

Jeremiah 33:14-16 ¹⁴''The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

¹⁵''In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.'

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13 ⁶But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. ⁷Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the LORD. ⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our LORD Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹²May the LORD make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our LORD Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

I READ AN INTERESTING STORY ABOUT, ARTIST BENJAMIN WEST, WHOM IS BEST KNOWN FOR HIS HISTORICAL PAINTINGS IN THE MID TO LATE 1700'S.

HE LOVED TO PAINT EVEN AS A YOUNG CHILD, AND ONE DAY AFTER HIS MOTHER LEFT HIM ALONE FOR A WHILE, HE PULLED OUT THEIR OIL PAINTS AND GOT TO WORK.

HOWEVER, HE WAS YOUNG ENOUGH AND IN EXPERIENCED ENOUGH THAT HIS PROJECTS DID NOT USUALLY TURN OUT WELL.

ON THAT PARTICULAR DAY, HIS EFFORTS DID LITTLE MORE THAN MAKE WHAT LOOKED LIKE A TERRIBLE MESS.

BUT HIS MOTHER CAME BACK BEFORE HE COULD DISPOSE OF THE TRAVESTY, AND WHEN SHE SAW HIS ATTEMPT, SHE COMPLIMENTED HIM ON THE WONDERFUL PICTURE.

YEARS LATER WEST WROTE THAT HIS MOTHER'S ENCOURAGEMENT GIVEN THROUGH HE COMPLIMENT, WAS WHAT MADE HIM INTO A REAL ARTIST.

ENCOURAGEMENT CAN BE A POWERFUL THING. IN THIS SEASON OF GIVING, AND INDEED ALL YEAR ROUND, THE GIFT OF ENCOURAGEMENT IS A WONDERFUL GIFT TO BOTH GIVE AND RECEIVE.

IN FACT, ENCOURAGEMENT IS THE WORD THAT CAN SUMMARIZE BOTH OF TODAY'S SCRIPTURE READINGS.

FIRST, WE HEAR FROM JEREMIAH, WHO WAS GIVEN A MESSAGE OF HOPE TO DELIVER TO HIS PEOPLE WHO WERE ON THE BRINK OF A NATIONAL DISASTER.

THEIR IMMEDIATE FUTURE HELD THE FALL OF JERUSALEM, AND EXILE FOR MOST OF THE PEOPLE.

AND YET, IN SPITE OF THE HARD TIMES THEY WERE GOING THROUGH, AND THE DIFFICULT TIMES TO COME, A MESSAGE WAS GIVEN TO THEM TO TRUST I GOD'S PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS AND RETURN.

THE PEOPLE WERE GIVEN AN IMAGE OF A TREE THAT HAD BEEN CUT DOWN, BUT FROM ITS STUMP A LIVING BRANCH GREW.

CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND THE ULTIMATE FULFILLMENT OF THAT PROMISE IS FOUND IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS, AS THE RIGHTEOUS KING FROM DAVID'S LINE.

THIS CALL TO TRUST IN THE LORD OUR GOD, AS WE WAIT HIS PROMISES TO BEAR FRUIT, IS ALSO AN ADVENT MESSAGE MEANT TO ENCOURAGE US AS WE WAIT FOR GOD TO ACT.

THE CHRISTIAN CELEBRATION OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS IS A TIME OF REFLECTION ON WHAT GOD HAD DONE IN SENDING HIS SON JESUS INTO THE WORLD.

IT IS ALSO A TIME TO WAIT IN FAITH FOR THE PROMISED RETURN OF THE RISEN CHRIST, AND TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER DURING THIS SEASON OF WAITING.

THE BENEFIT OF THIS TIME OF REFLECTION IS THAT IT ENCOURAGES US TO HAVE FAITH IN GOD.

FAITH AT ITS HEART IS NOT ABOUT HAVING ALL THE RIGHT ANSWERS OR PERFECT UNDERSTANDING.

