

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

“Citizens of Two Countries”

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Take a first look.

I. THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH WERE TAKEN AWAY INTO CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON. Prior to that cataclysm, the decline of the nation had gone from bad to worse. The roller-coaster ride of their relationship with God had hit its final descent. They had turned away to idolatry and wickedness and passed the point of no return. Finally, the Lord had brought their threatened temporary judgment to pass. They were conquered in war. Their entire culture was split wide open and scattered. Their laughter turned to mourning. The sound of the bride and bridegroom ceased. There was nothing to sing about. Those who survived in exile were faced with a dilemma. How should they act in the country of their exile? What should their outlook be? Was this the end of their nation? Had the great promises from God to their ancestors fallen to the ground?

In such a moment in time, God prompted Jeremiah the prophet to send a letter to the exiles in Babylon. This man who had been known as the Weeping Prophet now wrote words of reassurance to the people who were defeated and humiliated. The letter he wrote is a powerful word from God for people living in a temporary world.

II. THIS LETTER COULD BE WRITTEN TO CHRISTIANS LIVING IN ANY HUMAN CULTURE. The principles found in it are a powerful analogy to what Christians are called to be and do wherever they hold their earthly citizenship. Before we look at it, let's consider our moment in time today.

This weekend, we are celebrating the birthday of our nation. The United States of America was conceived only 250 years ago. In the realm of nations, 250 years isn't all that long. Didn't it seem only a few years ago that we were celebrating our nation's bicentennial? I realize that this shows my age. All of us who were alive in 1976 remember this well. Just two and a half centuries ago, our forefathers gathered in Independence Hall in Philadelphia for the Second Continental Congress. The tension between Great Britain and the thirteen British colonies in America had flared into armed conflict. Five men were assigned the task of putting into writing *The Declaration of Independence*, the document that stated the colonies' intention and reasons for becoming a sovereign nation. Thomas Jefferson wrote the rough draft of that *Declaration*. His work was reviewed and revised by the other four members of the draft committee: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston.

With a few significant deletions and additions, *The Declaration of Independence* was approved on July 4, 1776. It was signed by the delegates to the convention over the next month or so. Here is how it began:

“When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

After this statement of intent, the document states the source of their collective convictions: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. –That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, –That whenever any Form of

Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”¹

The framers of our government understood the temporary nature of human governments and nations. The *Declaration of Independence* also states another understanding. Even though our citizenship in the human nation is temporary, our standard of judgment of what is right and wrong, what is true and false, is not. This standard derives from something transcendent, something above and beyond presidents, kings, parliaments, congresses, and judges. It derives from the living God.

Today, we should soberly celebrate the greatness but also remember the mortality of human beings and human nations. We have been blessed to live on the capital of nearly four centuries of American heritage, but we are not naïve or blind to the mortal nature of even this great blessing. So how are we to live in such a temporary world? What should be our outlook as those who are citizens of heaven and citizens of this earthly nation?

III. I suggest today that God’s message through Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon has many applications for followers of Jesus Christ today. We are ultimately citizens of the kingdom of heaven, but we live in the present world, in our case today, as citizens of the United States of America as well. How shall we live with this dual citizenship?

Take a closer look at Jeremiah 29:1-14.

I. Citizens of two countries must be known for responsible living. Vv. 4-6

1. *God called the exiles to work for their livelihood.* vv. 4-5. He told them to plant vineyards and to build houses. This was and is responsible work. Such responsible work would speak well of the God they served, even in their temporary circumstances as displaced sojourners, “resident aliens” in a land not their own.

A—Our witness of Jesus Christ is strengthened greatly when the watching world sees us working hard for a living.

I—The CEO of a very large corporation was asked, “How many people work in your company?” His dry response was, “Not very many.” Are we a part of the few or the many? Can our teachers count on us to give an honest effort in our course work? Can our bosses count on us to give an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay? Great! We are set to prosper in this temporary world. We must not be known for being lazy and entitled, always hoping to get something for nothing or to take for ourselves what others have earned.

2. *God also called the exiles to build their families.* v. 6. He told them to marry and have sons and daughters, to find wives for their sons and give their daughters in marriage, so that they might have sons and daughters. He commanded them to increase in number there and not decrease. The building of their families was a primary task for the exiles.

A—How much attention are we giving to these most important relationships at home?

I—People who believe that the Bible is inspired by God have always valued

¹ Taken from <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>.

marriage and family as a central realm of human relationships. Jewish people who read the Old Testament can't miss this emphasis from almost the first page forward. In Genesis 1:27 (NIV), we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Right after this, the Lord commands the first man and woman to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28). And after the story of creation is retold with special emphasis on the forming of humanity, the inspired text says, "For this reason a *man* will leave his father and mother and be united to his *wife*, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, NIV). Jesus repeated this important and central position of marriage and family in His teaching (see, for example, Matthew 19).

Clearly, God envisioned marriage to be a covenant relationship between one man and one woman that has the potential and goal of nurturing godly children who would do the same for the generations to come. It is not possible for Christians who believe the Scriptures and who desire to honor God with their lives in a temporary world to accept any other relationship as equal to that of marriage, or to define marriage as some other kind of relationship than a heterosexual covenant before God.

