

# Jeremiah

## How to Be a City Saint

In January of 1962, I delivered an address at the annual Christian School Teachers Conference in the Asian city of Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The atmosphere in the country was tense and uncertain. Bewilderment marked the teachers' faces, for the Buddhist-dominated government had unexpectedly taken over all the church and mission-owned schools. Many teachers feared for their jobs, and nearly everyone was sure that this would be the last time such a conference could be held. The era of the Christian day schools appeared to be ended, and the role of the church in education seemed to be over.

What appropriate words could be used for such an occasion? The hearts of men and women were heavy. The takeover of the Christian schools was not the only cause for alarm in this tiny nation, for the society as a whole seemed to be going in the wrong direction. Christians in all areas of life were being discriminated against, and a movement was afoot to make Sunday a work day. Any Christian that opposed the trend risked losing his job, resulting in suffering for his family. Many had already decided to emigrate. They felt that the country had become a modern Babylon—violent, unjust, and pagan.

After much consideration, I selected the passage of Psalm 137:1-4, emphasizing the fourth verse.

By the waters of Babylon,  
there we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there



we hung up our lyres.  
 For there our captors  
 required of us songs,  
 and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
*How shall we sing the Lord's song  
 in a foreign land? (RSV, italics mine).*

The men and women who were present felt very much like the Hebrew prisoners in ancient Babylon. They were caught in a political, moral, and religious situation which they feared and disliked intensely. They longed for the old social order when, under British colonial rule, Christianity was the favored religion and Christian institutions enjoyed freedom and opportunity. These Christian teachers were tempted to give up, to "hang their harps on the willows," and regard the situation as hopeless. "How," they were asking in effect, "can we sing the Lord's song in a situation like this?"

The message was simple—regardless of the circumstances, the Lord's song must be sung! That was Jeremiah's message to the captive Hebrews in Babylon, and it was relevant in this situation. Because of their sin, God had allowed Israel to be captured and taken to a hostile, foreign city. But Israel's unique character as the people of God had not been removed, nor had Israel's mission among the nations been terminated. Babylon was a wicked and idolatrous city, ultimately doomed to be destroyed. Yet it was precisely in that situation that Israel was required to fulfill its calling as a holy people, set apart from among the nations to be witnesses of the one true God (Deut. 14:1, 2; Isa. 43:10). Israel in Babylon was still a people with a mission, and that mission was God-defined:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 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. 29:4-7, RSV).

The people were not to escape the city or sit in sullen rebellion. Though the city was wicked, they must not seek to destroy it.

They must build houses, plant gardens, marry, and beget children. Their population was to increase, not decrease. Their role was to be salvatory, not destructive. As God's people they were to seek in every way the city's welfare, its shalom in the fullest sense. Prayer to Jehovah on behalf of the city was to be the most profound expression of the people's attitude. In the welfare of Babylon, Israel would find its own well-being.

### A Formula for City Saints

God's word to Israel in Babylon provides us with a formula for city saints. It tells us how God wants his people to live and witness in the city. That was the issue facing the Hebrews in Babylon, and it is the question faced by city Christians today. Like the ancient Hebrews, many Christians ignore their mission, which to a great extent explains why city churches are so weak and cities are so bad. But the Scriptures are plain enough, and both the Old and New Testaments present the same message.

Writing to first-century Christians, most of whom lived in cities, Peter said: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9, RSV). To "declare the wonderful deeds of God" was another way of saying, "Sing the Lord's song." Christians scattered here and there in Graeco-Roman cities were regarded as "aliens and exiles"; they were accused of being traitors and tempted to abandon the faith (I Peter 2:11, 12). But there was to be no "hanging of the harps in the willows." Christians had a life to live and a message to proclaim. In short, they were called to be apostles to the city.

### Presence in the City

God's word to Israel in Babylon was, "Build houses . . . plant gardens." In other words, consider the city where I have placed you to be your home and stay there.

For the Hebrews in Babylon, it was not a question of whether or not they could choose to remain in the city. They were captives, and if liberation came at all, it would be by an act of God (Jer. 29:14). The challenges facing Israel were these: Would they repent from the sinful ways that had precipitated the exile? Would



they keep the faith despite pagan surroundings and the false prophets and prophetesses in their midst (Jer. 29:8, 9)? Would they fulfill their mandate as God's special people, his witnesses to the nations and now especially to Babylon? In other words, would Israel be renewed during the exile and once again carry out its redemptive role on earth?

