

America and the Christian (Part II)

Introduction

In our last study, we asked why we don't sing God and Country songs in Church (why don't we have the American flag on our platform?) We saw that there is no such thing as a battle hymn of the church that can serve at the same time as a battle hymn of the republic (or vice versa). We saw that from a strictly biblical perspective, America has never been God's people and Yahweh has never been America's God. These things can be true only of the church. America is a democratic republic (a human form of government), not a theocracy (a divine form of government). America was founded upon a Judeo-Christian ethic, but not at all upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the Church is built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. America will come and go (as with all other nations and world powers since the beginning of time), but the gates of hell will never prevail against the church. We are strangers and exiles in America, but in the church we find our true homeland. In the church we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem that is above – she is our mother. That spine-tingling thrill of our hearts must always be *by far* the greatest whenever we sing the great anthems of the church – whenever we read of Jerusalem's towers, ramparts, walls, and citadels. Our love is given to the church.

So do Christians turn their backs on America? Do we not care about our nation and government – our country of exile? Are we bad citizens of the state? As we will see this morning, the answer to all of these questions is a resounding “no!”

I. **1 Timothy 2:1-2** – 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.

The ESV study notes say that “this is a call for all *sorts* of prayer for all *sorts* of people.” In other words, Paul is not urging that we pray for each and every person on the face of the earth (though this wouldn't be a bad thing if it were possible!) Paul is urging that we pray for all different kinds and *types* of people, and then he specifically identifies one type of people – “kings and all who are in high positions.” At the church in Ephesus where Timothy was ministering, there were some Jewish false teachers who were making shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim. 1:18-20). It seems that these false teachers were minimizing the importance of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles – which explains why Paul says in verse seven: “For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.” When Paul says “I am telling the truth, I am not lying”, it implies that the Jewish false teachers were saying that Paul's ministry to the Gentiles was illegitimate and unneeded. So Paul says in verses 1-2: “First of all, *then* [in order that you might “hold” the faith and not make “shipwreck” of your faith as the false teachers have done], I urge you to pray for people of *all* kinds (not only Jews, but Gentiles also), and especially for those Gentiles who are in positions of authority. And why should we pray for these Gentile authorities? So “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” But what exactly are we to pray? How exactly are we to give thanks? What will prayers like this mean for how we have to live our daily lives? And what does Paul mean by a peaceful and quiet life? Does this mean a life of comfort and ease? To answer these questions, we first need to turn to Jeremiah 29:7.

II. Jeremiah 29:7

The second of three groups of Jewish exiles had been recently deported to Babylon (597 B.C.). But the final destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. (eleven years later) had not yet come to pass. There were false prophets among the exiles in Babylon who were saying that Jerusalem would actually be delivered and that the exiles would be restored to their homeland in a very short time. So the prophet Jeremiah (who was still living in Jerusalem) wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylon and warned them that the exile would last for *seventy* years. But if the Jews will be exiles in Babylon for seventy years, that raises the very practical question of how they will live and conduct themselves in this foreign land! They are cut off from the temple and the sacrifices. They are immersed in a pagan culture. They have none of their own rulers or government. In fact, they are ruled by a king who has forcibly uprooted them from their land and will soon burn their temple to the ground. I don't think we can quite comprehend the full meaning and significance of these things for the Jewish people. At the prospect of seventy years in exile, it was only natural to ask: What am I supposed to do with myself? How am I to relate to my pagan neighbors? How am I to respond to the godless authorities? And so it was in answer to potential questions like these that Jeremiah wrote in his letter to the exiles:

- ✓ Jeremiah 29:4, 7 – Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel... 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.

This would have been *shocking* advice to any Jew! “More revolutionary still was the advice to *seek the welfare (shalom)* of the Babylonian regime, to pray for its welfare and not its downfall. Jeremiah by these words cast the people completely adrift from all those things on which they depended and which they regarded as essential to their own well-being, a nation-state, kingship, an army, national borders, the temple. *Without all these Yahweh could give the nation new perspectives and a new understanding of their calling*” (Thompson). What were these new perspectives? What was this new understanding of their calling? Well first of all, this was a powerful way to remind Israel that their very reason for existing had always been to bring light and blessing to the Gentiles. This seemed to be almost always forgotten when Israel lived in its own land! So God sent Israel into exile to prepare them for the day when they would be recreated and reconstituted into the true Israel of God – the day when they would finally be able to fulfill their calling to the Gentile world. God promised that at the end of seventy years, He would bring the exiles back to Jerusalem, but never again did they truly have their own political independence as a nation with a Davidic king sitting on the throne. This fuller restoration of Israel did not take place until Jesus, the Son of David, ascended into the heavenly Jerusalem, took up His throne at the right hand of God, and was given as head over all things to the church. So in the book of Acts, when the Jewish church was debating about the legitimacy of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, James said:

- ✓ Acts 15:13-18 – Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,

and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.”

