

# Adult Teaching Resources

October 28, 2018



## Doing, and Being (September 2-November 25)

Genesis 2:18-24 – “Being Equal”

Psalm 90 (RCL 90:12-17) – “Gaining Perspective”

Isaiah 53:4-12 – “Redeeming Love”

**Jeremiah 31:7-9 – “Saving Grace”**

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# Saving Grace

Jeremiah 31:7-9

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Bible Background

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*“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.’”*  
Jeremiah 31:7

In the movie, “The Shawshank Redemption,” Red (Morgan Freeman’s character) and Andy (Tim Robbins character) have some powerful things to say about hope.

Red’s understanding of hope is dark and dangerous. “Hope is a dangerous thing my friend, it can kill a man.”

Andy, has a different view of hope. “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

As people of God, we can read those contemporary words from a movie script and place them in a book of modern-day truths. In our exploration of Jeremiah’s words, we read his words of hope for God’s people.

### Opening

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After everyone arrives, ask everyone to find a partner. Once everyone has a partner, ask them these questions for conversation and discussion.

What is hope?

When have you felt hopeless?

When have you felt hopeful?

When have you felt separated from God with no hope of reconnecting with the divine?

Where are you now with your relationship with God—hopeless or hopeful?

### Reading the Bible

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Sing aloud with gladness for who? (Jacob) Raise shouts for who? (the chief of nations)

What is the proclamation? (Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel)

Where is God bringing them from? (the land of the north)

## Reading the Bible *continued*

Where is God gathering them from? (the farthest parts of the earth)

Who will be in the group? (the blind, the lame, those with child, those in labor, a great company)

How will they come? (with weeping)

How will God lead them back? (with consolations)

Where will they walk? (by brooks of water in a straight path)

## Making Connections

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When you find yourself in a difficult situation, what does it take for you to turn to God? What is your prayer? What does God say to you?

What promises from God do you believe to be true? How do you know that?

Our Lesson Writer says, “In the previous oracle, Jeremiah declared that Yahweh had appeared to Israel, saying “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (v. 3). Jeremiah’s oracle is a plea that the people should cry out in repentance and hope in a God who would not let them go.” What statement of love would you like to hear from God? What is your cry of repentance?

When have you desired good news and it came? What was the news? How did you react?

Our Lesson Writer says, “Jeremiah’s promise offers hope to anyone who feels distant from God. We may sometimes think of ourselves as spiritually blind or crippled, or so burdened by other things that we can’t see through the fog to find God. This verse assures us that no one is so far from God or so handicapped by circumstances that God cannot find us when we cry out with Israel, “Save, O LORD, your people . . .” Who are our people who feel distant from God? How are we keeping them from connecting with God? How are we connecting them with God?

Share a time when you experienced repentance that led to tears. How was God at work in your life?

Our Lesson Writer explains, “There is no straight path along brooks of water between Babylon and Jerusalem, so we must read Jeremiah’s promise as a metaphorical vision of God leading the people directly home, providing for them and encouraging them along the way.” How does God straighten your paths? How does God ease the journey home?

## So What?

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Ask everyone to get together with their partner from the beginning of the lesson.

Share what our Lesson Writer says at the end of the lesson.

“For all who feel isolated from God, exiled by sinful choices or overwhelmed by circumstances, today’s text offers hope for forgiveness and a renewed fellowship with God, whose steadfast love never changes.”

Ask everyone to consider this question in light of today’s lesson:

What can we do to help those who feel isolated find hope and a renewal (or new) fellowship with a loving God?

Give everyone time to talk in their partnerships, then ask for volunteers to share within the larger group.

How can we be the presence of Christ for all others?

Move to the board and record the class’s answers for everyone to see.

## The Challenge

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This week, take one item from the list in the So What section and commit to living that out for someone else. Make an intentional effort to include someone else into the fellowship of God.

## Prayer

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*Loving God, we place our hope in you. You give us meaning and purpose in our life. Help us to share your hope, your love, your grace, and your peace with all others and especially those who need to hear your word. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Jeremiah the prophet**—Jeremiah lived and ministered during a difficult time in Israel’s history. His ministry involved not only spiritual matters, but also included pronouncements related to politics and foreign policy.

The international context played an important role in Judah’s internal uncertainty. The strong nation of Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom and led Israel into exile in 722 BCE, then dominated the international scene for the next 80 years. Judah had been forced to pay tribute to Assyria, but the overlord’s strength weakened during the last half of the seventh century. Nabopolassar led Babylonia to independence from Assyria and sought to dethrone Assyria as ruler of the roost. Caught up in its conflicts with the Babylonians, Assyria had fewer resources to spare in keeping Judah and other vassal countries in line. Egypt continued to be a major power that wanted to dominate Palestine, and Judah found itself caught in the middle of these struggles between larger nations. Its leaders sometimes sought to ally themselves with one against the other in hopes of regaining more independence.

