

ADVENT

WAITING ON THE LORD

WAITING WITH FAITH

ALL NATIONS CHURCH

WAITING ON PEACE

WAITING WITH HOPE

WAITING WITH LOVE



WAITING ON THE LORD

Advent Study 2020

Advent is a season in which we celebrate that Christ has come and in which we anticipate that Christ will come again. We put ourselves in the position of Israel, a people walking in darkness waiting for their light to shine, and, at the same time, we are reminded that we are a people who still, in so many ways, walk in darkness and long for the light to shine in our lives and in our world. We find ourselves living in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet”. And this year especially, as we enter the tenth month of living with a pandemic, we wait for the Lord to deliver us from this oppression, to set us free and to finally, once and for all, deliver us into glorious light. If there was ever a time we needed to learn the lessons which Advent seeks to teach us, it’s right now.

This study follows four passages from the prophet Isaiah which are traditionally read during Advent, and which we will read in worship this year as we light the Advent candles. These passages proclaim the messiah and the promises already fulfilled even as they also point to what is still yet to come. They invite us to enter the experience of Israel awaiting its messiah so that we might rejoice in the Good News of Christ, but they also teach us to wait patiently for Christ to come and make all things new.



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A dramatic landscape photograph of a castle on a hill. The castle, with its prominent clock tower and multiple spires, is situated on a hill covered in dense green trees. A stone bridge with arches is visible in the foreground, partially obscured by the foliage. The sky is filled with heavy, dark, and textured clouds, creating a somber and powerful atmosphere. The overall color palette is muted, with greys, blues, and greens.

***BE STRONG,
AND LET YOUR HEART
TAKE COURAGE,
ALL YOU WHO WAIT FOR
THE LORD.***

P S A L M 3 1 : 2 4

WAITING WITH FAITH

Week One

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

8 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.



There are times in our lives when God seems much more present, much more active, much more real. For most of us, faith comes more easily when God feels near; but faith is difficult when God feels far away.

This passage begins with a desperate plea to God: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” It expresses the longing that God would dramatically appear, descend to Earth, and reveal himself once more. They don’t just want to hear about God - they want to see God! They do not want God to be far away in heaven, or far away in the past - they want God near to them on Earth, right here and right now!

The people had heard the stories of God’s awesome deeds in the past (v3), but now it’s as if God has hidden his face (v7). By their sinfulness, they have turned away from God, and God has turned away from them. And now they feel distant from God. Will he return to save us? They wonder. Or have we been abandoned? Or was God never really the God we thought He was?

It's easy for us 2500+ years later to wonder the same things, to have the same longings. Where is God? Why doesn't he show up and do the the kind of things we read about in the Bible? Why doesn't God make things right? O that God would appear! Is it our fault? Have we turned away from God? So much seems wrong in the world; does God not care? Has he abandoned us? Will he come and make things right?

Now, especially, as we live through a pandemic, we can ask ourselves these questions (and more). It can make us wonder what God's role is in our current situation. Is this just how the potter is working with the clay!? (v8). Does God want this to be happening!? Surely not - but why doesn't God do something!? God has delivered his people in the past, but will God deliver us again? How long, O Lord, must we wait?

Although we live on the other side of Christ's coming, we still find ourselves in a similar position to the Israelites. We hear that God acted in the past, but we wonder if God will act in the future. One of the things we celebrate at Christmas is that God did indeed tear the heavens and come down in a way both more dramatic and more subtle than anyone could've imagined: he became incarnate and was born of a virgin. Isaiah's plea was answered. During Advent we return to these passages from the OT because they help prepare our hearts and minds once again to receive the Good News of Christmas, that God heard our cries, that God has come to us. We recall what it was like to walk in darkness so that we can rejoice in the light. By remembering what Jesus meant for people on that first Christmas, we see what he means for people now. And we are reminded that God is faithful.

And at Advent we remember that Christ will come again. Traditionally Christians have begun Advent by focussing on Christ's second coming, not his first. We begin at the end of Christ's story, completing the circle, as it were, before starting the story again. The end is like the beginning. Christ has come and Christ will come again. Once more we anticipate the day when Christ will tear open the heavens and come down, not as a humble baby, but as the King of Glory. And as we wait it's only human to wonder if God is really going to act. Why the wait? If God were going to do something, why didn't God do it already?

