

Jeremiah 31:15

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 December 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] It's a great story, isn't it? The Christmas story. The angel Gabriel, sent by God to tell Mary the good news, you will be with child and give birth to a son. The heavenly host, praising God, glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to men on whom His favor rests. The shepherds, scurrying to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, this thing that has happened. How can it be? What is it? The wise men from the East bearing precious gifts. It's a great story. But there is, somewhat unpleasantly, a dark side to this great story of the birth of Jesus. We read in Matthew chapter 2 and in verse 16, these words that relate to us, this dark side of the story.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. There is this chilling and tragic footnote that Matthew interprets for us in the light of the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping in great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more. Well, as I indicated already earlier on this evening, in the same manner as we have considered the other Old Testament references employed by Matthew in his birth narrative, we're going to do the same with this reference from the book of Jeremiah and consider it in the original context in which it was delivered by Jeremiah.

Now, very briefly, to locate ourselves historically, Jeremiah lived and ministered about a century after the prophets we have encountered in Matthew thus far. We've already seen references to the prophecies of Isaiah, of Micah, and Hosea. We've done that in previous weeks. And Jeremiah is of roughly the same period, but a further century or so on from these named prophets. He was called by God in 627 B.C., nearly 100 years after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. And his ministry continued sometime after the fall of Jerusalem, that very epochal event in the history of the people of God, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. And Jeremiah was still ministering at the time. He was there. He was in Jerusalem when it fell, and he continued for some time. We don't know just how long, but sometime after that event. Indeed, following this catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem, there was a failed rebellion against the Babylonian-appointed puppet regime in

Jerusalem. What remained of Jerusalem? Well, the Babylonians who destroyed it set up this puppet regime, and there was a rebellion against it, and it failed. And many of the rebels fled to Egypt, and they took Jeremiah with them. It would seem against his will. And so, it would seem that Jeremiah ended his ministry in Egypt. But it was still a fruitful time in terms of being God's mouthpiece, as he did at that time from Egypt, pronounce God's judgment against the nations, and not surprisingly, very particularly upon Babylon, that had been responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem.

So, that very fleetingly allows us to have a sense of when it is that these events are occurring. But what of the passage employed by Matthew in Jeremiah chapter 31? These words, indeed this chapter, appears in a section of the book of Jeremiah that speaks prophetically of the restoration of Israel and Judah, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. And so, this part of the book of Jeremiah is concerned with this future restoration. It speaks of their present reality, but is particularly concerned with looking forward to better days, to days of restoration. Indeed, at the beginning of chapter 31, we have almost what we might call a summary statement of what follows in the following three or four chapters. We read there in chapter 31 of Jeremiah, at that time declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they will be my people. Very much a familiar covenant formula. This is what the

[5 : 29] Lord says, the people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert. I will come to give rest to Israel. The Lord appeared to us in the past saying, I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have drawn you with loving kindness. I will build you up again, and you will be rebuilt, O virgin Israel.

And so, it continues. The words in chapter 31 and in verse 15 that we are particularly concerned with, these words quoted by Matthew in the second chapter of the gospel, these words serve as a somber and poetic description of a tragic present reality that is then immediately contrasted with a vision of a glorious future reality. So, the words in verse 15, a voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because her children are no more. That is what we're calling a tragic present reality. But in what immediately follows, we have given to us a vision of a hope-filled future reality. And that's how we want to consider this passage this evening. First of all, to consider the hopeless present, but also to consider the hope-filled future. We'll begin with the hopeless present that is described, or certainly that is referred to there in verse 15, as I say, the verse that Matthew also employs. In the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes, there is a time to weep. There is a time to mourn. And the time described by Jeremiah was certainly such a time. And three questions will help us understand the time that Jeremiah is speaking about. We want to ask of this verse, why the weeping? Why is it that Rachel is weeping? Why the weeping? But also, who is weeping? Jeremiah identifies a character who is weeping, and we want to think what it is that he is saying by that. But also, briefly, to ask why such weeping, and to think a little of the nature of this weeping that is described in verse 15 of Jeremiah 31. First of all, then, why the weeping? What is the cause of this great weeping? What has happened to provoke such a hopeless and desperate scene? Well, there is a clue provided in the location identified by Jeremiah as the scene of the weeping. We read there in verse 15, a voice is heard in Ramah. You'll get an idea of the significance of that location. All we need to do is to turn a few pages to Jeremiah chapter 40 and read in verse 1. One verse will be sufficient to give us really quite a helpful insight into the reason for this weeping. We read there at the beginning of chapter 40, the word came to Jeremiah from the Lord after Nebuchadnezzar Adan, commander of the imperial guard, that is of the Babylonians, had released him at Ramah. He had found Jeremiah bound in chains among all the captives from Jerusalem and Judah who were being carried into exile to Babylon. Ramah, as we notice there in that verse, was on the route to exile in Babylon. It was very near to Jerusalem, just some five miles north of

Jerusalem, but as we've read, this was the route that was taken by the Babylonians as they were taking with them their captives into exile following the destruction, following their victory in Jerusalem.

