

# In Hong Kong as it is in Heaven

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[ 0 : 00 ] The scripture reading comes from Jeremiah chapter 29. Please follow along on the screen, the bulletin, or your own Bible.

Starting in verse 1, we read, These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem.

The letter was sent by the hand of Elisa, the son of Shaphan, and Gamariah, the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah, king of Judah, sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

It said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

[ 1 : 09 ] Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your 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.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, The God of Israel, do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name.

I did not send them, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise, and bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me, and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

[ 2 : 29 ] You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord. And I will restore your fortunes, and gather you from all the nations, and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. This is the word of God. Great. Thank you, Betty. Well, good morning, everybody.

It is great to see you again. If you are at the community center or online, welcome. If you are visiting us for the first time, it's really great to have you. Thanks for joining us this morning.

My name is Kevin, and I'm one of the elder pastors here with Watermark. Why don't we pray together? We'll just pray briefly, and then we'll dive into this passage together.

Heavenly Father, as we come this morning, we haven't come just for a pep talk. We haven't come just to hear a little bit of advice for our lives. We've come to hear from you, the living God, the majestic and awesome and glorious one.

[ 3 : 37 ] God, as we look at this wonderful passage in Jeremiah 29, won't you speak to us? God, I pray you'll speak to every one of us here at Ebenezer, every one of us at the community center, those at home.

God, won't you drive your word into our hearts and give us a vision for what you've called us to and the life you've called us to live in this city. Why you've placed us in Hong Kong for such a time as this.

God, I pray that these won't just be the words of human ideas or thoughts. This will be your word, God, coming from your heart. Speak to us, we pray, in your wonderful and glorious name.

Amen. I wonder if you have ever received an unexpected letter or maybe a surprising email. In 2011, I one day received a surprising email, out the blue, from a lady that, a real estate agent that

had previously helped Claire and I buy a little apartment in Cape Town.

And the email went like this. The subject line was in capital letters, said offended. And then this was the email. This is a screenshot of the actual email. It says, Hi, Kevin.

[ 4 : 45 ] You sent me a Twitter response from a photo you have found of me. I take great offense at what you've said on your Twitter post to me. You profess yourself to be the greatest follower of God.

Well, I don't think so. After what you've posted on your Twitter wall, you're a false person. Erica, P.S., send regards to your wife and family. No, she didn't say that for us. There wasn't any regards being sent.

And what had happened was that in my very short-lived Twitter account, someone had hacked my account and sent a message to a whole lot of contacts saying, I found this embarrassing photo of you and I'm going to post it online.

Ha, ha, ha. And this person had received this and was very upset about this supposed picture I had found of her. Today we are starting this series looking at the book of Daniel.

And we're not actually going to get into Daniel today. We're going to start Daniel 1 next week. We're going to look at this passage in Jeremiah 29 because it kind of sets up the context of what's happening in the book of Daniel.

[ 5 : 50 ] And as far as surprising or bizarre letters go, Jeremiah 29 is one of the most bizarre letters that anyone would have received. Jeremiah 29 verse 11 is a very, very famous verse in the Bible.

And it's certainly a favorite for Christians who love making Christian merchandise. You know, T-shirts and coffee mugs and coasters and notebooks and pens and all sorts of other things. Because this verse is, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for peace and not for evil. Plans to give you a hope and a future. And so Christians throughout the ages have loved this verse.

It's one of those verses we attach to all sorts of things as a kind of promise of God's kindness to us. The only problem is that if those mug manufacturers or T-shirt manufacturers actually knew the context and the plans that God had for His people, they might start looking for another verse. Because what were the plans that God had for His people? Well, there was something like this. Israel's arch enemies, the Babylonians, are going to march into Judah, siege Jerusalem, destroy the city walls, burn down all the buildings, raise the temple to the ground, burn it flat, steal all the articles out of the temple, anything of gold or silver, and then march the people of Israel back to Babylon where they will serve their arch enemies as slaves for the next 70 years.