Ultimately this passage doesn't answer our questions but it shows us what to do with our anxiety, fear, and frustration. Despite all our questions, despite even our doubts, despite God feeling far away, this passage teaches us to wait with faith in the only one who can deliver. We have nowhere else to turn. Like Isaiah, we implore God, "Now consider, we are all your people." Isaiah reminded God of the promises God has made to His children. God has always been faithful in the past, so we trust that God will be faithful in the future. We place our faith in God's faithfulness. But we still have to wait.

*Yet, O Lord,
you are our Father;
we are the clay,
and you are our potter;
we are all the work of
your hand.*



WAITING WITH FAITH

Week One Reflection Questions

1. Do you ever want God to do the kind of dramatic things you read about in the Bible? Do you ever wonder if this is only something that happened in the past?
2. Does God at times feel close? And at times far away? Why is this?
3. Does God hide himself? (v5) Or does it only appear so from our perspective? What role does our sin play in whether we see God?
4. Why doesn't God just do that God is going to do? Why must we wait? What role does patience play in the Christian life?
5. How has the pandemic affected your faith in God's presence and promises?
6. How do we know that God is faithful? Is it obvious - or does it require the eyes of faith to see?
7. Does waiting increase or decrease our faith?
8. Do you look forward to Christ's coming again?

WAITING WITH HOPE

Week Two

Isaiah 40:1-11

- 1 *Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*
- 2 *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her
penalty is paid, that she has received from
the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*
- 3 *A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the
Lord, make straight in the desert a highway
for our God.*
- 4 *Every valley shall be lifted up, and every
mountain and hill be made low; the uneven
ground shall become level, and the rough
places a plain.*
- 5 *Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together, for the
mouth of the Lord has spoken."*
- 6 *A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are
grass, their constancy is like the flower of
the field.*
- 7 *The grass withers, the flower fades, when the
breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the
people are grass.*
- 8 *The grass withers, the flower fades; but the
word of our God will stand forever.*
- 9 *Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*
- 10 *See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*
- 11 *He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*



One of the major events in the Old Testament is the Exile. In the 6th century BC the Babylonians conquered the Israelites, sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple which Solomon had built. The Israelites were utterly humiliated and left with many difficult questions. If they were defeated in battle, did it mean that their God wasn't strong enough to help them? Had God abandoned them? Or was God punishing them? None of the answers to these questions seemed encouraging. It was not a hopeful situation.

But, surprisingly, over time the experience of exile, rather than leading to despair, instead led to increased hope. When exile began they wondered if God would go with them? What did it mean to be exiled from the Promised Land? Didn't God dwell in the temple, in Jerusalem, in Israel? Was God even still God in Babylon!? How could they worship their God in a foreign land?

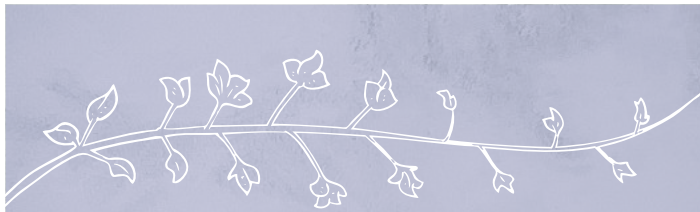
It was during the exile that Israel came to realize that their God was not just one god among many, not just the most powerful god, but the One, only, true God. And if that was true, then God's chosen people must be in exile because God allowed it - or even because God willed it. The people had been repeatedly unfaithful and God had been patient, but there came a time when they had to be taught a harsh lesson. It was a difficult time. But mercy always triumphs over judgment. Their despair turned to hope.

Isaiah was sent to preach a word of comfort. The people have served their time, their penalty has been paid (v2). God hasn't forgotten about them; in fact, God is coming, and they must prepare the way of the Lord (vv 3-5). People and nations come and go, but God's word will stand (vv 6-8).

This passage teaches us to be hopeful even when everything appears headed in the wrong direction, even when we're seemingly cutoff from the source of life, when God seems to have abandoned us in anger. God never leaves his people in that situation for long. God did indeed deliver the Israelites from captivity and back to the Promised Land, and centuries later, John the Baptist arrived preparing the way for the messiah, the Christ, God in the flesh:

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

On another level, this passage from Isaiah (and many like it) help us to think about our present situation. During this advent, we might feel as if we've been exiled in our own homes, exiled from one another, exiled from church - and we might even feel we've been exiled from God. Life in a pandemic is a lot like life in exile. We can wonder just what we're doing here and what this says about God and our relationship with God. We wonder if God is going to deliver us, or if perhaps God is slow to fulfill his promises. But God re-delivered the Israelites to the Promised Land, and God will do the same for us. Of course, our Promised Land is not a particular place, but a new heaven and a new earth. Then Christ will come to us again, wipe away every tear from our eyes, and "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more," - and there will be no more viruses either. We wait for that day, and we wait with hope.



