

Bible Study: Christmas 2 *January 3, 2021*

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Sometimes it is easy to lose sight of what is really important in life. The people of God have struggled to keep their end of the covenant with God, and every time they stray, disaster befalls them. In the Deuteronomic Code, they have been given numerous and detailed examples for how to love their God, yet Jeremiah has spent almost 30 chapters demonstrating that their repeated failures to love God as their God loves them has brought them into ruin and exile. At the end of Jeremiah, however, he assures them that God has not forgotten them. No matter how many times God's people stray and forget to love their God, God remembers them and will always bring them back into the covenant that was promised to them.

In our own lives, it is easy to become distracted by all the things in the world that pull on us. Sometimes, it is only when we lose something that is really important that we realize how valuable it was. Fortunately, we have been assured that God will always be ready to welcome us back when we get distracted, and it is never too late to remember God's love for us.

- When have you found yourself so distracted that you missed what was truly important in life?
- What is it like to only realize something is important when it's gone?
- How can you remind yourself that God will always be waiting to take you back?

Psalm 84

It is important to recognize the little joys in life. In this psalm, the people are shouting for joy in praise of God because they know what it means to see and hold onto what is important. They do not need to be the king or have great material wealth to be happy, because they can rest in comfort in the love of their God. They know what it feels like to be away from that which they love most, and they are sure to give great thanks when they have it close to them once again.

We are often pulled by the world into thinking we need the fastest cars, the biggest TVs, the trendiest vacations, or the fattest bank accounts. In reality, the greatest joys in life come from the smallest, simplest moments of spending time with a dear friend, coming home after a long journey, or being comforted in the arms of a loved one. The flashy things fail to fulfill us when love and relationship are missing. God has created a world for us in which the greatest happiness can be found in unassuming places, so don't forget to seek them out and be thankful when you have them.

- What does it feel like to be without something you hold dear, then to have it back again?
- Do you remember to give thanks for what you have when you have it?

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19

Being a good person is how we live out our joy and thanksgiving, not a way of paying God for what we have. When Paul is greeting the church in Ephesus, he is quick to praise them for how faithfully and richly they are living out their Christian lives. He is equally as quick to remind them that they have already been assured that they are God's beloved people whom Christ has saved once and for all. Paul acclaims the people of Ephesus and wants to them keep doing good work, remembering that they are

not buying God's love (because it has already been freely given to them) but they are instead showing thanks for God's love in the way they live their lives.

When we go out into the world to live out our call as Christians, we have two choices: We can love all people and spread the Gospel of the Lord because we are trying to pay God back for what has been freely done for us; or we can love all people and spread the Gospel of the Lord because we are thankful and joyous and this is how we want to live our lives in response. The first way diminishes our relationship with God into one of a mere transaction. It is far more meaningful to let our gratitude to God be demonstrated in the lives of love we live out in the world.

- When someone gives you a great gift, do you try to pay them for it?
- How can you demonstrate your gratitude for someone's gift to you?
- How can you demonstrate your gratitude for God's love for you?

Matthew 2:1-12

The story that we celebrate on this day of Epiphany presents a clear dichotomy between Herod the Great, false king, and Jesus, genuine royalty, according to Ulrich Luz in "Matthew 1-7: A Commentary" (Fortress Press, 2007). Herod's fright upon hearing from the Magi in verse 3 is the opposite of the joy that the magi have upon realizing that they will see Jesus soon in verse 10. Herod's evil plan in verses 7-9 is frustrated by God in verse 12. Even in its structure, this story is meant to undercut Herod while "paying homage" to Jesus. (Interesting note: The verb used here for paying homage, *προσκυνεω* (*proskuneó* in Greek), is only used in reference to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.) This is clearly the story of the gentiles, the magi, coming for a connection with Judaism, for they specifically ask to see "the king of the Jews."

Now, of course, what we always remember from this story is the star and the magi. Julius Caesar, Augustus and Herod all had stars on their coins to symbolize their kingship. Some theories would like to explain the star using science. Ulrich Luz, for example, points out a Jupiter-Saturn conjunction as one of the explanations. But **this misses the point**. The point is that God uses a miracle to symbolize God's son's kingship and divinity. This miracle shows God's will in bringing the gentiles into the unfolding salvation plan. The star hanging in the sky is God announcing to the world, "Arise, shine; for your light has come"!

- The story of the magi often gets lost in the mix of the nativity story. What do you think of the story when we see God's will throughout it in the background?
- Discuss some periods in your life when you look back and can see God's influence over what was taking place