

# 2 CHRISTMAS

*All Years*

*This Bible study was written by Ryan Wiksell for 2 Christmas in 2021.*

## Jeremiah 31:7-14

<sup>7</sup>For thus says the Lord:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,  
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;  
proclaim, give praise, and say,  
“Save, O Lord, your people,  
the remnant of Israel.”

<sup>8</sup>See, I am going to bring them from the land of the  
north  
and gather them from the farthest parts of the  
earth,  
among them the blind and the lame,  
those with child and those in labor together;  
a great company, they shall return here.

<sup>9</sup>With weeping they shall come,  
and with consolations I will lead them back;  
I will let them walk by brooks of water,  
in a straight path where they shall not  
stumble,  
for I have become a father to Israel,  
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him  
and will keep him as a shepherd does a flock.”

<sup>11</sup>For the Lord has ransomed Jacob  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong  
for him.

<sup>12</sup>They shall come and sing aloud on the height of  
Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of  
the Lord,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.

<sup>13</sup>Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy;  
I will comfort them and give them gladness  
for sorrow.

<sup>14</sup>I will give the priests their fill of fatness,  
and my people shall be satisfied with my  
bounty, says the Lord.

## Commentary from Ryan Wiksell

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.

## Discussion Questions

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

- <sup>1</sup>How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts!\*  
My soul has a desire and longing for the  
courts of the Lord;  
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living  
God.
- <sup>2</sup>The sparrow has found her a house  
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her  
young; \*  
by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts,  
my King and my God.
- <sup>3</sup>Happy are they who dwell in your house! \*  
they will always be praising you.
- <sup>4</sup>Happy are the people whose strength is in you! \*  
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- <sup>5</sup>Those who go through the desolate valley will find it  
a place of springs, \*  
for the early rains have covered it with pools  
of water.
- <sup>6</sup>They will climb from height to height, \*  
and the God of gods will reveal himself in  
Zion.
- <sup>7</sup>Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; \*  
hearken, O God of Jacob.
- <sup>8</sup>Behold our defender, O God; \*  
and look upon the face of your Anointed.
- <sup>9</sup>For one day in your courts is better than a thousand  
in my own room, \*  
and to stand at the threshold of the house of  
my God  
than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.
- <sup>10</sup>For the Lord God is both sun and shield; \*  
he will give grace and glory;
- <sup>11</sup>No good thing will the Lord withhold \*  
from those who walk with integrity.
- <sup>12</sup>O Lord of hosts, \*  
happy are they who put their trust in you!

### Commentary from Ryan Wiksell

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)

### Discussion Questions

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

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup>He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

<sup>15</sup>I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>17</sup>that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

### Commentary from Ryan Wiksell

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.

### Discussion Questions

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

<sup>13</sup>Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt <sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

<sup>19</sup>When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup>“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” <sup>21</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup>But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup>There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”

### Commentary from Ryan Wiksell

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.

### Discussion Questions

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?