Jeremiah was active during the reigns of five Judean kings: Josiah (640-609), Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609-598), Jehoiakin (598-597), and Zedekiah (597-587). He remained active after Nebuchadnezzar disbanded the monarchy and appointed a prominent citizen named Gedaliah to govern the province from the city of Mizpah. Jeremiah had not been taken captive with the exiles, perhaps because it was known that he had counseled submission to Babylon. He actively advised those who remained in the land, while also sending letters to those who were in exile, encouraging them to put down roots and get on with their lives.

Within a few years, a group of zealots assassinated Gedaliah in hopes of throwing off the Babylonian yoke. This led to another influx of Babylonian troops, and in 582 even more Judeans were carried into exile. Others escaped the Babylonians by fleeing to Egypt and reportedly forcing Jeremiah to accompany them (40:7-44:30).

Thus, Jeremiah ministered during a period of great upheaval. Well-schooled in the teachings of Deuteronomy and probably familiar with the ministries of eighth century prophets like Micah, Hosea, and Amos, he steadfastly proclaimed true Yahwism and denounced all religious deviations. Often, he interpreted Judah’s political troubles and impending wars as punishment for the nation’s sin in turning away from Yahweh; yet, he also offered glimpses of hope for the future.

**Jeremiah the author**—Jeremiah is one of the few prophets whose actual writing ministry is explicitly mentioned. While the oracles of other prophets have been preserved, we rarely read of them taking quill to parchment (or papyrus).

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Jeremiah 36:1-5, however, describes how God instructed Jeremiah to record all of his prophecies against Judah. He dictated the prophecies to his companion/scribe Baruch, who wrote them down. Some have suggested that the oracles mentioned in 36:1-5 may refer to most of what is now Jeremiah 1-25. The same chapter also makes clear what happened to one of the “original autographs” – King Jehoiakim cut it up and burned it as it was read to him. Afterward, Jeremiah had Baruch write the oracles again, and added many other choice words.

The book of Jeremiah is often confusing because it includes both first person accounts in which Jeremiah speaks, along with third person accounts that describe Jeremiah’s activities. God also speaks in the Book of Jeremiah, and sometimes it is difficult to determine whether the author intends for us to understand that that God is speaking or that Jeremiah is speaking. Jeremiah also speaks in behalf of the people or its kings, often as a sarcastic means of criticizing their actions – but not always with clear attribution.

Jeremiah often speaks in poetry: the first half of the book is dominated by poetic oracles, though some narrative exists to put them in context. The latter half of the book is primarily in the form of narrative, more frequently describing the prophet’s actions. Many scholars assume that Baruch, who is specifically described as the scribe who wrote at Jeremiah’s dictation, is responsible for much of the narrative that describes Jeremiah and his various activities.

There is a strong likelihood that the Jeremiah materials continued to grow in the hands of later editors and religious leaders who expanded on the prophet’s work, emphasizing his prophetic role and applying many of his sayings to the needs of their particular context. This may explain some of the many doublets in Jeremiah, places in which the same speech or content is repeated, but in different contexts. More than 50 doublets have been identified in the book of Jeremiah. Some samples are 6:13-15=8:10-12; 10:12-16=51:15-19; 11:20=20:12; 16:14-16=23:7-8; 23:5-6=33:14-16; 30:10-11=46:27-28; 49:19-21=50:44-46.

Evidence for the continued growth of the Jeremiah traditions is seen most clearly in a study of the differences between the text of Jeremiah as preserved in the traditionally accepted Hebrew text (the Masoretic Text, or MT), and in the ancient Greek translation of Jeremiah, as preserved in the Septuagint (LXX). The LXX version is about one-seventh shorter than the Hebrew form. Omissions range from single words to longer sections of several verses, such as 33:14-26. The LXX also preserves a different order: the “foreign prophecies” of Jer. 46-51 (MT) are inserted between Jer. 25:13 and 25:15 in the LXX, with 25:14 being omitted.

As a rule, the LXX tends to amplify the text it is translating, rather than abbreviating it. Thus, the shorter LXX text of Jeremiah suggests that the Greek translation was made from an early version of the book, when the corpus of the Jeremiah materials was still growing in the hands of later editors and theologians. Some have suggested that it was translated from an early Hebrew version that was preserved in Egypt, and thus does not reflect the editorial expansions presumed to have occurred in Babylon.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

As further evidence for the expansion of the Jeremiah scroll, note that Jeremiah is called a prophet only four times in the (older?) LXX. The MT, perhaps reflecting a development in the tradents' appreciation for Jeremiah, calls him a prophet 30 times. Similarly, expressions such as "oracle of the Lord," designed to emphasize that a word came from God, occur much more often in the MT.

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumram, Hebrew text fragments representing both textual traditions were found. This suggests that, as late as the first century B.C., there was no universally accepted text of Jeremiah.