[ 7 : 24 ] For I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord. These are not the kind of plans that Israel wanted. Now the reason why this is happening is because for hundreds of years, the nation of Israel, particularly the southern kingdom of Judah, has been in constant rebellion against God, constantly denying Him, rejecting Him, going their own way, and God has sent prophet after prophet warning them against their tolerance of sin and their lack of repentance, but to no avail.

They don't want to listen. And so Isaiah 30 captures this. Look at what Isaiah 30 says. It says, Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, In repentance and rest, you will be saved.

In quietness and in trust will be your strength. But you were unwilling. You said, No, we will run away on horses. Therefore, you will run away as exiles.

You said, We will ride on swift steeds. Therefore, your pursuers will be swift. God's calling His people back to Him and they say, No thanks.

We think we'll look after ourselves. And the consequence of this is utterly disastrous. Friends, maybe just as a side note here, you may be here this morning and think, If only those Christians knew what is going on in my life.

[ 8 : 49 ] If only they really knew. I know how this game works. I arrive at church on Sunday. I speak the right language. I say the right things. And nobody has a clue. Friends, God says that He will not be mocked.

You can't sow or invest in destruction without getting a return on that investment. You sow to destruction, you'll yield destructive patterns of life.

And that's what's happening here. Having invested in destruction, they're getting a return on their investment. And as is always the case, it always is more than what they bargained for.

And so, because of Judah's constant rejection of God, God has brought the Babylonians against him. And the Babylonians are his instrument for judgment and discipline. You may remember, this

is what the whole book of Habakkuk is all about.

We started preaching through it a few years ago. And so, the Babylonians come and they overthrow Judah and they take these people back to Babylon. And Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, does this in three stages.

[ 9 : 51 ] The first one is 605 BC. The second one, about nine years later, 598 BC. And then the second one, 10 years later, 586 BC.

And in the second instance, what he does is he comes and he takes the king and the queen and all the cultural and political and economic elites.

He removes them from Jerusalem and he takes them back to Babylon. And there he introduces them into a re-education program. He wants to re-educate them according to Babylonian values and customs and belief to indoctrinate them in their ways.

And that's how Daniel, that we're going to look at next week, ends up in Babylon. He works in the kind of palace. And so Nebuchadnezzar takes him back to Babylon and there he starts working in Nebuchadnezzar's palace.

But what happens is that Nebuchadnezzar installs his own puppet king on the throne in Jerusalem, a man by the name of Zedekiah. But soon Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar and says, I'm going to do things my own way.

[ 10 : 57 ] And so Nebuchadnezzar comes a third time, 586 BC, and this time he finishes off the job once and for all. And the Bible tells us that when Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed Jerusalem, this last, this third time, he was absolutely ruthless.

And so what he does is Zedekiah, this king, feels like, let's run away. And so in the middle of the night, he and his bodyguards find a gap in the wall and they try and escape out of the city of Jerusalem when the Babylonians have besieged it.

And Nebuchadnezzar catches this king and as punishment, what he does is he kills Zedekiah's children in front of his eyes and then he pokes out his eyes so that the last thing that he sees, his lasting memory, is that of his own children being killed in front of him.

And then after that, Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem absolutely. He burns every building, he destroys the temple, he steals all the articles, everything religious and sacred to the people of Jerusalem, he steals and takes it back to Babylon and he marches the people of Jerusalem back to Babylon and makes them his slaves, his exiles.

One pastor, a man by the name of Stephen Rain, said it like this, it is impossible to exaggerate the trauma of the events that unfolded with the overflow of Jerusalem.

[ 12 : 19 ] Everything of value to these people whether physical, emotional, spiritual had been ripped away from them. Psalm 137 captures some of the gravity of what they felt.

Listen to what Psalm 137 says, the people of God are marched off to Babylon and this is what they write. By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.

Zion is Jerusalem. On the willows there we hang up our liars and our harps. For there our captors required of us songs. Our tormentors mirthed and of its laughter.

They said to us, sing us one of those songs of Zion. The Babylonians are laughing at Jerusalem and said, hey, don't you guys like singing those Hebrew songs? Sing us one of your songs about how great God is.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? O daughter of Babylon doomed to be destroyed blessed shall he be who repays you for what you have done to us.

