

Overcome: Walking as the Chosen

Jeremiah 29:1-14 NIV

Raymond Evans

Lucknow Community CRC

Candidacy Sermon: Confessional Emphasis

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“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 NIV) This assurance from Jesus is one of the greatest comforts. That when we look to Christ we can have and know peace, for he has overcome. Last week we looked at the story of Jacob and his wrestling with God and how we too are called to be like Israel, to be those who wrestle with God and with man and overcome. This week we will be utilizing the Scriptures and the Canon’s of Dordt to see how the assurance we have acts as the springboard for our mission to the world.

Assurance is a word that we are quite familiar with. Each week we remember the assurance of pardon we have through Jesus Christ and his redeeming work on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. We also have the assurance of our series verse, John 16:33, which reminds us of the victory Christ has won. There is yet a third assurance we have and that is the assurance of our election. That God has chosen those who are His and that this election is not through anything we can do, and therefore potentially lose, but is by God’s sovereign omniscient grace.

The Canons of Dordt in the First Point, Article 12 give us this teaching about how we come to understand in this assurance of election,

“Assurance of their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God’s Word - such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.” (CoD 1.12)

This assurance is not something that we can come to know through “head knowledge,” but through the transformation of our character and our desires so as to align with the will of God. A “heart and hands” knowledge is the assurance we have.

However, since this understanding of our assurance has existed it has and will always suffer one critique - our tendency to take this assurance lightly. In one of his most well known works, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to this casual, laissez faire, attitude to assurance as “cheap grace.” Bonhoeffer defines “cheap grace” as:

“Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. . . . An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be sufficient to secure remission of sins. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” (p.45,47)

The assurance of election we have through the grace afforded to us by Jesus Christ’s blood is a costly grace. It is not one to be held flippantly. Our understanding of our assurance and the grace behind it shapes our response to God and to the world through which we were created to steward.

The Israelites fell into this trap time and time again. For they had the assurance of being God’s chosen people, and yet as seen throughout the history of Israel from Judges to Chronicles, the Israelites time and time again took advantage of this assurance for their own means. As John Lennox observed in his book *Against the Flow*, “Some of Judah’s leaders had fallen into thinking that, because their nation had been chosen to play a special role for God in history, it did not really matter how the nations or the nation behaved.” (p.13) It was this attitude and approach to the assurance they had with God that led to the Israelites being exiled to Babylon.

However, God's grace was still prevalent in their exile, and through the prophet Jeremiah God sent them some instructions as to how they were to live amongst the world of the Babylonians. Please turn with me in your Bibles or follow along on the screen as we read from Jeremiah 29:1-14.

“This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity [shalom] of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers [shalom], you too will prosper [shalom].’ Yes this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel says: ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD.

This is what the LORD says, ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper [shalom] you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I

will listen to you. 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 will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.'" (Jeremiah 29:1-14, shalom added beside instances of where it was translated into English.)

This is the Word of the Lord.

There's a lot to dive into with this passage, but I want to draw your attention to a detail that is often glanced over in this passage. Israel is given an assurance. They are assured by God Himself that this exile will "only" last for seventy years. God's elected nation and people are assured of their return to where they belong. While they have this assurance, they also are given a mandate, a mission, for their time in exile.

The Babylonians, under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, were the ones who have ripped them from their homes, their farmlands, their cities, and everything they knew. This world they now lived in is one constant reminder of what they have lost; and they have this assurance that as a nation it is only temporary. As such the Israelites are commanded by God not to give into to the regular ways of trying to overcome the world and culture they inhabit.

I have to credit my mentor, friend, and former Pastor Ryan Pedde for the following explanation. You see in the world of the Israelites, and in our world today we really only have four options when it comes to our engagement with culture. As alliteration is always awesome, here are the astounding A's to ascent to that assertion;

Attack: Fight, battle, and "rage against the machine," of the world and culture. This would've been an entirely understandable response for the Israelites based off the context. For us today, we are often tempted to this response to the world and culture by the rage and

anger that social media reinforces. Yet, this was not the way God ordained for the Israelites, and as we will see it is not the way of the chosen for us today either.

Avoid: The world can be overwhelming and frightening, and we have this assurance from God of our salvation (or for the Israelites, the return to the Promised Land.) Let's just hunker down and wait for it all to come to an end. This teaching was what God was warning the Israelites against in his rebuke of the prophets in verses 8-9. In the preceding chapters we see that false prophets in Jerusalem were sending word to the exiles that their exile would only last two years, and so they just needed to wait it out before they returned. For us today this avoidance can be seen through the practices of some monastic communities, but also is the trap of "cheap grace," we are to avoid as well. We may not avoid the world around us physically, but a hands-off, laissez faire, attitude to the world is a form of emotional, relational, and spiritual avoidance that is the antithesis of our calling.