And Jeremiah was part of that convoy of exiles in chains, but we read that orders were given that he be released. And so he was released, and he was given the opportunity to do as he chose. He was told, if you want to accompany the exiles to Babylon, you can do so. If you want to return to Jerusalem, you can do so. You can go where you please. Well, Jeremiah chose to return to Jerusalem. But the point is that Ramah, this locality that is identified in verse 15 of Jeremiah chapter 31, is a town that, in a sense, symbolizes, that speaks of the exile. So, why the weeping? Well, the weeping, we can confidently, or certainly with considerable confidence, assert, is the weeping that accompanied and followed the fall of Jerusalem. You see, the fall of Jerusalem was no painless or bloodless surrender. It followed a siege of over a year that resulted in starvation and death in Jerusalem. Indeed, in other parts of Scripture, the suffering of the inhabitants of Jerusalem is vividly described. And finally, when Jerusalem could withstand no longer, it fell in the midst of great carnage and destruction. The temple and much of Jerusalem were burnt to the ground. The walls of the city were destroyed. And so, the weeping that we read of here in Jeremiah, this weeping is the weeping of mothers who had lost sons, of women who had lost husbands, of children who had been orphaned. The weeping is the weeping of exiles being taken in chains to Babylon through Ramah.

The weeping is the weeping of the faithful remnant, as any lingering hope of repentance and reprieve has been lost. Jerusalem the beautiful, Jerusalem the loved, Jerusalem the favored, Jerusalem the unfaithful has fallen, and so the nation weeps. Why the weeping? But we said that we could understand a little more of this present hopeless reality described by Jeremiah by asking another question, who weeps. Now, that may seem a strange question to pose, given that we've really just been answering it. But in asking the question again, or in posing the question very explicitly, we want to draw attention to the manner which Jeremiah identifies who he would seem to present as the principal weeper. A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning in great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. So, Jeremiah identifies very particularly one individual, Rachel, who is weeping for her children. Why Rachel? Well, we know from our Old Testament history that

[12:51] Rachel was the favored wife of Jacob, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Indeed, as a curious detail, Ramah, this village of Ramah to the north of Jerusalem, is located in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, Rachel's son. But we know, of course, that Rachel died. She died giving birth to Benjamin. But when did she die? Well, she died some 1,300 years before the events being described by Jeremiah. So, why Rachel?

Why does Jeremiah speak of Rachel weeping for her children? Well, it would seem that what Jeremiah is doing is presenting Rachel as a symbolic mother figure of the nation, or even as a personification of Israel. Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel weeps even from her grave near Bethlehem. Curiously, also, we're told that she was buried on the route to Bethlehem. And Rachel weeps even from that grave in grieving solidarity with all the mothers of Israel in Ramah and Jerusalem.

Rachel stands, represents grieving Israel itself in the wake of this tremendous catastrophe that has befallen them in the fall of Jerusalem. But also, we can consider very briefly as we think of this present hopeless reality described by Jeremiah, why such weeping? Why weeping of the nature, described? And really what we want to do is to see just what kind of weeping is being spoken of and described by Jeremiah. I think we can describe it as intense, we can describe it as justified, and also as a weeping that is inconsolable. I think all of these things we find in these brief words in verse 15. Intense weeping, a voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping. There is an evident intention on the part of the one who pens these words to get across in as much as human language can do so, the intensity of the grief and of the accompanying weeping that is being endured and experienced by

Israel, represented by the figure of Rachel. This is intense. But also we can say, and it's important to stress this, that this is justified. It is right and proper that Rachel should weep.

She is weeping for her children. How could she not weep in the face of what has befallen her? That which is most precious has been brutally snatched from her. There is a time for weeping, a time when weeping is not only permissible, but necessary. This was such a time. And there are still such times in our own personal experience, in the experience of the church, in the experience of a society. There are times when weeping is not only permissible, but necessary. This is justified weeping.

[16:17] It's intense. Indeed, its intensity is such that we can also describe this as weeping that is inconsolable. Rachel is inconsolable. That is what is stated. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. Refusing to be comforted. What can we say of that? Well, we can't say that this is some kind of blind grief that stubbornly refuses to be comforted, but rather the sense is that she cannot be comforted. Such is her loss. There is no, there can be no comfort for Rachel.