[ 13 : 20 ] Derek Kidner an Old Testament scholar says this, every line of this psalm is alive with pain. God's people are in a foreign land being ruled by some people that they don't love and respect and their hearts are alive with pain because they are away from their homeland and in foreign territory.

They are living as exiles in Babylon. Babylon. What should God's people do when they address changes from Israel to the heart of the pagan district?

Well, what we have before us is a letter that Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon. When Nebuchadnezzar took the people to Babylon, he took all the cultural leaders who said, but he left behind the poorest of the poorest.

He left behind those that he thought were insignificant. And one of those is Jeremiah the prophet. So Jeremiah is in Jerusalem. It's all been destroyed. There's just smoldering buildings around him.

The cities are ruined. But he writes a letter to the exiles in Babylon. And what does God want to say to them? Well, that's what Jeremiah 29 is all about.

[14:38] Now, throughout the Bible, Babylon is described as the symbol of all that is evil and pagan and wicked and wrong with the world. Remember Genesis 11, there's the Tower of Babel.

That is the precursor to Babylon where the people said, who is God? We'll be our own gods. Let's make a monument to our own glory. In Daniel chapter 4, there's Nebuchadnezzar.

One day he comes out on the balcony of his house. He looks over Babylon and this is what he says. Is this not great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a testimony for the glory of my majesty?

Everything about Babylon rings with power and arrogance and it's the very heart of the city of man. And so, what would God want to say?

Well, in this letter, God says something very surprising because he tells the people of Israel to make themselves at home in Babylon because God in his sovereignty has sent them there so that God can build his city, the city of God, right in the heart of the city of man.

[15:44] In a sense, Nebuchadnezzar takes these people back to Babylon but in a far greater sense, actually God is the one who sent them there, not as exiles but as missionaries.

God has sent his people there to build the city of God in the heart of the city of man. And that's the main point of Jeremiah's letter is that there being in Babylon is not some cosmic mistake.

It's not because God fell asleep one day and Satan quickly overcame him. It's not because Satan overcame God. God's people are in Babylon by his sovereign will.

God is under control and therefore God can be trusted. And that despite how things appear, God has plans for his people even in the midst of Babylon.

I have plans for you in purposes says the Lord. Plans for your welfare. Plans for your prosper. Plans to give you a hope and a future. But as God's going to say this is only going to happen if you trust me if you live radically faithful lives to me in the heart of Babylon as you surrender and submit to me.

[16:52] And friends that's actually what the whole book of Daniel is all about. It shows us what does it look like to live as God's people in the midst of an ungodly world. Okay? Now let's dive into this passage and see what it says.

Before we do that one last thing. God's letter to the people in Babylon says you might be here because of some other agenda but I've sent you here because I've got plans for your life.

And friends that's actually the same for us today. You may be in Hong Kong because your company sent you here for a year or two. You may have come to Hong Kong on a two year contract. You may have come here to get some work experience or to travel the world for some other reason. But in another sense if you're a follower of Jesus God has sent you here because you've got a plan and a purpose for your life. God has sent you here to this great city the Pearl of the East this fragrant harbor as a missionary to build the city of God in the midst of the city of man.

And so let's see what God says to his people here. Three things we're going to see today. The first one God says is put down your roots. Put down your roots.

[18:04] Look at what God says in verse 4 to 9. He says Thus says the Lord of hosts the God of Israel Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat of their produce.

Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives to your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. When the Israelites first went to Babylon a bunch of the religious leaders were saying just relax God's just letting off some steam he just needs to calm down we'll only be here a year or two and then we'll go back to Israel and everything will be fine.

And what they were really saying was just sit on your hands sit tight don't get too involved in the city let's just stay in our Jewish bubble here on the waters of Babylon and pretty soon things will go back to the way that we've known them.

But Jeremiah writes and he says no, no, no don't let those false prophets deceive you God is going to plant you here for 70 years and he's asking you to take root here and the reason is because God has got plans for you God wants you to know things about him and about yourselves that you'll only discover as you put down your roots and as you plant yourselves here in the city of Babylon. God wants you to discover who he is and who you are but you'll only find that out as you live lives of radical faithfulness to him even in this ungodly world.

