



# ADVENT



**IRON CITY CHURCH 2018**

# CONTRIBUTORS

Jamie Bowman  
Ben Crocker  
Nathan Douthit  
Sam Evans  
Clark Hasler  
Daniel Howell  
Daniel Gilliland  
Ryan Grauel  
Kelly Redding  
Greg Spence  
Maggie Walsh

# INTRODUCTION

Typically, we think of the Christmas season as a time of uninterrupted celebration. So the word “lament” does not often find itself at the center of our festivities when we gather with family, friends, and community. As we take this time to reflect upon the Advent of our Savior and his gifts of peace, hope, and love, joy is an appropriate response, and so is the praise, thanksgiving, and jubilation which resounds from Christ’s Church during this season. However, in the words of Scripture and the history of the God’s people, lament proves an equally present response to our experiences in God’s world. Indeed, biblical lament can be found from the Fall through the entire testimony of Scripture.

To lament is to express sorrow – to grieve, to mourn, or even to complain. We might shirk at that last definition, but in an older, broader meaning, a complaint is not simply selfish grumbling. Rather, it is a declaration that all is not as it should be. Lament exists because suffering is real. Appropriately, the Bible records numerous accounts of lamentation because it testifies to real people witnessing the real God’s real engagement with his real world which is, really, broken. Therefore, lament can also be appropriate, because, we truly experience aggravating futility, moral iniquity, heartbreaking tragedy, and uncontrollable calamity.

However, lament also exists because these things are not all we know. From God’s Word, we know that Creation in its current state fails to offer a clear or complete picture of God’s declaration that what he made “was very good” (Genesis 1:31). In his sovereignty, wisdom, beauty, and power, God created a

magnificent universe. But humanity, as God’s representatives on Earth, stepped outside of his will and order. Seeking a way outside of Creation’s “very good” condition, human beings tried to establish a new pattern, with their preferences at the center (Genesis 3:1-13). As Paul writes, their rebellion subjected the universe and its inhabitants to futility and corruption (Romans 8:20-21; cf. Genesis 3:14-19). Sin and brokenness continue to cloud the reality of the universe’s goodness, but the LORD’s Creation is still wondrous and abundant, “declaring his glory” (Psalm 19:1). The reality of sin and evil does not overturn God’s declaration of the world’s inherent worth and his own satisfaction in it. But it does make us wonder when that perfect picture of God’s glory will be renewed. It makes us question if we will ever experience it. Indeed, Paul attests that “the whole Creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:22). In that unfulfilled longing, the prayers of God’s people often take a form similar to refrain found in many laments “How long, O LORD?” (Psalm 13:1; Habakkuk 1:2; Revelation 6:10).

Finally, lament flows from a deep knowledge of God, a recognition of who he is, and a trust in his revealed purposes. Those who have beheld the LORD - the one who spoke the universe and life into existence - know that he is all-powerful. In fact, no power, not even death could stop God’s loving purposes in Jesus (Romans 8:33-39). In addition to his power, we also know God’s character. He is not a tyrannical dictator. Rather he has revealed himself to be “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping

steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..." (Exodus 34:6-7).

The lament is also a cry that God's purposes would be fulfilled. Sin and evil often produce consequences which stand opposed to God's revealed plans. Once again, Scripture provides an example almost immediately after the Fall. Within God's judgment against the power behind the serpent, he promises that an offspring of the woman will one day prevail over evil (Genesis 3:15). However, the death of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain calls that expectation into question (Genesis 4:1-12). Without an offspring who has not given over to the power of sin (Genesis 4:7), who will overcome evil? Similar questions are raised throughout the Scripture. How will Abraham's descendants become a blessing for all nations without an heir (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6)? How will God's plans for Israel be realized when they are under the genocidal tyranny of a foreign power (Exodus 1)? How will God's people be a light for the Gentiles when they are conquered and exiled (Lamentations)?

God's sovereignty, his character, and his purposes - the lament recognizes

## ABOUT THE ART

As we recognize our world's and our personal brokenness, we cannot respond with idleness. Through the Spirit refining us, molding us, and challenging us, we grow.

This experience is depicted through the growth of a flower. A plant has no control over its surroundings or circumstance. Through scorching heat and bitter cold. Through drenched soil and arid ground. Through brightness and darkness and turmoil and tempest, a flower is not blind to its condition, but it grows regardless. And the product of its gravity-defying trials is beautiful.

Lament is not absent of hope, for circumstance is not who determines the outcome.

these things. The one who raises these complaints believes these things. But they also recognize that suffering and sin are hard to reconcile with both of those truths of God. In their petition and mourning, they ask God to manifest his character and power in a way that will bring help and relief, protection and vindication, welfare and rest, restoration and redemption.

Even after the first Advent of our Savior rescued us from the power of sin and death, they still remain a present reality. We have promises which are guaranteed by the gift of the Holy Spirit through Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20-22), but we still experience the unfulfilled longings of a world awaiting the consummation of its restoration. Therefore, this Advent, we join with God's people throughout history and the Scriptures as we lament the state of the world as it is and long for the culmination of God's redemption in Jesus. We allow ourselves to not be numb to the reality of sin, the power of evil, the suffering of the world, and the limitation of our own ability. We allow the Word to awaken in us those longings which inspire a holy expectation and an honest lament. And in view of our Savior's second Advent, together we cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

# WEEK ONE

## EXODUS 1 & 2

At the onset of Exodus, the Hebrew population was growing, which posed a threat to the new Pharaoh of Egypt. This new Pharaoh, whose name is never recorded in the Bible, first tried to control and oppress the Israelites as a way of stifling their growth. But when that didn't work, Pharaoh told two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill any male sons who were born to Hebrew parents. These midwives "feared God" (1:17), continuing to do everything possible to bring healthy babies into the world regardless of gender or ethnicity.

