

Jeremiah establishes the mood of Advent when he gives us God's declaration: "The days are coming," God says, "when I will fulfill my promise." Advent is about expectant hope, eager anticipation, waiting excitedly on the edge of your seat. God's promises are about to come true!

But as the Christmas season draws near, how can we really embrace this mood when the promises Jeremiah speaks of are fulfilled in the past? It's almost like the difference between an anniversary and a wedding day. They are intimately connected, but they aren't the same. We're joyful and thankful that the promise was fulfilled back then, but that's a very different feeling than eager expectation, the "thrill of hope" that that the hymn speaks of.

But Jeremiah's mood is the right mood for us to have, not because we are revisiting the past, but because of the *new* promise that we see in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13. Paul begins this passage by giving thanks for the Thessalonians in light of how they *responded* to Christ's Advent: "We're so thankful for your faith in Christ!" They responded to Advent the right way; they received the promised blessings by faith, and Paul is overjoyed.

But at the end of this section, Paul sets out a new hope for them: "May the Lord Jesus establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, *at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.*" Advent is a time of real expectant hope even for those who live *after* the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, because Jesus is coming again! We remember the *first* Advent, and we await a *final* Advent! "Jesus is coming!" is just as true for you as it was for Jeremiah, for Mary and Joseph, and for the church in Thessalonica, because He's coming again. The promise of Christ's return is the reason for our eager hope. And so as you enter into Advent, are you longing for God's promises to be fulfilled? Are you eager for Jesus to return?

But before we answer that question too quickly, we need to read further in Jeremiah. Vs. 15 says that "a righteous branch will spring up for David, and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land." *Perfect justice* and *absolute righteousness* will come through the house of David. All wrongs will be made right, and all wickedness will be punished. Are you ready for that? I think we're all ready for justice *for other people*, but are you eagerly anticipating an exhaustive audit of how righteous you are? The way you spend your money, your time, what you do, what you say, *who* and *what* you love and *how* you love?

If I really believed that I was about to give an account for my life four weeks from today, I would change some things, wouldn't you? I would speak to my wife and children differently. I would probably leave the remote untouched a bit more. I wouldn't worry so much about what people thought of me. And I hope that I would open my heart, my eyes, my mouth, and my home a bit more. I would want my life to match my deepest and truest priorities better.

And I'd need to start by *repenting*. Advent isn't *all* about repentance, but it includes repentance! Advent is a time to remind yourself that when Christ comes, He executes justice and righteousness. Are you ready for justice to be done to you? When Jesus comes looking for righteousness, will you be ready or will you be hiding?

1 Thessalonians addresses this question. Paul's earnest prayer is to be able to see the Thessalonians face to face, not just because he loves them and enjoys fellowship with them, but for a very specific purpose: in v.10, Paul says that the reason he wants face to face time with the saints in Thessalonica is so that through his ministry, he might *supply what is lacking in their faith*. Paul wants their hearts to be blameless in holiness before God at the advent of the Lord Jesus. This is the theme that unites these texts: in the light of Jesus' coming, we need to be found righteous, blameless in holiness. And Paul believes that he can help the Thessalonians with that need. Jesus is coming, they lack holiness, but they can get it through face to face contact with Paul.

So what does Paul have that can supply their lack? This passage in 1 Thess doesn't answer the question, but we know from Paul's life that his ministry consisted of *teaching* and *discipleship*, which is also the theme of Psalm 25. Look at v. 5: "Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long." In a season of waiting for God, the Psalmist asks God to lead him and teach him. That's what will prepare him for what he waits for, the coming of the Lord! And the rest of the Psalm deals with repentance and forgiveness in vv. 6-7, and God's faithfulness to set sinners who repent back on the right path in v.8-10.

This is the message of Advent: Jesus is coming, you need righteousness, and God supplies it through Christ and His Church, through face to face instruction in the ways of the Lord.