So God’s instruction to the Jewish exiles in Babylon was meant to begin reorienting their thinking. Through the exile, God was preparing the Jews for the fulfillment of their mission to the Gentiles as the true Israel of God.* Now perhaps we can better understand why God says: “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.*” God’s point was not simply to reveal the key to a life of ease and prosperity in Babylon! What was the ultimate *purpose* of Israel’s welfare in Babylon? The ultimate purpose of Israel’s welfare in Babylon was to bring light and blessing to the Gentiles. And Daniel was one who modeled this truth wonderfully! In the book of Daniel, Daniel actually quotes from Jeremiah chapter 29 (Dan. 9:1-2), so we know that he had also read verse seven, where God instructed the Jews to seek the welfare of the city where God had sent them into exile. Daniel sought the welfare of his “city” by earnestly warning and exhorting the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to repent of his sins.

- ✓ Daniel 4:19, 27 – Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “***My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!***” ... Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, ***that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.***”

Daniel also sought the welfare of his city by submitting to the laws of the kingdom and the governing authorities.

- ✓ Daniel 6:4 – Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him.

Even after Israel’s return to Jerusalem, the pagan king of Persia issued this decree:

- ✓ Ezra 6:9-10 – Whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

And so the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees describes how the priests came out from the temple to greet a Seleucid general “peaceably and to show him the burnt offering that was being offered for the king” (7:33). So now in light of all this background, let’s return to 1 Timothy.

* “With the exile the lines of Israel’s religious world were being redrawn... In exile Israel’s vision had to expand to encompass all the nations, and [so]... God’s universal redemptive intentions become increasingly clear.” (Towner)

- ✓ 1 Timothy 2:1-2 – 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.

Do you see how Paul’s instructions for the church in Ephesus sound just like Jeremiah’s instructions to the exiles in Babylon? The instructions are the same, but are the circumstances and the situation really the same? Is the church in Ephesus in exile just as the Jews in Babylon were in exile?

III. 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9-17 (cf. 1:17) – Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect **EXILES OF THE DISPERSION** in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia... *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light...* Beloved, I urge you as **SOJOURNERS AND EXILES** to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct **AMONG THE GENTILES** honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. *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... Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. *Honor the emperor.*

First of all, see how Peter uses language that once described Israel (Ex. 19:5-6) to describe the Church as the recreated and eschatological Israel of God. We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God’s own possession. And yet in spite of our identity as God’s chosen race and holy nation, we find that just like the Jews in Jeremiah’s day, we are exiles in a foreign land – dispersed among the Gentiles. We are citizens of a heavenly country, and yet we find ourselves subjects of human, and often times godless governments. And so it is in the face of this inherent tension that Peter exhorts us (just as Jeremiah exhorted the Jewish exiles) to “seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent us into exile.” The purpose of remembering that we are a nation in exile is not only to keep our hearts set on our true *homeland* in the heavenly Jerusalem (last week), but also to remind us of our calling to bring light and blessing to the Gentiles. After all, that’s the very reason we’re still in exile! God has promised that one day He will gather his people from every nation where they are in exile and restore them to their true homeland in the true Jerusalem that is above. But that day is not yet here And it’s *because* we live in exile that we are finally able to fulfill our true calling and mission to the Gentiles.

Peter says that the way we seek the welfare of the cities and nations where God has sent us into exile is by proclaiming “the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light”. And one of the ways we do this is by keeping our conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against us as evildoers, they may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Peter says to “honor everyone” (1 Pet. 2:17). Titus says to “be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (Tit. 3:1-2). Paul says to “give thought to do what is honorable in the

sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:17-18). And one of the specific ways that we keep our conduct among the Gentiles honorable is by living in such a way that they may not find any ground for complaint against us with regard to the laws of the land – because no error or fault can be found in us (cf. Dan. 6:4). We are to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-4), we are to honor the president (1 Pet. 2:17), we are to willingly pay our taxes (Rom. 13:5-7; Mat. 22:17-21), we are to obey the laws of the land (Tit. 3:1), and we are to pray for all those in positions of authority (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Every single one of these NT commands was given in a day when the governing authorities were pagan and godless – *just like* in the OT days of Jeremiah and Daniel. But what else should we expect to find as a nation in exile? The Jewish exiles in Babylon learned that “God accomplishes His will [even] through pagan leaders whom [God even] calls His ‘ministers’ and ‘servants’ (Is. 45:1; Jer. 25:9)” (Towner). And so we, too, must never forget that God is sovereign over each and every nation where He has sent us into exile. And it’s because of this that we can truly seek the welfare of the state and be in submission without any fear. Now let’s return once again to First Timothy chapter two.