The story of Moses is a classic for any kid who grew up in the church. It's well-known that the narrative of Moses' birth and life is a beautiful epic of how God uses individuals to bring his loving and redemptive plan to completion. But somehow, because it was a popular Bible story to share with children, I think there's a temptation to gloss over the fact that a genocide is occurring before these midwives' very eyes.

Pharaoh was so power-obsessed that the lives of an entire people group became a threat to his control. In his view, the Israelites were inconvenient, and the evil in his heart led him down a path void of humanity to one conclusion: Kill the male babies and in 20 years, they'll be much easier to control. The evil of one man with great authority led to unimaginably dark days filled with fear and injustice. This story is not one for just the history books. Ethnic injustices, prejudice, bigotry – these are current sin struggles all across our culture and the world. The rise in technology and education don't eliminate



these areas of sin. But through Jesus, God brings the hope of redemption and promise of restoration even when persecution presses down.

In the midst of an ethnic cleansing, the two midwives had the eternal perspective to set their fear of God above their fear of man. With each new birth, Shiprah and Puah made the decision to choose obedience to God despite direct orders from a man who had no qualms about killing those in his way. They did not look

## MATTHEW 2

“A voice heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.”

The long awaited king had come. The wise men from the east had anticipated his arrival, and lauded him with admiration and gifts worthy of his office as the new sovereign of his people. They rejoiced exceedingly, along with the shepherds, the angels, and all of creation with great joy. But his coming was strongly opposed. The dragon, cast down from heaven, was raging against the invasion of God’s power. Herod acted on his behalf, slaughtering the young Hebrews.

Surely the cries of those children are meant to bring to mind the butchering of the Hebrew babies in their earlier captivity, Egypt. In that time, the people were already groaning under the burden of labor placed upon them, and how their weeping must have multiplied as they saw their future destroyed, their young boys discarded without a second thought. God heard their groaning, God remembered his covenant, God saw his people, and God knew.

Just as at that time, one young deliverer was spared. He brought his people through the water into the wilderness, where they sinned by demanding food, testing God and worshipping the golden calf. Yet God was still faithful to them—and in the gospel, we see this baby, delivered from Egypt, passing through the

*december 2*

to what is seen, to earthly authorities and potential punishments. Instead, they looked to the unseen God to be their due north in what surely felt like a hopeless situation. And because of their faithfulness, the names of these two common women were forever preserved in Scripture.

May we similarly look to the unseen, to promises of the Father, despite the darkness and injustice all around.

waters of baptism, led into the wilderness where he resists sin by foregoing food, trusting God, and only worshipping the Father. Israel established a kingdom for a time, but this new deliverer announces to all who would come, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17)

We also don’t have to look far to see a world enslaved to futility, death, and destruction. A great sin of our generation is our despising children. We see the world as something to be abused, profited by, and discarded instead of stewarded. Our people are the ones bloated with their own pride, unwilling to cede an ounce of power or respect to others if it means they feel their kingdom decreases. We weep for our people, and cry for rescue from slavery. God hears, God remembers his Christ, God sees his people, God knows. The child who the magi worshipped, the young boy brought up from Egypt, the Son in whom almighty God was pleased, the Savior tested in every way and found perfect is the one who is coming for us. We groan in hope, knowing we are heard and feeling we are known, for the second advent of the king, who will receive the praise worthy of his office—the ruler of all things.

“I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.” Jeremiah 31:13b

## EXODUS 33 & 34

The presence of God is the only thing in this universe powerful enough to kill a man with one glimpse of it, yet humble enough to dwell within mortal man. The Lord placed Moses in a cleft in the rock, covered him with His hand, then thunderously proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (34:6). How was it possible for Moses to capture a glimpse of this kind of glory and survive? Although I am not sure that there is an answer, the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians may help; “For we now see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Even though Moses saw through this mirror dimly his face shine like that of an angel. Due to our stiff-necked and hardened-hearts, we cannot fully commune with The Lord. Although we ought to strive to see the Lord in as great a measure as possible now, we still

## NUMBERS 14:1-19

“Why has God liberated us from captivity for us to now remain miserable in freedom?” “Oh, that we would have just died as slaves in Egypt!” “Moses and Aaron are fools, they will just keep us from experiencing the finer things available in Egypt.” “Let’s forget this lost cause and go back to slavery.”

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob led Israel out of captivity in Egypt by his hand, just as he promised he would (Exodus 6:6). After miraculously granting the Israelites freedom, The LORD provided for their needs in the wilderness, just as he promised he would (Exodus 16:4). While caring for their needs, the LORD protected them and led them to the land, just as he promised he

are not able to see everything. Within our fleshly bodies we do not currently have the capacities to see the face of the Lord. Our minds, our hearts, and our eyes are all shattered, and if The Lord does not heal us we will never be able to substantially see his Glory.

Although brokenness is a dreadful truth, The Lord has promised that there is a day coming soon for all who have turned from their sin and are following Jesus, when He will give us resurrected bodies to live in His presence (1 Cor. 15). He will give us resurrected minds to comprehend and resurrected eyes to see the height and the depth and the width and the breadth of his glory that currently appears dull. Consider this certainty during advent season: If Jesus Christ has been resurrected from the dead, we who follow him will also obtain resurrection to the glory of God the Father.

would (Exodus 23:20, 31).

Israel’s grumbling reveals the folly of their hearts – the folly of our own hearts. Doubt about circumstances in the future leads to doubt about God’s trustworthiness in the present. Despite his past faithfulness towards us, and despite his promises of future grace in our lives, we also participate in this grumbling by stabbing our finger at the LORD and spatting, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?” (Psalm 73:11). Though we’ve been freed from sin, no longer enslaved to the elementary principles of the world but adopted as sons of God (Galatians 4:3-5), we return to slavery because we’ve been deceived into thinking it will satisfy us in a

*december 3 & 4*

way that freedom won't. The enemy leads us to believe that in order to experience pleasure and fulfillment and majesty we must put on the old self and resent the new.

