christians yet we are still back here with the letter that Jeremiah wrote to Babylon where we have to pray for the shalom for the well-being of the city and of course that's explained in verse seven in the final part of it for in its welfare you will find your welfare it would be very little help at all to these people of

Judah and Babylon if somehow or other Babylon was overtaken in another war or if a plague or a disease broke out and wiped out many of the people there that would have been very little good at all would have done no good whatsoever to the people of Judah in exile there instead of seeking that sort of thing or wishing that something bad would happen to all to all of these cruel pagan people Jeremiah saying this is God's will don't think ill will of them pray for their well-being pray for the blessing that you know God has given you pray that for them as well don't pray for anything less don't pray for anything contrary to that pray for that well-being for that shalom and that of course is what you find in the New Testament as well when you come to Christ's great sermon on the mountain Matthew chapter 5 you remember how in that chapter he described the people of God or his disciples as the salt of the earth and the light of the world you are the salt of the earth but if the salt has lost its taste of its savour how shall its saltiness be restored it is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet in other words he is saying in the midst of all that is different to yourselves you have to retain your saltiness you have to retain your integrity as

Christians you are the light of the world a city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden now you have to take that with you and then go to verses 43 and 44 you have heard that it was said you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven for he makes a sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust for if you love those who love you what reward do you have do not even the tax collectors do the same and if you greet only your brothers what more are you doing than others do not even the gentiles do the same you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect well there is no greater challenge than that that we actually imitate our father in heaven in the way that we relate not just to people ordinarily but especially to those who are at enmity with us because of what we are and who we are and what we stand for

[30 : 16] Christ is saying as Jeremiah in his letter said seek blessing for them bless and don't curse them don't have an ill will towards them seek their welfare seek their shalom Romans chapter

12 you find Paul saying very similarly there where he begins to apply the great doctrines in the previous part of this great letter verses 14 to 21 we can just read down through that passage because it's so relevant and so like what we are saying in Jeremiah bless those who persecute you bless them do not curse them rejoice with those who rejoice weep with those who weep live in harmony with one another do not be haughty but associate with the lowly never be conceited repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all if possible or I could really translate that as much as is possible for you so far as it depends on you live peaceably with all beloved never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God for it is written vengeance is mine

I will repay says the Lord on the contrary if your enemy is hungry feed him if he is thirsty give him something to eat for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good one of the most effective things that you and I can use against the enemies of the gospel is Christian kindness Christian patience Christian good has done to them isn't that what melted your own heart even if there was an effect from the law of God upon your soul showing you your sin isn't it really the case that what melted your heart more than anything else is to have come to realize the kindness of

God towards such as you and I are and when you come to know the kindness of God as indeed we'll see God willing in the next few studies in Joseph's life when he came to actually show his kindness to his brothers that especially is what left a mark in their hearts that's especially what filled them with amazement that's especially what really got to their conscience and if Joseph had treated them in a different way it would have a very different effect that's why Paul is saying you heap coals of fire upon their head what does that mean it means you actually really get to their conscience when you deal with them in a way that's different to the way they treat you that's how God dealt with ourselves we don't deserve any of his mercies we don't deserve the least iota of his kindness we forfeited the right to it we have to confess our unworthiness of it we have to confess indeed that we deserve every bad thing

God could throw at us including hell itself instead God invites us in the gospel to the peace that is in his son to the salvation to the forgiveness to the abundance of life that he has provided for us in the salvation that Christ has achieved does that not touch your conscience does that not melt your heart does that not get to you inwardly while he is saying you be the same as God has been to you when you deal with your enemies pray for their welfare seek the welfare pray to the Lord on his behalf for in its welfare you will find welfare and it is important that he is saying pray to the Lord on its behalf because it is such an important part of seeking the well being of our enemies that we pray for them sometimes while it is understandable and while it is necessary at times to argue against the arguments of whether it is secularists or atheists and very often if you start that you will find how really nasty they can be all you have to do is go on to some people's blogs or facebook pages or whatever those who stand firmly for the gospel and take on atheists head to head you will see the vitriol the vilest language that is used against christians it is horrible it is difficult it is vile it is necessary nevertheless to argue the arguments of the gospel to uphold the truth of the bible to do that against people who think the very opposite but it is always a danger that we go too far with it always a question when do we actually stop the words and begin the prayer of course the prayers are something that we do all along that is not what I am saying what I am saying is there are times when our interaction with atheism with humanism with the antagonism that comes from that sometimes we actually aggravate that antagonism by perhaps just keeping on too much in our verbal arguments and instead just leaving it at that

I am going to pray for them that is the best thing you can do is to pray for them and that is what we need to do with the babbling of our day pray for it tomorrow we have an early morning prayer meeting God willing and a prayer meeting in the evening and in these prayers and in these prayer sessions as well as on our own knees privately we have to pray for the well-being of Babylon we have to pray for the best for our enemies we have to seek for them what God has given to ourselves we have to ask God to help us never to have ill will towards them but always to seek the very best for them that's what God requires of us and that's why God will have us to pray as well as to seek in other means the well-being of those who are our spiritual and moral enemies and that of course applies to all areas of life this is what an

[37 : 47] American Baptist minister of the 1800s said with regard to the need to pray and this is something we know of but something we need to remind ourselves of very often a man called A.C.

Dixon when we rely upon organization we get what organization can do when we rely upon education we get what education can do when we rely upon eloquence we get what eloquence can do and so on nor am I disposed to undervalue any of these things in their proper place but when we rely upon prayer we get what God can do and there's a big difference he's not saying don't have any organization he was not saying limit your education he was not saying don't be thankful for eloquence what he was saying is don't rely upon them because if you rely upon them all you'll get really is what they can produce when you pray and when you rely on prayer then you get what God can do and what

God has done for us he can do for Babylon let's pray oh Lord oh God help us to be true to your word and to its principles help us Lord at all times in our interaction with one another with those of the world in which we live to live by the values that your word sets forth help us we pray to carry into effect the great teaching of your word in regard to those who are our enemies help us indeed to seek good for them help us to live in a way that would enable them to see good in us grant oh Lord that you would help us against our own natural tendencies and bless us we pray to that end we ask your blessing to be with us upon this week we have entered bless us in all our engagements help us

Lord in all that we do to live faithfully and live in a way that would seek to further your cause bless the conference we pray at the end of the week bless those who have organization and other responsibilities bless the especially as he comes to speak we pray that his ministry will be blessed oh Lord to all who will hear him we pray that these sessions of the conference will know the abundant blessing of your spirit we pray Lord that it may indeed lead to the transformation of many lives so receive our thanks now we pray impart us with your blessing for Jesus sake amen amen to others for us remember