

Week 11: Thanksgiving to Advent

Lamentations 3:19-26

GOAL:

Allow a clearer vision of God's character to prompt us to wait for God in hard times.

CHECKLIST

- Prepare for the meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Go over the upcoming Grow Group schedule, including Thanksgiving week and serving at the Christmas Store
- Encourage your group to participate in the Growth Guide devotions during the week.
- Spend time in breakout groups applying today's discussion and praying for each other.
- Close by giving the group any final words and a blessing.
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Almighty God, I praise you today as the source of all good things. Thank you for all of the many gifts that you have given us by your grace. I am truly grateful for all of the material blessings you have so generously provided, but I'm even more grateful for WHO YOU ARE. Thank you that you are loving, compassionate, and faithful. Please open my eyes to the beauty of your character and teach me that all I need is found in you. As I walk through difficult parts of my journey on earth, remind me that you are always enough. Teach me to wait patiently for you, trusting that you are in control and that you are good. In the precious name of Jesus our Savior I pray, Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT (15-20 minutes)

As your meeting begins, allow group members to visit and catch up informally. After a few moments, lead the group through the following connecting activities:

Group Connection: *Discuss the upcoming schedule for your Grow Group, including Thanksgiving week (no groups from 11/21-27) and the plans for your Christmas Store serving project. As a reminder, all Sunday AM groups will serve at their normal time slot. All other groups need to register for a project at <http://vrbc.net/christmasstore>*

Relational Connection: *In this section, spend time catching up relationally. You might want to use an icebreaker question or share “highs and lows.”*

Spiritual Connection: *Ask your group the following two questions:*

- *Where have you seen God at work this week?*
- *In what specific areas do you need God to work this week?*

This is an opportunity to praise God for the good things happening and to ask for his help in our challenges. Our natural tendency will be to focus on our circumstances, and that’s ok. But this can also be related to our spiritual lives as well!

PRAY (5-10 minutes)

This week, we’ll focus our prayer time primarily on Thanksgiving. You can do this in whatever way works best for your group, but one idea would be to start with “prayerful conversation” and then move into focused prayer. For example, you could say something like the following:

“As we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, we’re going to take some time to make a verbal list of some of the things we’re thankful for. Let’s take turns sharing something we’re grateful for, and as we share these with each other, let’s remember that God is the source of all of these blessings and he’s with us here in this moment.”

You could either go around in a circle and let everyone share something, or you could do it popcorn-style. One thing you might consider is letting this go a little bit longer than feels comfortable. What you’ll likely find is that there’s an initial surge of topics, then it may slow down after the most obvious things have been mentioned and people begin to have to think harder to find new things they’re grateful for, and then it will likely pick up again as they begin to realize just how many ways in which the Lord has blessed us.

After you’ve shared these things, take a moment to pray together, thanking God for his faithfulness and lifting up any needs within the group.

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DISCUSS (40-50 minutes)

Leader's Note: Due to the holiday schedule, we're taking a break from our normal sermon-based content this week to cover a passage (Lamentations 3:19-26) that will help us connect the seasons of Thanksgiving and Advent. This beautiful passage, which is the inspiration for the hymn 'Great is thy Faithfulness,' is often used around Thanksgiving as a prompt to thank God for his faithfulness. But because of its focus on waiting for the Lord, it's also a great lead-in into the season of Advent, when we focus on waiting for the coming of Jesus – both the celebration of his first coming at Christmas and his second coming at the end of the age.

- Read Lamentations 3:19-20. How does the author respond to his suffering in these verses?

Leader's Note: The author of these verses had been through a tremendous amount of suffering. He had seen his country of Judah and its beloved capital of Jerusalem overrun and destroyed by the Babylonians. As he reflects on the experience, he doesn't shy away from remembering or describing what he's been through. He doesn't sugarcoat it – he describes it as “bitterness and gall.” And he's honest about the emotional impact these terrible events have made on him. He says his “soul is downcast.”

- Sometimes our tendency is to try to deal with suffering by either ignoring it or distracting ourselves from it. Why might the author's willingness to honestly acknowledge his pain be helpful?

Leader's Note: Thinking about our pain is traumatic in its own way. As we remember and think about the hard times we've been through, our minds can actually re-experience the trauma to a certain extent. And the negative emotions we feel as we remember our suffering can be just as strong (or sometimes stronger!) as the ones we felt when we were actually walking through the experience. For this reason, many of us tend to push difficult experiences from our mind and pretend they didn't happen, pretend they didn't impact us, or just distract ourselves so we don't have to think about them.

The problem is that “stuffing” our emotions doesn't solve anything! There is always an impact. It is only by facing the hard things we've been through that we can be healed from them. This is certainly true in a secular sense...a therapist will tell you that in order to overcome past trauma, you have to face it and learn how to process it in a healthy way. And what is true in a secular sense is even more true in a spiritual sense. Lamenting our pain is biblical! It is only by bringing our pain to God and asking for his help that we can truly experience freedom and healing. The author's willingness to do this puts him in position to experience God's grace and restoration.

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WEEK 11

- Read verse 21. What is the significance of the word “yet?”

Leader’s Note: *As we discussed in the previous question, one of our tendencies is to ignore our pain or distract ourselves from it. But there’s another danger as well. Sometimes if we do end up acknowledging our pain, we can let it control us! We believe we are powerless to do anything about it and we let it lead us to hopelessness.*

But this beautiful word “yet” tells us that the author believes that his suffering doesn’t have the last word! He’s not denying that he has walked through a painful time...he looks clearly into it and acknowledges the pain and its effects on him. But after acknowledging the pain, he makes a turn. The word “yet” tells us that he’s about to tell us something that is going to reframe how he views his suffering.