INSTEAD, FAITH MEANS TRUSTING IN GOD'S LOVE AND PROMISES EVEN WHEN WE DO NOT HAVE THE ANSWER, OR REALLY UNDERSTAND GOD'S PLAN.

ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF ADVENT IS THAT IT ENCOURAGES US TO BOTH CELEBRATE WHAT GOD HAS DONE, AND TRUST THAT GOD IS STILL WORKING TO FULFILL HIS PROMISES.

THIS APPLIES TO THOSE WHO WAIT FOR CHRISTMAS ANXIOUSLY DUE TO GRIEF OR OTHER STRESS.

AND IT APPLIES EQUALLY AS MUCH TO THOSE WHO AWAIT THE DAY IN HAPPY ANTICIPATION.

HOPING IN THE LORD AS WE WAIT FOR JESUS, IS ONE WAY WE LIVE OUT FAITH, AS IS ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER.

CHRISTIANS BEING ABLE TO DEPEND ON EACH OTHER FOR SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT IS INDEED VALUABLE.

PAUL, IN MANY WAYS, COULD BE CALLED THE APOSTLE OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

HIS LETTERS ARE FILLED WITH WORDS AND PRAYERS MEANT TO UPHOLD, CORRECT, INSTRUCT, AND TO ENCOURAGE CHRISTIANS.

THE STORY OF THE PAINTER BENJAMIN WEST, I SHARED EARLIER, CAN SERVE AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THIS.

CHRISTIANS, LIKE AN ARTIST, DAILY TRY TO PAINT A PICTURE OF JESUS FOR THE WORLD TO SEE-BY HOW WE LIVE,

BUT LIKE AN ART WORK DOES NOT ALWAYS TURNOUT WELL, CHRSTIANS CAN ALSO MAKE MESSSES IN OUR LIVES, AND THESE CAN MAKE IT HARD FOR JESUS TO BE SEEN.

A SONG BY LEILN. MORRIS: "CAN THE WORLD SEE JESUS IN YOU?" – PUTS THE QUESTION TO US ASKING:

"DO WE LIVE SO CLOSE TO THE LORD TODAY, PASSING TO AND FRO ON LIFE'S BUSY WAY, THAT THE WORLD IN US CAN A LIKENESS SEE TO THE MAN OF CALVARY?"

CAN THE WORLD SEE JESUS IN ME? CAN THE WORLD SEE JESUS IN YOU?

DOES YOUR LOVE TO HIM RING TRUE, AND YOUR LIFE AND SERVICE TOO? CAN THE WORLD SEE JESUS IN YOU?"

HERE WE ARE CHALLENGED TO CONSIDER HOW WELL OTHERS SEE JESUS WHEN THEY ENCOUNTER US.

IN TRUTH SOMETIMES HE SHINES THROUGH US, AND OTHER TIMES HIS IMAGE IS SO CLOUDED IT CAN HARDLY BE SEEN..

BUT THE BIBLE TELLS US TO NOT BE DISCOURAGED IN THIS BECAUSE GOD IS STILL AT WORK WITHIN US.

FOR EXAMPLE: PAUL, IN HIS VARIOUS LETTERS SOUGHT TO ENCOURAGE CHRISTIANS WHO WERE MAKING A MESS OF THINGS, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO WERE DOING WELL.

HIS SOLE PURPOSE WAS TO STRENGTHEN FAITH IN AND COMMITMENT TO JESUS, AS WELL AS TO THE LOVE HE COMMANDED HIS FOLLOWERS TO EXHIBIT.

THE THESSALONIAN CHURCH WAS SPECIAL TO PAUL IN THAT IT WAS ONE OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES HE FOUNDED.

IT COULD BE SAID THAT HE CAME THERE TO PAINT A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE OF JESUS AMONG THEM, AND TO HELP THEM PAINT THEIR OWN PICTURES.

