



SEEK THE PEACE

LIVING TOWARD THE PROMISES, PART 1

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A ReVision Study from

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Seek the Peace
Living toward the Promises, Part 1
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Welcome to *Seek the Peace*

Welcome to *Seek the Peace*, Part 1 of a 5-part series on *Living toward the Promises*. Like Israel during her exile in Babylon, the Church today is an exile in a far country. We seek a City to Come, and we are strangers and sojourners during this earthly passage.

Be we are also the salt of the earth and the light of the world, so we cannot be indifferent to the condition of things in the world or the needs and concerns of our neighbors. How do we balance being a community in exile with our calling to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness?

Jeremiah had some keen insights to this question, and in this brief study we're going to see how we can understand and apply Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles in Babylon to our lives in this age in flight from God.

Don't rush through these studies, Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on the questions and *next steps* provided. Look for lessons you can implement so that your life begins to reflect more of the indwelling presence of Christ.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Encourage your fellow group members to prepare well and participate actively (Col. 3.16). Make sure you come away from each session with something to implement in your walk with and work for the Lord.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We are happy to provide these studies at no cost. If you find them helpful, please consider making a contribution to support the work of the The Fellowship of Ailbe.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Never So Bad

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon... Jeremiah 29.4

To flee the world?

How bad could things get?

Their capital city had surrendered to a powerful enemy, which had installed a puppet government, deported the most productive of the citizens, and put those who remained under a severe tribute.

But those who were still living in Jerusalem under the strong hand of Nebuchadnezzar at least considered themselves better off than those who had been sent into exile in Babylon. They *must* have felt this way, for even when Jeremiah urged *them* to yield to the Babylonian king and go peaceably with him to captivity, they refused, insisting instead on fleeing to Egypt.

In their minds going to Babylon was surely as bad as things could get, and they wanted nothing of it.

In different periods of Church history, members of the believing community, seeing the corruption and hypocrisy of their age, have fled the world and sought to carve out a space of peace for themselves away from it all. The spiritualists who fled to the deserts in the third and fourth century wanted nothing to do with what they considered to be the “worldly” church and the decaying Roman Empire. The various religious orders that sprung up during the late Middle Ages separated themselves from normal life in the Church, seeking to create communities of the sanctified against the compromise and corruption they saw on every hand. During the Reformation, Martin Luther saw the Church as under a kind of “Babylonian captivity” which could only be cured by leaving the Church to form a new branch of Christ’s Body. Within that movement certain Anabaptist leaders went even further, and walled themselves and their followers off in fortified cities, in a vain attempt to fend off what they regarded as the wickedness all around.

Even in our day some believers, frustrated over political corruption and juvenility, and seeing the wickedness on every hand, have chosen to withdraw from the world – its culture, society, and institutions – and to keep to themselves in holy enclaves, where either a strict legalism or a kind of *laissez faire* spirituality reinforces their negating posture toward all things worldly. Yet even here, the influence of the world leaches in and begins to work petrifying effects on the hearts of the people of God.

The Christian tendency to want to be rid of the world and its ugliness, meanness, and grasping ways is always present within us, while, at the same time, we want just enough of the world to assure our temporal happiness.

Blessing in time of trouble

The people of Jerusalem whom Nebuchadnezzar took captive to Babylon may have been tempted to agree with the assessment of their contemporaries: Living in Babylon is about as bad as it can get. They must have wondered aloud concerning what they would do, how they would live, and by what means they would manage to keep themselves separate and uninvolved with their pagan neighbors and oppressors, while, at the same time, doing what they could to make the most of their circumstances for their own wellbeing.

Certainly they harbored ill feelings toward their captors, and they must have felt fear and revulsion toward them as well. Doing something to *bless* the Babylonians was doubtless the furthest thing from their minds.

Ever the people of God

But as Jeremiah would explain in the letter he wrote to the captives in Babylon, conditions are never so bad that the people of God can simply forget their calling, deny their mission, set aside their mandate, circle their wagons, and hold on, hoping for the best, against the corruption and wickedness on every hand.

For the people of God never cease to be the people of God, no matter how bad conditions become; and things can never get so bad that the Church cannot make a powerful impact for grace and truth – if we separate ourselves from the ways of the world and remain faithful and obedient to our calling from the Lord.