Brother or sister in Christ, remember the promises of our Lord! Remember his steadfastness, remember his mercy, remember his love! In Christ you have been promised freedom (John 8:36), protection (2 Thessalonians 3:3), satisfaction (John 4:14), provision (2 Peter

## PSALM 90

Most likely, Moses writes this lament as he witnesses the daily fallout of the Israelites' rebellion. After failing to trust God and disobeying his command to enter their rightful land, God forced his people to wander in the wilderness for forty years until that entire generation of Israelites had died. For years, the most present reality for Moses remained the persistent flood of death, which still extinguishes people's fragile lives like the afternoon sun scorches delicate grass (90:5-6). All this loss and grief occurred because God's wrath burned against his people's sinfulness - their corporate disobedience, individual iniquities, and their hidden trespasses (90:7-8). Furthermore, Moses knows all mankind remains consigned to this fate, not just Abraham's descendants. Since the Fall, humanity has experienced the same death, decay, and disintegration promised to Adam and Eve after their rebellion (90:3). Therefore, all people live their lives, age, and die (90:9-10). Many of us have witnessed this tragedy, as parents, grandparents, friends, or even patients age, fall ill, and breathe their last. The finality of death seems inescapable, and even before our final hour our lives can be plagued with suffering, strife, futility, and failure. Taking this all in, we might be tempted to look at all of this pain,

1:3), and an inheritance that will never be lost (1 Peter 1:3-5)! Don't let anxiety or fear or hopelessness over what is to come cause you to forget what Christ has already done! He has called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light. Let's live and walk in that light, believing that the sufferings of this present life will all pass away in the age to come, when the light incarnate returns to authenticate every promise.

throw up our hands, and ask, "What is the point?"

But suffering and death is not the only thing Moses knows. He declares that the everlasting God and creator of all life is the "dwelling place" of his people at all times (90:1-2). Our lives find meaning outside of whatever we might be able to make of them, because the Maker of all things demonstrates his steadfast love, favor, and presence to his servants. Therefore, our life can have hope, for the gracious God will surely "make us glad" beyond our affliction (90:15). Even more, our labor can have purpose, for "in the Lord, it is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). And while we work, we wait, and while we wait, we rejoice. Because we know that a day is coming when suffering and death won't have the final word, and on that day, we'll be singing (1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

## JOSHUA 7

Sin has consequences. This is shown through the account we read in Joshua 7. Achan disobeyed the Lord and the Lord's anger was kindled against the people of Israel. If you are familiar with this story or the story of the Bible, you know that because humans are born sinning and continue in it. We are in need of an atoning sacrifice. We are in need of someone to turn the Lord's wrath away from us who deserve every bit of it. Therefore, sin leaves us longing for something or someone to do this. We long for what C.S. Lewis calls "the great reversal." When Adam first disobeyed God, sin, sadness, sickness, and death became frequent reminders of the fallen state of humanity. As we reflect this advent season, there is good news on which we can rest, even in the midst of our longings. The One to save us from the wrath of God has come. Jesus Christ was "born that man no more may die." Those who feel the effects of their sin

## PSALM 130

Jerusalem is located on a hill that stands tall among the surrounding cities. The Jews who lived outside of the city would make a pilgrimage up to the city for worship several times each year. This is a psalm that the Israelites would sing as they were making the ascent from the surrounding valleys entering into Jerusalem for worship. From the valley to the mountain they would cry out to the Lord asking him to hear as they declared utter and complete dependence on Him every step of the journey. Without His grace they could not stand. The psalm is said to mirror the journey into physical Jerusalem, yet it rings of Zion. Our posture toward the Lord must remain worshipful from the dregs to the mountain! We eagerly long and cry to the Lord for rescue us, yet within

each day and long for a Savior can look to Immanuel, God with us, knowing that He took on the curse that we deserve so that we can confidently look forward to a day when all is made right. There is a day of restoration coming (Acts 3:21). The effects of sin will be no more. The peace that we read about in the first two chapters of the Bible will be reality as we see Jesus face to face and have no more need for tears. Some of the best songs that have been written for the Church are the ones we traditionally sing during the Advent season. This is because they are filled with a sense of the weight of life in the midst of a sin-filled world and the longing that is created in our hearts by that weight. Our sin has created a curse that spreads far and wide, but Jesus has "come to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found." Let us humbly and repentantly look forward to the day when our sin is fully and finally behind us.

that cry we must not forsake worship. The depth of the valley is normally a place characterized by silence and fear, yet it ought to be filled with prayer (verse 1). Charles Spurgeon said, "Deep places beget deep devotion. Depths of earnestness are stirred by depths of tribulation. Diamonds sparkle most amid the darkness. Prayer from the deep gives to God the most excellent type of glory. The more distressed we are, the more excellent is the faith which trusts bravely in the Lord, and therefore appeals to him, and to him alone." The deeper the Lord takes us, the deeper we will need him, and the more pure worship we can bring to his throne.

Within this Psalm there is something else, something incredibly special- the psalmist appeals to The Lord's covenantal name

“Jehovah” five times within these few verses. In essence, he is guiding us to say “Jehovah, remember your covenant with Moses. Jehovah, remember your people. Jehovah, remember your promise. Jehovah, remember me.” Within the

## I SAMUEL 1 & 2

Childlessness, infertility, and miscarriages carry a particular kind of pain. It is a complicated pain, which can be difficult for those outside of it to understand. Like many pains, it is born from unfulfilled longings. But unlike many pains, it is a pain which can repeatedly bring lost hopes, recurring disappointments, and isolating grief. Like it was for Hannah, this kind of unfulfilled longing is not easily consoled by the presence of one's mate (1:8), especially when their embrace might bring further experiences of dashed hopes.