Again, to return to the text, because her children are no more. What comfort could there be for Rachel? What comfort could there be for the nation when her children are no more? So, this is indeed a hopeless present. A hopeless present that repeated itself in the history of Israel, poignantly and tragically, in the little town of Bethlehem. As the infants of Bethlehem are slaughtered by the twisted and bloodthirsty Herod. And Rachel wept again. Rachel wept again. But, thank God there is a but. This is not the end of the story. Because just as there is a hopeless present, there is also a hope-filled future.

Yes, there is a time to weep and a time to mourn. But as the dawn breaks, albeit a distant dawn, there comes a time to laugh and a time to dance. Notice the words of the prophet, the words of God, recorded by the prophet in verse 17. Immediately following this very tragic description of Rachel weeping for her children, what do we read in verse 17? So, there is hope for your future.

There is hope for your future. Today you can't see it. Today you're incapable of seeing it. How could you see it? But there is hope for your future, declares the Lord. God promises the weeping Rachel.

He promises the broken Israel and Judah, the whole nation. God promises hope. In their darkest day, in their hopeless present, a shaft of light breaks through the shadows. A promise of restoration. A promise that is able to grant hope in their darkest hour. And we can explore this promise and its fulfillment in two stages. First of all, we have the hope of a return to the land, but also the hope of a new covenant. Because both of them together constitute the hope that is being spoken of. And in that order, first of all, there is the hope of a return to the land. Jerusalem has fallen. The inhabitants of Jerusalem are certainly, a number of them are being taken in chains to Babylon as slaves, as exiles, certainly. But there is. God makes it very clear. Hope of a return. The language is explicit and clearly promises a physical return to the land, to Jerusalem. The exile will end, and a remnant will return. We read there in verse 16, in the second half of the verse, they will return from the land of the enemy. So, there is hope for your future, declares the Lord.

[19:55] Your children will return to their own land. So, there is this promise of a future hope of return to the land. Now, what would that involve, or how would it come about? Well, there are two elements, or actors involved, God and the people. With regard to God, we have the promise of God that flows from the love of God. We've read the promise. Your children will return to their own land. There will be an end to exile. There will be a return for this simple reason that God says so. But why does God make such a promise to His rebellious people? Why? Well, it is a promise born of love. Listen to the language of verse 20 that echoes really the language of Hosea that we were considering not so long ago.

Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, and with good reason, I still remember him. Therefore, my heart yearns for him. I have great compassion for him, declares the Lord. Why does God promise the people who are being exiled to Babylon, why does He promise that they will return? Where does that promise come from? Well, it's born in the great love that He has for them. It is a promise that flows from the love that He holds to His people, though they be a stubborn and rebellious people. He loves them. And so, out of this love, there emerges this promise that they will return. And so, God has His part. He has the principal part of promising, of guaranteeing this return. But as regards the people, they too have a part to play. Their return to God is a return that flows from their repentance. It is true that God, by His promise, guarantees the return, but the people are not passive in this matter. They must do the returning. And God urges them to take care, to plan their journey home with diligence and attention to detail, that they may not be waylaid or take a wrong turn.

Notice there in verse 21, it's almost like a, I don't know, a Middle Eastern highway code. Set up road signs, put up guideposts, take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, O Virgin, Israel, return to your towns. Yes, God has promised that they will return, but they have to do the returning. They are the ones who have to, as God grants opportunity, they have to pack their bags and return home, and instructions are given that they might do so. Why is it that they return from the perspective of the people? Well, this desire to return is born of their repentance. We read there in verses 18 and 19, I have surely heard Ephraim's moaning, you discipline me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return. In the first instance, I will return to God, but as a product of their return to God, so also a return to the land. Because you are the Lord my God, after I strayed, I repented. After I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth. And so, this return to the land is one that, on the part of the people, involves repentance. And as they repent, so God grants opportunity for them to return. And of course, in history, that is what happened. The exile did end, and the Jews, or a remnant of them, did return some 70 years later, as promised by God. And as they returned, well, it was a time not to weep, a time not to mourn, but a time to laugh, and a time to dance, as the psalmist describes in Psalm 126. Clearly, the writer of this psalm is one who was around at the time of the return from exile, way past the time of David, who is the author of most of the psalms, because he speaks of this return. When the Lord brought back the captive to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

And he continues. And so, this hope-filled future involves, in the first place, a return to the land. And no doubt, for most of Jeremiah's original hearers, this would have been their primary perspective and concern. When will we return to Jerusalem? And the promise is, yes, you will return. God promises that you will return, and they did return. But was this physical return a source of lasting and pure joy for Rachel, that we continue to think of Rachel as representing the nation?

