The Babylonian Exile.[1] (slide.1)

We've been spending these summer months looking at the prayers of the OT saints. And we've been doing this with the hope that we, as a church, might grow in prayer—not simply as a religious duty—but as a regular part of our lives. That's especially true with today's topic. It is our desire to make prayer for our city a regular habit (both individually and as covenant community) as we respond to the grace God has extended to us through the work of His Son. Debi already read our text, so let's begin by looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2)

In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian Empire, marched his armies into Jerusalem and besieged the city. He then grabbed a large portion of the population and brought them to the city of Babylon. For these Jewish men and women, life was turned upside-down as they were about to confront a different language, different customs, different rituals, different practices, and most of all a different faith.[2] But <u>how</u> this would come about was unique and unlike what Israel experienced previously in its history.

You see, 125 years before the Babylonian Captivity, a different group of people called the (slide.3) Assyrians conquered the northern tribes of Israel, but their approach was very different from the Babylonians. The goal of the Assyrians was (slide.4) **subjugation** and suppression. The people were put in chains and put to work. The upside to this approach was that the Assyrians got free labor, and because of that they were able to build more pagan temples. But the downside to this approach is that you almost always end up with an angry population/insurrections/slave revolts. So here are (slide.5) the Babylonians and they're not like the Assyrians. Instead of brutally enslaving these exiles, they're approach is more subtle. Their goal was not subjugation, it was (slide.6) **assimilation**. Their goal was to absorb those they conquered into Babylonian society. And they did that because they knew that, if they did that, over time, these conquered people (within a generation or two) would lose their distinct cultural identity, and would instead become Babylonians.[3]

Jeremiah's Letter.

So here (slide/black.7) are these Jewish exiles—they're no dummies, they know how these Babylonians operate, they're well aware of the assimilation strategy employed by the nation. So what do these exiles do? They settle outside the city and decided to wait it out. The thinking is, *"Yes, it's true that all these horrible things have happened to us, but we're sure God will show up and, before you know it, we'll be back in Jerusalem all safe and sound and far away from these horrible Babylonians."* And, as luck would have it, they even find a few "so-called prophets" that readily agree with what they're thinking. We read of one of these prophets in (slide.8) chapter 28. His name is Hananiah. He announces that God will (slide.9) "break the yoke" of the king of Babylon and "within two years," everyone will get to go home. So the exiles in Babylon are hanging on to this; this is there hope (slide/black.10).[4]

But then one day a letter arrives; it's the letter Debi read.[5] The letter is from Jeremiah. And it too is a prophecy, but it could not be more different from Hananiah's prophecy. In the letter (slide.11) the people are told, <u>not</u> to huddle/cocoon/isolate themselves. No, the Lord, speaking through Jeremiah, tells these exiles to stop living out of their suitcases, but to instead, get busy, and "build some houses, and settle down." And while you're at it, keep in mind that there's no pizza delivery, so if you're going to eat, you're going to have to learn the local agriculture, and get some Babylonian recipes, and figure out how to cook some food. So go ahead and plant gardens and eat what the gardens produce. And get married, and have children, and find wives for your sons, and husbands for your daughters (so they too might have sons and daughters), and increase in number and to not decrease. Because if all you do is sit around and pine for the day you're get back in Jerusalem, your life will be hollow and empty, and you don't want that.[6] And, of course, this was the complete opposite of what Hananiah and the other prophets had been saying. Instead of retreating, the people are exhorted to engage. Instead of waxing nostalgic and living in the past, the people are called to move forward and connect with the culture.

Now, don't get me wrong, Jeremiah is <u>not</u> telling the Jewish exiles to compromise and to forget the God they serve (the rest of the book of Jeremiah makes that abundantly clear). But he <u>is</u> telling them to live their lives and to live them well—again, to (slide.12) *"increase in number and not decrease"* (there's some Genesis "be fruitful and multiply" language here).[7]

But then in verse 7 (slide.13) Jeremiah mentions something else that he wants them to do. He tells them to *"seek the peace and prosperity of the city"* and to *"pray to the Lord for the city."* Don't forget who you are; don't forget who you serve. But at the same time, weave yourself into the very fabric of the city and to seek its betterment because, among other things, *"if it prospers you too will prosper."*

God's Shalom.