For many Christians today, presence in the city is a matter of choice,—a religious decision. To live in "Babylon" by choice requires a special sense of calling. Residence in the city often involves a certain amount of risk, and possibly sacrifice. Increasingly it means overcoming racial barriers and living among people of another culture, moral standard, and ethnic identity. To the extent in which individuals, families, and churches are convinced that urban presence is God's will for them, they will accept the challenge to remain in the city and bear witness there. Without the conviction that it is God's will to maintain Christian presence in the city, urban residence is hardly worth the price, nor is it likely to have any salvatory effect.

On the American scene today, a major shift in population is occurring. It is a movement away from the big cities. Where once Americans thronged to the cities and their immediate suburbs in search of jobs, education, and excitement, today they are moving in the opposite direction, toward the smaller towns and more distant suburbs. Between 1970 and 1974, 1.7 million more Americans left the big metropolitan areas than moved to them. Through migration, the New York area alone lost half a million people. Of the sixteen metropolitan areas in America that have more than 2 million people each, eight have lost population since 1970. Partly as a cause and partly as an effect of this migration, the quality of life in American cities is declining, problems are multiplying, and the human leadership needed to reverse the trend is becoming more difficult to find.

The reasons for the exodus are not hard to determine: urban crime, pollution, over-crowded schools, noise, high taxes, the high cost of living in general, and the impersonality of the city. Racial aversion is behind the flight of many whites, although, blacks, too, have joined the movement away from the city. Nevertheless, the danger is increasing that America may develop into a kind of *apartheid* society, with the blacks concentrated in the cities and the whites in the suburbs and small towns.

What is the Christian response to the question of continued residence in the city? To non-Christians, the only question to be asked is the pragmatic one: Where is the most pleasant and convenient place to live, work, and raise a family? But for Christians there are other things to consider. Christians are not their own, but they belong to God, and the Lord has assignments for all his servants. The question of where one selects a home and establishes residence is a religious question. It is to be decided through prayer and as an act of faith. It must not only be compatible with, but a result of one's understanding of God's will for his life and the task God expects him to carry out in society.

In view of God's continued concern for cities, any Christian contemplating flight to the suburbs should give the most careful consideration to what he is doing. The Scriptures reveal that at every key turning point in redemptive history, God sends his servants to the city to proclaim his word and herald his kingdom. The closing decades of the twentieth century are, by all estimates, one of history's greatest hours. God wants his witnesses in the key centers of culture, commerce, politics, and communication, and without exception these centers are the great cities. What irony, what tragedy it is that while God can be seen moving *toward* the city, God's people move in the opposite direction. This cannot be understood in any other way than as an abandonment of the task God calls Christians to perform and a denial of the mission received from the Lord.

### "Multiply, Do Not Decrease"

In Jeremiah's instructions to the Hebrews in Babylon, acceptance of the city as the place where God wanted them to be was related to the begetting of children (Jer. 29:6). The willingness to marry, give their children in marriage, and beget children and multiply, connoted acceptance of the city and adjustment to it. In the contemporary world, rejection of the city as a suitable place for life and progeny is seen in the return of Third World mothers to the villages from which they came when the time approaches for a child to be born. Despite the fact that the city offers them modern medical facilities, some women prefer going back to their villages where they must give birth on a hard dirt floor, attended only by semitrained midwives. By so doing, they say in effect that the city is not their home and they do not care to bear

children in the urban environment. On the other hand, acceptance of the city is indicated when a woman decides to stay in the city to bear her children. Once she has made that decision, her adjustment to the city is rapid and she no longer regards herself as essentially a peasant living in the city.

At a time when the birthrate in the United States and in other traditionally Christian countries has dropped to its lowest point in history, the divine injunction to Israel, "multiply . . . and do not decrease" (Jer. 29:6), raises some interesting questions. Is zero population growth a justifiable goal from the Christian standpoint? Urban experts point to the city's over-crowded housing, unemployment, crime, and spiralling cost of welfare services, and they tell us that if urban civilization is to survive there must be a decrease in the rate of human fertility. The majority of Americans seem to agree with this opinion, for recent polls indicate that an increasing number of couples either want no children or fewer children than their parents had.

Although to increase and multiply is an unpopular idea in many circles today, the Christian cannot accept the majority opinion uncritically. There are religious dimensions to the subject which secular analysts ignore. The predicaments of modern society are not simply due to the fact that there seem to be more people than the earth can support. Basically, the problems of society are caused by sin and by the unwise and unjust ways people have handled the world's resources. Simply reducing the number of people may relieve some of the pressure, but it does nothing to solve the real problem. Christians should resist the temptation to accept without question the opinions expressed by secular writers, for vital religious considerations are almost always left out of secular analyses of the causes of urban problems and suggested solutions.

