



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins  
*Senior Pastor*

The Lord's Day  
November 29, 2009

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**While We Wait**  
**Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:34-36**

Waiting . . . It's a part of life, isn't it?

We wait in restaurants—sometimes even to get a seat. We wait for our children to get home when they've gone out. We wait for the results of tests—tests at school, medical tests, and the tests of life.

Doctors' offices and hospitals and car dealership service departments all have *waiting* rooms. And so do other places. We spend a lot of our lives in them. Sometimes we wait for news, and it turns out to be good news. Sometimes the news we wait for turns out to be bad news—a difficult or grim diagnosis, or the surgery wasn't successful, or those dreaded words, "There's nothing else we can do."

We wait at traffic lights. My family and I live on the other side of town, and there's no way to get here without getting onto or at least crossing Horner Boulevard. Sometimes I feel like I spend a lot of my life waiting to get onto Horner!

Sometimes we wait for good things. We wait for the milestones and celebrations of life—the birth of a child, rites of passage, professions of faith and baptisms, graduation, marriage, and more. We wait for accomplishments to be achieved. We wait for Christmas. We wait for promises to be kept or fulfilled.

Waiting is a part of life.

***Waiting for a promise . . .***

Advent is about waiting. The two passages that serve as our text on this First Sunday of Advent are about God's good promise and waiting for him to bring it to fulfillment.

The first passage is from Jeremiah 33:14-16. It's about God's promise to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It was a promise about the future. It was a word from the LORD through his prophet Jeremiah about hope beyond horror and deliverance beyond destruction. The LORD declared that he would fulfill his promise of deliverance and restoration through a righteous Branch from David's line.

It was a grim time for the people of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel, which along with the southern kingdom of Judah made up the nation of Israel, had fallen to the Assyrian empire in 722 B.C. About 135 years later, Judah was now facing the same fate as the armies of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege to Jerusalem.

That's what the people of Jerusalem were facing. The siege had been on for nearly a year and a half at this point. The Babylonians were slowly strangling the city to death, cutting off all outside traffic. There was no commerce and no way to get food into the city from the

countryside. Now as food was running out, the people were starving. Many of the surrounding towns of Judah had already fallen, and now it was just a matter of time for Jerusalem. Jeremiah had already given a word from the LORD that made its inevitability clear.

The thing that brought on the siege was the ill-advised decision of Judah's King Zedekiah to rebel against Babylon. About a decade earlier, in 597 B.C., the young King Jehoiachin had almost immediately surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar. Thousands were deported to Babylon then, removing the royalty, nobility, artisans, craftsmen, and wise people. Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah was made king, and given a new name by Nebuchadnezzar—*Zedekiah*, which means "The LORD is my righteousness."

Despite his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah decided after a decade to plot with Egypt and other nations against Babylon. The siege was the result, and would end in 587 B.C. with the destruction of the city, including the temple that had stood since Solomon's reign. A second, much smaller deportation would leave only the poorest of the people to care for vineyards and crops. All the leaders that remained except Zedekiah were executed. As he and his army attempted to flee the city, they were overtaken. The Babylonians executed all his sons in his sight, then put out his eyes, so that the last thing he ever saw was the slaughter of his sons. They bound him in bronze shackles, took him to Babylon, and put him in prison, where he remained until the day he died.

When this destruction was imminent, Jeremiah had declared that it was sure because of Judah's continual rebellion against God. But even as he proclaimed this judgment because of their sin, he also proclaimed this word of hope, this promise—literally, this "good word"—that God would raise up a righteous king to deliver his people and execute justice and righteousness in the land. Jeremiah stated it in such a way as to draw everyone's attention to it: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (33:14, ESV).<sup>1</sup> The NIV doesn't translate the Hebrew interjection *hineh*, but according to my seminary Hebrew professor, Dr. Elmo Scoggin, *hineh* means something like, "Hey! Look here!" It's intended to call special attention to what's being said, or to draw the reader or hearer into the surprise of the turn of events.

Still, Jeremiah's proclamation must have seemed hollow to those who heard him. How in the world *could* he believe it? *Did* he really believe it?

Well, Jeremiah took the LORD at his word to the point of buying a field from his cousin Hanamel. The LORD had told Jeremiah that this opportunity would come, and that he was to buy the field. So he did, for seventeen shekels of silver. He signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and had his assistant Baruch to store it in a clay jar for future use, in his confidence in the word of the LORD that houses, fields, and vineyards would again be bought and sold in Judah (32:3-15).

So when he proclaimed the LORD's declaration that the LORD would fulfill the promise he had already made (in 23:5-6) to cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, Jeremiah wasn't just blowing smoke. He really believed it, to the point of buying a field he knew would one day be owned and maybe sold *by his descendants*. Despite circumstances, despite the siege, God's original promise still stood, and Jeremiah was fully expecting him to fulfill it!

