



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

2 Christmas
January 3, 2021

RCL: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Jeremiah 31:7-14

For years, Jeremiah 31 has been one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. Especially when one reads through Jeremiah from beginning to end, chapter 31, with its boisterous promises of restoration from exile, stands in stark contrast to the proclamations of disaster and scattering that precede it. A closer look at the structure of verses 7-14 provides **an** even greater focus **on** the message of this lection. Jewish poetry commonly employs a device called a *chiasm*, or *chiasmus*, in which the first line pairs thematically with the last line, the second line with the second-to-last line, and so on, until the middle line stands alone. This middle line quite often expresses the “central” theme of the poem, and as such, deserves extra weight.

This appears to be the case in verses 7 through the first phrase in verse 12. I encourage you to look closely to observe it yourself, but for the sake of space I will label the themes as follows: Rejoicing – Redeeming – Regathering – Renewing – Returning. The central theme of Returning is expressed in verse 9: “With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back.” Then the themes are repeated, but in reverse order: Renewing – Regathering – Redeeming – Rejoicing. After this, the final verses in the lection depict a festal celebration, featuring all the offertory elements of the Temple cult—grain, wine, oil, sheep, goats, cattle, and water, along with the joyous celebration that accompanies the offering—dancing, merrymaking. No one will be excluded from this celebration, as the priests and the people join together to proclaim that God has indeed brought us home.

- Do you ever feel like you are in exile? Or that the Church is in exile?
- Is there a sense in which the human condition could be described as homesickness?

Psalm 84

While reading Psalm 84, imagine a strolling minstrel on the road, walking with his family, his friends, and his neighbors. He is leaving home, but he is also going home. He likely makes this trip three times every year, along the “Pilgrims’ Way” (v. 4) to Jerusalem. As a Jewish man, he is expected to make this pilgrimage to worship at the Temple for three Levitical festivals—Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles). If he lives far from Jerusalem, this can be a long and dusty journey, with desolate valleys to endure and tall mountains to climb. It is road trips like this that call for a song of hope, rejoicing in the destination, and keeping it always before our eyes as we struggle to survive the perils of travel.

Naturally, the pilgrim's trust is in the LORD of hosts (v. 12), and so he looks to the LORD for hope and strength. He fixes his mind on the *house*, the *dwelling*, and the *courts* of the LORD (v. 1, 3), all references to the Temple. He looks forward to that final ascent, climbing from height to height to the crest of Mt. Zion, where the God of gods will be revealed. (v. 6)

The journey may last for days, and so the pilgrim camps along the road at night, where the dangers of exposure, robbery, and wild animals are ever-present. When morning comes, he thanks God for the sun which brings an end to the night. But then, after a few hours, the day gets hot, and he thanks God for the “shield” (perhaps a cloud, or even a shade tree) which brings relief from the sun. God is both, because God's glory is the light that chases away the dark, and God's grace is the shade which invites us into divine love. (v. 10)

- Have you ever felt like you were simultaneously leaving home and going home?
- When going through a challenging time, is it better to live in the moment? Or focus on the destination?

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Let's begin by pulling one line out of the middle: “He destined us for *adoption as his children* through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his *glorious grace* that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” Then pull two phrases out of that line: “adoption as his children” and “glorious grace”.

Before going further, let's recognize that both of these themes—adoption and glorious grace—are vested in our Messiah. “Through Jesus Christ,” and, “in the Beloved,” Paul writes after each one, respectively. Things are happening here which Jeremiah 31 and Psalm 84 foreshadowed, but that no one could envision perfectly or accomplish fully, apart from Christ.

As for adoption, this theme alone is worthy of taking a comb to the Scriptures, because it appears everywhere. Most notably, for the purpose at hand, is Paul's discourse on the “spirit of adoption” in Romans 8, on the “grafted branches” in Romans 11, and Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:3 about begin “born again.” Why is it important to remember that we are adopted into the family, or grafted into the tree? Although God has made us children in every sense, we can never forget what lengths God went to in order to bring it about. We were not born into the family like biological children; instead, God moved heaven and earth to welcome us in.

Once inside, we are invited to experience God's “glorious grace.” Could it be that Paul was meditating on God's “grace and glory” in Psalm 84:10, and chose to mash them together, “in the Beloved”? No longer two themes, but one. God's *glory* is bright and dangerous. It's not far away like the sun; it's right in our faces. We can't live up to it, so we invariably end up estranged from God. But God's *grace* is what grafts us into the olive tree. God's *grace* adopts us as children. God's *glorious grace* brings us home.

- Are there days when you need to be reminded that you are a grafted branch? Are there other days when you need to be reminded that you really do belong on the tree?

- How do you experience God’s “glorious grace” in the liturgy or ministry of the Church?

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

In Jeremiah 31, we see an exiled people whom God is promising to restore to their land. In Psalm 84, we follow a pilgrim in the wilderness, longing for the house of the LORD. And in Ephesians 1, we are brought into the story ourselves—we, who were once strangers, now embraced as children and heirs.

Matthew 2 encapsulates all these ideas in one of the earliest scenes in Jesus’ life story. It is a microcosm of the story of Israel; it is exile-and-return in miniature. In the space of only a handful of verses, the child Jesus is expelled from his country and called to return, then barred from the land of his birth (Judea) and holed up in a remote village (Nazareth). Though he was able to live and grow up in the nation of Israel, it was a place of no account, which did not commend him to the religious leaders of the day. Nevertheless, it was his mother’s hometown and a place where he could come into his own, out of the limelight.

I imagine there were moments in Egypt when Joseph and Mary thought, “What are we doing here? Remember the prophecies? Remember the angels? The Magi? Why are we languishing in Egypt?” And they may have felt much the same way later, in Nazareth—the middle of nowhere. We have the benefit of hindsight and history, but they didn’t. They had to wait on the Lord, and, to quote Tom Petty, the waiting is the hardest part.

- Are there times in your past when you felt sidelined?
- How do you use your own history to remind you, in the words of Psalm 84:12, to put your trust in the LORD of hosts?

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