[ 19 : 36 ] Look what he says in verse 12. He says then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you then you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

The problem with Israel is that they have not been seeking God they've been seeking all sorts of other gods that's why they're in Babylon because they've gone their own way and God says as you put down your roots as you make yourself at home here then you will find out what it means to be my people in this broken world.

Friends, it's one thing to be faithful to God in Jerusalem the epicenter of Jewishness. You've got the temple you've got the rabbis you've got the symbols you've got the Torah no, that's one thing but to be faithful to God in the heart of the city of man the heart of Babylon that's another thing altogether. But friends isn't that true for us as well? It's one thing to be faithful to God to sing of His covenant promises to say great is your name here on Sunday morning you've got the band you've got followers of Christ around you but what about in the office place?

What about in the courts of law? What about in home? What about in the classrooms? That's where it really counts that's where God wants us to be the people of God even in the midst of an ungodly world that's where it really counts.

[ 20 : 57 ] And so look at what God says here He says put down your roots build houses how many know that if you buy a house and then 70 years time everyone's going to leave you're probably not going to get a good return on your house right?

The Babylonians are not going to pay top dollar for those houses when suddenly the market is flooded there's plenty of houses on the market He says build houses plant gardens eat the produce be fruitful and multiply multiply and do not decrease Now quick question what does that remind you of?

Where else in the Bible does God say be fruitful and multiply? In Genesis 1 right? The Garden of Eden What's God saying here? He's saying in a sense I want you to bring Eden into Babylon I want you my people to bring the kingdom of heaven on here on earth God is saying I want you to build the city of God right here even in the midst of the city of man Now friends what does that mean for us here in Hong Kong?

Well one of the phenomena of big cities is that so many people move into the city into a big city like Hong Kong in order to use the city for what we can get from it rather than invest in the long term good and health of the city and so many people we think hey I'm here it's my company sent me here it's an opportunity to grow personally or professionally it's an opportunity to make some money before I go home it's an opportunity to travel and see the world all that without contributing to the long term health of the city but what we see here is that what happens if we're to see ourselves not just as those who use the city but as missionaries sent into the city for its well being and for its good what happens if God wants to send us to Hong Kong not just for what we can get from it but actually how we can contribute towards it and what that means is that Christians actually we need to learn how to be a counter-cultural influence in the heart of the city where we're not just using the city for our own benefit we're not isolating from the city in our own little

Christian bubbles but neither are we so part of the city that we adopt its values as part of our own rather what God wants us to do is to go into the cities and yet stay distinct from the city because we have our own Christian values even as we live in the city and live for its well being and its benefit Tim Keller says this Christians should demonstrate what an alternative human culture one that's based on the gospel can look like Christians should demonstrate in the heart of Hong Kong what does it look like to use money and sex and power not just for our own benefit not to use others how to prop ourselves up but how do we use our money how do we use our power for the well being and the blessing of others friends obviously our city Hong Kong has gone through massive changes everything's up in the air and there's so many questions that are on people's minds and one of the questions that as Hong Kong as many of us are asking is where is my future secure should I be should I stay here should I look to move now friends

[ 24 : 14 ] I want to say that's not the wrong question to ask that's not a bad question as Christians we should be responsible we've got to be responsible for our families we've got to be responsible for our aging parents and so that's not a bad question to ask but maybe one of the questions that God wants us to ask in addition to that is God are you possibly asking me to stay here for the long term well being and the blessing of the city God is it possible that you're asking me to be here and to contribute to the long term good of the city and you know what that's going to cost involve great sacrifice that's going to involve great cost but remember what John the apostle says about Jesus in

John chapter 1 he says Jesus the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us the actual Greek this is Jesus pitched his tent amongst us Jesus didn't just helicopter into Jerusalem at age 30 and say right let's get this show going right Jesus takes on our nature