The word used by Jeremiah, the word translated here as (slide.14) "peace," is the Hebrew word *shalom*. While it's similar to our English word peace, it's also different. It has a larger footprint and takes up more real estate. For us, peace usually concerns itself with an "absence of conflict" or maybe a "state of tranquility." But, while including these things, *shalom* is also connected to more. It's connected to (slide.15) justice and health; it's connected to flourishing and wholeness. It speaks of social/economic/emotional/relational/aesthetic wholeness, and especially *spiritual* wholeness.[8] I like how Cornelius Plantinga puts it; he writes that (slide.16) *"Shalom is the way things ought to be."*[9]

And this idea of *shalom* was so important to the Jewish people, that (slide.17) in Psalm 122, the people of Israel were explicitly exhorted to make it their regular practice to pray for the *shalom* of Jerusalem (as best as we can tell) each and every day. Peace within the walls of the city; peace within the palaces; peace for the sake of family and friends. And yet, here in (slide.18) Jeremiah 29, these same people are told to stand in the gap and pray that same kind of prayer...in this case, not for Jerusalem…*but for Babylon!* To pray for *shalom*. In fact, each (slide.19) of these words used here in verse 7 is the Hebrew word *shalom*—to pray for the blessing and betterment and prosperity of the city.

So how do you think these Jewish exiles responded to Jeremiah's letter? As you might imagine (slide/black.20), not everyone was crazy about it. In fact, some of the so-called prophets who spoke of a two-year exile were furious. But surprisingly, as best as we can tell, most of the people accepted Jeremiah's message. And because of that, these exiles found out what it meant to be the people of God in a city they would have *never* chosen on their own. And as a result, this became one of the most creative periods in the history of the Hebrew people. A big portion of the psalms were written during this time. A ton of music and literature was created during this period. The synagogue, as a place where the Torah might be studied, was birthed in Babylon.[10] Furthermore, as we look especially at the book of Daniel, we see the faith of the Hebrew people being spread—*even to King Nebuchadnezzar*. Historians are quick to point out that it was during this Babylonian Exile, in particular, that the people of Israel once again learned how to worship and pray. Though they were in exile, they did not *lose* their identity—rather they *discovered* it![11]

This City at This Time.

So what might this mean for us? There's a painting by a (slide.21) Scottish artist; his name is William Dyce. The title of the painting is *Man of Sorrows*; it comes from a verse in Isaiah 53 that speaks of the rejection of Christ by His own people. But Dyce does something unexpected. Instead of depicting the landscape of Judea, Dyce very deliberately uses as his background, *the Scottish Highlands*. He locates the painting of Christ's rejection and lament, not outside the city of Jerusalem, but within Dyce's own locale and among his fellow Scots.[12] It would be comparable to us placing this same scene outside of (slide.22) downtown Tampa or Hyde Park or Carrollwood.

You see, as Christians (slide/black.23), we are citizens of two cities—one that is earthly and another that is heavenly. **But neither is an accident.** Our heavenly citizenship is entirely a matter of grace. But as strange as it may sound, so is our earthly citizenship. Paul speaks of this in Acts 17 (slide.24). While addressing the people of Athens on Mars Hill, he declares that (slide.25):

> From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and
> He marked out their (slide.26) appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.
> God did this so that [people might] seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him,
> though He is not far from any one of us.

In other words, <u>when</u> you live and <u>where</u> you live is no accident. We see this even in the passage (slide.27) Debi read for us. How was it that the people of Jerusalem ended up in Babylon? Well, the answer depends where we look. If we look at verse 1 of our text, we see that (slide.28) *Nebuchadnezzar* was the one who carried the people into exile. Yet if we look at verse 4 we learn that (slide.29) *God* was the one who carried the people into exile. ***So which is it?*** God is saying, <u>+</u>*"Sure, social forces brought you here, but I also used those same social forces."*[13] And the same is true with you and with me. From all the places on earth and from all the possible times in world history, why are we living in the Tampa Bay area in the first quarter of the 21st century? I don't know! All I know is that God providentially put us here, and if we're to believe the words of Scripture, He did so for a reason.

And yes (as we mention in our new members class), it is much easier to (slide.30) go tribal and to separate and cocoon and live in isolation (which is why many Christians do just that). And, truth be told, it is <u>also</u> much easier to (slide.31) acquiesce and assimilate and give into the culture around us (which is why many Christians do that). But the *harder/better* thing is to (slide/black.32) live the gospel, and to serve, and to work for the betterment of the city we're in, while at the same time fully remembering who we are and to Whom we belong.