UNFORTUNATELY, VERY SOON AFTER MANY ACCEPTED CHRIST AS SAVIOR PAUL HAD TO FLEE THE AREA BECAUSE OF THREATS TO HIS LIFE.

NATURALLY, HE WAS CONCERNED FOR THE PERSEVERANCE OF FAITH AMONG THESE NEW BELIEVERS AS THEY ALSO FACED SOME PERSECUTION.

TODAY'S READING OPENS WITH PAUL REJOICING THAT TIMOTHY, WHO HE HAD SENT TO THEM, RETURNED TO REPORT ABOUT FINDING FAITH AND LOVE AMONG THEM.

THIS REPORT WAS SOMETHING THAT ENCOURAGED PAUL, AND THOSE WITH HIM, IN THE MIDST OF THE DIFFICULTIES THEY WERE HAVING AS THEY SPREAD THE GOSPEL.

THE APOSTLE EXPRESSES HIS GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE THESSALONIAN'S FAITH AND FOR SIGNS OF CHRIST-LIKE LOVE GROWING AMONG THEM.

HE ENCOURAGES THESE CHRISTIANS BY LETTING THEM KNOW HE HOPES TO RETURN TO THEM AND BOOST THE FAITH OF THOSE WHO WERE WAVERING.

JUST AS IMPORTANTLY, HE LETS THEM KNOW THAT HIS IS KEEPING THEM IN HIS PRAYERS.

PAUL UNDERSTANDS THE REASON FOR THEIR FEARS AND THE STRESS THEY ARE UNDER.

THE APOSTLE ALSO KNOWS THAT MANY CHRISTIANS WERE STRUGGLING IN FAITH BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT JESUS WOULD HAVE RETURNED BY THEN.

HIS MESSAGE TO THEM IS A REMINDER OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR THEM, AND IS DOING AMONG THEM.

THE FINAL WORDS OF THE PASSAGE ARE PARTICULARLY NOTEWORTHY.

THEY ARE SO, BECAUSE THEY CAN BE APPLIED AS MUCH TO OUR FAITH JOURNEY AND STRUGGLES AS TO THE ORIGINAL RECIPIENT OF THIS LETTER.

FIRST, PAUL PRAYS THAT AMONG CHRISTIANS THERE WILL BE AN INCREASE IN OUR ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE AND SHARE CHRIST'S LOVE.

NEXT, HE PRAYS GOD WILL STRENGTHEN US IN FAITH AND IN THE HOLINESS ONLY THE SPIRIT CAN IMPLANT WITHIN.

FINALLY, HE CLOSES WITH HIS CONFIDENT DECLARATION OF GOD'S PROMISES, IN PARTICULAR THE SAVIOR'S PROMISE HE WILL RETURN TO EARTH.

NOTICE HOW PAUL CALLS US INTO RELATIONSHIP, FIRST WITH GOD, AND THEN WITH ONE ANOTHER.

THE ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SEASONS ARE ALSO ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.

THEY DRAW OUR ATTENTION TO HOW GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT JESUS WAS BORN AS ONE OF US, AND TO HIS PROMISED RETURN TO US.

THIS IN TURN REMINDS US NOT ONLY OF GOD'S LOVE FOR US- BUT ALSO FOR THE REST OF THE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD FOR WHOM JESUS WAS BORN, AND DIED, AND ROSE TO SAVE.

HERE IN THIS SPECIAL TIME OF THE YEAR, PERHAPS MORE VISIBLY THAN ANY OTHER TIME, FAITH AND LOVE JOIN HANDS AS THEY INVITE US TO LOOK TO JESUS.

AND PAUL MODELS FOR US HOW WE CAN PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS SPIRITUALLY, EVEN AS WE DO SO WITH ALL OUR HOLIDAY DECORATIONS AND DOINGS.

FIRST, WE ARE CALLED TO FAITH AND LOVE. NEXT, WE ARE CALLED TO BE OPEN TO THE SPIRIT'S STRENGTH AND SACRIFICE, SO WE MIGHT DRAW OTHERS CLOSER TO JESUS.

