



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, 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*, of examining our hearts to see what we need to deal with to be ready to celebrate the Messiah's birth in a worthy way, and to be ready for his return.

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've been at war since 2001, with no end in sight. And the threat of terrorism is still very real around the world and even here on our own soil.

Civil unrest has plagued our country over the past several years, as well as multiple and mass shootings at concerts, churches, and schools, and on our streets.

Then there are the personal crises we all may face at some time or another, actual or possible—a critical illness or death in the family, a fractured family, a wayward family member or friend, a financial crisis

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

Deep yearnings

When we turn to our text for today, you can multiply those yearnings. The people that this text was originally intended for were the Jewish exiles who had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in the late sixth century B.C. They had heard great promises about the restoration of Israel 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 of what used to be the outer court, from time to time they would offer this prayer from Isaiah 64:1-12¹ . . .

**Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
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!**

For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
 you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
 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.
 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?
 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.
 No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you;
 for you have hidden your face from us
 and have given us over to our sins.
 Yet you, LORD, are our Father.
 We are the clay, you are the potter;
 we are all the work of your hand.
 Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD;
 do not remember our sins forever.
 Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.
 Your sacred cities have become a wasteland;
 even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation.
 Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you,
 has been burned with fire,
 and all that we treasured lies in ruins.
 After all this, 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 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, whose hopes had been deferred. Instead of all they had longed and hoped for, 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 in his anger over their sin finally turned from them totally?

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 when he came down at the Exodus (remember, he told Moses, **"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt . . . I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them . . ."** (Exodus 3:7-8).

The prophet bases his plea 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). After that he makes one final plea for deliverance and mercy, appealing to God's character, their relationship with him, and the need for deliverance based on their circumstances (64:8-11). He concludes by saying: **After all this, LORD, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?** (64:12).

Feeling helpless

Do you remember how we all felt in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks? There was not only terror and fear; there was the overwhelming sense of *helplessness*.

Maybe that helplessness is a little like what these Israelites were feeling. Babylon had destroyed their holy city and temple. After half a century of Babylonian oppression, they were now under a bit more benevolent Persian rule. But Jerusalem and the temple still lay in ruins. 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. Amid that overwhelming helplessness, people began looking to someone bigger than it all—to God. But it was short-lived. That first Sunday after the attacks, attendance at the church where I was pastor was up over fifty percent for worship. The next Sunday, it was still up. But then it began to fall off again week by week. Our seeking for God and his deliverance really didn't last very long.

This kind of turn toward God was more sustained during the Great Depression and World War II in the 1930s and 40s. After 9/11, our government's response to protect us against terrorism appeared to be strong, decisive, and extensive. So maybe we didn't feel as helpless anymore. Maybe we no longer felt the urgent need to seek God's deliverance

But was that the case with the Israelites? Hardly! They'd been taught that as long as the temple, where God dwelt, stood, 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 because of Judah's sin. 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 also a prayer that was undergirded by *hope*. Do you plead with someone who can't make a difference in a situation? Deep down, the prophet *knew* 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*.

Longing and pleading

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 our situation?

Pleading with him on the basis of his character and our relationship with him?

Pleading in the confidence that he can deliver us as he has in the past, longing to see him work 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, it's about even more—more than just 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 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.

The salvation he brought us in his cross and resurrection will be experienced in its 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. 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 wrote:

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? 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*?

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

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