### Seeking the Shalom of the City

"But seek the welfare [shalom] of the city," said God through Jeremiah to the Hebrews in Babylon, and that was the most important and comprehensive assignment they could be given. Not counting the various proper names such as Salem, Jerusalem, Absalom, and Solomon, there are more than three hundred fifty places in the Old Testament in which shalom or its derivatives appear. The root meaning of shalom is to be whole, sound,

saved. Fundamental to the idea of shalom is totality. The fulness of life is involved. Anything that contributes to this wholeness makes for shalom, and anything that stands in the way disrupts shalom. God is the source and foundation of shalom, and in the last analysis there is no shalom apart from him.

In the New Testament, shalom is most often translated "peace" (*eirēnē*), though no single word, either in Greek or in English, can adequately express its meaning. Everything the Old Testament teaches about shalom provides background and understanding to this great concept. Peace is vertical and horizontal. It stands for right relationship with God and right relationships on earth among people who are learning to walk in step with one another. It means peace with God through the person and work of Christ, the Prince of Peace, and peace among men who live by the Spirit and do God's will. It is the life of the kingdom and an ongoing enterprise. The mission of the church is to live peace and proclaim it, doing both within the context of a world that is out of step with God and out of step with itself.

In modern cities shalom is attacked and undermined in a thousand ways, and therein lies the root of urban problems. The mission of the church is to proclaim, promote, and demonstrate shalom amid all the hindrances which sin throws against it. The urban apostolate of the people of God is to be agents of shalom in the midst of the city. To carry out this mission they must understand the following implications of the shalom they are called to establish.

1. *Shalom creates community.* Loneliness, which results from the lack of community, is an indication that life in the city is failing. Where shalom exists, each individual is important, each person plays a part, and each one knows that there is meaning and purpose to his life. The warmth of community relationship dispels the cold loneliness of insignificance.

But what is the situation in modern cities? In Brazil, which expects to add around 30 million people to its already crowded cities in the next ten years, there is a new organization called "Neurotics Anonymous." It is patterned after the well-known Alcoholics Anonymous. Neurotics Anonymous is designed to meet the needs of lonely city people, people who have no one to talk to, no one to whom they can go when their problems become unbearable. Neurotics Anonymous offers lonely people an op-



portunity to talk to someone on the telephone and meet with others once a week. The members of Neurotics Anonymous cling to each other because no one else seems to care about them as individuals.

Here is an area about which Christians ought to be deeply concerned. Is not *koinonia*, ("fellowship"), one of the church's chief characteristics?

2. *Shalom in the city means concern about the material and physical prosperity of its citizens.* The presence of poverty, slum housing, and unemployment is evidence that life has gone wrong in the city, and shalom has been violated. Oftentimes Christians fail to realize that God expects them to be concerned about poverty, suffering, and injustice, and they raise the bogey of the "social gospel" to warn Christians away from secular involvements. But such neglect of the "horizontal" dimensions of life in favor of exclusive concern with the "vertical" is not biblical Christianity at all. God's mandate is to seek the shalom of the city, and that includes the physical and material well-being of its citizens.

3. *Shalom means trust, confidence, and mutual concern between neighbors.* Where there is deceit and treachery, concern only for one's self and family without concern for neighbors and fellow citizens, shalom is violated and community life disrupted. This points up the fact that in almost every place in the Old Testament where shalom appears, the emphasis falls on the interpersonal nature of human life. Shalom is found where people live in a right relationship with one another. There is trust, confidence, and mutual concern. The New Testament describes the shalom-life in terms of the life of love. It is loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

The Israelites in Babylon had much to ponder when they heard Jeremiah's instruction to "seek the shalom of the city." For they were the people with whom God had established the covenant of shalom, and the shalom-life was the essence of their national character. At every level—family, tribe, city, and nation—Israel was to live out the implications of shalom, and its influence was meant to permeate all areas of Hebrew life.

In Babylon the people were told to seek the shalom of the community beyond the ethnic borders of Israel. This added a new dimension to Israel's religious understanding, and it required a radical reorientation of the people's pattern of thinking. The

situation in Babylon was discouraging. In the "old days," back in Palestine, the theocracy had provided a social and political context favorable to the exercise of true religion. National religious life fluctuated, to be sure, and there were many long periods of widespread idolatry and sin. But still, the temple was there, the religious ceremonies that Moses had prescribed were carried on, and there was always a true prophet around somewhere to speak God's Word and teach the people righteousness.