*The grass withers,
the flower fades;
but the word of our God
will stand forever*

WAITING WITH HOPE

Week Two Reflection Questions

1. Can you imagine how it would've been difficult for the Israelites in exile to maintain hope? Why do you think the experience eventually renewed and restored their hope?
2. What is it like to be in exile? Have you ever felt like you were exiled? Does life during a pandemic feel like exile? (Who are the exiles in our world?)
3. Does it ever seem to you (as the Israelites assumed) that God is more present some places and some times than others? Does it ever seem as if there are boundaries that God can't cross and situation that God cannot influence?
4. Do you ever wonder if God is really going to keep His promises? Does it sometimes seem like God is waiting too long?
5. When something bad happens to us, might God be teaching us a lesson? How do we know when something is God's positive action versus just the negative reality of sin?
6. Do you think the pandemic is the result of God's deliberate action? Or is it the opposite, the result of sin which is contrary to God's plans? How does the way we answer this question affect our hope in God?
7. How can we prepare the way of the Lord?

WAITING WITH LOVE

Week Three

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

- 1 *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the
oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;*
- 2 *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;*
- 3 *to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.*
- 4 *They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*

- 8 *For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with
them.*
- 9 *Their descendants shall be known among the
nations, and their offspring among the
peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has
blessed.*
- 10 *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of
salvation, he has covered me with the robe of
righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself
with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself
with her jewels.*
- 11 *For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to
spring up, so the Lord God will cause
righteousness and praise to spring up before
all the nations*



Even following their return from exile, the Israelites were still an oppressed people. They had been allowed to return to their land, but they were not free. First in captivity and then later in their continued oppression Israel began to long for a great prophet who would deliver them. These words from Isaiah (vv 1-4) describe the vision of what the prophet will do.

The passage is all about good news to the poor people of Israel, to those who had been driven from their land brokenhearted, held captive in prison, mourning all that was lost, their old homes lying in ruins. But God will restore his people, Isaiah declared. God will restore them in every way: mind, body, and soul. God will transform their suffering into joy. God will make all things new.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth, read this passage (Isaiah 61:1-4) from the scroll, and declared, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). And throughout the Gospel we indeed see Jesus fulfilling this Scripture as he brings good news to the oppressed, as he sets the captives free, as he gives sight to the blind, etc. This passage from Isaiah 61 served as Jesus' mission statement. This is why he came; this is what he came to do. And this is what it means for Jesus to reveal, reflect, demonstrate, and embody, the very love of God. How do we know God loves us? How do we know what love is? How do we know what love looks like in action? We see what Jesus did.

Of course, most of those people in Nazareth didn't recognize and receive Jesus for who he was. They didn't yet see the Scripture being fulfilled. And, indeed, as we look around our city and our world, we don't always see this Scripture being fulfilled either. We read it as something that happened in the distant past, or as something that might happen in the distant future, but the reality of Jesus' presence fulfilling this Scripture in our midst can feel far away.

In fact, in our own current situation it might feel as if quite the opposite is happening. We are all being oppressed by a potentially deadly virus which does not discriminate between the righteous and unrighteous. So much seems in danger of being lost. We long for Jesus to fulfill this Scripture right here and now. But we must wait.

While we wait for Jesus to return and fulfill this Scripture completely, Jesus calls us to fulfill this Scripture ourselves! The same Spirit that was upon Jesus he has shared with us; he has made us part of his Body; he even tells us that we will do greater works than he did! (John 14:12). The two greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus showed us what the love of God looked like, what he meant to love your neighbor, and he calls us to do likewise.

While we wait for Jesus - and while we wait for this pandemic to end - we too can bring good news to the poor, we can tend to the brokenhearted, we can comfort those who mourn, we can rebuild what has been torn down, we can even help set the captives free. We can wait with love.