Biblically, Hannah, and women like her, are not alone. Sarah, Rachel, and Elizabeth experienced years of sorrow due to their difficulties conceiving. From Scripture, we also know that these women were able to conceive and bear children. Such knowledge can be encouraging. On the other side of it, God's Word also tells us why this suffering exists. One of the punishments given to our first parents was God's promise, to “multiply your pain in childbearing” (Genesis 3:16). We sometimes think this only refers to the physical pain involved in giving birth, but the book of Genesis and the experience of many women throughout time attests to emotional anguish, spiritual pain, and deep fear that they may never have the chance to experience the labor pains of childbirth. And if we think about it, that sorrow is understandable. Human beings were created and blessed for the special purpose to “be fruitful and multiply,” spreading God's image and rule over the earth (Genesis 1:28). Thus, the experience

deepest sorrow, we must remember His promises. The Lord is not finished. For the sake of His name, he will keep his promises. This is truly a psalm that ought to be sung on our knees in repentance to the Almighty!

of every kind of infertility calls into question God's purposes and touches on a core aspect of humanity and femininity for the women who experience it. What is the encouragement for these women and the couples who suffer quietly, praying fervently and sometimes silently for this desire to be met?

The answer can be found in the name of Hannah's son, for Samuel sounds like the Hebrew for “heard by God.” In the midst of pain and anguish, God looks upon us with mercy and favor. And the God who created the universe by the sound of his voice listens to the brokenhearted and silent laments of those suffering the effects of our ancestors' curse. Psalm 113:9 promises that “the LORD gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children!” This promise may not be fulfilled literally for every mourning wife and husband, but in the miraculous birth of Jesus, we have assurance that God hears and new reason to hope that our ultimate longings will be fulfilled. He is the proof that creation and humanity is not consigned to the consequences and conditions of a fallen and broken world. For through him, God is making all things new (Revelation 21:5), and that blessed restoration will flow “far as the curse is found.”

# WEEK TWO

## LUKE 1

Luke chooses not to begin his gospel story with the birth of Jesus. Instead, he starts by presenting the desire for answers.

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, long for a child. Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, appears to him and tells them that God has heard their prayers and that they will have a son. In response to this proclamation, Zechariah asks “How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years” (1:18). He seeks clarity instead of relying on faith, and in turn, Gabriel temporarily removes Zechariah's ability to speak. In longing for answers, he is made to watch and listen, instead of asking.

Mary, too, has questions. Gabriel also appears before her to proclaim that she will give birth to a son, the Son of God, and will name him Jesus. Being a young, unmarried woman, Mary responds by saying “But how can this happen? I am a virgin” (1:34). As a faithful servant who wants to obey the Lord, she still longs to understand how this miracle could be possible.

Even Elizabeth, upon seeing that Mary is pregnant and knowing that she carries a holy child, asks “Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?” (1:43). Throughout these events, there is a consistent longing to understand why God has chosen three specific, seemingly insignificant people for such a grand purpose.

But with this longing to know comes a desire to celebrate. The first chapter of Luke conveys both Mary's song of praise and Zechariah's praise to the Lord in his prophecy. Though they were not given



the direct answers they longed for, their yearning for the plans of the Lord to be revealed led them joyfully closer to him. God fulfills the longing of his people. While Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary all have questions about what the Lord is doing, they rejoice in his greatness and mercy. They know that his plans are coming to fruition and are grateful to be

## PSALMS 9 & 10

God is able to handle our earnest lament. He is big enough for our honest tears and heartfelt cries. The depths of our heart and soul do not scare him or push him away - he made us. These laments are vehicles of praise, even in their sorrow, question, and despair.

Psalms 9 and 10 work together as one acrostic poem. In tandem the psalmist writes up and down the throes of praise, exaltation, lament, and plea. The psalmist says he will recount the wonderful deeds of God and proceeds to mention God's enthronement forever in Zion (9:1, 7-11). Not only that, but also says the Lord's throne is one of justice, and his judgment is that of righteousness and uprightness (9:8).

Yet even after all these wonderful descriptions, the very first line of chapter 10 rings out: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" Then the psalmist goes into a lengthy recollection of the wicked, who believes that God does not see. Meanwhile, "the helpless are crushed" by the wicked (10:10). The psalmist in desperation asks the Lord to arise and lift up his hand (10:12).

There are going to be plenty of times in our Christian life where our cries swing from Psalm 9 to Psalm 10, and we wonder why God is standing far away, especially based on what the wicked accomplish on this earth. In our longing for our eternal

part of his plans, however they unfold.

Through God's greatest act of grace, our longing was met with more than we could have ever hoped for in Jesus. People of God, rejoice! Lament does not last forever. Longing does not go unrecognized by your Father. He hears you, knows you, and will make a way. In fact, he already has.

home, we can speak freely with our God who upholds us. Like the psalmist we can take heart that underneath it all, "The LORD is king forever and ever," and he will incline his ear "to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed" (10:16-17). Even when we do not realize it, God is the one who avenged blood and is mindful of his people; "he does not forget the cry of the afflicted" (9:12). He does hear us, and he does not abandon us.

## II KINGS 19:9-19

Prayer, I must admit, is not often my first impulse when my back is up against the wall. I will usually try to control the situation, fighting and maneuvering so that I can get the outcome I want. It is only when I have depleted all my options and realize the inevitable, that I turn to the Lord in prayer.

In 2 Kings 19, we find King Hezekiah with his back against the wall. Assyria has decimated the northern Kingdom of Israel, taking the survivors into exile across the world (2 Kings 17). Sennacherib, King of Assyria, has made his plans to conquer Judah and Jerusalem known to Hezekiah. Once Hezekiah realizes that no strong ally or no amount of money will save Jerusalem, he turns to God in a prayer of lament.

