

Babylon Welfare Of The City

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Date: 04 April 1990

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great delight to be with you today.

I asked some of the people in our congregation what they thought evangelism was, and one of them told me that it's very difficult, very awkward, and socially quite unacceptable, and that while she thought it was very interesting to talk about eternal life, she thought it was a bit heavy, and it would be better if you just did something practical for people and not talk so much.

So I am duly convicted, and I'm going to go on talking, which is the big problem is how you say it.

Like, I have nightmares about talking to you people on Wednesday. Well, they're mostly in the daytime, actually, and they usually come on Wednesday afternoon.

But what we're talking about today is the city, which in this case is Babylon, and one little suburb of the city into which a group of exiles were sent from Jerusalem.

[1 : 32] So that they came and they lived in the city of Babylon, and it's there that Jeremiah wrote them the letter which you just heard.

But in order to talk a little bit about what Jeremiah said in that letter, I want to talk to you a little bit about the city.

This is our last one in a long series on the city, and I want to see if I can at last make it all straight to you what I'm talking about. I think what you have to start with is you have to start...

Ah, look at that. No, but yet there is hope. I... Isn't that wonderful? Well done, Lisa.

That's a better trick than I've ever been able to... Anyway, what you've got is that this is the picture of who man is.

[2 : 34] That man is a perpetual wanderer. And that's his nature. He's always looking for something.

He's always trying to find something. And he's been a wanderer for a long time. You will remember that when Adam and the Lord came to...

Well, they lost their meeting of minds about how the world should run. It says that the Lord God drove out the man, and at the east of the Garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

There was no return to the tree of life. Adam had to go, and he kept going. And this is the kind of prototype of all humanity. Leaving the garden behind him and heading out to make it on his own.

In the very next chapter, you have the story of Cain. And how Cain murdered his brother. And he became a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

[3 : 49] He went away from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod. And the land of Nod is the land of wandering.

And if you take these sort of great people who portray the whole history of this globe for all the centuries that it's been in existence, or the millennia, that the story is always of people wandering and wandering and wandering.

So that you have the Gauls in Galatia and the Gauls in Quebec. You know. And they're presumably all from the same people originally.

People wander all across the face of the globe. And it would be very interesting to be able to put a map of the globe and trace you for the last two or three generations to see where you came from and how you got to be here on Wednesday afternoon, April the 4th, in the year of our Lord, 1990.

I mean, it would be an amazingly complex picture. Because of this essential nature of our humanity, and that is that we wander and wander and wander. And in the words of somebody whom none of you will remember, even in the old times, his name was Burl Ives.

[5 : 14] And he sang, I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger traveling through this land of... I can't remember what land it was. But he was just a poor wayfaring stranger.

And, you know, the cowboy stories, the amazing sort of sense of wandering, which belongs to the Negro spirituals, and the fact that there was no place to go, no place to hide.

There was no conclusion that they went on and on and on. One of the great distinctions that's conferred upon you, probably, is that you are a frequent traveler.

That's a new classification. And you get points for it. And you... Which shows the kind of wandering quality in all of our lives.

It's an interesting thing that in the New Testament, the word faith, is used by Paul in a very judicial sense. You know, that therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God.

[6 : 28] The case has been heard. The man at the bar has been justified by faith. And that's a very legal sense of what faith means.

But if you go into Hebrews, faith means journeying faith. It's a constant journey. And a journey you take by faith. And they sought for a city whose maker and builder was God.

So that it describes faith as that which is expressed as we journey on. So you get a very strong picture of man journeying.

And constantly on the go. Constantly looking for something. And finally, deciding that he can do something about it. And this, of course, is where he builds his city.

And he comes to his city. And the great accomplishment of the whole of humanity is summed up in the cities which we build. This is where there is the ferment of intellectual life.

[7 : 32] This is where law and order are hammered out. This is where wars are planned and run. This is where money flows in and out.

This is where art and music and drama come to their flowering. You know, the desire to have a play and to show it downtown in Vancouver. It's a great symbolic achievement.

And it's because the city is terribly important. And it's terribly important because I think what it is, is that it's the best answer we can give to the wanderlust that is built into our hearts.

That we keep going and going and going. And we never arrive. Until we build ourselves a city. And we say, Well, this is where I've been going all my life.

And once you get established in business, and once you start making money, and once you have a socially prominent address, you buy a hundred acres up in the Chilcotin and build yourself a cabin to get away from the city.

[8 : 45] There's something about the terrible restlessness in us that happens to us, and we can't tolerate it.

We have not arrived. Even with all the accomplishment, all the culture, all the wealth, all the technology, put it all together and pile it up into the biggest and best city that has ever been.

The discontent of the human heart is still there, and man is still a wanderer. And he goes into the nightclub and drinks and talks to the bartender about it all, who understands.

That's the sort of ultimate pinnacle of civilization, is that conversation that takes place. Well, that kind of thing happens, and you get the people of God having to live.

