

*Christ is certainly no less concerned than Nietzsche that the personality should receive the fullest development of which it is capable, and be more and more of a power. The difference between them lies in the moral method by which the personality is put into possession of itself and its resources—in the one case by asserting self, in the other by losing it. . . . We complete our personality only as we fall into place and service in the vital movement of the society in which we live. Isolation means arrested development. The aggressive egotist is working his own moral destruction by stunting and shrinking his true personality. Social life, duty, and sympathy are the only conditions under which a true personality can be shaped. And if it be asked how a society so crude, imperfect, unmoral, and even immoral as that in which we live is to mould a personality truly moral, it is here that Christ comes to the rescue with the gift to faith both of an active Spirit and of a society complete in Himself.*

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**E**XILE IS TRAUMATIC AND TERRIFYING. Our sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When that changes, violently and abruptly, who are we? The accustomed ways we have of finding our worth and sensing our significance vanish. The first wave of emotion recedes and leaves us feeling worthless, meaningless. We don't fit anywhere. No one expects us to do anything. No one needs us. We are extra baggage. We aren't necessary.

Israel was taken into exile in 587 B.C.<sup>2</sup> The people were uprooted from the place in which they were born. The land that had

been promised to them, which they had possessed, in which their identity as a people of God had been formed, was gone. They were forced to travel across the Middle Eastern desert seven hundred miles, leaving home, temple and hills. In the new land, Babylon, customs were strange, the language incomprehensible, and the landscape oddly flat and featureless. All the familiar landmarks were gone. The weather was different. The faces were unrecognized and unrecognizing.

Israel's exile was a violent and extreme form of what all of us experience from time to time. Inner experiences of exile take place even if we never move from the street on which we were brought up. We are exiled from the womb and begin life in strange and harsh surroundings. We are exiled from our homes at an early age and find ourselves in the terrifying and demanding world of school. We are exiled from school and have to make our way the best we can in the world of work. We are exiled from our hometowns and have to find our way in new states and cities.

These experiences of exile, minor and major, continue through changes in society, changes in government, changes in values, changes in our bodies, our emotions, our families and marriages. We barely get used to one set of circumstances and faces when we are forced to deal with another. The exile experienced by the Hebrews is a dramatic instance of what we all experience simply by being alive in this world. Repeatedly we find ourselves in circumstances where we are not at home. We are "strangers in a strange land."<sup>3</sup>

The essential meaning of exile is that we are where we don't want to be. We are separated from home. We are not permitted to reside in the place where we comprehend and appreciate our surroundings. We are forced to be away from that which is most congenial to us. It is an experience of dislocation—everything is out

of joint; nothing fits together. The thousand details that have been built up through the years that give a sense of at-homeness—gestures, customs, rituals, phrases—are all gone. Life is ripped out of the familiar soil of generations of language, habit, weather, story-telling, and rudely and unceremoniously dropped into some unfamiliar spot of earth. The place of exile may boast a higher standard of living. It may be more pleasant in its weather. That doesn't matter. It isn't home.

But this very strangeness can open up new reality to us. An accident, a tragedy, a disaster of any kind can force the realization that the world is not predictable, that reality is far more extensive than our habitual perception of it. With the pain and in the midst of alienation a sense of freedom can occur.

#### FALSE DREAMS

The reason for Israel's exile is clear enough: Jeremiah and other prophets had preached that the nation's stability and security depended on a certain faithfulness to the love of God. That message had been scorned and rejected. The Babylonian army came one day and captured the city. After conquering Jerusalem the Babylonians selected the leading people of the city for deportation. The tactic was to remove all persons of influence and leadership—artisans, merchants, political leaders—so that the general populace would be dependent on and submissive to the invaders. Without leaders the people, like sheep, would submit to the puppet king and the occupying army with a minimum of hassle. Jeremiah, interestingly, was left behind. He had been ignored for so long as a leader by his own people that the Babylonians did not consider him important enough to exile.

How did these people in exile feel? How did they respond? If we

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imagine ourselves in a similar situation, remembering how we respond when we are forced to spend extended time with people we don't like in a place we don't like, we will not be far from the truth. Their experience can be expressed in a complaint: "A terrible thing has happened to us. And it's not fair. I know we weren't perfect, but we were no worse than the rest of them. And here we end up in this Babylonian desert while our friends are carrying on life as usual in Jerusalem. Why us? We can't understand the language; we don't like the food; the manners of the Babylonians are boorish; the schools are substandard; there are no decent places to worship; the plains are barren; the weather is atrociously hot; the temples are polluted with immorality; everyone speaks with an accent." They complained bitterly about the terrible circumstances in which they were forced to live. They longed, achingly, for Jerusalem. They wallowed in self-pity, what Robertson Davies calls the "harlot emotion."<sup>4</sup>

They had religious leaders with them who nurtured their self-pity. We know the names of three of them: Ahab, Zedekiah and Shemiah. These prophets called attention to the unfairness of their plight and stirred the pots of discontent: "Yes, the old religion of Jerusalem is what we must get back to. Yes, it's worse luck that we are here when so many are enjoying the good life back in Jerusalem. But hang on a little longer and we'll get back. It can't last much longer. How can it? Not one of us deserves such a life. Justice will prevail." These prophets described dreams, God-given they claimed, that revealed that the exile would end soon.