Assimilate: Whereas the first two A's recognize the world and culture as something to overcome and to be weary of, assimilation occupies the other end of the spectrum. We see in the book of Daniel how Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians tried to assimilate the Israelites through changing their names and trying to get them to adopt the Babylonian gods as their own. Yet we see in verses 12-14 that while amongst the Babylonians and their diviners, seers, and idols they are still to seek after and pray to the LORD. While our world today doesn't explicitly worship idols there are practices and teachings everywhere around us that are against the teachings of God, and yet the temptation is to adopt these practices and teachings so as to be more approachable but in doing so we lose what makes us distinct.

Alongside: This is the only option. We see through God's message that the Israelites weren't just to survive amongst the Babylonians, they were to seek it's *shalom*, it's peace and prosperity. They were to come alongside this world and be different, but also for it. Even though they had the assurance of return, God commanded them to build houses, marry, plant

gardens, and work for the overall *shalom* of Babylon. The very people who took them into exile.

Now, I've intentionally be using the term *shalom* alongside the words peace and prosperity found in the NIV for a reason. Prosperity and peace are entirely accurate and true translations, but there is depth to *shalom* that we miss in those English translations. As peace in our modern understanding is often seen as the absence of conflict, and prosperity is most commonly understood through a financial lens. Neither of which fully capture *shalom*. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis provides us this definition and understanding of *shalom*:

“Shalom is fullness, completeness. So it’s well-being. It’s prosperity: not in a cheap making-a-profit sense of possibility, but in a deep sense of my well-being is integrated with the well-being of all around me, human and non-human, and the earth on which our lives depend.”

The Israelites when they were commanded, “*seek the [shalom] of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it it, because if it [has shalom], you too will [have shalom],*” (Jeremiah 29:7, with only *shalom*) were to earnestly care for and seek a deep sense of well-being for their captors, and to pray for them as well. This is costly grace. This is the mission of those with the assurance of their salvation from God.

The Canons of Dordt affirm this response to assurance, the teaching contained within Article 13 instructs us:

“In their awareness and assurance of this election, God’s children daily find greater cause to humble themselves before God, to adore the fathomless depth of God’s mercies, to cleanse themselves and to give fervent love in return to the One who first so greatly loved them. This is far from saying that this teaching concerning election, and reflection upon it, make God’s children lax in observing his commandments or carnally self-assured. By God’s just judgement this does usually

happen to those who casually take for granted the grace of election or engage in idle and brazen talk about it but are unwilling to walk in the ways of the chosen.” (CoD, 1.13)

Humility, adoration, sanctification and fervent love to God are the responses to have to this assurance. This hope is to be shared with the world as we come alongside it. Fulfilling the two great commands, *“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* (Matthew 22:37-40 NIV). The love of God that assures us of our pardon of sin, our salvation and election is a love that needs to be wielded alongside the world. In the world, but delightfully different from it.

While this command was given to the Israelites in exile, it is also a part of the mission of the Church today. In fact, the apostle Peter recognized the importance of this relationship to the world as he instructed in 1 Peter 2,

“Dear friends, I urge you , as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.” (1 Peter 2:11-17 NIV)

Just as the original audience of Jeremiah's letter were exiles, so to were the original audience to Peter's letter, and us today. We are not of this world, and of this place, but we are exiles amongst the world and so we are to seek to live good lives while here, to seek the *shalom* of Lucknow, Huron-Kinloss, Kincardine, Wingham, Dungannon, Ripley, Goderich, and so many other towns that I am still learning.

Peter before that section we just read reminded his readers that Jesus Christ is our cornerstone, our firm foundation. Recall our series verse, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33 NIV). The Israelites had the assurance of seventy years of exile from God, and us today have the assurance of pardon that comes from Jesus Christ who paid the ultimate cost and died in our place so that we may have the forgiveness of sins, but also so that we may go with the assurance of our salvation so as boldly proclaim the gospel. To seek *shalom* by loving God and loving our neighbour.

Jesus Christ affirmed for us that he has overcome the world, and through his life and ministry we see that one of the ways he are to imitate to overcome the world is through servanthood. Our assurance gives us the freedom not to advance our own causes, not to seek first our desires and goals, but to serve those around us and seek the *shalom* of Lucknow and area and through that love displayed we build God's Kingdom and show the love of Jesus Christ to those we encounter. Let us pray.

Close in Prayer.

- Philippians 2:5-11 NIV include in prayer.