Well, sadly not. Indeed, many chose not to return. Many had settled in Babylon and were quite happy to remain there. Even though they had opportunity, they chose to remain in Babylon. Some did return.

[25 : 10] And no doubt, as they did return, they did so with great expectation that all would be as before. There would be a return to the golden age of David and Solomon, but it was not so. Yes, their return was a joyful return, but they returned to be in great measure disappointed. Things did not turn out as they had hoped. And so, this return, though impartial fulfillment of the promise given by God through Jeremiah, clearly did not satisfy the promise in its entirety. The promise of a hope-filled future is only to be partially fulfilled in the return to the land. It is also the hope of a new covenant, the hope of a new covenant. And this is a matter that Jeremiah immediately moves on to broach in this same passage. In the same chapter, we've read in verse 31, the time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

Indeed, these verses in Jeremiah, this is the only explicit reference to the new covenant in the Old Testament. And the reason given by God for the promise of a new covenant is the abject failure of the people to keep the old covenant. That is how God Himself explains why it is there is to be this new covenant. The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. Yes, the covenant, there was nothing wrong with the covenant. The problem was with the people that they continued to break the covenant.

And so God says, no, this hope-filled future involves not only a return to the land, but something far greater, a new covenant that I will establish with my people. And the new covenant will be of a different order. Yes, there will be continuity with the old, but it will be of a different order, as the law will be engraved on their hearts, and the people will no longer deal with God through prophets and priests, because, as we read, they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

A new covenant. But our primary interest this evening, in the few moments that remain, is to consider not the content of the new covenant, but rather the identity of the mediator of the new covenant. And this is a matter that Jeremiah also broaches, but on another occasion in his book.

We just need to return to chapter 23 of Jeremiah to think and to identify the identity of the mediator of this new covenant promised. Chapter 23 and verse 5, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely, and to do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called, the Lord our righteousness. And so, Jeremiah, though he doesn't name the one who will mediate the new covenant by name, he identifies him for us. And when we turn to the New Testament, when we turn to Matthew's gospel, and as we see how Matthew employs in his birth narrative the words of Jeremiah 31, where the prophet speaks of a new covenant, we can see how Matthew is pointing us very clearly in the direction of the newborn babe from Bethlehem, as the mediator of the new covenant. The newborn babe who was exiled to Egypt, only to return to fulfill his mission. He is the one who will mediate in this new covenant. If further proof were needed, we can do no better than turn to Hebrews, where the writer quotes word for word the prophecy of Jeremiah concerning a new covenant, and explicitly identifies Jesus as the mediator of this new covenant. Let's just notice briefly there in Hebrews, and in chapter 8. We don't really need to read the passage, because all that the writer does is to quote word for word the words that we find in Jeremiah chapter 31.

[29 : 42] There in Hebrews chapter 8, we can begin the reading, and then we won't need to read all through it. In verse 7, for if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.

But God found fault with the people, no, not with the covenant, but with the people, and said, the time is coming, declares the Lord. And the writer to the Hebrews then takes us back to this same chapter we're considering in Jeremiah 31, and the words of Jeremiah concerning the new covenant. But what does the writer to the Hebrews then go on to do in chapter 9, and in verse 15, what do we read? For this reason, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. The babe born in Bethlehem is the promised Messiah. He is the mediator of the new covenant.

He is the one who came to die as a ransom to set us free from sin and death. And Rachel no longer weeps. For Rachel and for us, this is a time to laugh and dance, for the Messiah has come, the promise that was given through the prophet Jeremiah, that was partially fulfilled in the return from exile, is fully fulfilled in the coming of Messiah Jesus and the establishing of a new covenant.

But though we recognize that, and we do recognize that we live in a time that primarily ought to be a time to laugh and to dance, we can't close without recognizing that the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem reminds us that even with the coming of Jesus, for this massacre occurred at the very time of the coming of Jesus, even with the coming of Jesus, we still live in a time when weeping continues.

We live in a time when our laughing and dancing must, on occasion, be accompanied or even interrupted by weeping. We live in such a time. But there is a time coming when our weeping will cease forever. There is a time coming when the new covenant promise will be fulfilled and experienced just as God intends. Just listen to a voice from heaven. Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. Rachel will no longer weep. We will no longer weep ever again. Will this future glorious hope that we enjoy in great measure even today, but that will be enjoyed in greater and fuller measure in a time that is yet to come, will this be any time soon? Well, let's hear the answer that Jesus gave to this question. And we can quote Jesus word for word, yes, I am coming soon. Yes, I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Let us pray.