Hezekiah petitions God to hear and answer his cry of lament. Hezekiah affirms that Yahweh is the only true God. Given Jerusalem's current circumstances God's sovereignty is being called into question. Not only is Jerusalem in danger, but God's very character is being mocked by Sennacherib. The King of Assyria

believes Yahweh is no greater than the countless other man-made idols he has destroyed. Hezekiah is not only asking for deliverance from Assyrian forces but also for God to protect his character through this deliverance. Remarkably, God does answer Hezekiah's prayer. God delivers his people and glorifies himself by delivering them. The Assyrian forces will be held off and Jerusalem will not be taken into exile by them. Yahweh makes clear that Jerusalem is safe from Assyria but not safe from exile. He promises that by his zeal he will preserve a faithful remnant in the exile to come (2 Kings 19:31; 25:27-30).

As Christians, Hezekiah's lament teaches us that our deliverance also leads to God's glory. In the person and work of Jesus we have received the greatest deliverance. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus also provides the most magnificent picture of God's glory ever given. In this Advent season let us marvel at Jesus, who is our greatest gain and also the greatest display of God's glory.

## PSALM 74

"It's not as it should be." You can practically hear the Psalmist saying this to himself as he sits in a dark room, staring at the flickering flame of a solitary candle. His tone in this chapter is dejected and matter-of-fact. He's reached the end of his logic, and he's left with the one agonizing question that he knows he can never fully reconcile, never fully understand. It's the same question that sits at the end of each of our ropes - "Why?"

The psalmist is looking around at the injustices and oppression all around him, and he is baffled. And so, he begins to

question God and remind the Creator of our universe of all the things going on that God already knows - that his chosen people are being mistreated, that the meeting places in his name have been burned up, that those against him have malice in their hearts. The Psalmist is confounded and frustrated, and you can feel the strength of his emotions in his words, in the way he asks, "O God, how long will the adversary reproach? ... Why do you withdraw your hand?" (74:10-11). His emotions are raw, not filtered through "appropriate" prayer jargon or cloaked by

cultural clichés that oversimplify terrible situations. It's plainly stated pain, and it's so real.

But then he begins to worship, to proclaim the glory of the Lord and what he has done (74:12-17). It's not the kind of bubbly worship that rides the emotional high of thankfulness or celebration. Rather, it's the kind of worship that looks to God in spite of circumstances or emotions. It is deliberate, purposeful worship wrought from mature faith that lifts the psalmist's head so that he can fix his eyes on the Father, because the psalmist knows the character of God.

## JEREMIAH 8:18 - 9:3

In this passage, Jeremiah weeps for the sin of God's people. He recognizes that "they are all adulterers - a pack of treacherous liars" who do not know the Lord (9:2-3). "They only go from bad to worse," and Jeremiah will go on in this chapter to speak of the Lord's judgement that will result from their sin (9:3). Little hope seems to remain for the Israelites. The continuous cycle of sin and attempted repentance has been unending. Jeremiah observes their sinfulness and laments their disobedience, crying "I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief" (8:21).

But the weeping prophet is not the only one pained by the defiance of the Jews. God hates the sin that plagues his people. He is angry, yes, and he is just, but he is also loving. He laments as well, saying "Oh, why have they provoked my anger with their carved idols and their worthless foreign gods?" (8:19). God longs for his people to do what is right, to seek him, and to stay with him. He wants his people to be with him.

God hates the sin he sees in you, and the reality is, the sin of the Israelites is just as

This is the cadence of our faith: cry out, remember, fix our eyes, repeat. Each heartbreaking situation, each season of loneliness, each time we look in the mirror and wonder, "Who am I becoming?" – these are just a few of the notes in the song of our lives that combine to bring praise and glory to our Father and King. That is our purpose, and that is our focus. Even in the midst of despair and questions, we remember what God has done and we, like the psalmist, choose to turn our eyes to the Creator who is sovereign over all things.

present today in the hearts of humanity. We are liars, traitors, people who turn our eyes from the Lord. Left to ourselves, we are without hope of escaping the wrath of God for the evil that dwells within us. Our souls long for healing from wrongdoing and freedom from ourselves.

This longing is not for nothing. It serves as a consistent reminder that we are in need of salvation. In our lamentable state, we hold to the hope of a day when sin will be no more. We trust in the one who has and still offers us grace despite our failures. We rejoice that God does not leave us as we are but, in his mercy, makes us new.

## PSALM 89

The Lord is faithful to his covenant anointed, and by him, to his people. That is the message of Psalm 89. The psalm begins by establishing that promise to David, the covenant king. It then goes on to praise the Lord for his attributes, including his transcendence, might, faithfulness, sovereignty, righteous and justice. Truly blessed are those who know this God and are known by this God. However, there is one who is known in a special way. Described as David, the covenant king, this chosen one calls God his father, and is to be made the exalted firstborn, the highest of all kings. He will never lose his lineage nor his throne. The covenant will stand firm for him, it will endure as the heavenly bodies in the sky.

However, it is here at verse 38 we see the psalm take a different turn. Far from extolling the Lord's faithfulness, the author cries out to the Lord that the covenant king, the chosen one has had his throne cast down, he is covered in shame, and the victim of scorn from all who see him. The author remembers the promises of God, but all he can see is the current suffering.

We live in a world of suffering. Anyone who has ever been in a hospital, who has seen the devastating effects of natural disaster, who has hurt from infertility,

disability, or impotence in the face of ever-mounting threats can weep with the author in verse 47-48. However there is one who has felt this more keenly than we can ever imagine.

This psalm was passionately read by a people in exile. They sang with anguish of their rejection, but were able to close with a plea to the Lord to remember, and a blessing to his name. God did not forget them, and their suffering was nothing compared to the true Son of David.

In the gap between verses 37-38 we see the span of Matthew 3:17 "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," all the way to Matthew 27:46—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Christ bore the insults of many nations, he bore the shame of our sins, he carried our guilt on his own body, and for our sakes, the chosen son of David suffered and was rejected. When we suffer and hurt and lament we read these psalms and remember what the Anointed went through for us, and cry out for God to remember, and for the second advent of our covenant King to come.

Blessed be the Lord forever!

Amen and Amen.

