

Second Sunday after Christmas

NO LONGER WINNERS OR LOSERS, ONLY THE REDEEMED

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

7For 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." 8See, 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. 9With 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 in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

10Hear 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 a flock." 11For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. 12They 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. 13Then 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. 14I will give

the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

DIAGNOSIS: Wrath Has Gone Forth (Jer. 30:23-24)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Israel the Loser; Assyria the Winner*

On the surface, the world seems to be neatly divided between the winners and the losers. In this particular case, Israel is the loser and Assyria the winner. Israel the loser has been conquered by Assyria the winner. Israel the loser has been exported (scattered, v. 10) into exile and lives a sorrowful (v. 9) slave's existence under the Assyrian winners. Life couldn't be worse for Israel and it couldn't be better for Assyria. Or so it seems....

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Israel in Despair; Assyria Is Haughty*

What's more, Israel is in despair and bereft of hope. It had once boasted of being the chosen of the Lord. Indeed, it was haughty—and presumptuous—about that claim when it was on top. But now it lives in doubt about that claim. Assyria, by contrast, like the other powerful nations, is haughty about its status as a winner. It mocks Israel's God, thinks it is the world's sovereign and feeds Israel's doubts. Life couldn't be worse for Israel and better for Assyria. Or so it seems....

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *All Are Losers: The Wrath of God Goes Forth...*

But wait! Deeply hidden within this world of winners and losers, of despair and haughtiness, resides the wrath of God. This God is the Lord of history, the sovereign over the nations, of whom Jeremiah is the spokesperson. This is the God who at this moment made Israel the loser and who made Assyria the winner. But don't

think that the Lord of history is pleased with either Assyria or Israel. He is not. "His wrath goes forth" on all who are haughty about their winnings and on all who despair because of their losings. Indeed, all are losers before the wrath of God. Just wait Assyria. Israel's fate is your fate. You'll see your Babylon. And, then, just wait Babylon. You'll see your Persia... and Persia your Greece... and Greece, your Rome... and Rome, your barbarians... And so the flow of history goes. This is the way of history under God's wrath. Great nations beware! You are nothing but veiled losers. "The wrath of God goes forth (Jer. 30:23)... The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back (Jer. 30:24)... And so it is!

PROGNOSIS: Proclaim: "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel" (Jer. 31:7)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Lord Has Ransomed His People*

Or is it? Can the wrath of God be "turned back"? Surprisingly—and undeservingly—the answer is YES! Scholars call Jeremiah 31-33, the book of consolation (v. 9). It comes out of the blue in the midst of Jeremiah's words of judgment. With no warning or expectation, the Lord of history, the Sovereign of the nations, announces that he has decided to side with the losers: "the Lord has ransomed Jacob and redeemed him from hands too strong for him" (v. 11). Two things are of note here: first, the past tense. The verbs "has ransomed" and "has redeemed" (v. 11) do not mean that this ransoming and redeeming work has already happened *historically*. But it does mean that it is absolutely certain, however. It has happened *theologically*. Why? Because the sovereign Lord of the nations has promised it. Second, the "hands too strong for him," the hands from whose clutches God has promised to ransom and redeem Jacob, are not just the hands of the Assyrians, but the hands of God himself: the wrathful, punishing hands of God. Here is the heart of the

good news: God's promise to save Israel the loser from the defeat God inflicted upon it on account of God's very own wrath. And just as those wrathful, punishing hands have placed their stamp on real, human history—Israel's history, the nations' history, our history—so the ransoming, redeeming work of God to deliver losers like Israel (like the nations, like us) from God's very own wrathful hands must also be done in history. So where in history is this word of ransoming-redeeming promise accomplished? Answer, in the cross and resurrection of Christ! Christ is the fulfillment of this surprising announcement delivered by Jeremiah. He is Lord of history (who now becomes revealed as Triune through the incarnation of the Son) entering into Israel's history to ransom and redeem Israel from God's own judgment upon it. He is the surprising historical fulfillment of what Jeremiah was told to prophesy. In the language of today's Gospel reading, Christ is God's "grace and truth" come in the flesh to deliver us from the law, the wrath of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : All Losers, Israel and the Nations, Rejoice!

Although the historical fulfillment of this announcement, the actual payment of the ransom, the appropriation of its cost by God, does not happen until the event of Jesus Christ, nevertheless, the rejoicing it calls forth in those who hear and believe knows no bounds—and in two respects: with respect to time and with respect to persons. With respect to time, from the moment the announcement is made, faith and rejoicing is called forth. Indeed, the announcement of the promise and the call to faith and rejoicing are one and the same. For to believe is to have and to have is to rejoice. Even though the ultimate return home to God the redeemer is still unfolding, it is, nonetheless, certain because of God's sovereignty and Israel's faith. But this promise, along with its corresponding faith and rejoicing, is not only issued to today's losers. It is also issued to

today's apparent winners, to powerful nations, like Assyria. The announcement calls the nations to rejoice in the redemption of the losers they are lording it over because they need the same redemption, the same faith, the same rejoicing. But this is also true. Only a remnant (v. 7) seems to heed the call to faith and rejoicing. Will we?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *No Longer Winners and Losers, Only the Redeemed*

By promise and faith, a new future with God is certain, even though its final fulfillment is still to come. The ransom has been made. But that future also begins to reshape the present, at least among the believing remnant, precisely because of the certainty of faith. Winners and losers who hear and believe begin to look at each other differently: no longer through the lens of wrath, but now through the lens of promise. Indeed, they no longer look at each other as winners or losers, but as redeemed, as co-workers with the sovereign Lord who both rules this world with justice and redeems this world in mercy. As a result, a new kind of politics enters the stage of history: providing for the blind, the lame, the widowed and orphaned, and the poor becomes the agenda. The old divide between winners and losers is being bridged. And God's people "shall be satisfied with [God's] bounty" (v. 14).