*For as the earth
brings forth its shoots,
& as a garden causes what
is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will
cause righteousness and
praise to spring up
before all the nations.*

WAITING WITH LOVE

Week Three Reflection Questions

1. What does this passage reveal to us about God's love for us? What does that love look like when put into action?
2. What kinds of things did the Israelites expect God's anointed to do for them? And what kinds of things do we expect Jesus to do for us? What does salvation look like for them, and for us? Is it the same?
3. Similarly, when we read about Christ setting free the oppressed, releasing the captives, etc., do we imagine this literally? Or do we think of it more spiritually? Or is it both? What did the Israelites expect? And how did Jesus meet - or defy - their expectations?
4. In what sense did Christ fulfill the words Isaiah? And in what sense have they not yet been completely fulfilled? Does this passage seem to you more something that has already happened? Or more something that has yet to happen? How can it be both?
5. The prophet Isaiah first spoke the words, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me", then Jesus made those words his own in Luke 4. In what sense are we to claim these words as our own? Can each of us truly say, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me"?
6. While we wait for Christ to return and fulfill this Scripture completely, how are we called to participate in fulfilling these words? In what specific ways does this passage call us to love our neighbors?

WAITING ON PEACE

Week Four



Isaiah 9:2-7

*2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness
on them light has shined.*

*3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Light/darkness is a simple but powerful metaphor used throughout the Scriptures, and this passage is among the most famous that utilize that imagery. Isaiah portrays a land covered in deep darkness; it calls to mind people stumbling blindly, unable to see and perceive reality. Sin has cut them off from the God who is light; sin has cut them off from one another.

Advent invites us to recall that there was a time (in history, or even in our own lives) when darkness covered the world. We recall this so that we may more fully rejoice in the light which has come into the world, come into our lives. We are reminded of how much remained hidden so that we can delight in what has been revealed. The light has come! Christ is the light of the world! "A child has been born for us; a son given to us". Whereas before we knew God partially (at best), now we behold God face to face; whereas before there was "dividing wall of hostility" between people and nations, the "Prince of Peace" makes possible reconciliation between God and between one another.

The Israelites had been waiting centuries for their messiah. They awaited deliverance from darkness into light, for the burden of their oppression to be lifted, for God's justice and righteous to be established on the Earth. Despite being God's chosen people, they repeatedly found themselves oppressed by godless enemies; darkness always seemed to triumph over light.

The messiah they awaited and longed for - the messiah of which Isaiah spoke - was not one who saved them out of the world but rather one who appeared in the world and transformed it into a place where the "Prince of Peace" reigns and restores everything to the way it was supposed to be before sin messed up everything. God would take His rightful place, his authority would grow continually, "and there shall be endless peace" in a world filled with glorious light.

When we declare at Christmas, "Peace on Earth", we are proclaiming the amazing thing that God has done in Christ. Peace is now possible with God, and with one another. We no longer have to stumble in the darkness, for now the light has shined. We speak of what God has done in the past tense (as this passage does) as something completed, something already true.

One of the reasons we love Christmas is because it invites us into a story in which there really is "Peace on Earth". At the manger the world is calm and peaceful; there is present the promise sure to fulfilled of who this child is and what this child will do. Things are being made right.

And yet we know that this moment, this feeling, does not endure as we would like. Despite our belief that the Prince of Peace has come, we live in a world in which there is seldom true peace. We see nations at war with one another and peoples divided against one another. We see enemies where we should see friends. We celebrate "Peace on Earth" even as we await peace on Earth. The light has shined, but much of the world (and many hearts) remained covered in darkness.

Our hope is ultimately not that God will save us from this world but that God will come to the world and make it new - that there really will, finally, be "Peace on Earth". Our hope is that the kingdom of God will come on Earth as it is in Heaven. Although this is a future hope to be fully realized when Christ comes again, it's also a hope we can see fulfilled here and now. The apostle Paul said that God, having reconciled us to Himself through Christ, "has given us the ministry of reconciliation". That is, God makes us participants and coworkers in his own ministry. We are to proclaim the Prince of Peace, but we are also to be peacemakers. As we wait for the time when there is "endless peace", we have plenty of work to do.

