

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/29/2024

### GOD's Presence in Exile

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

***ONE AT ONE*** – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, July 30 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who are in hardship because of the many wars around the Earth. Pray especially for children who experience the loss of parents, struggle to find food to eat, and suffer the effects that war brings to them. Pray for those who provide humanitarian assistance. Ask GOD to bring an end to these conflicts.*

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In 598/7 B.C., the Babylonians conquered the kingdom of Judea, or the southern kingdom, and took them into exile. This was after the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered. About a third of the population of Jerusalem was killed during the Babylonian conquest. Another third managed to escape out the backdoor, so to speak. The last third was taken as captives to Babylon. This is known as the Babylonian Exile and, with the Exodus, is one of the two greatest events in Israel's history.

The Jews came to believe that the Babylonian Exile was GOD's punishment of Israel for turning away from GOD. Or at least they believed it was GOD's way of calling them back to faith. Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) had already divided primarily over the issue of who was king. The northern kingdom chose and continued to choose kings who were not worshipers of GOD but rather other gods. The southern kingdom had turned from GOD by rejecting many of the guidelines GOD had given them. But when the southern kingdom saw the Babylonians coming, they repented. The king and all the people put on sackcloth and poured ashes on their heads as signs of their humility before GOD and their repentance. Because of their remorse, GOD sent the Egyptian army north and the Babylonians abandoned Jerusalem to attack the Egyptians. Sadly, as soon as the Babylonians disappeared over the hill, the people of Jerusalem put back on their good clothes and went back to their sinful ways. The Babylonians conquered the Egyptians and returned to Jerusalem, defeated it, and took many Jews into exile.

The ones who had gotten away from the attack of the Babylonians later returned to a city that was mostly destroyed, including the Temple of Solomon, the first temple built in Jerusalem. It was not a great place to live and there was much disease and hardship. But it was not total isolation as messages could be exchanged between the people in Jerusalem and the exiles in Babylon 500 miles away.

The challenge for the Israelites in Babylon was to decide if they would be faithful to GOD (who many believed was still back in Jerusalem) or instead worship the gods of the Babylonians. The stories recorded in Daniel tell of this struggle and of the faithful witness of Daniel and others like Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego. Daniel called the people to continue to trust GOD even though they were now in a foreign land.

GOD also called prophets to urge the people to turn to GOD. One of the most significant of those prophets was Jeremiah. Though he was part of the group still living in Jerusalem, his writings were carried to Babylon and conveyed GOD's love for and presence with the people in exile. Jeremiah 31 presents a powerful message of presence and promise: *"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again, you will take up your timbrels and go out and dance with the joyful. Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit. There will be a day when the watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our GOD."*

Though some believed that the GOD who dwelt 500 miles from them had abandoned them, GOD who is everywhere, assured them of GOD's presence. More than this, GOD promised that they would one day return home and that the land and the people would be restored to what they once had been. The messages of

Jeremiah gave them hope and allowed for the creation of a faithful remnant who returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C.

There are times in our lives when we find ourselves in exile. We feel lost from what was familiar. We no longer have our focus and the homes and lives we once knew. It can be tempting to give up on GOD and turn elsewhere. When these times of exile come, it is important that we remember that GOD still is with us. Even in exile, GOD says to us as GOD said to the Jews in Babylon, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again.”*

In CHRIST's love,  
Pastor Jeffrey