Jesus takes on flesh and blood and Jesus is born into this world as a human being with all the brokenness all the insecurity all the fears all the dangers Jesus came and pitched his tent as well he laid down his roots he got involved in the heart of what is going on so that Jesus could really bring the kingdom of God to the kingdom of the world that Jesus could bring the city of God into the city of man Jesus came and dwelt amongst us and Jesus says as his disciples he says come and be with me come and follow me come and become like me come and do the things that I did put your roots down in the city for it's good okay so put down your roots second thing is this Jesus says Jeremiah says seek the welfare of the city look at verse 7 with me Jeremiah writes to these exiles in Babylon and he says seek the welfare of the city where I've sent you into exile for in its welfare you will find your own welfare now the word welfare here is the Hebrew word shalom okay and shalom doesn't just mean peace it means a holistic harmony that is involved that touches every area of our lives so shalom means this harmonious flourishing this well being personally and psychologically so harmony within myself spiritually harmony with me and God relationally harmony with those in my life even culturally and socially harmony in society and it's where all of life is marked by this fullness this rest this peace this harmony that every human being longs for it's the garden of Eden now one of the main points of scripture is that the deep harmony the soul rest that all of us long for that we spoke about last week this deep shalom that our hearts long for is never found apart from God himself remember our scripture last week

Jesus says come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest the grand narrative of scripture is that we are created to be at shalom with God but because of our sin we've been cut off from God and we separated from him and now we live with a state of restlessness in our hearts remember Augustine's great quote we were made for you oh God and our hearts will always be restless until they find their rest in you and so look at what God says to the exiles who are living in the heart of the city of man in pagan Babylon he says I've sent you there that you may seek the shalom the peace the prosperity of Babylon now what does that mean what does that mean for us here in Hong Kong God says to us watermark I've called you to Hong Kong not just to enrich yourselves not just to get some experience

I've called you to seek the shalom and the blessing the welfare of this city while we live here what does that mean well it means a couple of things the first thing it means is on the one hand it means proclaiming the gospel this is the essence of who we are we are a gospel proclaiming community friends if you're not a Christian this morning that might sound bigoted and judgmental and arrogant that we go out there telling everyone that we're right and that they're wrong but that's not the heart of evangelism at all the reason we want to tell people about the gospel is because of what Jeremiah says here we want the shalom we want the well-being we want the peace of our city and we know that there'll never be true peace apart from reconciliation with God remember what Martin Lloyd-Jones says you'll never have the peace of God without first being at peace with God the reason we go and proclaim the gospel is because our city is so unrestful our city is full of restlessness and we long for our neighbors and our family and our colleagues and our friends to experience the deep shalom that God wants for them and so we are a gospel proclaiming community the only way for everyone or anyone to have real lasting peace is through believing what Jesus did on the cross confessing our need for him and coming to him in faith and repentance and so that's why at Watermark Mission is at the very heart of what we do because we are gospel proclaiming community but that's not the only thing God asks us to because he also asks us to live out the gospel in other words we proclaim the gospel with word but we also proclaim the gospel with deed we as Jesus did we go out teaching and proclaiming who God is but we also go out doing good to our city friends we are called to proclaim the gospel in word and deed and that means that Christians we work for the peace and the security and the justice and the prosperity of the entire city not just Christian communities it means that as citizens of heaven

Christians should be the very best citizens of Hong Kong the very best citizens of Hong Kong because we walk in the footsteps of the one who laid down his life even for his enemies think about that for a second God's called us here as citizens of heaven to be the very best citizens of Hong Kong I don't know if you remember a few weeks ago we were preaching through Matthew's gospel and we got to Matthew chapter 9 and Jesus is having a meal with some tax collectors and some

sex workers and a bunch of other people and the religious leaders come to Jesus' disciples and they say how can your rabbi be having a meal with those scumbags with those people surely how can Jesus associate with them and Jesus says this is the very reason I've come I've come to bring peace to the city I haven't come just to hang out with those that have got it all together I've come to call sinners to repentance