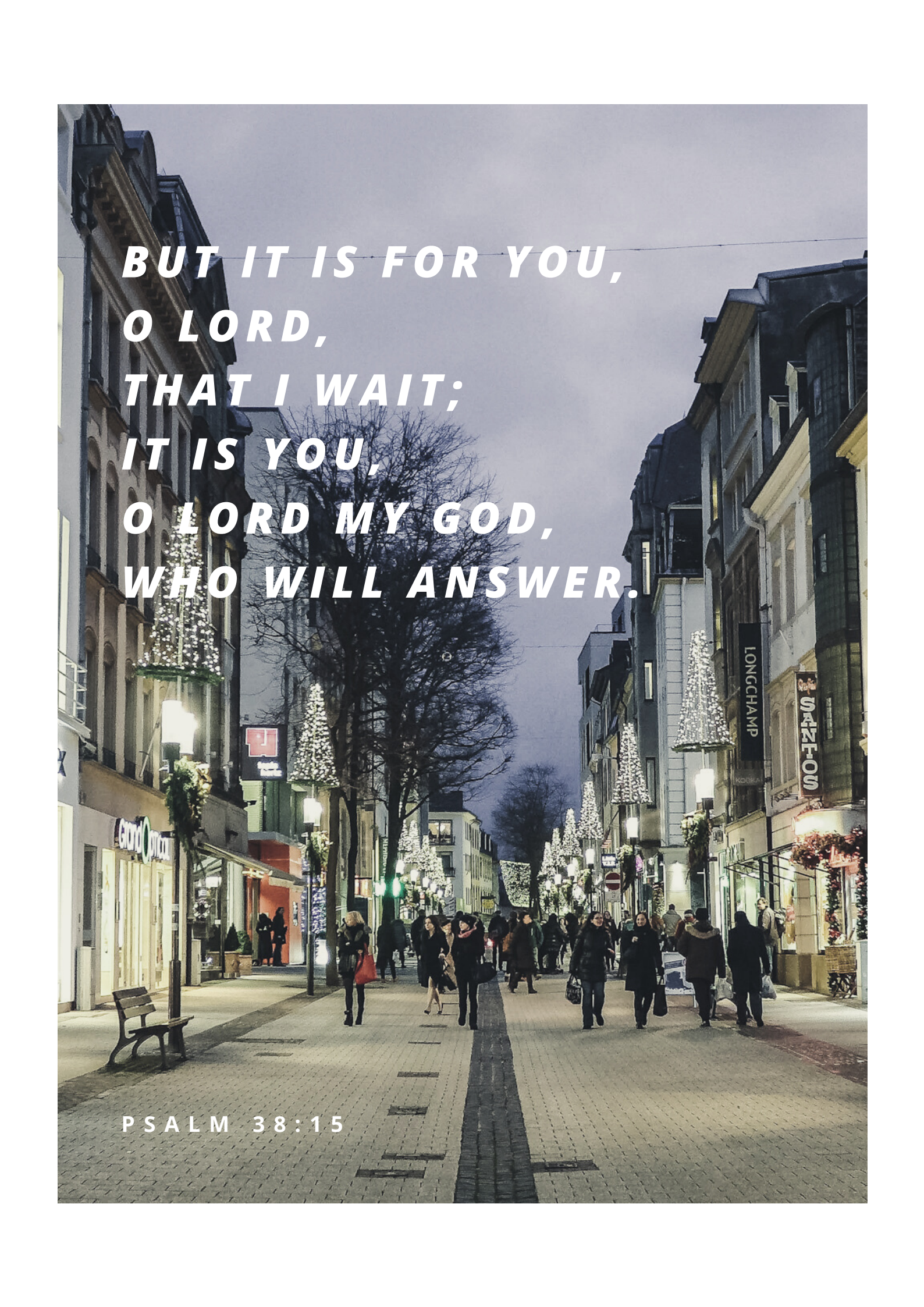
*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*



WAITING ON PEACE

Week Four Reflection Questions

1. When you hear at Christmas, "Peace on Earth!", what do you think? In what sense does it express something already true? And what sense does it express a longing for it to be true?
 - a. Does this passage seem to describe more the past or more the future?
 - b. When you look at our world, do you see more darkness or more light? How has the light already shined in the darkness? And how does it need to still?
 - c. How is the world now different than before Christ came? How does it remain the same?
 - d. If the Prince of Peace has already come, why is there (and has there been for centuries) so little peace?
2. What is it like to live in this "time between the times" - the time between Christ's coming and his coming again? What has already happened? And what is yet to come?
3. How is Christ's second coming like his first? When you think of the kingdom of God being established, heaven coming to earth, etc., do you imagine "endless peace"? Why is peace so important?
4. Similarly, When you imagine what ultimately God will do, which do you hope for more: That Christ would come and bring peace to a restored Earth? Or that you will eventually leave this Earth and go to Christ? What does this passage and other from Isaiah (as well as the passages in Revelation which echo Isaiah) teach us about what God intends to do - about the nature of Christian hope?
5. How does God empower us to be peacemakers? How can we share in God's "ministry of reconciliation"? What are some practical ways that we can bring peace to our world?



***BUT IT IS FOR YOU,
O LORD,
THAT I WAIT;
IT IS YOU,
O LORD MY GOD,
WHO WILL ANSWER.***

PSALM 38:15