But exactly what was this promise all about? When you look at all of chapter 33, you see that it's full of assurances that even though destruction was at hand and would take place, restoration was just as sure. Though judgment might be necessary because of Judah's rebellion, God's promise endured—he would raise up a righteous ruler who would execute justice and righteousness in the land, and the LORD would bring salvation and security for his people under

the rule of this Branch of David. All this was, after all, rooted in God's covenant with King David, that he would always have a descendant ruling over Israel. The rule of this righteous Branch would be of such character that what was said would be *his* name in 23:6, is now prophesied to be the new name of *Jerusalem* under his rule: "The LORD is our righteousness." King Nebuchadnezzar had set up a weak puppet king and named him "The LORD is my righteousness." *God* would raise up *this* king, *his* anointed king, and give him *and* his people the name "The LORD is our righteousness"!

So this promise was a promise of mercy beyond judgment and restoration beyond destruction, God's good purpose to give them a hope and a future (29:11). It was the assurance of the ultimate triumph of God's gracious redemptive purpose. Indeed, it was a "good word"!

But did it happen? The return from the exile and the restoration that took place afterwards paled in comparison to the glorious promises of the prophets. It seems to have materialized in only the smallest of ways. In the centuries following the exile, Judah was only a pawn in the successive empires of the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and the Seleucids. They enjoyed independence for only about a century, and that was under the rule of high priests, not a descendant of David as king. And then the Romans came on the scene, subjecting and occupying Judah once more. Their rebellion against Rome from A.D. 66-70 ended in the destruction of the temple. A second attempt in A.D. 133 led to the destruction of the nation that lasted from then until the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

Could it be that what Jeremiah was describing here was much broader and greater than what the Jews were expecting, much larger and more universal than one ethnic group and a tiny plot of land in the Middle East?

In the centuries between Jeremiah and Jesus, Jewish messianic expectations grew from an ideal ruler to an apocalyptic deliverer. By Jesus' day, both these views and many others somewhere in between all had their adherents. And people were filled with fervent expectations.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus came as the expected Messiah—in fact, *Christ* is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew *Messiah*, the "anointed one."

But Jesus didn't fit *any* of the Jews' expectations fully. He was a much different kind of Messiah, with a much broader purpose and plan than they envisioned. He wasn't coming to bring deliverance from Rome for the Jews; He was coming as God in the flesh to bring salvation from sin for all who would put their faith in him! Through both personal redemption of individuals and corporate redemption of a people for himself from all the tribes and nations of humanity, he began the fulfillment of the promise. Looking back from this side of the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, we who are Christians know and affirm that *in the coming of Jesus Christ, God has begun to fulfill his good promise!*

### ***While we wait . . .***

But when we look around us, we see injustice and oppression in a world filled with unrighteousness and rebellion against God. We see suicide bombings and terrorist attacks and horrible crimes and children being kidnapped and molested and murdered. We see human beings treating other human beings in incredibly *inhuman* ways. We experience disease and disability and death, the loss of jobs and financial security, the straining of relationships with family and friends, sometimes to the breaking point. Our existence in this age is still filled with pain and peril, destruction and death, disappointment and despair.

But we have to remember—the promise has only *begun* to be fulfilled. Its total fulfillment awaits Christ’s *second* coming, his return in glory! We live *between his comings*. The fulfillment has already begun, but it’s not yet complete. God’s kingdom rule has come in Christ, but it’s still coming!

And so we wait. But *how* should we wait?

In our second passage in Luke 21:34-36, Jesus tells us. He was talking about his return and the events that would precede it—the destruction of the temple (which happened in A.D. 70), the rise of false prophets and messiahs (which has happened on numerous occasions), the usual international conflicts and wars and natural disasters, persecution of Jesus’ followers, and events that would shake the heavens and the earth.

As he told his disciples about these things, he warned them:

“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”

The old *Revised Standard Version* translates the warning, “But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down . . .” Think about what Jesus was saying here.

When we live in the midst of all the injustice and oppression and upheaval of this fallen world, it’s easy to forget that we are a people who are to live in *hope*. We’re waiting in confident expectation that God will fulfill his promise in Christ. But we must watch ourselves. This age will try to squeeze us into its own mold (Romans 12:1-2), and that eventually leads to despair. Despair leads people to seek ways to numb their personal pain and despair, and often that leads to dissipation and drunkenness—excessive indulgence and the attempt to escape from reality.

Jesus said that this kind of lifestyle, as well as the anxieties of life will weigh our hearts down. And when our hearts are weighed down, we will not be living in light of Christ’s promise to return, so that day will come on us like a trap. So we’re to “be always on the watch,” praying for his help to escape whatever trials and tribulations we experience in this world in the hope of standing before him when he comes, rather than cowering from him in shame.

### ***How should we live?***

So what should we do while we wait? *We should live prayerful lives that focus on God’s promise rather than our circumstances.* We should live in *hope* rather than despair.

That doesn’t mean that we’re oblivious to the injustice and oppression and evil and suffering and anxiety around us, or the evil and difficult circumstances that befall us. It’s all too real.

But it does mean that we don’t allow those things to control us, and indeed, in the hope of what Christ will bring to completion at his return, we work to try to make things more like he will eventually make them when he makes all things new!

So in this Advent season as we look to our Lord’s coming, we believe and affirm that in Christ’s coming, God has begun to fulfill his good promise. And in God’s own good time, Christ will come again to complete the fulfillment of that promise. We wait in hope of his return!

Even so, Lord Jesus, come! Amen!

†MEG

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.