Now, the people of God have a fairly strange... I mean, the problem they always raise for other people is that it all began with creation.

[10 : 01] You know, and you can get an argument going about that almost anywhere at any time. How did it all begin? And for the most part, our society is going to say, I don't care how it began.

What we've got is what we have to deal with, and where we came from doesn't matter. And then Christians, the people of God, do the other thing. And they say, well, the pinnacle of it all was in the cross of Christ.

So you go from this creation to this moment in history, which is the contemporary moment of all history. What happened in that hour, on that day, in that place, is the great event of the whole of human history on the globe.

So that's the important moment in the whole of history. And the next important moment will come with the judgment of God in the end. So Christians are always moving from creation to this great moment in which a whole new creation begins, and on to the ultimate judgment.

And the world is saying, but it's here, it's now, this is where you've got to be. And it's very difficult to persuade people to be Christians in our kind of society, because the clamor for you to live right here, right now, with the resources that are available, the situation that you're in, the potential that you have, all that can be realized right here and right now.

[11 : 27] Where we came from doesn't matter, and where we're going to is probably mythology. So all there is, is right now. Well, there's a kind of wisdom to that.

But when a Christian says, all there is, is right now, he says that right now is marked by the reality that we were created in the image of God. We were redeemed by the death of Christ on the cross, and we ultimately will face the judgment of God.

So that the most important dimensions of right now have to include that. And the people who build the city say no. Well, one of the great sort of pictures then of how, how this all works out is the picture that, that we started with of, of, of Babylon.

And how there was a people of God in an alien city. They looked back to their origin as the people of God. They looked forward to their emancipation.

But right now, they were coping with the, the fact that they were exiles and in captivity. And that parable from Jeremiah's letter to the captive people of God in Babylon becomes a kind of prototype of how the Christian is to live in the world.

[12 : 42] And that's why it tells you there that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that, that we've just, that, that we've just, you've just read.

What was happening was, you see, that those people living in captivity were gathering to themselves, diviners and false prophets and soothsayers telling them, it's all going to be over soon.

Babylon's going to fall. You're going to go home. It's going to be glorious. It's wonderful beyond anything you can imagine. And it's almost right here and right now. And are you with it? And Jeremiah wrote a letter and said, they're liars.

It's not over. It's going to get worse. And you are stuck there. And you've got to live there. And you've got to make the most of living there.

And of course, that's what happens in churches, you know, is that we get so carried away by all the promises of the glorious future that Christians and the people of God are never told, live where you are right now.

[13 : 55] Accept the reality of where you are right now. Because you are the instrument of working out God's purpose in that situation. And so what Jeremiah said to the people there is not that your captivity is going to be over.

You're going to be returned home. You're going to be reunited with your families. All these wonderful things are going to happen. Jeremiah said, no, the thing for you to do is plant your garden, grow your potatoes.

You'll be there to eat them. Plant some trees, and you'll probably be there to pick the fruit of them. Give your sons in marriage and your daughters in marriage. Multiply.

Don't decrease. Establish yourself. And there, though you are in an alien, foreign culture, speaking another language, having a totally different set of values from you, in that place, you are to seek the welfare of the city.

That's your responsibility. Though you are a wanderer, and though you are an alien, and though you have aspirations that carry you far beyond, your present responsibility is to seek the welfare of the city.

[15 : 09] And Jeremiah goes on to say, as you seek the welfare of the city, you will find your own welfare. That's where you're to do it.

That's where you're to be. You're to be, as a people, very present to the alien culture in which you live, with the ideals and the aspirations which are totally alien to you, with a language that you don't properly understand, and a culture that you abhor.

You're to live there. And you're to seek the welfare of the city. There's a great story about a fellow from Manchester who used to get drunk every Friday night.

And as sure as shooting, as soon as work was over on Friday, he was off to the pub, and down went the good brown ale until he reached, in a fairly short order, a state of total insensibility.

And somebody said to him, Alf, why do you do it? Week after week you do it. And Alf said, it's the fastest way I know to get out of Manchester.

[16 : 28] Well, you know, and, you know, that, that in a sense illustrates the kind of Friday night syndrome that we all suffer from.

You know, that though the city is that on which our life is, is based, there is something else that we need more than that. And that's, and that's what, what happens.

Well, the stars that they call the black holes that, that draws everything in and everything in and everything from everywhere goes into it.

The city is like an, a black hole with an insatiable appetite that consumes and consumes and consumes homes. And, uh, with no place to leave its waste.

You know, the, that's, uh, waste disposal is the big problem in the modern city. The, uh, consumption has got to go in order to keep our economy going, but what are we going to do with all the waste we create? This consumption, the fires of this consumption are greed and pride and covetousness and jealousy and violence.

[17 : 50] there's just, they're just insatiable appetites and this keeps coming into the city and we keep, uh, the, the city keeps consuming and consuming. Well, that's the city and that's the thing we have to live in and that's the thing we have to seek the welfare of and that's the thing through which we find such welfare as we are prepared to know, as, as it is possible for us to know in our life is because of our involvement with that city.