# LAMENTATIONS 5

Lamentations is written within the context of the Babylonian captivity. It was a time when the Lord's people turned their back on Him; they found their hope in idols so he gave them over to their own lusts and desires. The Lord sent the Babylonians to capture and mutilate Jerusalem in order to bring them to repentance. This reflects our state as well; due to mankind's rebellion we are in a consistent state of exile here on earth. The Lord's people are the citizens of the kingdom of God, yet that kingdom has not yet manifested itself here on earth as it is in heaven. That is a problem for those who love the Lord. Jesus promised that we would be as sheep among wolves (Matthew 10:16), and that the world is going to hate us (John 15:18); in essence, Jesus promised that we would be placed in a type of indefinite earthy captivity for following him. Around the world many believers are tormented and murdered for their faith in Jesus; many are in a physical exile. Within our context, many believers trade fellowship with the Lord Almighty for their own idols; they are in a spiritual exile. Whether

sexual desire, financial status, or self-idolatry, many have bowed the knee before their idols and are in need of repentance.

With this reality in place, read verse 21 again, "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored." Take note of three things here. First, Ezekiel is crying out not only on his own behalf, but also on the behalf of all of the Lord's people; restore us to yourself. Second, that the Lord is completely sovereign over the restoration of hearts; restore us to yourself. Third, although Jerusalem is in a detestable state, this is not a cry for material blessing. It is a cry for restoration to the Lord; restore us to yourself. Oh, that the Lord would raise up a generation of Christians that would faithfully fall to their knees before the Lord Almighty and ask for the restoration of the body of Christ!

# WEEK THREE

## JOHN 16

Jesus did not go to the cross without making sure his disciples knew what they would face for following him. "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). The suffering that Christ endured on the cross was an intense form of persecution. He was dejected, shamed, and humiliated. He was tortured, beaten, and mutilated. The suffering of the cross was extreme, but Jesus says we should expect no less as his followers. Christ is King, and he is coming back, but this world and those living in it belong to the tribe of Adam. Sin came into the world through Adam, and ever since then death has reigned in the hearts of man (Romans 5:12-14). Through Christ, we can reign in life by receiving the abundant grace that causes us to be born again into God's tribe (Romans 5:17).

Living as members of God's tribe in this world makes us aliens and exiles. Our citizenship is in heaven and not on earth, and Jesus promises that we will experience persecution in the world from those still in the tribe of Adam. He warns that our worship and our very lives are at stake, and that they will be attacked (John 16:2). We can rejoice, though, because Jesus' warning does not come without a great comfort! Though Christ has departed from this world, he assures us that it is for our good, because in his place he has sent us a helper.

Brother or sister in Christ, do you know this helper? Do you know the one who convicts the world of sin and righteousness and judgement (John 16:8), who guides you into all truth (John 16:13), who glorifies Christ and declares all that the Father



has (John 16:15)? Do you know the Holy Spirit? Jesus promises us that we will face persecution and suffering for following him, and he has given us the Spirit as a source of comfort and boldness and life amid this persecution. We cannot live as disciples of Christ, as members of God's tribe, in a dark and fallen world without the help of the Holy Spirit. There is sorrow in this life as we long for the return of Christ, and our sorrow will turn into joy when he comes, but by the power

## PSALM 30

The psalms hold a language for lament to which our modern hymns and worship music fall far short. They are a book read by a people in exile. They remember the dedication of the temple, and know that it is God who kept them. They must feel this third stanza so acutely, with its boast of immobility, recognition of God's favor, and the utter chaos that ensues when he leaves them to their own devices. As they read this now, they recognize that death is their only future. As they stare into Sheol's gaping jaws, they cry out for salvation. In this moment, God remembers them.

We also are inclined to look to God only in our distress. The trials we taste in this life are frequently graces that cause us to stop trusting our own strength and to cry out to God for his mercy and memory. We serve a God who hears.

The people of Israel often faced the threat of extinction. They were exiled, they were captive in their own land, they were brutally disenfranchised by different foreign powers. They truly felt that God had hid his face from them. However, after so many years of silence, again they heard from the Lord. While the deliverer was still in her womb, Mary said the Lord "has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the

of the Holy Spirit we can be sorrowful yet still rejoice in this life (2 Corinthians 6:1-10).

For the sake of our witness (Acts 1:8), our hope (Romans 15:13), and our endurance (Ephesians 1:13) we need the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that if we ask, we will receive (John 16:23-24), so let us continually ask for more of the Holy Spirit as we long for his appearing.

mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy" (Luke 1:51-54).

On this side of remembrance, in the final verse of the psalm, they no longer sing their own prosperity and security, but only that their glory may sing God's praise and thank him forever. On a dark night in Bethlehem, the angels cried out, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14) For the long-suffering, humble, and hungry saints the mourning is over, and their rejoicing in God has begun. May Christ come soon and wipe every tear from our eye, as we devote our lives to his glory.

## PSALM 13

Imagine that you have crashed your car into a ditch and are bleeding out. Someone calls 9-1-1. As you lay waiting, there are probably a million thoughts that would run through your mind. You might recount the crash. You might think about the intense pain that currently is overtaking you. It might also seem like an eternity as you wait for the paramedics to arrive, maybe even thinking that they will never get there to save you. Did they forget? This intense longing for someone to provide relief is seen also from David in Psalm 13. He feels forgotten. He is sorrowful. He is anxious that his enemies may seemingly have the final word. This often feels like the life of Christians, especially those who have experienced loss or suffering. We feel that the Lord has brought us to this place and left us to be forgotten. We, like a man awaiting the arrival of the ambulance, are in need of a Savior because we are unable to save ourselves. As humans, we are best described by the words of Ezra the priest, "our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens." (Ezra 9:6) However, unlike

## JEREMIAH 31

Jeremiah has said that Israel committed covenantal adultery against God; they have sought religions and idols of falsehood. Disaster and destruction are coming their way. Exile is in their future. There will be exceedingly much about which to weep and wail. Lament and mourning will be close companions to Israel. But not forever. The 31st chapter of Jeremiah is pivotal for the future hope and joy of God's people.

