

## Jeremiah 29:4-14

### Ockenga Fellows Retreat 4: Politics

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Today I'm preaching on politics. I was just at my fourth Ockenga retreat at Gordon-Conwell and this was our topic. My **goal** today is **not to convince** you to **vote** for a **candidate** or **issue** or to **review** this week's **news** but to help us all **process** how the **Bible** calls believers to **think about** politics. Today's sermon is not **comprehensive**, but hopefully you'll find it **helpful**, or at least **thought-provoking**. If you want to have a **friendly conversation** about my sermon, **come with me** to get **lunch** at **Panera** after the service. If you can't make that, come next Sunday to our Christian Education hour to talk about it.

In preparation for the Ockenga retreat our 14 pastors and ministers read the book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* by **James Davidson Hunter**. Many of the things I'll be sharing come from his writing. Now I don't want today's sermon to be just a **book review**, so today we'll also be looking at **Jeremiah 29:4-14**. Hunter unpacks this passage in *To Change the World* and I'm going to share many of the same points he makes. But before we dive in let me **pray**.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for politics. You give us rulers and leaders and systems of government to help us live ordered and prosperous lives. May today's sermon not divide but provide a Godly and Biblical perspective on a difficult topic. Open our ears and guide my words. In Jesus name, amen.*

**How** should Christians live in **exile**? An exile is someone who isn't living in their **home country**. Exiles live somewhere **foreign**. The **Bible** calls **believers** exiles. Hear what **Peter** says to the early believers:

#### **1 Peter 1:1**

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, [and Westford MA...] (See also 1 Peter 1:17; 2:11)

The book of Hebrews calls the **heroes** of our faith "**foreigners and strangers on earth.**" (Heb 11:13b)<sup>1</sup> If you belong to Jesus, you belong to his kingdom, which is not of this earth. We are **citizens** of **Christ's kingdom**.

**Philippians 3:20** But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, (NIV)

We are **spiritual** exiles. In our passage the Israelite people were **literal** exiles. In 606, 597, and 586 BC the nation of **Babylon deported** the people of Jerusalem and Judah back to Babylon, about a thousand miles journey (2 Kings 24:15).<sup>2</sup> A prophet named Jeremiah wrote them a letter around the second deportation telling the Jewish exiles in Babylon **how to live** in exile. This is my **big idea** and the big idea of the book.

### God calls exiles to "faithful presence." (Jer 29:4-7)

I've put "faithful presence" in **quotes** because this is Hunter's name for the **posture** we find Jeremiah telling the Israelites to take. Lets read the first couple verses.

#### **Jeremiah 29:4-7**

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

God doesn't say Babylon carried Jerusalem into exile but that **he did it. He carried his people** into a foreign land. This implies that as exiles of God's kingdom **he puts us exactly where he wants us. Wherever you are**, your **political environment, workplace, family, community, gym, school**, that's where God has carried you. Where has God carried you? Do you see how he has carried you there?

5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

God wants his people to **be present** where he puts them. He doesn't want them to try and **get back** to Jerusalem. He doesn't want them to try and **take over Babylon**. He simply wants his people to be **faithful to him** and **live life** where they are. They're to **hold onto their faith in him** and live where he has them. **Are you faithful to Christ where you are?** Are you **investing your life** in the **people** around you?

7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (NIV)

The word for "peace and prosperity" here is the Hebrew word "**shalom**."<sup>3</sup>

"[Shalom] is a vision of order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being." - *To Change the World* (p. 228)<sup>4</sup>

So "seek the (**order** and **harmony**, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness and beauty, joy and well-being) of the city to which I have carried you into exile..." Did you know that **our word "politic"** comes from the **Greek word "polis,"** which just means "**city**."<sup>5</sup> Are you cultivating **shalom** in the **city** (the **polis**) where God has you? Are you **politicking for peace**?