But in Babylon? Here the people of the covenant were thrown into a pagan, hostile, and racially mixed environment. Could God expect them to seek the shalom of this uncircumcised crowd? Could Israel be required to identify with a city such as Babylon and build a relationship of trust and mutual concern with this people? The concept was revolutionary, and it beckoned Israel to understand divine mission in a way which was hard to accept. Yet that was precisely what the prophet said: "Seek the shalom of the city." Even if that city is Babylon.

4. *Shalom has reference to righteousness, in the sense of "just" and "fair" relationship between people.* Without righteousness there cannot be shalom (Isa. 32:16-18; 48:17-19; 60:15-22). There is no shalom to the wicked, nor can an unrighteous society expect to enjoy shalom's benefits (Isa. 48:22; 57:21; 59:8). Bribery, corruption, dishonesty, and cheating destroy shalom and undermine society's welfare. The righteousness in society to which shalom refers is not defined by public opinion or the mores of a given community, but by divinely established standards of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood. Nor is righteousness the same as what is legal, for there are immoral acts which human courts declare legal. God is the fountain of righteousness, and he is its final judge. Human laws and customs and the structures which govern society must conform to God's standards if that society is to enjoy divine blessing and truly promote the well-being of its citizens.

5. *Shalom, above all else, means peace with God and reconciliation with the Maker and Ruler of the universe.* Shalom, you see, means right relationships both vertically (with God) and horizontally (with our fellow man). Old Testament and New Testament revelations blend together to provide the full, rich message of shalom. The essence of the gospel may be expressed in one word, shalom. "You know the word which he [God] sent to Israel,"

said Peter to Cornelius, "preaching good news of *peace* by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)" (Acts 10:36, RSV, italics mine). To the Ephesians, Paul wrote: ". . . shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of *peace*" (Eph. 6:15, RSV, italics mine). All the New Testament teachings about reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness, adoption, and justification are built upon and included in the concept of shalom. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, is the source and mediator of shalom. Through him, shalom comes to earth and joy is restored to human life (Luke 2:10, 14). For this reason, shalom in the Old Testament always has a messianic tone, for it points forward to the coming of the one who alone can remove the barriers between God and man and between man and man, and establish a kingdom in which truth, love, righteousness, and joy prevail.

Shalom has cosmic and eschatological dimensions. Just as the earth and the universe came under the curse because of man's sin, they shall share in the peace of the sons of God. "The creation," writes Paul, "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21, RSV). Because of this, Israel's mandate to seek the shalom of the city extended to the natural as well as the spiritual order, to animal life as well as human life, to the welfare of the trees and rivers of Babylon as well as the health and preservation of human life. Shalom has implications for everything that is city.

### Incarnation and Proclamation

God's people in Babylon were instructed to identify with the city, for in the shalom of the city they would find their own shalom (Jer. 29:7). They were called to be a people set apart, but the quality of their separation had to shine forth in the context of identification. Like the Prince of shalom who someday would come incarnate, they were to be in the world, but not of it; share its burdens, but not its sins. The Israelites were to give themselves for the welfare of the city, for in the prosperity and peace of Babylon they would find their own satisfaction and security.

As agents of God's shalom, Israel could not be quiet in Babylon. They had a message to tell as well as a distinctive life to live.

Actions alone were not enough. Shalom had to be acted out and also spoken out. God's people had a divine word to communicate, and their mission to Babylon could not be fulfilled without God's revelation being spoken to the city.

This raises an interesting question, for if there was ever a time when silence might have been justified it was the time of Israel's captivity in Babylon. Was Israel in any fit condition to speak redemptively and prophetically to Babylon? Did their prophets really have a word from the Lord from which Babylon might benefit? Or was this a time when Israel ought to remain silent, reflect upon their own moral condition, and wait for the Lord to heal their wounds? The spiritual condition of Israel at that time was horrendous, and that very condition had precipitated the exile. Was Israel in a proper condition to communicate shalom's message to Babylon?

To be sure, the necessity of oral proclamation does not mean that God's people need to be talking all the time. There are times when silence is necessary. Sometimes, unfortunately, the church has spoken when it ought to have remained silent, just as it has often remained silent when it ought to have spoken.