In the midst of Israel's captivity, God did not cease to be their God. He moved Jeremiah to speak words of comfort and counsel to His people, so that they might be careful not to miss the opportunity God had set before them of preparing for a season of revival, renewal, and awakening yet to come.

God had brought Israel to this bitter political and cultural situation, but not without a purpose, and not without a plan.

Today is no different. The bitter taste and ugly taint of materialism and narcissism saturate the air around us, and the Christian community has not escaped their effects. Yet we are still the people of God, and God is still our God. He has a message for us today, and He intends, no matter how bad things become, that we should hear His Word, heed His voice, and take up the work of Kingdom righteousness, peace, and joy.

For reflection

1. Christians seem to be of two minds regarding “the world.” On the one hand, we don't like what we see out there. On the other hand, the world very often seems too much with us. Do you agree? Explain.
2. How do you see that Christians have withdrawn from large sectors of contemporary culture and society, leaving the world to its own wiles and ways?
3. Is there a sense in which the Church today is under a kind of “Babylonian captivity” of its own? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Share your answers to these three questions with some Christian friends. Do they agree? Invite them to join you for this study.

2 Focus on the Promises

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29.11

A matter of perspective

The danger exists that we in the Christian community become numb to the corruption and worldliness of our day, and decide that such is the norm, and there’s nothing we can do about it except to keep as far from it as possible.

We are becoming so accustomed to the forsaking of traditional values, the undermining and fragmenting of long-established institutions, and the breakdown of morality and civility, that we can begin to regard these conditions as the norm, the best we can hope for in an age in flight from God, such as our own. The images of the Church as the salt of the earth, light of the world, and leaven of righteousness, peace, and joy can seem little more than wishful thinking against the sad and scary backdrop of contemporary life.

Everywhere we look in our day, the prophetic words of William Butler Yeats, in his 1919 poem, “The Second Coming,” seem to be coming true: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world./The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/the ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

But the appearances, which press upon us daily, are only a matter of perspective. As a friend once reminded me, a penny is a very small thing – until you hold it right next to your eye. In the same way, many believers today spend so much time analyzing, criticizing, and condemning the broken conditions of our hapless society that they have lost sight of the larger realities within which those conditions are occurring. They’re holding the wrong thing up to their eye.

The people of Jerusalem, carried off to captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar, were in danger of making a similar mistake. But Jeremiah understood that they needed to keep a proper perspective on their situation, and the way to do that was by focusing on and striving toward the exceedingly great and precious promises of God.

Partake of God?

Like Jeremiah in his day, the Apostle Peter reminded a community of persecuted believers, mid-way through the first century, that their circumstances were not so bad as to be able to cancel the promises of God. In Jesus Christ, our Lord holds out “exceedingly great and precious promises,” Peter explained, so that by these promises, leaving the corruption of the world behind us, the people of God could partake of the very essence of the divine King Himself (2 Pet. 1.4)!

Eyes on the promises

In the same way, Jeremiah counseled the Jews in captivity to remember the promises and plan of God, a plan first spoken to Abraham, reinforced through Moses, and broadened under King David. God determined to redeem a people for Himself and to bless them so that they, in turn, could be a blessing to all the nations.

God promised to give *Himself* to His people, so that, in fellowship with Him they could know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16.11). He promised to make them a great nation, who, by their righteousness and love for one another would be the envy of all the surrounding nations (Deut. 4.1-8). And He promised to send a great King to shepherd them, so that they could realize all the promises of God’s great and glorious plan (Gen. 49.8-11; Jer. 23.3, 4).

These were exceedingly great and precious promises, indeed! By focusing on these promises, and embracing the plan of God to give them a future and a hope, the exiled people of Jerusalem would find a proper

orientation for understanding their times, and the right means and incentive to know the outworking of God's plan for their lives.

Likewise today

So today, when things are falling apart all around us, when the center of Western civilization seems to be coming unglued, and anarchy, violence, and self-serving are on every hand, the followers of Jesus Christ must not lose sight of the promises of God. The promises made to Abraham and recalled by Peter are still *our* promises today (cf. Rom. 4.16-25). They remain exceedingly great and precious, and still have the power to enable us to partake of the divine nature – to know God in His glory and to live for His glory, no matter how bad the conditions around us may become.