Ask yourself, "How can I cultivate **harmony** in my **workplace** or **town**?" "How can I foster a **fruitful relationship** with those who hold **different views** than me **politically**?" "How can I work for **wholeness**?" "How can I help create **beauty, joy, and wellbeing** where I go?" So often we Christians are known more for what we are **against** when we should be known by what we are **for**. Before we ever point out what's **wrong** with our **culture** let's point out what's **right** with it.<sup>6</sup> *God calls exiles to "faithful presence."*

I'm **assuming** I haven't said anything most of us disagree with all that much. We want to be faithful and present where God has us. Sometimes **defining** what something **should be** includes saying **what it's not**, which is what Hunter does. He lays out three positions that **differ** from faithful presence. I want to introduce you to these with this next quote. Speaking about the Babylonian exile Hunter writes:

Clearly it would have been justifiable for the Jews to be hostile to their captors. It also would have been natural enough for them to withdraw from engaging the world around them. By the same token, it would have been easy for them to simply assimilate with the culture that surrounded them. Any of these three options made sense in human terms. But God was calling them to something different—not to be defensive against, isolated from, or absorbed into the dominant culture, but to be faithfully present within it...

On the face of it, this was not a posture of radical and prophetic challenge to the powers that be, but neither was it a passive acceptance of the established order. The people of Israel were being called to enter the culture in which they were placed as God's people—reflecting in their daily practices their distinct identity as those chosen by God. He was calling them to maintain their distinctiveness as a community but in ways that served the common good. - *To Change the World* (pp. 277-278)<sup>7</sup>

God calls exiles to faithful presence, but that excludes defensiveness, absorption, or isolation. Let's look at each one of these other responses to culture and politics a little more closely.

## God doesn't call exiles to be "defensive against." (Jer 28:1-4; 29:8-10)

During the exile to Babylon a **false prophet** named **Hananiah** prophesied that the people would all get to go home within two years and that God would destroy their captors.

**Jeremiah 28:1-4** "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. 3 Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. 4 I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,' declares the Lord, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" (NIV)

Hananiah is **lying** that God will punish their **enemies**, **get back** the **culture** they lost, and they'll all be able to **go home soon**.<sup>8</sup> But what does Jeremiah prophesy?

**Jeremiah 29:8-10** Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. 9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. (NIV)

"Get comfortable in exile. Make this your home. Be faithful and present where God has you because you're going to be here a while, 70 years." It's hard to make a **foreign country** your **home** if you're **fighting against** its **government** or **people**.

Hunter explains the "defensive against" posture much better than I do but I've tried to take the gist of what he says and **summarize** it with the **objective** of each posture, the **challenges** it faces, the **strategy** it uses, and the **outcome** it has had. There's always **exceptions**, and this position **could be true** of **either side** of the **political aisle**, but **in Hunter's opinion** the "defensive against" posture is **generally true** of **political** and **theological conservatives**. We're a **theologically conservative church (CCCC)** and some of us may hold conservative **political opinions**, but let's just hear him out. **Defensive against:**<sup>9</sup>

1. **Objective:** retain right belief and right actions within the world.
2. **Challenges:** try to preserve the nation and Christian faith in the midst of secularization.
3. **Strategy:** call for national repentance and faith while confronting opposition.
4. **Outcome:** creation of walls between self and world, self protection; creation of parallel institutions (music, education, media); anxiety and alienation.

**If you're like me** you're **probably thinking**, "But **aren't there** things we should **confront** like **abortion** or **systemic racism**? Shouldn't we stand up and say 'that's not right!'" During our retreat several of my **African American brothers** and **sisters in Christ** noted the importance of the **prophetic voice**. This is something the **black church** does well—**speaks truth to power**. So where's our prophetic call? I'm not sure. There may be **times** and **seasons** for us to speak prophetically, but if that's all we do we can **miss the opportunity** for faithful presence. **Jeremiah didn't call his people** to speak prophetically to Babylon. God

raised up **specific people** to do that—**Daniel, Esther**, and others—but all did so humbly and faithfully where God **placed them**. *God doesn't call exiles to be "defensive against" but to "faithful presence."*

## God doesn't call exiles to be "relevant to." (Jer 29:11)

God doesn't call the exiles to take their future into their own hands, but instead he'll be faithful to them.

**Jeremiah 29:11** For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (NIV)

The "relevant to" posture is when believers adopt the culture **without reservation**. This happens when churches **forsake** the **Bible** because it **hinders** their **growth** or **cultural impact**. **In Hunter's opinion** the "relevant to" posture tends to be true of **political** and **theological liberals**. **Relevant to:**<sup>10</sup>

1. **Objective:** connect with the world, people and issues of the day.
2. **Challenges:** try to impose ethical restrains and changes on a society that resists.
3. **Strategy:** focus on relevance and felt needs but neglect right beliefs.
4. **Outcome:** loss of distinctiveness and historic Christian faith, creeds and confessions; alienation.