There are circumstances in which believers should not even attempt to speak; situations in which the church has become so confused, so uncertain about its message, or has identified itself so completely with a secular culture that it is in danger of declaring untruth in the name of God. There may be instances when spokesmen for the church have succumbed to outside and anti-Christian forces with the result that their pronouncements result in death instead of life. In such circumstances the church should remain silent, and Christians can only pray for the spirit of repentance and for new and better days.

In such circumstances, actions are also quite useless. For where the spiritual climate has dipped so low that Christians do not know their message and dare not attempt to communicate it, neither their speech nor actions can have any salvatory effect.

Though at times silence is necessary, the verbal proclamation of God's Word remains the continuing mission of his people, and the responsibility to communicate in this fashion rested with Israel in Babylon as well. There was no other way for the full impact of shalom to be felt. Verbal proclamation was, then as now, a dangerous business, and Israel was tempted to avoid the



risk of harassment and persecution by remaining silent. But new things do not happen as a result of timidity, and if Israel was to be the Lord's witness in Babylon, shalom had to be spoken as well as lived with all its implications.

### Prayer for the City

Jeremiah's instruction to the exiles in Babylon included a word about prayer. "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf . . ." (Jer. 29:7, RSV, italics mine).

In Genesis 18, we read that Abraham interceded for the wicked city of Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33). Six times he asked God to spare Sodom, and each time God granted his petition. Sodom was frightfully wicked, so wicked in fact that there were not even ten righteous people to be found within its gates. Yet for the sake of just ten, God would have saved the city. What was the significance of this handful of righteous people in such a sinful environment? They were agents of shalom, a righteous leaven in an unrighteous loaf. The city could go on only as long as it contained these bearers of God's Word. Without them the city was doomed.

Prayer for the city is a holy war against all the hostile forces that militate against the peace and well-being of the city. By their prayer, God's people distinguish themselves from those who delight in evil. Like priests, they intercede that the city be spared, that its good be promoted, that its sins be forgiven, and that all citizens come to know the fulness of shalom.

Prayer for the city is missionary prayer. It pleads that Christ's lordship be established in the city. One of the reasons there are secular cities in nations that have known the gospel for many years is that our prayers and our witness have been meager and narrow. We have not prayed as we ought that the shalom of Jesus Christ penetrate the corridors of government, the courts of justice, the circles of commerce and business, and the great educational institutions of the land. Because we have not prayed, we have not made an impact for Christ in countless areas of urban life.

Much more needs to be said to help Christians translate words and theory into apostolic purpose and concrete decisions. For Christians who accept the challenge to be "city saints," agents of shalom in metropolises, these are some suggestions:

1. *Live in the city by choice.* If you are now located in a suburb, consider moving back into the city to be a light and witness for Christ. If this is impossible, give personal and moral support to those individuals, families, and churches that want to stay in or move back to the city.

2. *Support programs that are designed to help inner-city people.* In every city there are church-related and community programs that need funds and volunteer help to assist individuals and families that have problems which they cannot solve by themselves. Learn what it means to "go the second mile" with an inner-city family, whether that mile is material, physical, or spiritual.

3. *Get involved in denominational or interdenominational city mission work.* Find out what is going on, offer to help, and give as much input as you can on the basis of your understanding of what urban apostolate involves.

4. *Become acquainted with inner-city people of a minority race.* If they need help, render it yourself or assist them in finding an agency which can meet their need. Oftentimes, inner-city families are not aware of the social services that are available, or they need help in taking advantage of these services.

5. *Encourage open housing.* Through your neighborhood association or other circles of influence, do what you can to make sure that whites are shown houses in racially mixed areas as well as in all-white neighborhoods, and that blacks are shown homes in all-white areas as well as in racially mixed districts. Also insist on equitable mortgage loans for all races and for all parts of the city.

6. *Urge your church to show Christian concern for inner-city people.* If your church is located in the city, urge the evangelism committee to try innovative reach-out programs that will combine both word and deed in the name of Christ and will reach all races and social classes within a certain radius of the church building. If yours is a suburban church, urge the church to join in a partnership relation with an inner-city church to help them minister in the city.

7. *Support adult education, literacy programs, and social services offered by the community.* Through every avenue open to you encourage all good endeavors to help the poor and promote a better life for all citizens. At the same time, actively oppose every

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enterprise or influence that you feel is damaging to the social and moral health of the city and its inhabitants.

8. *Pray for the city.* Pray big prayers, prayers that cover the full range of urban life, the poor, the power centers, the communications media, the commercial and industrial worlds, and the political leaders. Pray for city churches and the Christians who comprise them, that they will not abandon their urban mission but will be true agents of shalom in the city.