[ 31 : 35 ] I've come to bring wholeness and shalom to those that need it Jesus says the reason he came is to bring shalom his restorative redemptive healing shalom to the pain and the brokenness of our world and friends as challenging as it is that's what God calls us to as well and so what does that look like practically well it means that as Christians we're always looking for an opportunity to tell people about Jesus it means the Uber driver he's stuck with you you've got 10 minutes with him he's not going to go anywhere well I guess he's got the steering wheel maybe he could go somewhere maybe he could hijack you and take you somewhere but it means telling people about Jesus the driver the taxi driver our neighbours it means giving out Christian books to those it means inviting people to outreach opportunities we're always looking out for ways to help people find true and lasting peace but you know what it also means it means paying a fair and adequate wage to those that work for us whether those in our home or whether those in the office it means paying and treating people with dignity and honour it means foreign domestic helpers that work for Christians should be the most honoured and respected foreign domestic workers in our city friends it means rather than spending our entire budget on ourselves maybe setting aside a portion to support and finance and underwrite those that are doing good work in our city and prospering and bringing back the peace and the shalom of our city it means extending grace and forgiveness to those that have hurt us or wronged us seeking reconciliation friends it means helping women that have been abused and used by men for their bodies to get out of the slavery of the sex industry and to find work and employment that is full of dignity and honour friends it means opening up our lives and our hearts and maybe even our homes to those that are considered outsiders those that are part of another ethnicity or another race those that are part of a different socio-economic bracket it means maybe fostering vulnerable children in our city maybe even adopting a child that doesn't have a family it means coming alongside single moms and teenage moms and saying

I know your life is tough and we want to come inside and be there for you and support you and to love you and do what we can to bring shalom and peace to your life friends for some people and Christians should be at the forefront of this it means maybe even lobbying government or setting up a work tank or an NGO or some kind of program to ensure there's just and equitable laws and policies in Hong Kong it means fighting for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in our city Tim Keller says this and this is really profound and I want us to think about this as Christians we don't just use the resources of the city to build a great big church actually Christians use the resources within the church to build a great city let me say that again as Christians we don't use the resources of the city to build the church so that we can get a bigger and more powerful and stronger and more famous church we're not trying to build our name actually as Christians we use the resources that God has given us to advance and cultivate the prosperity and the blessing and the shalom of our city the goal of Watermark is not just to have a great church it's to have a great city and that's why God has planted us here and so Jeremiah writes and he says seek the shalom the welfare of your city for in its welfare you will find your own and isn't that amazing that God says the shalom that so many of us long for isn't found as we divorce ourselves from the city and live in our Christian babbles and just work for a Christian organization and only have Christian friends actually the shalom and the blessing that we long for is found as we work with God in the midst of our city and bring the kingdom of God to our world as we join God in bringing the city of God to the city of man in that very place is where we find the shalom and the blessing and the peace that we long for friends you'll never find the peace that your heart longs for simply by going on holidays and sitting on the beach you'll find it by joining God in what he's doing in this city as we join him seeking the blessing of our city is that okay does that make any sense okay

I've got one last point let's see if we can revive it okay so firstly put down your roots make this city home ask God is this God do you want me to stay here for the long haul secondly seek the shalom the wholeness the blessing the city of God in our city third thing is this look at what Jeremiah says pray for the city pray for the city look at the way that Jeremiah phrases it here he says pray to the Lord on behalf of the city now that language is almost priestly Jeremiah isn't just saying pray for the city and he's certainly not saying do what Jonah did remember Jonah he goes to Nineveh and he

tells them about God and the gospel and then he retreats and he sits up on a hill and he kind of says okay God let's see you nail these guys and Jonah if he prays for the city he's praying that God will smite them right but what does

God say to Jeremiah he says well Jeremiah says to the exiles pray on behalf of the city it's almost like God is saying these guys need my mercy and my grace but they don't know how to call out to me but you do so why don't you pray for them on their behalf to me for my grace and my mercy isn't that incredible remember friends the Babylonians are Israel's arch enemies they've just burnt down their city they've pulled down the walls they destroyed the temple they've stolen all the goods they've desecrated the holy place and God you want us to do what for them you've got to be kidding right friends I know that some of us here are extremely frustrated even angry maybe at what has happened in our city and the changes that have taken place over the last two years and I must confess that as a foreigner

