

“What God Wants for Christmas”

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It is 8 days until Christmas, how many of you are done shopping? How many of you still have more shopping to do?

I would say we are 3/4ths of the way done. The kids are pretty much done which is the biggest part of our shopping. But now we are just left with a few adults and each other. Actually I was thinking that while the kids get the most presents, they are easier to shop for than adults. There are so many options for kids and they love toys. Adults can be more difficult. How many of you have someone in your life that is nearly impossible to shop for? For many of us, this is our parents or our in-laws. They have everything they need and want and if they don't, they go purchase it.

What do you get the person who has everything?

That is a struggle we experience at Christmas, but I want to use that question to launch into our text today. What do you get the God who has everything?

He doesn't need anything from us. God is not lacking anything. But there are some things he wants.

If it is not too strange, how would you finish this sentence? What God wants for Christmas is _____. If you have a pen or a pencil, write down an answer for that in your bulletin, or take a quick note on your phone. Finish this sentence, “What God wants is _____.”

Our text from Jeremiah has a few answers for us. Let's look together at Jeremiah and see what he says.

First, let me introduce Jeremiah. Jeremiah was born about 650 years before Jesus and He grew up in the suburbs as the son of a priest. He was destined to be a priest himself, until in his late teens or early twenties, when called him to a different life. Jeremiah was to be his prophet in the land and specifically in Jerusalem.

To be God's messenger in the land was a great calling, yet for Jeremiah it would mean a lot of suffering. He was beaten and publicly humiliated. He had had to compete with many false prophets who claimed to be speaking for God, but were only telling people what they wanted to hear. In Jeremiah 36, God told Jeremiah to write a word of warning to the King so that the people would turn from the evil ways and

God would save them and forgive them, the king burned the scroll and tried to kill him. Zedekiah, Judah's last king, often asked Jeremiah for his counsel, but then ignored what he said.

Jeremiah was there when Jerusalem was sacked and burned to the ground. And after Jeremiah's prophetic words of judgment were proved right, Jerusalem was destroyed and the remnant of people who were left were carried off into exile, God gave Jeremiah a different message to send to the people. God told Jeremiah to write to those in exile, not more judgment, not the divine version of I told you so, but rather God had Jeremiah send words of restoration and hope starting in chapter 30:1 and culminating here in 31:31.

31 "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.

God says, I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah that is different from the one I made when I brought the people out of Egypt.

A covenant is just another name for an alliance or a treaty. It is a contract between two parties. You may remember that God made a covenant with Abraham that in exchange for obedience, God would give him a family, make his name great, and bless the world through him. And God made a covenant with David that one of his descendants would rule over an everlasting kingdom. (As we have talked about in this sermon series, both of these were completed in Jesus. Jesus was the blessing from Abraham's line and is the one who will rule over the new creation.)

The old covenant mentioned here was made between the people of Israel and God at Mount Sinai, after the exodus from Egypt. At Sinai, God makes a binding agreement with Israel. He promised to bless Israel if they obeyed his laws (namely the 10 commandments) and to curse them if they disobeyed his laws.

So if they did what God says, God would bless them and they would be his witnesses to the world. And if they disobeyed, there were consequences.

And as you may know, the family of Israel, rejected God. And when they did, they experienced a kind of trauma and pain unknown to most people and they were forcibly exiled 1000 miles from home. And in their pain and despair, Israel regretted their decisions and began to wonder if this was the end of Israel. Is this the end? Will God choose another people?

God answers them in verses 35-36, Only if creation itself falls apart will you stop being a people on earth. This is not the end for Israel. And in v.37 God goes on:

37 This is what the Lord says:

*“Only if the heavens above can be measured
and the foundations of the earth below be searched out
will I reject all the descendants of Israel
because of all they have done,”
declares the Lord.*

We can't measure the universe now, and they certainly couldn't then. Will God ever cast off Israel? In a word, no. He never will.

This is not the end and God still loves you.

Let's pause for a minute. One big idea from this passage for us is that we cannot know God through the circumstances of our lives. What I mean is that a good job, a happy family, and a healthy bank account are not the same thing as having God's approval. They can be good gifts from God, but they don't tell the whole story. Jeremiah had a 40 year ministry. The first 18 years of Jeremiah's ministry, the economy was good, unemployment was down, and crime was at an all century low, but the beginning of the decay of Judah was already there. Outwardly things were going well, but the people's hearts were turned from God. Their faith was just empty rituals. They thought God would bless them no matter what they did. And they were wrong. Outwardly things were good and they missed God.

You cannot know God's heart by looking at your life circumstances. If your circumstances are great, you can miss God. And if your life circumstances are horrible, it is still true that God loves you and there is hope.