So here's a question to ask yourself: "What is lacking in my faith?" Is there some aspect of knowledge or obedience or character that God is laying on your heart that He wants you to grow in? Maybe you've been caught up in a battle over a particular sin, and God is calling you to use the

next few weeks to get serious about winning that battle. Maybe, as in our gospel reading, your hearts are weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and (here's a big category) *the cares of this life*, and your walk with God is suffering. Or maybe you've been challenged by the sermons in November, and your faith has been lacking an open mouth or an open home. What is lacking in your faith? Take some time to explore that question this Advent season.

And remember that Paul expects face to face interaction for teaching and discipleship to supply that lack. Personal devotions or individual study are great, but that's not Paul's prescription for getting ready for Jesus to come. You need to gather together with God's people and spend time with those who can shepherd your soul so that your hearts may be established blameless in holiness. You need to be actively engaged in a Church context where, as 1 Thess. 3:12 says, the Lord will make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

Don't do Advent as an individual! Don't do Advent just as your family. Advent is a season for the Church to be the Church together, where discipleship happens and love abounds. If your schedule this season takes you *away* from Church instead of increasing your time with God's people, you've not only missed the point of Advent, but you're missing out on the very gift God gave to supply what is lacking in your faith, so that you'd be holy and ready when Jesus comes.

And I want you to take this very seriously, in light of the gospel reading from Luke 21. This is Jesus' description of another of His comings; this time, His coming in judgment on Jerusalem in AD70. "When heavenly signs and earthly distress causes people to start fainting with fear in light of Jesus' glorious coming, that's when you should straighten up and pay attention. Watch yourselves, and don't get caught up in sin, or *this* Advent will spring on you like a trap! Stay awake all the time, praying that you will have strength to escape what's coming and to stand before the Son of Man." An unrighteous world is not a safe place to be when a righteous King shows up.

Jesus knows that the world is trying to lull you to sleep, and so He commands you to stay awake! If you don't fight sin, you won't escape. Notice that Jesus is talking to His disciples, not to the world. As Christians, you must stay awake, praying for strength to escape and strength to stand before Jesus. Sleepy or sinful followers of Jesus are in grave danger in light of Jesus' coming. If you aren't righteous, then you won't be able to stand when righteousness comes.

Advent, then, is time to stockpile spiritual caffeine to help you stay awake!

Christian, you are at risk of falling asleep, but if you listen to Jesus and obey Him, you will escape, and when you stand before Him, you will be found to be righteous.

This is because God not only *tells you* what you need, He *meets* your need! As we circle back to Jeremiah, we see that not only does God announce the coming of the righteous one, not only does He tell you where to find the righteousness you lack, and not only does He warn you of the grave consequences of falling asleep when righteousness comes, God Himself *is* your righteousness. That's the good news of Jeremiah 33:16: the Lord is our righteousness.

First and foremost, what we celebrate at Advent is that God saw how unrighteous we were, and before He came to destroy the unrighteous world, He came to save us by making us righteous. He sent His Son to be born into this world, to live a righteous life, to suffer death at the hands of the unrighteous, and to receive God's vindicating verdict of resurrection, when God rebuked the crucifixion and announced to the whole world that Jesus Christ was the Righteous One.

This was a display of God's righteousness, but it was so much more. Listen to 2 Cor. 5:21: "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus came to show us how to live righteously, but before we are able to live righteously, we need to *be* righteous. And that's what God does through the gospel! When you respond in faith to Jesus, letting go of all your own home-made righteousness, and trusting in Him alone, God counts you righteous in Christ, and *then* He begins a wonderful work of transformation in your life. *Now*, because you've become righteous in Christ, you are able to live righteously. When you live righteously, now you are ready to welcome Christ at His return instead of fearfully expecting His just and righteous judgment to destroy you.

And all of this is a result of God keeping the gracious promise He made to Israel and to the house of Judah. It's not a result of what you do; it's the result of God's work for you and in you, which is why Jeremiah says "The Lord is our Righteousness."

This is how you can approach Advent in hope, instead of fear. The Righteous One is coming again, and you need righteousness if you are going to survive! But the righteousness you need is the righteousness that God supplies through Jesus Christ. So put your trust in Him, and look forward in hope to His return.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*