God has great plans for us, plans to bless us, and to make us a blessing. And we must daily focus on those promises and strive toward their realization, for if we do, God will surely bless us and make us a blessing to our sad and weary world. We will be His people, He will be our God, and He will do great things in, for, and through us. Then even the sad world around us will be compelled to admit, “The LORD has done great things for them” (Psalm 126.2).

For reflection

1. In what ways do you see that Christians are “numb” to the conditions of the world?
2. What about our being salt, light, and leaven to the world? Are these images no longer relevant? Explain.
3. What does it mean to partake of the divine nature? How do the exceedingly great and precious promises of God accomplish this in us?

Next steps – Preparation: Would you say that the exceedingly great and precious promises of God constitute the “penny” you hold up to your eye? Talk with a fellow believer about this question.

3 Seek the Lord

“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD...”
Jeremiah 29.13, 14

A God at hand

In exile from their beloved promised land, the people of Jerusalem had a choice: they could either moan and lament for their condition of chastisement and exile, and give in to the temptations of Babylonian life, or they could look to the promises of God, and let those be the horizon which defined their journey during this season of captivity in Babylon.

However bad it may have been under Nebuchadnezzar’s boot, the promises of God would neither change nor fail; He would be steadfast in His love and faithful to His Word. Israel’s hope, and the resolve and strength such hope engenders, depended on their ability to keep their eyes on the promises of God, especially in the midst of their difficult trial.

With their eyes firmly fixed on the promises, Israel now had a second duty it must fulfill. God commanded His people to seek Him, promising that, if they would do so with all their hearts, He would be found by them, and would restore His blessings. They would know Him, partake of His presence, and know His power for revival, renewal, and awakening.

This must have puzzled the people of Israel, as they read these words from Jeremiah in their captivity in Babylon. Wasn’t God dwelling in Jerusalem? In the temple He had commanded them to build? How could they expect to find God so far away from home (cf. Ps. 137)?

So today, many believers find their fullest experience of God when they are together with other believers in worship. The rest of the week they are so enmeshed in the world – or working so hard to remain free of its taint and threat – that the Lord can seem far away and hard to reach.

An earnest seeker

But the exiles who truly knew the Lord – like Daniel and his friends – understood that the temple was not the only, or even the *primary* place where God could be found. Daniel needed the presence of the Lord, for strength to seek the peace of the Babylonian Empire, and he turned to God in earnest prayer and faithful reading and meditation in the Word of God.

With Daniel, we get a glimpse of how one faithful believer sought God with his whole heart in prayer. In chapters two and four, faced by crises and threats, Daniel went to the Lord in prayer. We see him praying earnestly on his own, enlisting his friends to help him in prayer, and praying every day three times a day, seeking the Lord as often as he could for strength to serve Him well.

In chapter nine we again find Daniel in prayer, but this time in response to his reading of the same book of Jeremiah that we are considering in this study. As Daniel read in the scroll of Jeremiah, seeking the Lord and His will, he discovered in Jeremiah 25 that Israel was to be returned to the land after seventy years of captivity. He must have tallied up the years he’d been in Babylon and realized that the time had come. Now in earnest prayers of confession and pleading, Daniel sought the Lord to fulfill all that He had promised.

Seek the Lord in prayer, and seek Him daily in His Word. We will lose sight of the promises of God, and fail to know His reviving strength and power apart from diligence in each of these.

Faithful and diligent

This is the way to gain the Lord's presence and His promises, when we turn to Him in faithful reading and study of His Word and diligent, earnest prayer.

God promised Israel that He would be found by them when they sought Him consistently like this, with all their hearts. Daniel believed that promise from God, and found it to be true; it remains so for us today.

Do we hope to know the promised blessings of the Lord in the midst of an increasingly hostile age? Are we determined to be a people who bring the Kingdom power of righteousness, peace, and joy to our sad and weary generation? Then we must commit to seeking the Lord in His Word and prayer, more fervently and consistently than ever before. There is no shortcut to partaking of the divine essence. We must go through His promises, especially as these are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1.20). These promises are sprinkled throughout the pages of Scripture, and we begin to lay hold on them as we come to the Lord, promises in hand, pleading for their fulfillment through Jesus.