The people were in exile. Their circumstances were awful, but God had a message of hope for them. *“31 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.”*

God says, I am going to make a new covenant, set up a new agreement with both Israel and Judah. A short word about that. The two different houses, Israel and Judah, refer back to before the family of Israel was split by a civil into two kingdoms. It had been 150 years since the kingdom of Israel even

existed. God is saying I am going way back, to how things used to be, how things should be, the whole family is included. This is the new covenant:

33 "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Real quick, if you remember what Pastor Amy said last week, there are layers to Old Testament prophecy. What is being said here is for Israel in Jeremiah's day and we will see it is for Jesus and his disciples including us, and it is talking about a future that has not yet come. For the last few months, we have been looking together for Jesus in the Old Testament and we are going to find him in this language about the new covenant. This language of new covenant is used only once in the whole Old Testament right here in Jeremiah 31, but Jesus picks up on it in Luke 22:20, Jesus on the night that he died, "*after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."* Jeremiah 31 says look forward to the day this will happen and Jesus said with this meal and my death and resurrection, this new covenant has begun. We are living in the New Covenant.

With that in mind, here is the new agreement that will come in those days, in a little while: *God says I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. (v.33 again)*

The law is still a part of this new covenant, meaning God has not changed and what humans were made for has not changed. God has made human beings to follow the Ten Commandments, or as Jesus said in Matthew 22, *36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."* That is still God's plan, but how that happens will be different. The law will not be an external measuring stick, but God will write it on their hearts and they will become people who effortlessly do what God commands. It will flow out of them.

Back to our opening question: The first thing God really wants for Christmas: God wants us to do what He made us to do. God wants us to be good from the inside out. God wants us to love him and love other people.

Now here God says in the new covenant, God will put His law in us and my best understanding is that right now this is what the Holy Spirit is working on in us right now. This does not mean that we are without sin now, but God is working this in us. I will talk a little bit about our role at the end. But gift number one: Do what God made you to do.

I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

"What does God really want?" God wants to be known and loved. God wants to be our God and for us to be His people. He wants us to love Him. He wants to love us. And He wants everyone, from the least to the greatest, to know him.

What does it mean to know God? At one level, it means to know God's character. What is God's character? My seminary professor had this great line, "God is like Jesus all the way down." What is God like? God is like Jesus all the way down.

But to know, in this case, is not just cognitive or mental recognition. To know is to both know about God, his character, what he loves and what he does, but it also means to love and obey him. In Hebrew, there is no word for hearing and not doing. Similarly, there is no way to really know God without experiencing life under his care and leadership. To know God is to trust his character and submit yourself to his leadership, his plan for your one and only life.

I was reminded this week that there is only one definition of eternal life, the eternal kind of life in the whole bible and it is this in John 17:3, *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

God wants to be known and loved. Just like what we really want is to be known for who we actually are and loved. That is what God wants.

And then that line, *"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

What gets in the way of knowing, loving and obeying God? It is our sin, but God has made a plan for our sin. This is what Jesus did on the cross. All that led Israel into exile and what would lead us into exile as well, has been forgiven on the cross. God is no longer counting our sins against us. What amazing news!

I want to look at the final verses of this chapter and then offer a few ways to respond and then we are done. Initially I thought these words at the end of the chapter were just throw-away and the first time I read it, I just skimmed right over it. (Anybody else ever skim when they read the bible?) Look again,

38 "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.

God says, I will rebuild Jerusalem for me, starting in where it all fell apart. The Tower of Hananel to the Corner gate is likely the place where the invasion forces entered the city. God will start at the broken places and expand the city to include *40 The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the Lord.* (This is the valley of child sacrifices to other gods, the place of their most wicked rejection of God. And somehow, God will reclaim and recreate even the worst of our sins, of our rejection.) *The city will never again be uprooted or demolished*” God wants to live with us forever. Our sins will no longer keep us apart. This is eternal life. A few possible responses to this passage this week:

- 1) For some of you, it may be helpful to answer the questions: What circumstances in your life make you doubt God’s love for you? I am sorely tempted to need all my life to go perfectly in order to believe God loves me. My circumstances dictate my view of God. But even in the worst of circumstances, Israel is in exile because they broke their promises to God, God still loved them. What makes that hard for you to believe? And as a part two, tell God. He already knows. He knew Israel’s questions and doubts. He knows ours too. Answer, “What circumstances are most difficult?” And then talk honestly with God.
- 2) Do what God said to do, just because He said so. This week, do something just because it is the right thing to do. The Holy Spirit is at work in us right now, trying to change us into good people from the inside out. We can help him out. We can consciously choose to keep God’s command and love someone. So this week, ask for forgiveness from someone, close the internet browser, pray for an enemy, just because God said so. It is not yet natural for us but it will be someday.
- 3) Finally, sneak a few minutes with God each day. Confession, this week between the work and the family things, my life has been full. And for whatever reason, my attachment to my phone has gone up as well. I have spent 5 hours a day on my phone this week. I have filled my life to the brim and I have crowded God out of my mind and schedule. God wants to be known and loved, and we can know God and love him by talking with him. Pray while you wait in line at the stores. Read a story from the gospel of Luke before bed. Look for a way to steal a few minutes with God this week. Spend time with the God you love. This is what God really wants for Christmas: for us to do what He made us to do, to know and love Him, that He might be our God and we might be His people.