



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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Longing for Deliverance
Isaiah 64:1-12

Today we're beginning the season of Advent—those four weeks of getting ready to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus at Christmas.

Advent isn't celebrating Christmas early.

It's a time of preparation—a time of looking into our hearts to see what we need to deal with to be ready to celebrate the birth of the Christ child in a worthy way, and to see what we need to deal with to be ready for His return in glory.

It's a time of yearning, a time of longing—longing for God to *do something* about the shape this world is in.

I mean, look at it!

We're involved in two wars already, and there's the potential for others as well in the near future. This week our local National Guard Unit will begin its deployment process.

To say that our economy is shaky right now is an understatement. Those who have disciplined themselves to save and invest for retirement have seen half of what they've accumulated vanish. Others who live week to week are finding that lifestyle even more challenging.

Layoffs and downsizing and reorganization are household words right now. One industry after another is asking Congress to bail them out, even if that means selling out their economic soul to the government. Churches and benevolent organizations are seeing more requests for help than usual.

And look at how so many families are falling apart. Lots of times it's the couple that seemed to have everything and be happy, but somehow that wasn't enough.

And then there are the personal crises we all might face at some time or another—a critical illness, a death in the family, a rebellious or wayward child or grandchild.

And deep in our spirits, we just want things to be the way they should be. We want peace in the world, and peace in our lives. We want healthy relationships and economic prosperity, or at least stability.

When we turn to our text for today, you can multiply our yearnings.

The people this text was written for were the Jewish exiles who had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in the late sixth century B.C. They had heard great promises of the restoration of the nation and the rebuilding of the temple and of Jerusalem.

But all around them, the land still lay in ruins. The temple—the symbol of God's presence among them—had been looted, destroyed, and burned by the Babylonians when Jerusalem fell.

Everything was overwhelming—the destruction, the drought and famine, the difficulty of starting over completely from scratch.

Yet each week, when the Sabbath came, many of them would still go to the temple, or what remained of it anyway, to worship God. And amid the burned-out ruins in what used to be the outer court, this prayer would be offered . . .

- ^{64:1} Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
- ² As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
- ³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled
before you.
- ⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
- ⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
- ⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
- ⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and made us waste away because of our sins.
- ⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
- ⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look upon us, we pray,
for we are all your people.
- ¹⁰ Your sacred cities have become a desert;
even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation.
- ¹¹ Our holy and glorious temple,
where our fathers praised you,
has been burned with fire,
and all that we treasured lies in ruins.
- ¹² After all this, O LORD, will you hold yourself back?
Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?

It's a moving prayer, isn't it? Does it stir something very deep inside you?

This prayer is actually a lament, very much like the psalms of lament in the book of Psalms. It honestly expresses the feelings and frustrations of the people who had returned, whose dreams of glorious restoration had been shattered, and whose hopes had been deferred. Instead of all they had longed and hoped for, and had really and truly expected, now what they needed more than anything was God's deliverance.

But it seemed that God didn't hear them, that as C.S. Lewis once described his own experience of grief and despair, when they needed God the most, He had slammed the door in their face, and they had heard the sound of bolting and double bolting.² Had the LORD finally turned from them totally in His anger over their sin?

It would have been easy to think so. We question God's love and presence in far less pressing and stressful situations, don't we? But the prophet was determined to lead the people to plead for God's mercy, that the LORD might forgive them and deliver them from their dire circumstances. Look at the prayer.

It pleads for God to rend the heavens and come down, as He did in times past—especially at the Exodus (remember, He told Moses, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt . . . I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . .” Exodus 3:7-8, RSV).

The prophet's plea is based on God's past acts of deliverance (64:1-3). He then makes confession, first about God's character (that the LORD is the God who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him), then about their sinfulness, their uncleanness, and their failure to call on God (64:4-7). Then he makes one final plea for mercy and deliverance, appealing to God's character, their relationship with Him, and the need for deliverance based on their circumstances (64:8-11), and concludes by saying: “After all this, O LORD, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?” (64:12).

Do you remember how we all felt after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath? I vividly remember that not two days before those attacks, when I had seen a report about one of the suicide bombings in Israel, I had thought, “I'm so glad we don't have to worry about those kinds of attacks here.”

And then it happened. It was not only the terror and fear; it was the overwhelming sense of *helplessness*.

While it was a totally different situation, maybe that helplessness is a little like what these Israelites felt.