The LORD says, "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away.

the imaginary story with which, we can truly await the end of our suffering and sin knowing that a Savior has already come. This is how the psalmist can rejoice while feeling forgotten, because he knows that the LORD has dealt bountifully with him (13:6). This is the tension that exists in the everyday Christian life. We feel and see the effects of our sin in everything that we do. We know that this world is not as it should be. But we also know that the Lord has finished the work (John 19:30). We who are in Christ are seen by the Father just as He sees Jesus. This isn't because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. This is why David can be sorrowful while still rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10). He knows that, although it may not always seem like it, God has stayed true to His character and already shown salvation to David (13:5). This is what is so bittersweet about the Advent season. We still sin. We still mess up. We still suffer. But we can be confident that God has dealt bountifully with us because of Jesus, and He will deal bountifully with us for all of eternity.

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (31:2-3). The LORD declares, "And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant" (31:28). The suffering will be worth it, and the lament will end.

Somehow, as only God can do, there is grace in the wilderness. The love of God toward his people is an everlasting one. His love is great and pervasive enough to establish a new covenant on our very hearts, within our very skin. If we are

scattered, we will be gathered. If we are struck down, he will build us up again. If we weep, he not only hears; he will bring the eternal Morning to end our mourning forever. "For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish," the LORD says in verse 25.

The God of all faithfulness declares this

## PSALM 137

The Psalmist of Psalm 137 gives us a unique look at the lamentable situation of the Israelites in the Babylonian exile. The scene that is opened for us shows a defeated and mocked Israel hoping for God's justice to come.

The people weep by the waters of Babylon a far way off from God's presence in Jerusalem. The Babylonians consider Yahweh as nothing because they have conquered his people. They mock the Israelites and tell them to worship this God who could not save them from exile. The priests, who played and sung in the worship of Yahweh, have hung up their instruments. They would rather forget how to play and sing than betray God. They pray for God to remember. They do not want him to simply recollect what has happened but, they want him to repay the Babylonians for the cruel acts they have committed against Israel.

Babylon is certainly a far way from Birmingham, but I believe this Psalm resonates with us today. The disturbing request of the Psalmist for God to dash the enemies' babies against the rocks strikes a chord within us (137:9). It upsets us not because we are above such a request, but it upsets us because we wish we could say it. This request, as grotesque as it is, is simply a request for God's justice to come. The Israelites realized that the world was not as it was supposed to be. They wanted God to bring justice to their situation.

to be true. If he has brought us this far, then he will bring us further "by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble" (31:9). He does not leave us alone in our lament. Our future is not a hopeless one of unfulfilled promises. He who has made promises must keep them, for it is his name and character.

Is the same not true for us today? In a world of #metoo and Black Lives Matter, we are well acquainted with injustice. We lament the exploitation of our sisters and the oppression of our black brothers and sisters. The most Christianly thing we could do is follow the example of the Psalmist and make bold requests for God's justice to come. The hope that Advent offers us in our broken world is that justice came in the person of Jesus. God provides justice for us in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Looking back to the justice of the Cross helps us to view our broken present with the hope that justice will come again in the future. This Advent season we can lament our current situation as we hope for God's justice to come in the second Advent of Jesus.

## DANIEL 9

Daniel's response to the word of the LORD was to turn, seek, and confess... with trembling! Daniel's turning and seeking and confession was accompanied with fasting because the presence of the LORD was absent from his people. Jesus explains in Matthew 9 that guests at a wedding do not mourn during the celebration because the groom is present, but when the groom departs from the guests and leaves the celebration, it is right for the guests to fast. Fasting is an expression of longing and mourning in response to the absence of God's presence in the world. Daniel's pleas for mercy and confession were accompanied with fasting because he longed for God's presence to be restored to his people.

Daniel confesses that Israel is deserving of open shame because of the treachery and sin they have committed against the LORD. Israel sinned, did wrong, acted wickedly, and rebelled by turning aside from the commandments and rules of the LORD. The LORD graciously sent prophets to speak on his behalf to the people and to warn them of their transgression, but they refused to listen. Even once suffering and calamity came upon them for their sin, they were still given an opportunity to turn from their iniquity and gain insight from God's truth. Instead, they sinned. They lived wickedly.

Does the dire depth of Israel's sin resonate with you? Do you feel as though your sin is too much? Do you feel as though your sin has abounded too greatly for you to have hope for God's abounding grace? Sin is a reality in this world, and it will be until Jesus returns. Things are not the way they should be. Not in our lives, or in our families, or in our neighborhoods, or in our social justice systems. Not in our schools, or in our governments, or in our living rooms, or in our bedrooms. Things are certainly not the way that they should be in our own hearts. Things are broken.



Daniel's prayers reveal his belief about what the solution to this brokenness is: "O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate" (Daniel 9:17). God's answer to the brokenness in the world and the brokenness in our own hearts is his bright, fiery, holy presence. When sin abounds, long for the presence of God. When calamity strikes, long for the presence of God. The return of Christ will consummate the union of God's presence with the world, but until then

## PSALM 120

Words have incredible power. They do not merely have the capacity to do harm or good; they also have the ability to influence the very atmosphere in which we live. Words change the surrounding environment mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. They can spur anger, create laughter, express wisdom, provide affirmation, and call us to action. Words shape the world and, therefore, must be wielded carefully. Unfortunately, words are often treated with little value. The human tongue lies, deceives, and commences battle in needless conflict.

The meditation of this brief psalm reflects a desire for peace. The psalmist longs to no longer be among those who have "deceptive tongues" and only wish for war (v. 3). He finds himself surrounded by people abusing language by lying and deceiving. In distress, he uses words: "I took my troubles to the Lord; I cried out to him, and he answered my prayer" (v. 1).