IV. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 – 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. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

What is the point of leading a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way – while in exile in a foreign land? Well, it’s certainly not so that we can be happy and comfortable and stop longing for our homeland (which is exactly what happened with the exiles in Babylon!; Jer. 50:8; 51:6, 45, 50; Zech. 2:6-7; cf. 2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4). The ultimate point of a quiet and peaceful life is so that we might give free and unfettered expression to our faith as a public *witness and testimony* to the pagan people who live all around us (cf. Towner; Hendriksen; 1 Tim. 2:8-10; 3:7; 5:7; 5:14; 6:1; Mat. 5:13-16). As Paul says, “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, *who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*”

In the Greek, “all people” can refer literally to every individual on the face of the earth, or it can also refer to all different kinds (or categories) of people (cf. Titus 2:11). Only the context can decide this. In verse six, Paul will say that Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for “all”, and yet Jesus said that He came to give His life a ransom for “many” (Mat. 20:28; cf. John 10:11, 14-16). The Bible teaches that Jesus died not just to make salvation *possible* for every sinner in the world, but to actually *save* all those given to Him by the Father (Mat. 1:21; Lk. 19:10; Gal. 1:3-4; 1 Tim. 1:15; Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 3:18; Rom. 5:8, 10; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24; Eph. 5:25-26; Heb. 13:12; Jn. 6:35-39; 10:11, 14-16; 17:1-2, 6, 9-10, 20-21; Rom. 8:32-34; Rev. 5:9; Jn. 11:51-52; Heb. 9:15; Mat. 26:28; Heb. 9:28). So when Paul says that Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for “all”, he must mean that Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for people from all nations – *Jews and Gentiles alike*. And the context supports this conclusion when Paul defends the fact that he is a teacher of the Gentiles, and that he is telling the truth and not lying. We have already seen that the “all people” in verse one refers not to every single individual alive, but to people of all different kinds – including Gentile rulers and authorities. So in light of all these things, we could translate verses 3-4: “[Prayer for people of all different kinds (including Gentile rulers and

authorities)] is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires that people from all the nations be saved [not just Jews, but Gentiles also] and come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Conclusion

No matter which nation it is that happens to be our appointed place of exile, it is God’s will that we should seek its welfare. This means being model citizens of the state, submitting to, and praying for the governing authorities, and being above reproach in every way. In America, I believe that seeking the welfare of the state would certainly require voting, as well as provide incentive for Christians to run for public office. Yes, when we are required to do something that the Bible forbids, or when we are forbade from doing something that the Bible commands, we have no choice but to disobey the government (Acts 4:18-20; Ex.1:15-21; Dan. 1:8-21; 3:1-30; 6:1-28). But even here, we must only act in humility and with the utmost deference and respect – being willing to accept the consequences of our actions (Acts 5:27-29, 40-41; Heb. 10:32-34).

One day, God will gather His church out of all the nations where it has been dispersed in exile. In that day our eyes will finally see the city that we have been longing for – our true home. But until then, we have a calling to be faithful citizens in a foreign land, to truly seek the welfare of our earthly place of exile, and in this way to give people every reason possible to believe the gospel that we proclaim.

Teaching our Children

- Q.** When God sent the Jews to live as strangers and exiles in Babylon, what did He tell them to do while they were there?
- A. See Jeremiah 29:7 (II. B. above)
- Q.** When the people of Israel were at home in their own land, they kept forgetting about their reason for existing in the world. What was Israel's reason for being in the world?
- A. Israel's purpose for being in the world was to bring light and blessing to the Gentile nations.
- Q.** So when God sent the people Israel into exile among the nations and told them to seek the welfare of those nations, what was God preparing them to do?
- A. God was preparing Israel for the day when they would truly fulfill their calling and bring light and blessing to all the nations.
- Q.** ~ Read 1 Timothy 2:1-2 (II. D. above) and compare it with Jeremiah 29:7 (II. B. above).
~ (Remember that Paul's point is that we should pray for people of *all* kinds (not only Jews, but Gentiles also), and especially for those Gentiles who are in positions of authority.)
~ Paul seems to be telling the church the same thing that Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon.
~ How is our situation the same as the exiles in Babylon?
- A. Read and discuss 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9-17 (III. above; see also III. A.)
- Q.** How should we seek the welfare of the places where we are living in exile?
- A. See again 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9-17 (III. above). See also III. D.-F. and Conclusion A. 2.-4.
- Q.** As we are seeking the welfare of the places where we live in exile, what is our most important goal?
- A. Our most important goal is to give people every possible reason (humanly speaking) to believe the Gospel that we proclaim (see 1 Timothy 2:1-4; IV. above)!

Remind and exhort your children:

- ✓ One day God will gather His people out of all the nations where they are in exile, and then He will bring them to their true home in the beautiful and heavenly city of Jerusalem.
- ✓ On the one hand, we must not get so comfortable here that we stop looking for our true homeland!
- ✓ On the other hand, we must not forget that the reason we are still exiles is so that we can seek the true welfare of the cities and nations where God has placed us.