God promises that, if we will seek Him like this, with all our heart, we will find Him, and in finding Him, find the strength we need for revival, renewal, and awakening, beginning right where we are.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to *seek* the Lord? To seek Him *with all your heart*?
2. Does it seem to you that your Christian friends have a hard time realizing the presence, promise, and power of God apart from church? Explain.
3. In what sense are all the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus? How should this guide our time in God's Word and prayer?

Next steps – Conversation: How can believers help one another seek the Lord with all their heart? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

4 Build Up the Community

“Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished.” Jeremiah 29.6

Increase, always increase

Without a solid and secure spiritual core to their lives and communities, the exiles from Jerusalem would not have the stamina to endure the hardship they would know in Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon. They needed to seek the Lord daily, in prayer and His Word, as we see Daniel did.

Similarly, the Church today will make no progress in knowing the blessings of God and being a blessing to the world around us unless we devote ourselves daily and earnestly to strengthening our souls in the Lord. Fulfilling our calling as the salt of the earth and the light of the world begins within, in the depths of our souls, where we keep our eyes steadfastly fixed on the promises of God and bend our knees and hearts to seek Him in His Word and prayer, day by day.

Focus on the promises of God, and seek Him with all your heart. With this as a foundation, the Lord through Jeremiah gave a third command to His people: They must not allow their time in captivity to cause the numbers of the people of God to decline. Rather, they must work to *build-up the community of God’s people* by giving their sons and daughters in marriage, and raising sons and daughters to know the promises of God and to seek Him with their parents.

God’s command was clear: Israel must increase in captivity in Babylon, even as bad as conditions may have been in some places; they must not allow the ranks of the people of God to decline.

Working at increase

Here is yet another sound word of instruction for the Church in exile in our secular and materialistic age. We must work hard to increase the ranks of the followers of Jesus Christ. Christians must not follow the fashion of the times which deprecates marriage and child-rearing in favor of a life of getting and spending. God has called us to be fruitful and multiply in every age; no amount of economic opportunity or ambition must be allowed to get in the way of this most important mandate.

In addition, the Church today needs to rediscover the work of evangelism. We have become so used to thinking of the lost as “seekers,” and doing everything we can think of in our churches to attract them to us, that we have forgotten, or at least, minimized, the mandate to make disciples as we are going, in the everyday situations of our lives.

But the world is not commanded to go to church; the Church is commanded to go to the world, and this is a form of ministry that has fallen by the wayside in too many churches today. This is evident from the way services of worship have changed to reflect the informal and spontaneous pop culture spirit of the age. It’s also a fact that church attendance is declining, compared with the growth of the population as a whole. We are not keeping pace, much less increasing.

But if we will faithfully focus on God’s purpose and plan, and seek Him daily and earnestly, we may be reminded and recalled to this most central component of our mission in the world.

To reverse a trend

Nationally, the percentage of the population claiming to be Christians is declining annually. Surely we can see that this is not the will of God for His churches! And we will not bring the peace and blessings of God to our nation if we continue decreasing in numbers of faithful believers.

In our churches, therefore, let us work to promote and strengthen Biblical and Christian marriage, to raise and nurture strong families, and to equip all the members of the Body of Christ for the work of sharing Jesus and proclaiming His Kingdom to every person in our community.

And let each of us take up the responsibility of identifying and working our [Personal Mission Field](#), reaching out to the people we see each day with the grace and joy of Jesus, making the most of every opportunity to exemplify and proclaim Him, risen from the dead.

How else can we expect to multiply followers of Jesus Christ, and bring His blessings to ourselves and our neighbors? The “seeker-friendly” posture of our churches is not working, because it is not what God has called us to be as a community within our communities. We must shine like the light, season like salt, and spread like leaven into every neighborhood, school, work place, and every nook and cranny of culture and community life, there to touch others with the grace and truth of Jesus.

For reflection

1. Why do you think churches today have largely abandoned the work of evangelism?
2. Since God commands us to make disciples *as we are going* in the world (Matt. 28.18-20), should we not expect Him to bless and prosper this effort? Explain.
3. What would it look like if your church were more like light, salt, and leaven in your community?