When considering the difference between the time in which this passage was penned and the present condition of the world, there seems to be little difference. We live in a land of sharp language based on snap judgements. As much as we have the responsibility as Christians to be attentive to and involved the socio-political climate around us, we can quickly become discouraged

God's presence is graciously given in his Spirit to those who long for his appearing and who long to make him known.

Let's long for God's kingdom to be present on earth as it is in heaven. Let us fast and confess and pray and plea for this mercy: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations."

by and caught up in the back and forth unnecessary disputes. In a world where anyone will say anything, we can easily find ourselves desperately longing to hear words of peace.

In our longing, we can trust that the words of the Lord are true. He values words. He used them to bring the world into existence and inspired them into a text to guide us. He longs for us to use them as well, not to create discord, but to cultivate peace.

This world will never be able to offer us the perfect peace we seek, but the Word of the Lord is our refuge. Our longing only leads us back to the one who satisfies, who speaks truth, and who answers when we call. And when he speaks, the word he pronounces is, "Peace" (Ephesians 2:17).

# WEEK FOUR

## LUKE 2

Waiting in hopeful expectation is not something that we do today. We have virtually eliminated waiting in modern society. Our fast passes, minute clinics, quick service restaurants, 24-hour news apps, and Amazon Prime accounts have ensured us that we never have to wait for anything. When we do have to wait (I'm looking at you, DMV!!) we can easily distract ourselves so that we do not feel the effects of waiting. The ability to not have to wait has ironically made us a more impatient people. Perhaps the greater consequence of not having to wait, is that our capacity for hope has been diminished.

Can you imagine waiting your entire life for something to happen? This is exactly what Simeon was doing in Luke 2. A devout man filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon was waiting in hopeful expectation for the consolation of Israel. Simeon knew the stories of his people and the promises of God. He knew that even though his people had been delivered back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon everything was not as it should be. His people were under Roman oppression, the Jewish leaders were corrupt, and there were still so many who did not know Yahweh. In all this brokenness and not-as-it-should-be-ness, Simeon waited in hopeful expectation for the Messiah. He would be the Spirit-anointed One who would proclaim the good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, give sight to the blind, liberate the oppressed, and proclaim the Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19).

When Joseph and Mary came to Jerusalem to present Jesus, the Holy Spirit illumined Simeon to see that this baby was



the consolation of Israel. This baby was the one he had longed to see his entire life. Simeon held Jesus in his arms with the assurance that he could now die in peace, because this baby would be the one to bring salvation to his people and the Gentiles (2:29-32). The promise of God for which he had hoped beyond hope was being fulfilled before his own eyes in Jesus.

The Advent season provides hope in our hopeless society by waiting for Jesus. We look back and rejoice, as Simeon rejoiced, that God provided consolation for Israel in the life, death, and resurrection of

## PSALM 102

There are so many expectations on Christmas, on this one month or these few days. We expect everyone to be joyful. We expect there to be some kind of holiday spirit associated with the season that makes all kinds of things work out. We expect people to be 97 percent more likely to get along and equally more selfless. And yet, with each passing year, we feel more and more the pull of selfishness and the exhaustion from the pace of the season. For me, there's always a moment of feeling letdown by the season, whether it's a fleeting thought or a resting awareness that certain days on the calendar do not automatically mend broken people and remove all sin.

We live in a fallen world and are encased in cracked and fragmented shells. All it takes is a well-placed jab to be painfully aware of our surroundings and situation. And the more we get to know God and his character, the more obvious it is that this is not how his creation was intended to look and feel. This passage says that the Lord hears "the prayer of the destitute" (v. 17) and he does not despise it, that "a people yet to be created may praise the Lord" (v. 18).

Jesus. As we look back to Jesus' first Advent, we become acutely aware that we still live in a world where everything is not as it should be. The dissonance we feel between the state of the world and the hope we have in Jesus moves us to look forward to his second advent. Even in our modern hopeless society, we have something worth hoping for. We hope for the day that there will be no more tears, death, mourning, or pain. We hope for the day when we will see Jesus seated on his throne, making all things new (Revelation 21:4-5).

We, and so many others, are those "yet to be created" who are destitute, crying out to God from our brokenness. And in his unceasing love and unfathomable mercy, God sent a piece of himself to us in our brokenness. He knew that Jesus would suffer greatly, that he would eventually be murdered publicly and inhumanely. But God's love for us is so great that he put a piece of his very heart on this earth and chose to do nothing as sinful humans put Jesus on a cross. What agony the Father and Son endured for us.

That is what we are to remember in a still moment on this Christmas Eve. We celebrate the birth of a child and look to the cross, knowing that though "our days are consumed like smoke" (v. 3), we serve a Father who "shall endure forever" (v. 12).

## REVELATION 12

On the island of Patmos, the apostle John sees a myriad of apocalyptic visions. These visions give him a beautiful but mysterious glimpse into redemptive history, past and future. This Revelation is sent to Christians who are suffering and at times complying with the Roman rule of the day, and it is meant to encourage and also strongly challenge their living. Before going further, it is important to note that Revelation is not intended to primarily be a place to calculate dates and times nor should it be read like a newspaper.

"She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne" (12:5). The birth of Jesus is our cause of foremost celebration on Christmas Day. All the Hebrew cries for a Messiah have been heard, and this birth immediately initiates the fulfillment of God's great promise to his people. But the birth did not end the story, for Christ's blood was shed to make atonement for our sins and secure an eternal redemption for us (Heb. 9:12).

The apostle John goes on to say that salvation has come and the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down - but "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb (12:10-11). Satan, sin, and death have had a monopoly with lies, sorrow, and destruction upon the people of God, but the blood of Christ is putting them out of business. God has not only heard the cries of his people throughout time and space but also given them an eternal inheritance of salvation. He has given us an indestructible means of conquering through the blood of the perfect son born in a meager manger. This gift is something that cannot be taken from us, no matter what falls upon us in this world. He has come to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.