[ 38 : 06 ] I don't I carry the city so deeply in my heart but I know that I probably don't understand and feel it to the depth of many of us here friends God asks us to pray on behalf of our city and I know that's an incredibly difficult thing for some of us maybe but I want to ask you this do you think that you could possibly find it in your heart to trust the one who when he was being nailed to the cross by his own enemies and his enemies looked upon them with a smirk on their face Jesus cried out Father forgive them they know not what they do and when Jesus prayed that prayer he wasn't saying he wasn't just praying for a blanket amnesty he wasn't just saying God let's just pretend this whole thing hasn't happened he wasn't just saying let's just sweep their sins under the rug

Jesus was saying God these people need your grace and your mercy but they don't know how to call out to you and so I'm going to call out to you that you by your grace will reveal yourself to them so that they will find you and call out to you for the grace and the mercy that they need God if you leave them to their own devices they're in deep trouble but they need your mercy and they don't know how to find you so God I ask you won't you in your mercy won't you pour out your grace in them so that they can find you friends could we not pray the same thing for our city Father forgive them they know not what you do pray to the city on behalf of it now why does God ask us to pray I want to give us three quick reasons one reason is this because prayer is powerful you'll know this very famous I've mentioned many times I think the 16th century John Knox is a Presbyterian pastor in Scotland and he used to pray in Queen

Mary the Queen of England she says I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the armies of England right because prayer is powerful and it changes things and prayer actually works and when we pray for our city God hears our prayers and he does things prayer is powerful the second reason is this you pray for what you love and you love what you pray for it's very hard to pray for someone and despise them it's very hard to pray for someone and then use and abuse them you pray for what you love but also as you pray for someone your heart grows for them as God asks us to pray for the city it'll grow our own heart for the city and even the areas of pain and the areas that we find hard but here's a third reason because not only is God asking us to love and serve the city of Hong Kong he's asking us to serve the city of Hong Kong in his way Francis Schaeffer used to speak about doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way in other words what he's saying is we can go out in the city of Hong Kong we can set up NGOs and start schools and plant churches and set up charities but if we do it without deep meditation on the gospel if we do it without the dependence that comes from prayer you know what will happen we'll do it self-righteously we'll do it with self-sufficiency we'll do it in our own strength and you know what we'll probably cause more harm than good Steve Corbett wrote a book 15 years ago called when helping hurts and he spoke about how so many NGOs go into the cities and try and do things but in the end they cause more damage than good because they do it in their own self-righteousness and their own strength and Steve Corbett says that when we do that we try to bring the kingdom of heaven to our world without the king friends we need to be people that pray in this great city of ours that has gone through so much in the last two years friends it's easier to complain than to pray it's easier to mock and scoff and laugh and ridicule and criticize than it is to labor and pray it's easier to point with our finger than to get on our knees but friends what our city really needs is not just more charity and it's not just Christians that are going out and doing random acts of kindness it's not just Christians trying to be good people what this great city needs is the kingdom of God it needs the presence and the power of the once crucified but now resurrected Christ who sits in glory friends what this city needs is the life transforming power of the sovereign majestic glorious God the God who gives life to the dead

and how's that going to happen?

it's going to happen as his church presences itself in the city seeks the peace and the shalom of the city but as we give ourselves to pray Jeremiah writes this letter to the people of God in the heart of the city of man and he says go and put down your roots seek the shalom and the welfare and the peace of the city go and be people of prayer may we do the same let's pray together oh heavenly father we God we come before you this morning and we hear your word Lord that you call us to this great city not just for our own welfare not just for our own good you call us here God not just to use the city but to bless it oh heavenly father we pray come and stir our hearts God to love and serve the great city of Hong Kong the fragrant harbor Lord the pearl of the east we pray God that this city will be infused with the fragrance of heaven Lord

Jesus come and have your way but first we pray come and have your way in our own hearts God God won't you come and shape us Lord won't you come and form us God won't you come and make us more like you God we so need you here Lord I pray for every one of us this morning whether we're at home whether we're at the community center whether we're here at Ebenezer won't you start to call us God God we're convinced that you've called us here for such a time as this it's no coincidence that we're in Hong Kong for this time this season God won't you lead us won't you help us won't you speak to us God help us to love our city and to serve our city help us God to bring the kingdom of God to the city of man

[ 45 : 14 ] Christ come and have your way we pray Amen