

The Prophet and the Apostle Bible Conference

Let's imagine that God called the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Peter to come to Birmingham, Alabama, in 2022, for a two-day Bible conference on "*Living in Exile.*" Since we cannot afford to leave their Spirit-inspired message back in biblical times, we need to accept the cross-cultural, spiritual challenge of receiving God's word from the prophet and the apostle. We pray for ears to hear and eyes to see God's word applied in our city and century *today*.

On the first night of the *Bible* conference Jeremiah compared sixth century B.C. Temple Religion to twenty-first century American Christianity. He recalled the challenge of conveying to the people in Jerusalem the very unpopular message that their culture was going to be overrun by the Babylonian empire. Jeremiah claimed that this social and political reality needed to be accepted as the judgment of God *and not resisted*. He told everyone how religion was thriving, and true faith and faithfulness were dying. Temple religion had never been more popular, but God was fed up with Israel's idolatry and infidelity. Jeremiah lamented that a self-promoting, self-centered spirituality was celebrated everywhere.

He insisted that the Babylonian captivity was coming, and the people of God needed to repent and return to the Lord if they expected to remain faithful and blessed by God through the ordeal. Jeremiah compared the coming invasion of Babylon to the challenges facing Christians in the Secular Age. Like seventh century B. C. Israelites, American Christians were accustomed to favored nation status, religious pride, racial privilege, conventional morality, and the acceptable seduction of money, sex, and power. They were into a private faith of the spiritual self, safely compartmentalized from nearly every other aspect of life from sports to sex, and from politics to work. They were passive recipients of spiritual services.

Jeremiah concluded his message that night by encouraging faithful disciples to learn how to live faithfully and courageously for Christ. He shared how he experienced in his own body, mind, and soul the judgment of God that Judah deserved. He stressed the need for courage and willed passivity to walk alongside a rebellious and disobedient people through the valley of despair. He challenged Christians to help each other grieve their loss and interpret their suffering. He gave words to their lament and challenged them to grapple with the validity of God's judgment. He taught them how to submit to God's justice and judgment and work through their grief to an enduring hope in God's great faithfulness.

On the second night of the conference, the apostle Peter preached on "Resident Aliens in Your Home Culture." The thrust of Peter's message was this: the followers of Jesus Christ are strangers in their own homeland. To be born again into a living hope is to become a foreigner in the land of their birth. Without moving from one country to another, and without crossing any political or regional boundaries, Christians should see themselves as resident aliens. He stressed that the impact of the gospel must be both theological and sociological. In Christ, believers re-enter their home culture as foreigners, who for all practical purposes are now strangers without status in their home culture. Christ's followers become exiles without being deported or traveling to a foreign country. Believers are resident aliens by virtue of their newfound faith in Christ and kingdom lifestyle. Like Jeremiah, Peter called for courage because of the inevitable clash with culture that ensues because of the "sheer contrariness" of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Peter challenged the Birmingham crowd not to abdicate but embrace the life of biblical discipleship. There was a murmur in the crowd when he suggested that the reason we suffer so little for Christ is because we are not serious about applying ourselves to New Testament Christianity. Peter observed that Christians have assimilated into southern culture so completely that there is no real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. The apostle reasoned that if everyone is a Christian, then no one is a Christian.

Peter insisted that instead of mounting an argumentative defense against an abusive anti-Christ culture, he admonished Christ's followers to respond to the world as Christ did, with humility and gentleness. Our task, he stressed was "doing good" and pleasing Christ. He envisioned a community of resident aliens, chosen outsiders, whose identity is in Christ, and when they suffer social hostility, it is because they are so good. During the whole evening Peter showed no interest in condemning the world; his concern was how to help the world. The issue, Peter insisted, is not how bad the world is, but how good the Christian ought to be, because the gospel is so great.

Peter concluded by emphasizing that the gospel doesn't write the culture off. We cannot wash our hands of the whole mess and go about being nice to our friends and living a nice Christian life. We are called to engage the world in a way that is a true benefit to the world. In the Spirit, we are empowered to have a faithful, fruitful, and insightful gospel witness.

Over the two nights both Jeremiah and Peter insisted that the church must refuse the strategies of worldly power, with its coercion, exploitation, and propaganda. Instead, the people of God must opt for a fundamentally different kind of social power, one inspired by the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ordinary believers in their ordinary lives living in Christ and practicing the Jesus way in the world. I came away feeling that I had a lot to learn from the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Peter.