Marriage must always carry with it the potential of childbearing and child-rearing. Marriage is not just about the self-serving happiness of the couple getting married. It is also about their responsibility before God for the children (and grandchildren and great-grandchildren!) that He may (or may not) give to the couple.

II. Citizens of two countries must seek the good of their temporary culture. 7-9

1. *God called them to work for the good of their city.* He knew that the good of the city would be their good, too. Look at what God commanded them to seek: "Seek the *peace and prosperity* of the city to which I have carried you into exile." The phrase *Peace and prosperity* (NIV) translates the one word *shalom* in Hebrew. This is a word full of meaning. It doesn't just mean the absence of conflict. It has to do with *completeness, soundness, health, wholeness, contentment, tranquility, prosperity*. These words are attempts made by the writers of Hebrew lexicons (dictionaries) to translate the idea contained in this one rich word. It is found in both parts of v. 7. "Pray to the Lord for it, because if it *prosper* (has *shalom*), you too will *prosper* (have *shalom*)." There is a connotation included that regards true peace as comprehensive, involving a right relationship with other humans, with the cosmos, and supremely with God.

A—So how are we seeking, by active effort, to establish the *shalom* of our present culture? The Lord knows well enough that all is not rightly ordered before Him in our present culture. There is much that is out of sync with His design and purposes for humanity. What are we doing to do in light of this?

I—There are various levels of working for the good of this temporary "city." We can vote. We can speak up on moral issues that come before us for decision by writing letters to the editor of our local and regional newspapers. We can publish books and pamphlets and links to thoughtful content on social media. We can run for public office. We can bear witness to our fellow-citizens of the power of Jesus Christ to change us from self-serving to God-and-others-serving people. Nothing makes for good citizenship like the transforming power of the Holy Spirit of God!

This country of our present temporary citizenship, the United States of America, is a unique experiment in the history of the world. As our *Declaration of Independence* states, "Governments are instituted among Men" to "secure these rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit

of Happiness.” These governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.”² This is the radical and unique basis of our present form of government, however imperfectly and poorly it has or is being practiced. “The consent of the governed” was never sought before by the government of a nation, except in rare and limited settings. We have a government “of the people, by the people and for the people,” as Abraham Lincoln described it in the famous *Gettysburg Address*. This puts the responsibility of government on the shoulders of every citizen, not just in the hands of some caste of elite members of our society. We need people of godly conviction who will be the “salt” and “light” that Jesus commanded us to be in every conversation important to the Republic. How about us?

2. *He also called them to pray for the city’s good.* This is seeking the good, the *shalom*, of the city from the only permanent Source, from God Himself.

A—Are we going regularly before God for the good of this city, this county, this state and this nation? If not, we have no right to complain about the lack of decency or morality or spiritual understanding of our fellow citizens.

I—**Dr. Richard Halverson retired some years ago as the chaplain of the U.S. Senate [yes, the fulltime, paid Christian chaplain of the United States Senate].** When he was chaplain, he spoke before a group of evangelicals who were mad because Congress was so inactive and seemingly apathetic about the issue of school prayer. They were irritated that Congress had not acted with a strong initiative to restore prayer in schools. To these who were seeking a greater initiative from the government, Dr. Halverson asked, “How many of you have prayed with your children this month, outside of church?” Not a single hand went up.³

Could it be that we are requiring something from elected officials that they cannot produce? No act of legislation can change the heart of the people. No new law can make Christians practice their faith at the point of entrusting the culture’s good to God in prayer. If we don’t pray for our country, if we don’t seek its moral, physical, and spiritual good before God, who will? Civil liberties groups may or may not. Political parties may or may not. *We must.*

I—**When Daniel was serving in the court of the king of Assyria, he was falsely accused and set up by jealous rivals.** This story is told in Daniel, chapter six. A law was passed that forbade the people to pray to anyone except the self-serving king for a certain period of time. How would such a law affect the average Christian in America?

Daniel did what he had always done. Rather than retreating into a “private” faith, he opened his windows toward the east and prayed, three times a day. God moved in a powerful way, even though Daniel was eventually thrown into a den of lions for his faithful habit of prayer. God protected Daniel there and demonstrated His reality to that hostile king who was steeped in self-interest. What would have happened if Daniel would have stopped praying, even for the ninety days? We are not told, because Daniel did not stop praying. He had learned where his ultimate strength came from to prosper in a temporary world.

So must we.

III. Citizens of two countries must have confidence in God’s ultimate purposes. Vv. 10-14, 8-9

1. *God told the people that their present home was not their final home.* He reminded them through Jeremiah that their stay in exile would last seventy years, and only seventy years.

² Quoted from formerly cited source.

³ Quoted in *In Other Words*, 1997, p. 42.

A—We must remember that this is not our final home, either. This is why I am always harping on about being “friends in exile” in my little “Got a Minute?” devotionals. We are destined for heaven, for the Resurrection and the “new heaven and earth” which we will inhabit forever.