Next steps – Preparation: Watch the brief video on Personal Mission Field at our website, www.ailbe.org (click the Resources tab, the Ailbe Videos, then scroll down). Then map out your Personal Mission Field, and get started increasing the blessings of God to the people around you.

5 Build for the Future

“Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord.” Jeremiah 29.5-9

What’s the use?

God had revealed to Jeremiah that the people of Jerusalem would be in exile in Babylon for seventy years. This meant that many of those who were being taken into captivity would die in Babylon. They would not live to see the promise of revival, renewal, and awakening. Indeed, it is quite possible that *most* of the exiled Israelites believed that would be the case for them.

When prospects are bleak, incentive to build for the future can be in short supply. Why work hard and seek to prosper if it’s all going to be taken from you anyway?

And if our leaders aren’t casting a vision for revival, renewal, and awakening, how will the rest of us maintain and live toward such a hope?

The way people view the future affects the way they live in the present. If one’s attitude toward the future is that things are only going to get worse, the bad guys are going to increase in strength, and the good guys will be reduced to a small remnant, waiting for the Lord to lift them out of their troubles into heavenly bliss – if that’s what we believe, it will have a huge effect on how we do our work, raise our children, and seek the welfare and peace of our neighbors.

And if that’s what we’re hearing from our preachers, then our preachers aren’t hearing the Word and promises of the Lord.

Working for a better tomorrow

Today there is no shortage of preachers and evangelists declaring such a dim view of the future. They seem to believe the world is a weed field, waiting to be burned, rather than a wheat field to be harvested, in which we must sow and work toward filling the barns of the Lord (Matt. 13.24-30, 36-43). Their counsel to the Church is, “There’s nothing we can do to avoid the growth and progress of evil. We just need to hang on until Jesus comes and raptures us up to heaven.”

Such words do not line up well with God’s promise to revive and renew His people, and to awaken the world to the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom.

The Jews in Jeremiah’s day might have been of a similar mind, but God commanded them instead to build for the future, to seek prosperity for themselves and their families, and to contribute to the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual wellbeing of the people around them. Circling the wagons and hoping for the best was simply not an option.

The Scriptures teach the followers of Christ in every age to build for the future. We are to grow in the grace of our Lord; take every thought captive for Jesus; reconcile all things back to God; and live for His glory in every area of our lives. The Daystar has arisen, as John declared in 1 John 2.8-17, and the Light of Christ was even in John’s day advancing against the darkness, bringing truth, hope, and new life to a world long-shrouded in darkness and unbelief. And though he was in exile on the isle of Patmos, still he believed the

exceedingly great and precious promises of the Lord, and counseled his readers to seek the Lord, and not to heed those who taught contrary to God's Word.

A growing stone for Jesus

In exile in Babylon, Daniel saw the Kingdom of God as a growing stone. From its beginnings in the time of the Roman Empire throughout the course of history, God's Kingdom would grow, expand, overcome all opposition, and fill the earth with the knowledge of God and His glory (Dan. 2.44, 45; Hab. 2.14). Yes, there would be difficult times, even times when it would seem as though evil was ascendant and impossible to resist. Yet the purpose of God is that His Church and Kingdom might prevail, and not merely at the end of days, but throughout these last days (cf. Dan. 7.13-27; Mic. 4.1-8).

This is not the vision of the future held by many Christians today, or taught by many pastors. But God calls us always to build for the future, to lay the foundations of blessing and spiritual advance in every area of life in our own day, so that those who inherit our "houses and fields" will find them strong and fruitful in their day as well (Ps. 45.16, 17).

Beware the false prophets who counsel a defeatist, withdrawing attitude toward the future. God has plans for our future, to fill us with hope, make Himself known, and use us as His people to bless the nations of the world. Let's work *toward* what God has promised, not *away from* what we've been taught to fear.

For reflection

1. Meditate on Daniel 2.44, 45. What evidence can you see from Church history that Daniel's vision of the Kingdom of God was correct?
2. How would you summarize your church's attitude toward and vision of the future? Is it large, expansive, and growing? Explain.
3. How can believers help one another to nurture and maintain a *Biblical* vision of the Kingdom and future?

