He does advise that we *take the long view*. When we find ourselves in a new place, a new life, a new experience, we need to decide how we to live a meaningful life *within* that context, rather than *outside* of that context. Jeremiah’s theme is *how to live when you are in exile or feel like an exile.*

Jeremiah was the first theologian who spoke during the exile as one of the exiled. Although Jeremiah was not yet in Babylon, he soon would be. Before he is trundled off to exile, he writes: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” (v. 7). The Hebrew word translated as “welfare” is the well-known word, shalom (peace). The literal translation is, “Seek the peace of the city.” Shalom is a deeply nuanced, rich word with layers of meaning. Shalom is the daily greeting of neighbor to neighbor in the Middle East. Shalom means peace (an absence of conflict), but it also desires a person’s wholeness and healing and freedom. Anyone who enjoys shalom experiences a deep and perfect inner peace, a completeness of heart, mind, and soul.

Jeremiah’s advice is surprising. To this community of a persecuted people who have every reason to hate and fear their captors, he says, “Seek the shalom of their city, which is now your city. Pray for them. Live peaceably beside them. Treat them as neighbors.” This is easy to say, but difficult to practice when life seems broken and in disarray. But note that Jeremiah is not advocating a “smile, when you heart is weary,” or a “keep the sunny side up” kind of attitude. Jeremiah’s advice goes far beyond mere positive thinking or putting up new wallpaper in the sitting-room of the soul. Jeremiah urges *active engagement* with the world around us, cultivating a creative relationship with the people and places where we find ourselves.

Jeremiah urges a fundamental change of perspective: see the city not as a fearful place, a den of crime and poverty and incivility, but as a community filled with teeming, bustling, energizing, imaginative, and resourceful people who are worthy of your best effort. Jeremiah speaks in terms of dollars and cents, of marriage and family, of houses and farms. Jeremiah’s bottom line is that the exiled community better get a grip, get a life, and face the harsh facts. They might wish they still had the temple; but they don’t. They might wish they still lived within the walls of Jerusalem; but they don’t. They might wish they could still drink the wine of their own vineyards; but they can’t. They might wish they could sing their songs in Judah, but they can’t. Jeremiah tells them to build a bridge and move on, and he gives them six handy-dandy relocation tips.

**Step 1: Reimagine the Journey.** For these exiles, going “home” will not happen for 70 years. For now, Babylon *is* the destination. They must get used to their new surroundings. Jeremiah says, you are here because God put you here, and you will move only when God moves you. Your faith in God is not tied to a location. You can be a people of faith wherever you are. So, imagine a journey in which God goes with you, a journey in which you carry your faith with you. Imagine finding God in unexpected places and live for the “now” and not for the “then.”

**Step 2: Check out the Housing Market.** Jeremiah says, “Build a house,” which is practical advice; but it also reinforces the message that three generations of families are going to live in Babylon. This is the context of your new life. In your house, you will cook, sleep, and take care of the kids and the dog. You will take singing lessons, study, and go to school. Find a place to settle in and settle down.

**Step 3: Explore the Job Market.** You will have to pay your way. The government may offer you some work, probably manual labor. You will need to plant gardens, do some farming. You will need to make a living: build something, sew something, or grow something. Contribute to the well-being of your family, your neighbors, and your community.

**Step 4: Start a Family.** Have kids! “Multiply there, and do not decrease” (v. 6). Sing songs and find husbands for your daughters and brides for your sons. Teach them their history and their faith. Worship God in a foreign place among foreign people with a foreign culture. Be faithful, even in exile, for in numbers there is strength.

**Step 5: Beware of Scammers!** Do not let anyone deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams that they dream. Do not cling to the future they imagine for you. Hold fast to the words God speaks to you; follow God’s dream for you, even if it leads you to strange and scary places and an uncertain future. If God takes you to it, God will see you through it.

**Step 6: Pray and Prosper.** Jeremiah reminds the people that if their host city prospers, they will prosper. So, they should pray for its success. His exact words are: “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” (v. 7). When we seek the welfare of our neighbors, even the ones with different beliefs and customs, their success is our success.

The apostle Peter also wrote to groups of exiles, the diaspora, who needed encouragement. Scattered throughout the Roman Empire, including the city of Rome which the apostle John refers to asBabylon, Peter writes:“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds” (1 Peter 2:11). Wherever you find yourselves, be good, kind, faithful people. This is good advice for anyone who is a “resident aliens,” far from home and family, surrounded by new experiences, new people, and new circumstances. Which could be any of us, really!