If God promises to take care of his people in exile, and to even bless them, we **don't have to create** our **own blessing**. We are called to seek the shalom of the city, we're not called to **look just like** the city. *God doesn't call exiles to be "relevant to" but to "faithful presence."* And thirdly...

## God doesn't call exiles to "purity from." (Jer 29:12-14)

In our last few verses God says he will be with his people in exile. He says their job is to seek God and God will take care of **bringing them out** of exile.

**Jeremiah 29:12-14** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (NIV)

God will bring us out of exile, **not us**. **In Hunter's opinion** the "purity from" posture tends to be true of **any group of people** who **withdraw** or **separate** from culture or society. **Purity from:**<sup>11</sup>

1. **Objective:** preserve the historic Christian faith and witness.

Although "purity from" is **similar** to "defensive against" the **difference** is in the **response**.

2. **Challenges:** the world is so broken we can't do anything for it.
3. **Strategy:** withdraw from world and culture to restore true witness.
4. **Outcome:** disengagement with world; closed communities; feelings of "us-against-them;" alienation.

All three postures lead to the **same outcome, alienation**. *God doesn't call exiles to be "defensive against" or "relevant to" or to "purity from" but to "faithful presence."*

***God calls exiles to faithful presence.***

I'd fall short if I didn't try to offer what Hunter's understanding of "faithful presence" might be a little bit more. **He calls for the following to be true of followers of Jesus.** He hopes this other way can **become true of citizens of heaven, of exiles, of the church.** So if you're **not** living like this, and you fall into one of those other postures, **consider** this other way. **Faithful presence:**

1. **Objective:** be faithful and present wherever God calls us.

This is a call to love God and love your neighbor, even if your neighbor is different politically.

2. **Challenges:** temptation to fight back, forsake beliefs, or disengage.

When you're next tempted to **criticize** someone who sees politics different than you **stop** and **pray** for them.

3. **Strategy:** the great commission—go and make disciples in every level of society; incarnate the Christian faith; be in the world but not of it.

If God calls you to be a school **teacher**, **teach** for him, or drive the **dump trunk**, take out the **trash** for him. If he calls you into **government**, **govern** to the best of your ability for him. **Live for Jesus** where he has you.

4. **Outcome:** shalom; hope and joy; patient endurance; finding the common good; reconciliation.

Faithful presence leads **not** to **alienation** but **reconciliation**. The **gospel** is that **God himself became an exile for us**. The **Son of God exiled himself from heaven** so that he could come and be **faithful and present among us**. He didn't let our **sins** and **ugliness** and **politics drive him away**. Instead, he **loved us**, and **spent time with us**, and **taught us the way of forgiveness and eternal life**. And what did we do? We **crucified** him. But God used **Christ's innocent death** to **pay the penalty** for our sins so that anyone who **repents and believes in Jesus** will be **saved**. Through Jesus you and I can now **experience God's faithful presence**. We can be **reconciled to God**. Now what does Jesus **call us to do**? "**Go and do likewise**. Go and **be a faithful and present exile** in a world that needs me." *God calls exiles to faithful presence.*<sup>12</sup>

*Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).*

<sup>1</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 6; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 52. [https://accordance.bible/link/read/Tyndale\\_Commentary#59195](https://accordance.bible/link/read/Tyndale_Commentary#59195)

<sup>2</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (p. 276). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> The ESV and NASB say “seek the welfare of the city.”

<sup>4</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (p. 228). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Politics," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Politics&oldid=918479472> (accessed September 29, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> I believe Hunter makes a point like this in his early chapters.

<sup>7</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (pp. 277-278). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (p. 277). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (pp. 214-215). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (p. 215). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World* (p. 218). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Several other pastors and teachers have given great sermons or lectures on politics. Check them out:

- Jon Tyson: The Controversial Jesus - Jesus and Politics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1En37ldKvIU&t=1s>
- Tim Mackie (founder of The Bible Project): Lecture on the Early Church & Politics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXcSJVW8rg4>