FINALLY, ONE OF THE WAYS WE ACTIVELY WAIT FOR CHRISTMAS AND FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST IS THROUGH PRAYER.

WE EVEN CHANGE THE OPENING PART OF OUR WORSHIP DURING ADVENT, TO INCLUDE A REFLECTION, SCRIPTURE, AND A PRAYER, TO ACCOMPANY THE CANDLE LIGHTING.

SOME CHRISTIANS HAVE AN ADVENT WREATH AT HOME AND LIGHT THE CANDLES WITH A SCRIPTURE READING OR PRAYER.

OTHERS REFLECT ON THE SEASON WITH THE HELP OF AN ADVENT DEVOTION.

ONE THING EVERYONE CAN DO AS WE DECORATE OR BAKE OR DO OTHER ACTIVITIES IS-TO SAY A PRAYER OF THANKS TO GOD, OR PRAY FOR OTHERS, OR EVEN OURSELVES, TO BE ENCOURAGED IN SOME WAY.

WHEN WE ARE PURCHASING OR WRAPPING GIFTS FOR FAMILY, FRIENDS, CO-WORKERS, OR STRANGERS- WE CAN SAY A PRAYER FOR THE ONE WHO RECEIVES THE GIFT.

WE CAN PRAY HE OR SHE WILL FEEL THE LOVE OF JESUS IN US OR THROUGH THE GIFT ITSELF.

AND IF THEY DO NOT KNOW CHRIST, LET US PRAY THEY WILL COME TO KNOW HIM NOT ONLY AS THE ONE IN WHOSE NAME THE GIFT IS GIVEN, BUT ALSO AS THEIR SAVIOR.

FINALLY, I SAW ON FACEBOOK AN IDEA THAT CAN BE DONE AT HOME, ESPECIALLY WITH CHILDREN, BUT EVEN WHEN NONE ARE IN THE HOME.

THE IDEA IS TO TAKE THE NATIVITY SET STATUES OF MARY AND JOSEPH AND PLACE THEM OUTSIDE THE MANGER, THEN MOVE THEM EVERY WEEK, OR AS OFTEN AS YOU WISH.

THE SAME CAN BE DONE WITH A PICTURE YOU DOWNLOAD AND PRINT OUT, OR ONE A DRAWING OF THEM.

IN THIS WAY YOU REMEMBER THEIR JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM EVEN AS YOU JOURNEY TOWARDS CHRISTMAS.

THEN ON CHRISTMAS EVE OR DAY, PUT THEM IN THE MANGER WITH JESUS, OR ADD JESUS TO THE PICTURE AND PUT IT IN A PROMINENT PLACE IN YOUR HOME.

IN ALL THESE WAYS AND MORE WE CAN ACTIVELY WAIT FOR CHRISTMAS, AND FOR THE RETURN OF JESUS TO THE WORLD.

LET US PRAY:

ETERNAL GOD, WE GIVE THANKS THAT YOU CAME TO US IN A SPECIAL AND POWERFUL WAY WHEN JESUS CHRIST WAS BORN.

NOW, AS WE WAIT TO CELEBRATE THE DAY OF HIS BIRTH, WE ALSO AWAIT HIS RETURN- PRAYING HIS RULE MAY BE COMPLETE AND YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL FULLY REIGN OVER THE WHOLE WORLD.

BY YOUR SPIRIT, OPEN OUR EYES TO YOUR GRACE AND BLESSINGS, AND NURTURE OUR SOULS IN ALL SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND FRUIT.

IN THIS TIME OF WAITING, WE HUMBLY ASK FOR YOU TO FILL US AND OTHERS WITH THANKSGIVING FOR YOUR LOVE AND FAITH IN YOUR PROMISES.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS, OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, WE WAIT AND PRAY. AMEN