These three prophets made a good living fomenting discontent and merchandising nostalgia. But their messages and dreams, besides being false, were destructive. False dreams interfere with honest living. As long as the people thought that they might be

going home at any time, it made no sense to engage in committed, faithful work in Babylon. If there was a good chance that they would soon get back all they had lost, there was no need to develop a life of richness, texture and depth where they were. Since their real relationships were back in Jerusalem, they could be casual and irresponsible in their relationships in exile—they weren't going to see these people much longer anyhow. Why bother planting gardens? That is backbreaking work, and they would probably be out of there before harvesttime. Why learn the business practices of the culture? That is demanding; they would get along with odd jobs here and there. Why take on the disciplines of marriage and family? They would make do with casual sexual encounters until they got back to Jerusalem where they could settle down to serious family building.

The prophets manipulated the self-pity of the people into neurotic fantasies. The people, glad for a religious reason to be lazy, lived hand to mouth, parasites on society, irresponsible in their relationships, indifferent to the reality of their actual lives.

#### A LETTER FROM JEREMIAH

One day two men from Jerusalem appeared unannounced among the exiles: Elasah and Gemariah. They had come on official business, carrying a message to the king of Babylon. On their way to the palace they visited the community in exile. The air was charged with excitement. Everyone had questions: What was this one doing? What was that one doing? Elasah and Gemariah waved them silent. Before giving them the gossip, they had a message from Jeremiah, a letter to the exiles.

“This is the Message from GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, Israel's GOD, to all the exiles I've taken from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build



houses and make yourselves at home. Put in gardens and eat what grows in that country. Marry and have children. . . . Work for the country's welfare. Pray for Babylon's well-being. . . . Don't let all those so-called preachers and know-it-alls who are all over the place there take you in with their lies.'"

*Build houses and make yourselves at home.* You are not camping. This is your home; make yourself at home. This may not be your favorite place, but it is a place. Dig foundations; construct a habitation; develop the best environment for living that you can. If all you do is sit around and pine for the time you get back to Jerusalem, your present lives will be squalid and empty. Your life right now is every bit as valuable as it was when you were in Jerusalem, and every bit as valuable as it will be when you get back to Jerusalem. Babylonian exile is not your choice, but it is what you are given. Build a Babylonian house and live in it as well as you are able.

*Put in gardens and eat what grows in the country.* Enter into the rhythm of the seasons. Become a productive part of the economy of the place. You are not parasites. Don't expect others to do it for you. Get your hands into the Babylonian soil. Become knowledgeable about the Babylonian irrigation system. Acquire skill in cultivating fruits and vegetables in this soil and climate. Get some Babylonian recipes and cook them.

*Marry and have children.* These people among whom you are living are not beneath you, nor are they above you; they are your equals with whom you can engage in the most intimate and responsible of relationships. You cannot be the person God wants you to be if you keep yourself aloof from others. That which you have in common is far more significant than what separates you. They are God's persons: your task as a person of faith is to develop trust and conversation, love and understanding.

*Make yourselves at home there and work for the country's welfare. Pray for Babylon's well-being. If things go well for Babylon, things will go well for you. Welfare: shalom. Shalom means wholeness, the dynamic, vibrating health of a society that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life-transforming love. Seek the shalom and pray for it. Throw yourselves into the place in which you find yourselves, but not on its terms, on God's terms. Pray. Search for that center in which God's will is being worked out (which is what we do when we pray) and work from that center.*

Jeremiah's letter is a rebuke and a challenge: "Quit sitting around feeling sorry for yourselves. The aim of the person of faith is not to be as comfortable as possible but to live as deeply and thoroughly as possible—to deal with the reality of life, discover truth, create beauty, act out love. You didn't do it when you were in Jerusalem. Why don't you try doing it here, in Babylon? Don't listen to the lying prophets who make an irresponsible living by selling you false hopes. You are in Babylon for a long time. You better make the best of it. Don't just get along, waiting for some miraculous intervention. Build houses, plant gardens, marry husbands, marry wives, have children, pray for the wholeness of Babylon, and do everything you can to develop that wholeness. The only place you have to be human is where you are right now. The only opportunity you will ever have to live by faith is in the circumstances you are provided this very day: this house you live in, this family you find yourself in, this job you have been given, the weather conditions that prevail at this moment."

#### LIVING AT OUR BEST

Exile (being where we don't want to be with people we don't want

to be with) forces a decision: Will I focus my attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for myself? Or will I focus my energies on how I can live at my best in this place I find myself? It is always easier to complain about problems than to engage in careers of virtue. George Eliot, in her novel *Felix Holt*, has a brilliantly appropriate comment on this question: "Everything's wrong says he. That's a big text. But does he want to make everything right? Not he. He'd lose his text."<sup>5</sup>

Daily we face decisions on how we will respond to these exile conditions. We can say: "I don't like it; I want to be where I was ten years ago. How can you expect me to throw myself into what I don't like—that would be sheer hypocrisy. What sense is there in taking risks and tiring myself out among people I don't even like in a place where I have no future?"

Or we can say: "I will do my best with what is here. Far more important than the climate of this place, the economics of this place, the neighbors in this place, is the God of this place. God is here with me. What I am experiencing right now is on ground that was created by him and with people whom he loves. It is just as possible to live out the will of God here as any place else. I am full of fear. I don't know my way around. I have much to learn. I'm not sure I can make it. But I had feelings like that back in Jerusalem. Change is hard. Developing intimacy among strangers is always a risk. Building relationships in unfamiliar and hostile surroundings is difficult. But if that is what it means to be alive and human, I will do it."

Fenelon used to say that there are two kinds of people: some look at life and complain of what is not there; others look at life and rejoice in what is there.<sup>6</sup> Will we live on the basis of what we don't have or on what we do have?