**Jeremiah's message**—Jeremiah's preaching, writing, and activity were all predicated on the belief that God is alive and at work in the world, relating directly and purposefully with His people.

God is a *primary actor* in Jeremiah, though not always easy to understand. God appears as both intensely angry and mournfully compassionate, as a God of both wrath and weal, a God of both judgment and of salvation.

Jeremiah has much to say about *creation*, declaring that God made the earth (33:2) sustains it (31:35-36), and fills it with His presence (23:23-24). Nevertheless, human behavior can bring harm to God's creation (12:1-4), so that human choice has a wide-ranging impact.

It is Jeremiah's understanding of this connection between God's activity among all peoples and throughout creation that leads him to speak as a prophet, not only to Israel, but to other nations (1:5, 10).

Jeremiah, who is sometimes described as the "weeping prophet," often speaks of God's deep pathos, as God feels deeply the pain of the Israelites and the groanings of creation. God also expresses anger, heartache, and regret, even hate. These emotions are often displayed in the words or the actions of the prophet, as Jeremiah resonates with the heart of God that hurts for the people but also resents their rebellion. The picture of an angry God is not an attractive one for contemporary believers, but it is helpful to remember that God's anger is not a perpetual divine attribute so much as a temporal response. God's anger is always provoked by human sin, and it is always accompanied by grief; God takes no joy in anger, and mourns when punishing.

The sin that most frequently caught Jeremiah's eye was Israel's persistent penchant of going after other gods and failing to trust in Yahweh. Like Hosea, Jeremiah often described this rebellion through the metaphor of marital infidelity. The people of God are depicted as a wife who has been unfaithful to her husband, as an animal in heat that becomes a slave to its passion.

Jeremiah echoes the basic theme of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History in asserting that sin inevitably leads to judgment. Because the people have chosen evil, evil is visited upon them. That evil often comes through the medium of earthly powers. Thus,

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Nebuchadnezzar and the conquering Babylonians could be seen as God's unwitting agents of judgment, even as Cyrus the Persian would later become a medium of salvation.

Despite his focus on judgment for Israel's sin, Jeremiah also saw a new day coming when God would forgive recalcitrant Israel and return them from exile. Most of the hopeful prophecies are found in Jeremiah 30-31 (some include chapter 33), often called the "Book of Consolation."

**The text**—Jeremiah 31 is a popular chapter in the lectionary. Jeremiah 31:1-6 is used for Easter Day in Year A; 31:7-9 for "Proper 25" in Year B (this Sunday); 31:7-14 for the second Sunday of Christmas in all three years; 31:15-17 for "Holy Innocents" day; 31:27-34 for "Proper 24" in Year C; and 31:31-34 for the fifth Sunday of Lent in Year B.

We'll focus on the three verses of the assigned text (31:7-9), but with some reference to the oracles on each side. Verses 1-6, 7-9, and 10-14 probably originated as separate oracles, but were fit together since they speak to the same theme: a promise that God will forgive Israel and bring them back from exile.

**The blind and the lame**—Leviticus 21:16-20 excluded priests who were blind and lame, among other things, from entering the temple and drawing near to the presence of God. Women were categorically excluded from the temple. Jeremiah, however, saw a day when God would reach out to and restore all people, even those one might not expect to be included. Later, Jesus would make a point of showing similar concern for all people.

## The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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### Has Jeremiah's prophecy been fulfilled?

The hopeful words of Jeremiah's prophecy continue to inspire, but were they actually fulfilled? In one sense, we can answer in the affirmative, because the exiles in Babylon were allowed to return to Jerusalem after the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BCE. Cyrus' philosophy, different from that of the Assyrians or the Babylonians, was that people are more likely to be loyal to the empire if they are allowed to live in their homelands and worship their own gods.

So, the Hebrews, like other conquered nations, were allowed to return home. Several waves of Hebrews made the long and arduous journey to Jerusalem and the small area of "Jehud" Cyrus had granted them, but many others chose to remain in Babylon, the only home they had ever known. There was no great migration of Israelite exiles from other parts of the world, and certainly no easy journey along brooks of water.

Some people today might argue that the formation of the secular State of Israel in 1948 fulfilled the promise, because Jews from all over the world have returned to inhabit parts of the land, though they remain a small minority of Jews the world over. God's presence is not limited to the former lands of Judea and Samaria, however, but extends to wherever people are. The modern State of Israel is a human creation in response to the holocaust – and one that often violates the inclusive spirit of Jeremiah's promise – not a fulfillment of divine prophecy.

One may suggest that the ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy is found, not in a return of a Hebrew remnant to Jerusalem, but in the opportunity for all people to come to God through Jesus Christ, who reached out to all people, whatever their gender or physical capabilities or nationality.

In Christ, God's reconciling love and abundant forgiveness is available "from the farthest parts of the earth, calling all people to "come home" to the land of communion with God – and with all of God's children.