Now they were trying to find God in it all, seeking His help, feeling like He was paying them little or no mind.

We do the same thing, don't we—try to find God when there's a major crisis or national tragedy?

That's how it was with us after 9/11, you know. In that overwhelming helplessness, people began looking, if only briefly, to someone bigger than it all—to God. But it was short-lived. I remember the Sunday after 9/11, our attendance at the church I was serving as pastor was up

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 4.

over fifty percent for worship. The next Sunday, it was still up. But then it began to fall off again. Our seeking for God and His deliverance really didn't last very long, despite the fact that our nation was soon at war in Afghanistan, then Iraq.

This kind of turn toward God was much more sustained during the Great Depression and World War II. But after 9/11, our government made a strong response to terrorism, and thanks be to God, we haven't been attacked again. On that front, maybe we don't feel as helpless. So maybe we no longer feel the urgent need to plead for God's deliverance . . .

But was that the case with the Israelites? Hardly! They were once taught that Zion was inviolable, that as long as the temple, where God dwelt, was there, Jerusalem could never fall. And since God dwelt there, the temple would stand forever on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. It was a sure thing—until God decided to withdraw His presence from the temple. So much for that false security!

During the exile, the Jews had been given high hopes of a glorious restoration. But their experience to this point was only the slightest shadow of fulfillment at best! Even after they had returned to their beloved land, they were still *longing for deliverance*.

So this prophet's prayer was a *prayer of desperation*! Yet for all the desperation, it was a prayer that was undergirded by *hope*. After all, you don't plead with someone who can't make a difference in a situation, do you? Deep down, the prophet *knew* that God acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. He was praying in the confidence that *God's people can trust Him to deliver them in His own time and way*.

Isn't that what longing for God's deliverance and pleading with God for it are all about?

Longing for God to do something about the situation we're in?

Pleading with Him on the basis of His character and our relationship with Him?

Pleading in the confidence that He can and will deliver us as He has in the past, longing to see Him work like that again?

Pleading in recognition of our own inadequacy to do anything about our circumstances, and in recognition of our own sin and failure?

But for us, on this side of the Incarnation (the coming of God in the flesh in Jesus Christ), it's about even more. It's not just about longing for deliverance from our present difficulties and circumstances. It's about something much bigger!

In Christ, we long not only for deliverance in history, but for eternity! What the Jewish exiles were really yearning for could only be truly fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And while we experience glimpses and foretastes of that now, we'll know it in its fullness only when *this* world passes away, and Christ brings the kingdom in its fullness in new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells for eternity.

The salvation He brought us in His cross and resurrection will be experienced in its complete fullness only in eternity. In his grief C.S. Lewis remembered the words of his beloved wife Joy, how in the midst of her suffering she had said, "Real life has not even begun yet. We are still in the shadows."

Lewis had affirmed that in his writings over and over. But it was put to the test in the worst way when Joy died after a long struggle with cancer. Lewis' struggle is portrayed powerfully in the 1985 BBC television movie *Through the Shadowlands*.

Lewis had prayed for Joy's recovery, and her aggressive malignancy went into remission for about two years. But then it came back with a fatal vengeance.

After her funeral, Lewis' priest and dear friend Harry Harrington says, "Thank God for your faith, Jack. It is only our faith that sees us through times like this."

Lewis replies, "No, that won't do, Harry. This is a mess, that's all there is to it." Lewis went through months of grief and anguish and depression, a real dark night of the soul. But then suddenly, early one morning, he writes:

"Imagine a man in total darkness. He thinks, because he can see nothing, that he is in a dungeon. But then he hears a sound . . . maybe something in the trees, and feels the breeze on his face, and realizes he is really in the open air. Nothing in his situation has changed; he is still in total darkness. Only now he knows the unseen world is greater than anything he can imagine . . ."

Maybe this prophet had heard the sounds and felt the breeze of the unseen world on his face.

What are you longing to be delivered from?

Financial pressure or disaster? Sickness or disease? The grip of a grief that just won't let go? A family crisis or a failing marriage? A wayward child or grandchild? Some kind of addiction? Some dark secret or sin?

My brothers and sisters and friends, I have good news for you! In Jesus Christ, God has come to deliver us! And in His own time and way, He will! Our deliverance is in Christ!

Are you longing *for Him*?

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