Next steps – Transformation: Does your attitude reflect the teaching of Daniel 2.44 and 45, Daniel 7.13-27, and Micah 4.1-8? Why or why not?

6 Seek the Peace of the City

“And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.” Jeremiah 29:7

Blessed to be a blessing

Even while they endured the hardships of exile in Babylon, the people of Israel needed to remember that God intended them to be a blessing to the world. Jeremiah called them to focus on God and His promises, to seek the Lord earnestly, and to build their communities for a future of revival, renewal, and awakening. They must not be deterred in this calling either by the allure of pagan materialism or the false teaching of timid, unbelieving prophets. Come what may, God’s faithful people were to seek the future *He* had in mind, not merely what they saw before them.

People may rage against God, turn away from His Law, cast doubts on His existence, and pursue lives deliberately calculated to give offense to His holiness. Yet the love of God perseveres, even for such as these. His Spirit strives to keep rebellious unbelievers from destroying themselves with their sin; only reluctantly does God give people up to the consequences of their folly, and even then He stands ready to welcome every repentant sinner (Rom. 1:18-32). The kindness of God, Paul reminds us, leads people to repentance (Rom. 2:4), and a primary way that kindness comes to people in an age in flight from God is through the faithful stewardship and diligent love of His obedient people.

Shalom

Jeremiah counseled the exiles in Babylon to seek the peace of the nation to which God had sent them. The word is actually *shalom* – a kind of omnibus term of blessing, that means something like health, peace, prosperity, wellbeing, and salvation, all rolled into one. The Babylonians had shown nothing but scorn and violence toward Israel and her God; nevertheless, God had business to do with those people, and He intended that at least *some* of them should know His blessings.

Ironically enough, King Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord, himself became a worshipper of the one true God because of the faithful, frank, and loving ministry of Daniel (cf. Dan. 4:34-37). As Daniel sought the peace of the king and his court, so all the people of God were expected to do with their neighbors in every quarter of the empire.

We exist for God!

And so we must do today. In many churches, we rejoice and are quite happy when someone finds his way to our fellowship and begins to know the blessings of salvation and new life in Christ. But *waiting* for people to find their way in to our fellowship is a far cry from *seeking the peace* of our neighbors as part of our being-in-the-world in the community. In Psalm 48 the Church is pictured as the joy and beauty of the whole earth. In how many communities today are churches regarded in this way? Not many, I suspect. Do many of our churches even *aspire* to such a place in their community?

The Church does not exist for itself. We make an idol of our church if we look upon its worship, fellowship, programs, and other ministries as ways to satisfy our needs and calm our fears. We must look to *Jesus* for this; the church is rather the sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God, the staging ground, evidence, and forward line of advance for the Kingdom of God.

Churches exist for God, for the Lord Jesus Christ, and for the purposes of the divine economy. And those purposes include filling the earth with Jesus Christ and the knowledge of God’s glory (Eph. 4:8; Hab. 2:14). God’s intention through the Church is that the rule of King Jesus – a Kingdom where liberty from sin and guilt leads to righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit – *that* rule might increase and affect the lives of

hurting and needy people everywhere.

It is the Church's task, and the calling of every *particular* church, to reach out to their neighbors and, like Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, humble ourselves to show the love and beauty of God in ways appropriate to the opportunities before them, and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus by every available means.

Believers have been redeemed unto good works (Eph. 2.10); the Church, as the Body of Christ, should reflect in its earthly sojourn the same kind of care, outreach, compassion, sacrifice, service, and witness that Jesus demonstrated while He was on earth.

The Church is the Body of Christ – Jesus to our world – and we will not be able to fulfill that high and holy calling apart from a prayerful and diligent effort at bringing the salvation and blessings of God to the people in our communities.

For reflection

1. How much does prayer for your community feature in the life and worship of your church?
2. In what ways does your church seek to bring the beauty and joy of Jesus to its community?
3. What glaring needs exist in your community that you might expect Jesus to address if He were living within your community?

Next steps – Preparation: What might your church do in order to better fulfill its calling as Kingdom sign and outpost, and to bring the beauty, joy, and goodness of the Lord to light in your community (Ps. 27.13)? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

7 Pray for the City

“And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.” Jeremiah 29:7

Well, this for one...

