



good shepherd  
presbyterian church

## **On Being Well and Finding Peace** Jeremiah 29:7

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In the past weeks we've talked about all that we've lost in the past nine months. We've asked what we are supposed to do. And we've been reassured that God sees us, God hears us, God is still with us, and God has a purpose for us even in the midst of all this.

But what is that purpose? Is God going to make it better? Is God going to bless us and look out for our welfare, our well-being? In our call to worship from Psalm 85, the people of God were asking similar questions and praying similar prayers:

*Restore us, O God! (v.4)*  
*Will your anger with us ever end? (v.5)*  
*Will you not revive us again?*  
*(That your people may rejoice!!) (v.6)*  
*Show us your lovingkindness... (v.7)*  
*I will hear what God the Lord will say... (v.8)*

I believe the ultimate answer to that is 'yes'; but listen to how God answers the same set of questions from God's people in Jeremiah's day. It shows a striking parallel to the teachings of Jesus, and is something I think we need to work to understand and live out. It is something we need to join the Psalmist in declaring, "I will hear what God the Lord will say."

### **Seek and Pray**

Last week, looking at Jeremiah 29:5-6 we noted that everything had changed – location, work, relationships, government, worship. But God said the important things had not changed. His people (and we) were still to build, plant, marry, and multiply. We were

still supposed to teach our children and BE the people of God in this strange new world. But it's not just about me and mine...

God's message continues on into verse 7, with the challenge to "seek the welfare of the city... and pray to the Lord on its behalf." This message is radically other-focused in a context where the natural bent of our prayers would be for ourselves and our loved ones. My seeking – what I'm looking for – and my prayers come easily enough for my own safety, my own well-being, my own blessing. But that's not what God said. God said to seek the welfare or well-being of the city and pray on its behalf. That city is Babylon! That's their captors! Those are the people that took everything. But God said what is important has not changed. Keep being my people.

This challenge connects to the covenant of old, in which God told Abraham He would bless him that he (Abraham) and his children might be a blessing to the whole world. It does not matter that God's people have been taken from Jerusalem; they are still able to fulfill their covenant purpose of being a covenant community of faith and blessing those among whom they lived. It's easy to celebrate the God blessing us part; it is much harder to work for the blessing of Babylon.

Let me say a word about 'welfare' or 'well-being' or 'blessing' – I've used all those interchangeably. Some translations will also use 'peace'. It's all translating the Hebrew word *shalom*. Depending on context and shade of meaning, it can mean peace, well-being, completeness, wholeness, blessing, or as translated here, welfare. The use of *shalom* here stands in marked contrast to what the Jewish Exiles seem to have lost. Taken from home, they felt lost, broken, incomplete, and cursed – anything but *shalom*. If there were one thing that could give back all that was lost, it would be *shalom*. Yet God asks – even commands – that they pray on behalf of the city of Babylon for the very thing that they feel is missing. Can you imagine? I think some of you can, as you are identifying with the kind of loss the Exiles experienced.

### **In Giving You Will Receive**

"What about me, Lord?" What about MY welfare? Interestingly, and this is the other thing I want to lift up out of this verse, God says, "In the city's welfare you will have welfare." Pray for the *shalom* of this city and her people – the place where you are exiled – and as they experience my peace, healing, and wholeness, then YOU will experience my peace, healing, and wholeness.

“But Lord, I had those things back in Jerusalem. I just want to get home.” In this case, the Lord had them in Babylon for a reason, and peace was not to be found in returning to the place from which they had come. Peace and healing and wholeness and blessing was to be found in their praying and God’s providing *shalom* for the city of Babylon.

Jesus echoed this idea in his teaching on loving neighbors and enemies. In Luke 6 after saying, “Love your enemies, and do good” (v.35) and “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (v.36) he says “Give, and it will be given to you... good measure, pressed down, running over...” (v.38). I often note that Abraham and we are blessing to be a blessing; but Jeremiah and Jesus note that we are (also) blessed when we are a blessing.

The *shalom* that I long for – that I NEED, Lord – is not found in the place I came from, nor where I think I might go, but in obediently following the Lord to the place He leads. Lord, help us hear; help us understand!

### **Whose Well-Being?**

God’s prescription for *shalom* is to live full and godly lives in the places you are, and to seek and pray diligently for that *shalom* for those all around you. In that living and seeking, He says, we will find it for ourselves.

If you and I were to take this prescription seriously, what would that look like? For whose well-being would we work and pray?

One immediate application that we’ve all lived through is wearing masks. We all have different opinions and feelings about masks, but we don’t wear them to protect ourselves; we wear them to protect those around us. They primarily keep germs from getting out rather than getting in. We space out and take other precautions for similar reasons.

Perhaps even more challenging is the ongoing political and cultural divide in our country and even among friends and family. What a difference it would make if our driving motivation was the well-being of our neighbor and even our opponents? What if we worked and prayed for that? I can’t make anyone else do that, but I can choose to do it myself. And this teaching in Jeremiah (and from Jesus) would suggest that it might be an effective way to reach the well-being that I want for myself and my loved ones.

It’s putting “love of neighbor” and “love of enemies” into action. Those are easy phrases to say and even idealize; they are much harder to live out, but God didn’t give them to

us as slogans for a t-shirt, but as how we are to live. Ouch. If I'm honest, I like that about as much as I liked eating vegetables as a child. It made me mad; it sometimes made me cry. But I recognize that my mom gave them to me out of love and because they actually were the best things for me. Lord, help me hear and understand!

More broadly, beyond COVID or politics, where in our neighborhoods and city do people most long for or need God's *shalom* – His peace, wholeness, help, completeness, and healing? If we are to be God's people, then that is our mission. If we want to know God's complete plan for us, then we need to seek and pray for the well-being of THIS city. After the pattern of God's people of old, we are to live full and godly lives where we are, and diligently pray for and seek out those all around us, that they might know the fullness of knowing God.

It's hard right now, perhaps as hard as it's been in our collective memory. We are worn down, frustrated, fearful, feeling diminished... you fill in the blank. But God's message remains: I see you; I hear you; I am with you; I love you. And I have plans and a purpose for you, my children. May God give us ears to hear and hearts to follow. Amen!