We can't, it's a, this kind of love hate relationship. But, what I want to suggest to you is that there is a remarkable contrast and that is that if you take the city to be as, as we think of it as the city of man and this is the, the great tribute to man's ability, man's, ability, man's creativity, all that man is and then you take the great object of God's activity in, in contrast to that, the contrast is the cross of Christ.

That, that those are the two things. Jesus Christ here and the city there. And the difficulty, you see, that we have is that we've got to, we've got to make a choice between whether the ultimate goals of our life are going to be realized in the city or whether there is another goal for which we have been created and which we must seek to achieve in the course of our life.

And that other goal is Jesus Christ. That's the alternative to the city. It's living in the city, seeking the welfare of the city, but going beyond the city.

So that what, what happens then is, is this. And, and this comes from, from the 13th chapter of Hebrews which tries to illustrate what this means.

[20 : 02] I mean, I, I hope that you were thinking that, the contrast between the person of Jesus Christ and the city is, I mean, most of the people I know say, you know, it's the city to which I have got to relate, you know.

I cannot go away for the weekend unless I have a telephone, you know. I've got to stay connected with the city. my relationship to the city is the thing on which my life depends.

You see, and all those words can quite quickly be translated into, my relationship to Jesus Christ is that on which my life depends. That is the real source of life is Jesus Christ.

It's not the city. The city will take everything you can give it and consume it because it is a black hole. Jesus Christ provides an endless source to us.

And so we're called by reason of our faith in Jesus Christ who becomes for us the very source of our life to live in the city that consumes us and to live there because ultimately God's purpose is the redemption of the whole city.

[21 : 39] That's what God proposes to do and he does it through the people who find their resource in Jesus Christ. And that's why I want to give you an example of how that works just as I finish.

When you look at Hebrews 13 and it says let brotherly love continue. Well you see that's something unique that the believer in Jesus Christ can bring into the city.

A very important resource which most people would say is absent on the streets of our city. Let brotherly love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. Well you know showing hospitality to strangers is something we proof our children against.

Don't have anything to do with and whatever. Why would anybody do that? Well you would do it the writer says because you might entertain an angel unaware that you are to reach out to the stranger.

[22 : 52] then it says you're to remember those who are in prison because you're a captive too and you understand their situation. You know what imprisonment means.

And he goes on to say those who you are to remember those who are suffering or ill treated since you also are in this vulnerable body which is subject to suffering and ill treatment.

And then it says one of the great contributions of the Christian community the people who find their resource in Jesus Christ is let the marriage be held in honor among all.

let the marriage bed be undefiled for God will judge the immoral and the adulterous. And so we bring a high view of marriage to the center of the city and recognize that though the city is often characterized by immorality and adulterous behavior that that ultimately will perish under the judgment of God.

keep your life free from the love of money. Be content with what you have. And all this is not just models of ethical behavior.

[24 : 30] This is because you have the promise I will never fail you nor forsake you. Living as you are as an alien captive in an exile in an alien community.

You have the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ that I will never leave you nor forsake you. Well it goes on.

A few verses further it says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever. Kingdoms rise and fall. But this reality the reality of God's revealed purpose in Jesus Christ this is the same yesterday today and forever.

This is the resource. And then it gives this very poignant picture. It shows the city and then it says of Jesus Christ it shows the analogy from the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

But he said Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Jesus who is rejected from the city by his death makes his atoning blood available to the people of the city to establish the grounds of God's redemption of the city.

[25 : 59] And then he goes on from there in the most amazing way to say that here we have no continuing city but we seek one which is to come so that in the faith of Jesus Christ we recognize the transient nature of the city which is so attractive to us but it is not a continuing city but in the faith of Christ we look for one that is to come which is the new Jerusalem the city of God as opposed to the city of man and then it says about Jesus Christ Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured and it makes it very clear the issue that confronts the

Christian either you live on the pride and vanity of the city or you go to him who is outside the city and suffer with him the shame and abuse in order that you might through him seek the resource for the welfare of the city and in that find your own welfare your own salvation you see the city attractive as it is is a black hole that will consume all that you give it Christ is the one through whom we find fulfillment and that's why that as we end this series on the city the choice is between the city and all the dynamic of it in which we are to live and whose welfare we are to see and him who is outside the city to whom we are to go forth bearing the shame the rejection the one who should have been acknowledged as king but who was taken to a hill shaped like a skull outside the city and there was crucified and so that we're forced to say this is where my life is in the city or in the person of

Jesus Christ let me say a prayer our God we thank you that your purpose of redemption from the time Adam left the garden through the building of the whole of human history points us unerringly still towards the person of Jesus Christ the same yesterday today and forever God our contemporary and God the one before whom we will all stand take from us any pride and help us to be unashamed to identify ourselves with the despised and rejected one in whom the purpose of God is revealed we ask in his name Amen God to and others to maybe study