



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Christmas 2
January 5, 2020

RCL: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

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 2:13-15, 19-23

When we have been given great gifts in life, it is important not to forget those who are suffering or living in want. Right in the midst of the birth narrative of Jesus Christ – the great gift that God has given us to be reconciled and healed – is a terrible tragedy that should not be missed. A great many lectionaries, including this one, skip past the story of the massacring of the innocent infants by Herod, in his attempt to kill the Messiah. It is a story that makes us uncomfortable, sad, mad, and is not in keeping with the happy story of Jesus' birth into the world. Yet we cannot ever forget that, even as someone is experiencing great joy, someone else is in pain.

We need to give thanks to God for the joys and great blessings we experience in our lives, and it certainly is right to do so. Give thanks, but do not forget those who are homeless and hungry, lost and alone, dying and ill, persecuted and victimized. We are called to do the hard work in this world of being thankful while yet seeing there is much healing that needs to be done, resting in God's love while yet seeing that we need to challenge injustices in the world, finding joy in Jesus' birth while yet wrestling with human sin.

- When has wrongdoing in the world kept you from feeling joy?
- When has joy in the world kept you from noticing wrongdoing?
- What can you do to balance being joyful about gifts and diligent about injustice around you?

This Bible study, written by Stephen M. Balke, Jr., originally ran for Christmas 2 on January 4, 2015.