In Psalm 137 the psalmist reacts negatively to an attempt on the part of one of his Babylonian captors to get him to sing one of the songs of Jerusalem. The bitterness and sorrow expressed in that psalm capture what must have been the heart burden of many of the people of Israel, as they endured captivity in Babylon.

How could they sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land? How could they even *think* of letting the cruel Babylonians gain any benefit from their devotions? And yet, and yet – Psalm 137, bitter and hard as it is, is a prayer to God, what we call an imprecatory psalm, calling the judgment of God down against those who harm His people.

God commanded His exiled people to pray for their captors; doubtless such imprecatory prayers often arose from the midst of the captive people. And God approved them, understanding and compassionate with His people all the way.

But His people must not stop here. Even as they sought the Lord's vengeance against their captors, the exiles in Babylon were commanded also to seek His grace on their behalf, that He might penetrate their hearts, turning many to the knowledge of God. Asaph had shown the way for such prayer in Psalm 83:16. The people must also pray, as Daniel doubtless did for King Nebuchadnezzar, that their captors would become ashamed of their wickedness and folly, repent of their violent and oppressive ways, and learn to worship the living God.

Such prayers must have seemed like long shots for those who prayed them, but, given the experience of Nebuchadnezzar himself, we can believe that many Babylonians came to know the Lord because of such prayers.

For all people

Seeking the welfare of the communities in which we live will be more effective when we bathe and envelop all our endeavors in prayer. Paul commanded that prayers and intercessions be made for all people everywhere (1 Tim. 2:1, 2). That surely includes the people in our communities, the teachers in our schools, those who own the businesses and farms, the civil magistrates, those who defend our nation at home and abroad, and all our neighbors, associates, and coworkers. God works through prayer, and if we wish to see the promised blessings of God come to the people in our communities, then we shall have to begin praying for them more earnestly.

The work of prayer

In our private devotions, before family dinners, in our churches and Bible study groups, where two or three believers are gathered for lunch or any other reason, let prayers ascend on behalf of our neighbors. Let the promises of God, and especially the promise of revival, renewal, and awakening be our guide. The more we pray for people, the more we will be aware of them and their needs. The more aware we are of them, the more attentive we will be. And the more attentive we are to them, the greater is the likelihood that we will begin to reach out to them with the blessings of God.

Prayer for our communities and our nation can unite churches across denominational divides, bring pastors together on behalf their community without jealousy or suspicion, and create a united voice for revival and awakening for the entire world.

Any decision *not* to pray for our neighbors, and to seek the Lord for His promised revival, is simply a decision *not* to obey the plain teaching of Scripture. It is to despise the promises of God and to prefer the sinking status quo of the Christian faith. It is to reveal a heart not intent on seeking the Lord, unloving toward our neighbors, and not submissive to the whole counsel of God. If you *will not* pray for your community, that God will bring His blessings through His churches for the *shalom* of all, then how can you dare come before God *for anything at all in prayer?*

Will we pray for our neighbors, our community, our nation, and our world? If we will not, then we must face up to the fact that we are disobeying a divine mandate, abandoning our neighbors to their folly, and stoking the fires of indifference – if not outright scorn – for the unbelieving world around. But if we will pray, who knows what God might be willing to do?

And we are missing the best opportunity any of us will ever know to realize more of the exceedingly great and precious promises of God.

For reflection

1. Does your church pray for its community? Do you?
2. Meditate on 1 Timothy 2:1-8. How might you encourage your fellow believers to begin practicing this kind of prayer?
3. Why is today such an excellent time for seeking to realize the exceedingly great and precious promises of God?

Next steps – Prepare: How can you begin to pray daily for your neighbors and your community? Encourage other believers to join you in this work of seeking the peace and promises of God for your neighbors.

For reflection or discussion

1. In what ways is the situation of churches today like that of Israel in exile in Babylon? What opportunities does this situation afford for us?
2. How might you begin to focus more consistently on the promises of God, and to live toward them more consistently each day?
3. Have you identified your [Personal Mission Field](#)? Are you beginning to work it day by day?
4. How can you help your church to be more faithful in seeking the peace and welfare of your community?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you implementing that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship to help us extend our ministry and resources to others. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.