I—A few years ago, Stephen Curtis Chapman recorded a song entitled “Heaven in the Real World.” The crux of the song is that people are “looking for heaven in the real world.” It is an interesting song, and in general, I like it. But it makes an assumption that I reject and hope that I will never make again. It is the assumption that this present world is the Real World. *This present world is not the Real World at all.* People are really looking for the Real World amid this deceptive and deceitful temporary world that masquerades as the real world. The truth is, *heaven is the real world*, and for now, we are “just a-passin’ through” the unreal world, as that old Gospel song puts it.

2. *God told the people that His purposes were for their prosperity and hope, their shalom.* Look again at verse 11. The NIV reads, “‘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.’” There it is again in the original Hebrew text, that word *shalom*. God says that His plans for the exiles are to *give them shalom*, which the NIV translates as “prosper you.” This is a basis of real confidence. To know that God’s ultimate purposes are for our *completeness, soundness, health, wholeness, contentment, tranquility, prosperity*, to “give us a hope and a future,” as well—this is a powerful basis for standing strong, even in the midst of hardship. Keep this in mind as we are tempted to lift these words out of their context. The “plan” that the Lord had for them included seventy years in exile. Yet, even then, it was a word of hope.

3. *Their realization of this hope required seeking Him with all their heart.* This good purpose would only come as the people keep seeking the Lord for it. It would not come automatically.

A—This is the timeless truth: we are found by Him when we open to Him our entire hearts without reservation.

I—I understand that in Ecuador, the celebration of a new year has significant meaning. During the week preceding January 1, people create and decorate scarecrow-like dummies. Then at midnight on December 31, they take these dummies out and set them on fire. It’s called “Burning the Old Man.” This tradition gives the people a sense of new beginnings and represents the burning away of their sins and shortcomings.

When we get serious about our relationship with God, there is a kind of death and rebirth [2 Corinthians 5:17, again]. We do die to ourselves, to our self-directed and self-absorbed lives, and come alive to God in a way that up to then was not true of us. Half-heartedness holds no promise in the spiritual life. Could we possibly have the same trouble that the people had during the time of the prophet Malachi, even after the restoration to the land after the exile? Malachi chided the people for bringing as their offerings to God the leftovers and the rejects from their flocks and herds. Yet, they complained that God was not blessing them fully. Malachi’s message to them was basically this: *we can’t experience God’s full blessing with a half-hearted offering of ourselves.* We get the same message as we fast-forward to the Christian teaching of the Apostle Paul (in Romans 12:1-2, FJV):

“Therefore I am appealing to you^{p4}, brothers, through the mercies of God to present

⁴ The superscript “p” indicates that the pronoun is plural in the Greek text.

your^p bodies as a sacrifice that is living, holy, well-pleasing to God, which is your^p rational service of worship.⁵ And stop being conformed to this age, but keep on being transformed by the renewal of the mind so that you^p may continue to approve what is God's will, the good and well-pleasing and perfect."

In short, *God really wants us all in, to experience the fullness of shalom.*

4. *Their realization of this hope required resisting false prophets who were telling lies to the people in the name of God. Vv. 8-9 (and see vv. 15-23).* The Lord warned the people that they were listening to "prophets and diviners" who were deceiving them. God pronounced a severe judgment on those who would deceive His people in this way (vv. 15-23).

A—Followers of Jesus Christ today must be eternally vigilant against distortions, perversions and replacements of the truth that God has revealed to us throughout salvation-history and supremely through His Son, Jesus Christ.

I—We are no help to our culture, or to any culture, if we accept a perversion of *shalom* as the true peace of God. It is right and good for us, given all circumstances and the history of America's war on terrorism, to seek the political and economic and social stability of other nations. However, if these come at the cost of religious freedom, they are worthless. What people in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Canada and Mexico, Spain and Portugal, Russia and the Ukraine, Venezuela and China all need is the kind of religious liberty that stands at the heart of this Republic. They need the freedom to seek the truth of God without inhibition or coercion. They need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ proclaimed clearly and courageously. All people do not have this freedom yet. We should pray that one day they will.

Take it home (applications).

How shall we celebrate our Independence this year?

I. We should open our hearts unreservedly to God today and seek Him with all our being.

II. We should decide that we will live fully in this temporary world.

1. Work hard for the provision and protection of ourselves and our families.
2. Love our family members well, just as Christ has loved us.
3. Make a difference in our culture to bring about *shalom*. This includes voting with as much wisdom and spiritual priority as possible, as well as speaking into our culture about God's perspective on the people and issues of our times.
4. Hope in God, in Whom alone is our help and strength and hope.

⁵ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*: "Which is your reasonable service (tên logikên humôn latreian). 'Your rational (spiritual) service (worship).' For latreia, see on 9:4. Logikos is from logos, reason. The phrase means here 'worship rendered by the reason (or soul).' Old word, in N.T. only here and 1Pe 2:2 to logikon gala (not logical milk, but the milk nourishing the soul)."