

Pastor Letter: Unchained Word of God (10/9/22)

This week's scriptural passages take us into a world of exile and imprisonment. In our Old Testament passage from the prophet, Jeremiah, we find the nation of Judah has been taken into captivity as they are exiled in Babylon against their will. The Babylonian regime has taken the best Israelite leadership, craftsmen, artisans, priests, and learned individuals away to Babylon as a means of controlling those people left behind in Judah. Without leadership the people would become dependent upon the established puppet government. One of those left behind was the prophet, Jeremiah.

The false prophets who had been taken into captivity were feeding upon the exiled Israelite's self-pity, instructing the people to resist Babylon's authority, and telling the fearful Israelites that they would soon be going back home to Judah. God instructed Jeremiah to write a letter to the exiled Israelites encouraging them to stop being filled with self-pity, suck up their hardship, prepare for a long captivity, and "bloom where you are planted." Jeremiah also instructed the people to do something very strange for a Hebrew mindset. The Lord's message to the people was, "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," (Jer. 29:7). The Lord was telling the wayward Israelites that their welfare (shalom) was dependent upon the welfare (shalom) of the place of their deportation. They were to pray to the Lord on behalf of their foreign captors.

One of the blessings of my seminary education was the encountering of students from around the world. One such amazing student was a Methodist man from India. He shared his experiences of being a Christian in a hostile Hindu community. Part of his persecution came because of his lack of participation in the many local Hindu religious festivals and special community functions. His Christian faith prevented his family from joining in these local celebrations. Although his family demonstrated many acts of Christian charity within the community, they were treated as foreign outsiders.

Another seminary student from Indonesia shared his stories of hostility from his local community. His family was from a very traditional Muslem community which considered proselyting a very serious crime. The student's grandfather had been murdered by the locals for starting a Christian house church. This student planned to return to that area to continue his grandfather's missionary work, when he graduated from seminary.

During a missionary conference, I was introduced to a couple who was engaging in a medical ministry in Pakistan. The wife was a medical doctor and the husband was a hospital administrator. They shared that their hospital was in a predominantly Muslem community. Although they were forbidden to proselytize, they readily answered any religious questions that were presented to them. During a hostile uprising by the Muslims, the Church recalled all Christian missionaries in that region due to the expanding violence. Many of the Muslem hospital staff begged the couple not to leave the hospital and vowed that they would protect the couple from any danger. The local hospital staff recognized the couple's loving Christian dedication to the Muslem community and did not want to lose their medical care and expertise for their people.

These are just a very few examples of dedicated Christians who live their Christian faith in a foreign community. They seek the welfare of the community in which they reside and pray constantly for welfare of that neighborhood. These neighborhoods are not always found in foreign lands but can often be found within the bounds of our own communities. One can often feel exiled within our own cities, towns, and states.

Our New Testament passage comes from the apostle Paul's letter to Timothy. Paul is shackled in a Roman prison awaiting his martyrdom, but is still sending a letter of encouragement to his young pastor in Ephesus. Paul writes, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal," (2 Tim. 2:8-9).

Paul has spent many years traveling around in Gentile territory spreading the Gospel message of salvation so others can be set free from the bondage of sin and death. Paul reminds Timothy that although the apostle is in chains, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not chained and the young pastor should continue to spread this message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul writes, "But the word of God is not chained. Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory," (vv. 9-10).

Paul continues to encourage Timothy to carry on the sacred work of following in Paul's footsteps of serving as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth," (v 15).

As faithful disciples of Jesus Christ we should use these two scriptural passages to fuel the fire of our own Christian ministry in the place where Almighty God has placed us. We may feel as if we are in exile, shackled in prison, or sent to a foreign land, but we can always pray for the welfare of that locality. We must remember that God's Word will prevail in every situation because it has never been chained. We should put the apostle Paul's words in practice every day of our own spiritual journey, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth," (v 15). Remember the Word of God is not chained and many imprisoned and unsaved souls need to be set free!

May Almighty God richly bless you in all that you do for the Kingdom of God.

Pastor Larry