Wherever they are, Christians are “resident aliens.” We are a people *in* the world but not *of* the world. We are a people *in* time but also *out* of time. We have one foot in this life and one foot in the next. We owe allegiance to the authorities locally and to the true authority in heaven. As Christians, we are resident aliens immersed in the culture but working to transform the culture.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote a book entitled “Resident Aliens,” in which they discuss the church’s relationship to culture. Churches should focus on developing Christian life and community, they argue, rather than attempting to reform secular culture. Hauerwas and Willimon reject the idea that America is a Christian nation; instead, advancing the idea that Christians are "resident aliens" in a foreign land. Rather than try to convince others to change their ethics, Christians should model a new set of ethics that are grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Only when the Church enacts its scandalous Jesus-centered tradition will it truly be the body of Christ and transform the world.

Jeremiah and Peter counsel the exiles to recognize that they are resident aliens; to stop whining about the past and to remember that God is faithful; to stop living for an uncertain future and to live in the moment. If they pray, they will prosper. If they sow gratitude, they will reap hope. If they are faithful, the lives of others will be transformed. As Pastor Doug Scalise puts it: “Gratitude is how faith responds in remembering God’s faithfulness in the past; hope is how faith responds in trusting God’s faithfulness in the future.” We are here because God put us here, to live and love the people nearest to us in Christ-like, life-giving and affirming ways.

Prayer: God, we pray that you would help us to seek the welfare of the people and places to which you send us. Lord, strengthen us in our daily living to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, loving as he loved, speaking as he spoke, healing as he healed, and serving as he served. Lord, grant us greater love for our neighbors. Lord, we ask for a revival of compassion, patience, and understanding in our communities. Lord, we pray for an end to the pandemic and a rise to prayer, praise, and salvation worldwide. We sing praise to Your name and thank You for all that You are doing in us, through us, and around us. In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.

**Sources:**

* Hauerwas, Stanley and Willimon, William. “Resident Aliens.” Abingdon Press; Anniversary edition (April 15, 2014).
* Scalise, Doug. “Jeremiah – Seeking the welfare of the place you live.” brewsterbaptistchurch.org, March 9, 2015. Retrieved March 13, 2022.

**Don’t Move Until God Moves**

Sunday, October 9, 2022 [Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+29%3a1%2c+4-7&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 1 Peter 2:11-17

According to the World Bank, more than 20% of the world’s people live on less than a dollar a day; and many of these are permanently on the move, fugitives from warfare, persecution, or starvation. The numbers of the world’s refugees may be unparalleled, but the phenomenon is hardly new. Centuries before Jesus was born (to Mary and Joseph, who would flee to Egypt), there was a community of refugee Jews, dwelling in a foreign land, far from home. Their general delivery address was Babylon, the sprawling capital city of the Babylonian Empire.

When the Babylonians conquered a nation, one of the first things they did was round up the leading citizens and ship them to Babylon. As involuntary “guests” of the Babylonian king, these distinguished citizens lived in comfortable circumstances. They moved freely about the city, engaged in business, married, and raised children. They could do most anything they wanted, except return home. They were birds in a gilded cage.

Jeremiah speaks to these Jewish refugees forcibly relocated to Babylon between 606-586 B.C. Their future was bleak and uncertain. Their homeland no longer existed. The glory years of Saul, David, and Solomon existed only in stories shared around the fire or as legends told by bearded scholars. There was no Israel. No Judah. No nothing. But the critical piece in this text is the fact that the Hebrews are in exile *because God put them there.* This being the case, Jeremiah advises: *stay where you are*. Do not plan on moving; do not start packing until God sends the moving trucks.

If we are where we are because God led us, pushed us, or dragged us there, then we better stay put until otherwise notified. If, on the other hand, we got into our present mess without any help from God, then we might need God to un-mess it; and we might have to wait. God will help when God is good and ready. Which is not what we want to hear. There is no quick fix here.

So, Jeremiah offers some advice to the Jewish expats, and by extension to us. First, we must decide if we are “here” (wherever “here” is) by the will of God or by our own doing. Second, if we are here by God’s will, then we better be prepared to settle down until God moves us. Jeremiah’s counsels that if there is no easy solution to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, then it might be best to adapt to our surroundings. Jeremiah does not tell us to give up or knuckle under. He does not tell us to compromise our faith or our values.