Prayers for the City.

- So here are some questions for us: What might it mean to get more involved in this city?
- What might it mean to engage with our neighborhoods and work toward greater *shalom*?
- What might it mean to care for the poor and those who feel stuck?
- What might it mean to reach out, not only to those who are like us, but also those different?
- What might it mean to work out the implications of the gospel in our vocations—to seriously consider the effects of Christ's work upon the specific field God has placed you in?

I like how Michael Langer puts it; he asks (slide.33): *What is good that we should encourage? What is broken that we should restore? What is missing that we should create? What is evil that we should oppose?*[14]

So where do we begin? (slide/black.34) Let's again consider our text. The people of Israel, the exiles in Babylon, received a letter. And in that letter was a list (slide.35). This list, again, consisted of things God was calling them to do. Each involved an act of engagement. Each involved a way of connecting to the fabric of the city. Yet the truth is, most of these things could not be acted upon immediately. It takes a while to build a house. It takes a while to plant a garden and enjoy its produce. Babies are not conceived of and birthed overnight. It takes even longer for those babies to grow up so they too can have babies.

But there was one thing that these Babylonian exiles could do there on the spot. ***Do you see it?*** They (slide.36) could pray. They could pray for the peace and the shalom and the prosperity of the city. No committee needed to be formed; no task force needed to be called. Right there, on the spot, at the close of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, the people of Israel could pray. So what would it mean if we did the same?

I love the passage James led us in earlier in the service, the passage from (slide.37) Psalm 48. I love the psalmist's call to walk about Zion, to go around her, to count her towers, to consider her walls, to view her palaces. So what if we did the same? What if we prayed for (slide.38) Tampa as we walk through our neighborhoods and walk through the city? What if we prayed for the peace and prosperity of this city, *and all that that would imply*, while we're in our schools, grocery stores, coffee shops, golf courses, playgrounds, and gyms. What if we prayed for this city while visiting loved ones in the hospital or while hanging out with friends in a restaurant? What if we prayed for the city as we drove around? What would that do? What would He show us? I always (slide/black.39) loved this quote from Emmanuel Katongóle. Katongole is a theologian from Uganda; teaches at Notre Dame. He beautifully wrote that (slide.40): *"The first language of the church in a deeply broken world is <u>not</u> strategy, but prayer."*[15]

So we pray (slide/black.41). But we do so, not by our power, but by the power of the Son of God who became an exile and (according to Hebrews 13) suffered outside the city gate in order to make us holy through His blood.

Our Jesus who lost the city so we might become citizens of the city to come.
Our Jesus who experienced darkness so we might be salt and light and a city set one a hill,

Our Jesus who made us clean, and set us free, and made us alive, so we can confidently share the good news, not as a work that scores points with God, but as a response to His grace.
As we thank God for *this place at this time.* To the glory of the one who is before all things and in whom all things hold together.

Let's pray.

[1] Congregation reading: Psalm 48:9-14 (NIV).
[2] Eugene Peterson, *Run With the Horses*, revised ed. (Downers Grover: InterVarsity Press, 1983, 2009), 146.
[3] Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIVAC, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 47; Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).
[4] Other false prophets prophesied similarly (Jer 27:16; 29:21).
[5] The letter was addressed to the first group of exiles brought into Babylon, but as Wright suggests, "it's safe to assume that the message was repeated as subsequent groups were pulled in." Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 289.
[6] Peterson, *Run With the Horses*, 149.
[7] Several writers note the strong Pentateuch language found in these verses (cf. Gen 1:26-28; 9:7; 17:3-6; 22:17; Deut 20:5-10; 28:30-21). See Pamela J. Scalise, *Jeremiah 26-52*, WBC 27 (Waco: Word Books, 1995), 72; Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, BST, 291.
[8] Timothy Keller, "Serving the City" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2016).
[9] Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), xxi.
[10] David A. Rausch, "Synagogue," *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1061-62.
[11] Peterson, *Run With the Horses*, 152.
[12] Neil MacGregor, *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 110; "William Dyce: *Man of Sorrows*," *National Galleries of Scotland*, https://www.nationalgalleries.org (accessed July 17, 2025).
[13] Keller, "Serving the City."
[14] Michael Langer, "From Insecurity to In Security," *Faithful Presence Weekly*, September 14, 2022.
[15] Emanuel Kantogole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008).