

# scattered

## Bible Study

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**Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Acts 8:4**

### Engage Urban

“Pray to the Lord for [the city], because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”  
Jeremiah 29:4-11

#### Get Context

The destruction of the great walled city of Jerusalem, with its temple, palaces and municipal structures being turned to rubble by King Nebuchnezzar’s soldiers, demolished the safety and community which can only be found in a city. People from ancient times tended to congregate and structure life around connected communities that could provide for greater security, access to resources, and exchange of goods and ideas. In the Bible, the countryside was more often than not viewed as wilderness, unfit for habitation, dangerous. Jeremiah wept as he walked through the ruins of the once-great urban Jerusalem and wrote Lamentations. In Jeremiah 29:4-11 he writes a letter of instruction and encouragement to his countrymen, more than 10,000 of them, who had been forced by the Babylonian victors in war to relocate throughout Babylon as refugees exiled from their homeland and the safety of their city. In this letter, Jeremiah reminds the dispossessed in a strange land that God has plans for them, to “prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” All would not be lost. But to discover this promising plan, they must find a way to thrive in new cities, and new communities.

Whether you are an urbanite or not, you likely have a perspective about “the city.” Read these two views of the city of Chicago, which while separated by time and culture, show a perspective:

Rudyard Kipling wrote, “I have struck a city, a real city, they call it Chicago ... I urgently desire never to see it again. It is inhabited by savages.” Let’s summarize his view as – “YUCK!”

Oprah Winfrey said, “My first day in Chicago, September 4, 1983. I set foot in this city, and just walking down the street, it was like roots, like the motherland. I knew I belonged here.” Let’s summarize her view as – “WOW!”

Never mind Chicago in particular, nor Houston, Beijing, São Paulo, London, New York, etc. In general, when you think of “city-life” do you think YUCK or WOW? Why is that?

What personal experiences have you had “in the city” that have shaped your perspective?

In what ways have media (news, movies, social networks, etc.) shaped your view of “the city”?

## Get Scripture

### Read Jeremiah 29:4

What does it say to you that the Lord was actively involved in moving tens of thousands of people from homeland-city Jerusalem, with its strong walls and amazing temple, to Babylon, one of the greatest cities in the world at the time?

What kind of fears do you think the children of Israel had as they were being forced to relocate to a new city? What hopes might they have had?

### Read Jeremiah 29:5-7

Whether the refugees from Jerusalem felt YUCK or WOW at their new location, God instructs them to be active in their new city. What sorts of activities did He require?

As a holy people guided by the laws of Moses, Israel had many laws about what they could eat and with whom they could socialize. What kinds of feelings do you think might have developed with the kinds of demands God asked of His people in their new environment?

Most of the Hebrews removed by King Nebuchadnezzar from their homeland to Babylonian cities became servants or worse. Today deep poverty and horrific violence mar the lives of many who live in cities, from Mumbai to East Saint Louis. How do you see the advice of verses 5-7 impacting those who are poor in the city? How does it impact the rich? The disempowered? Those with clout?

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (a.k.a.; Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) were taken into exile to Babylon around this time as well (Daniel 1:1-7). As the kings of the ancient era (and the movers and shakers of our day) lived in their cities, what benefits do you see by having spirit-led people find their way into urban positions of power and influence?

### Read Jeremiah 29:8-9

Jeremiah speaks of false prophets who are being encouraged by the people to give messages that reinforce points of view contrary to God's truth. Given what you've learned about the Lord's desire and plans for Israel living in a new, difficult city, what do think these "deceivers" might have been saying?

In order to seek the peace and prosperity of the city, faith-filled refugees needed to learn to cooperate and get along with people very different from them – different cultures, language, tastes, values, ethnic backgrounds, views of family and the like. Do you suppose the "deceivers" were promoting too much "mixing" with the "ungodly" or demanding too much "separation" from the "pagans?"

How might some of America's "talking-heads" contribute as "false prophets" that derail God's desire for cooperative efforts to benefit everyone?

## Read Jeremiah 29:10-11

What is God's promise to exiled Israel as they "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" of Babylon? Seventy years, as related to Babylon and Jerusalem ("this place"), could all be highly symbolic. They are used symbolically throughout scripture, and in fact it was not a literal 70 years which ended the "Babylonian captivity." Daniel also wondered about this and as the time approached prayed with some concern (Daniel 9:2) until the angel Gabriel answered him with a promise that sounds like captivity ends with the Messiah being sacrificed for the people's sin. Before Jesus comes, though, God does use Ezra and Nehemiah to begin rebuilding Jerusalem, its temple and protective wall. How is your faith impacted by knowing God was faithful to His exiled city-dwellers, though it took a long time (more than a single generation)?

Verse 11, "I know my plans for you ..." is often quoted as a benediction or promise of God for people enduring life's harsh realities. What is the importance, in your opinion, of Jeremiah pairing "seeking the peace and prosperity of the city" with "plans to prosper and not to harm you?"

## **Get Real**

Reflecting upon Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, how do you think God views cities? How does this shape your view of the city?

Knowing Israelites were often immigrants (by choice, as in Egypt), or refugees (not by choice, as in Babylon), or slaves (not by choice, as in Egypt), how do you think believers in cities should treat immigrants, refugees and other disempowered persons?

Most Americans (80 percent) live in urban areas. Most Free Methodist churches in the United States (75 percent) are in towns and rural areas rather than cities. What attitudes need to be developed within Free Methodists to develop an intentional "working for the peace and prosperity of the city?" Which attitudes might you need to grapple with?

Revelation 21 describes heaven and our eternal life as the "Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down from out of heaven from God," (verses 2, 10) complete with streets, high walls, a fountain of living water, and people from all nations gathered together. Do you see any way whereby your befriending a neighbor "unlike you" may be contributing to building the New Jerusalem even now?

It appears God's hope for cities is WOW, transforming the YUCK factor through the radical love of Jesus embodied by His faithful followers. What is one practical way you can help your city or a nearby city experience less YUCK and become more WOW?

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