- How does the author continue to respond to his suffering in this verse? What intentional action does he take? What is the result?

Leader’s Note: *After acknowledging his pain and its impact on him, the author makes an intentional decision: He “calls something to mind.” We’ll see in the following verses exactly what it is that he calls to mind, but the main point here is that he believes he has control over what he thinks about. Yes, he’s been through a hard time. But he is not going to allow it to dictate what happens in his mind. He has the freedom to intentionally choose his thoughts.*

This is a powerful truth, and one that has had a massive impact on suffering people throughout history. Evil can take many freedoms from us. People may be oppressed, abused, stolen from, imprisoned, and even enslaved. And Christians around the world are experiencing all of these things today! But there is one freedom that evil can never take away from us – the freedom of where we fix our thoughts. No one can control what we think about unless we allow it. The author knows that the Babylonians may have destroyed Jerusalem, but they can never destroy his freedom to choose his thoughts. And he makes the intentional decision to direct his thoughts in a particular way, and that decision gives him hope.

If you want to look at some parallel passages in this area, here are a few great ones: Philippians 4:8, 2 Corinthians 10:5, and Colossians 3:1-3.

- Read verses 22-23. What does the author “call to mind” that brings him hope? Why do you think he focuses on God’s character?

Leader’s Note: *The author calls to mind God’s love, his compassions (some translations say mercies) that are new every morning, and his great faithfulness. It’s interesting that he doesn’t say that he calls to mind the fact that God is going to fix everything, or that God will punish the Babylonians. Instead, he focuses on God’s character.*

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He first thinks about the fact that despite his circumstances, God loves him deeply. As the Psalmist says, “as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.” And importantly, he reminds himself that because of that love, there is nothing in the world that can happen that will be ultimately harmful to him – “we are not consumed.” Like Paul would say six centuries later, “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

He then remembers God’s merciful compassion. He reflects on the fact that God doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve, but instead has mercy on us. And not just once – but over and over again! Every time we wake up, God is ready to meet us with new mercies. He is faithful, day in and day out. He won’t change. He can always be counted on. “Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!”

This is a really important lesson for us. By nature, people tend to “put God on trial” based on what they experience in their circumstances. If their circumstances don’t line up the way they want, it calls God’s character into question. (how can a loving God allow this to happen?) But the author takes a different path – the biblical path! He first establishes who God is in his heart and mind, and then he responds to his circumstances from that place of faith.

There’s a major takeaway here for us. As we discussed in the last question, we have the freedom to fix our minds on whatever we choose. And the healthiest place we can fix our minds is on the character of our Lord! As we fix our minds on who he is, we find that we gain a new perspective on everything else in our life. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 16, “I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”

- Read verses 24-25. What does the author mean when he says, “The Lord is my portion?” What does this truth lead him to do?

Leader’s Note: *The author is saying that what he truly needs isn’t better circumstances. What he truly needs is the Lord! God is his portion, and if he has God, he has all that he needs. I (John) love the way the NLT translates Psalm 23:1 – “The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.” That’s what the author is saying here – he recognizes that it is God that he needs most. Despite his circumstances, God is enough. Based on his love, compassion, and faithfulness, he is enough. And because of that, he is going to wait for him.*

It’s important to note that he doesn’t say that he’s waiting for God to fix everything. As we’ll see in verse 26, he does believe that God will save him, but the main thing he’s waiting for is God himself. The greatest blessing in the Christian life isn’t what God will do about our circumstances. The greatest blessing in the Christian life is experiencing God himself!

And as verse 25 says, the people who wait for God and put their hope in him are the ones who know the goodness of the Lord! The first time you read this verse, it might sound like God only chooses to be good to the ones who hope in him. But I think the deeper truth is that it's only those who hope in the Lord who put themselves in position to experience the goodness of the Lord. As the Psalmist invites us to do in Psalm 34, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." In other words – God is good! And the invitation is open to us to experience that goodness by waiting on him, hoping in him, and receiving his love .

Another important point to note in verse 24 is that the author says, "I say to myself, the Lord is my portion." To borrow the vocabulary of psychology, he's engaging in self-talk! When we're going through hard times, it's easy for our thinking to be negatively impacted. That's why it's important to remember the things that are true (as we discussed in verse 21) and to constantly remind ourselves of what we know and who we want to be. The author is reminding himself that God is enough, and that he's made the decision to trust him fully.

- Read verse 26. What might the author mean by the phrase "wait quietly?" What do we sometimes do in times of suffering rather than "waiting quietly?" How can we engage in this practice of waiting during this Advent season?

Leader's Note: Waiting quietly is a challenge! Our tendency in tough times is to become impatient and frustrated, to try to fix everything in our own strength, or to give in to hopelessness. Lead the group to talk about the ways we engage in these kinds of responses, then help them wrestle with what it would mean to "wait quietly" for the Lord.

My interpretation of this phrase is that the author has determined to wait patiently for the Lord to act. He isn't frantic, anxious, or worried. Instead, he is settled and at peace, even satisfied, knowing that God is absolutely trustworthy. Help the group unpack what this kind of attitude would look like in the real world. What would it look like specifically during this Advent season? How can we intentionally adopt a posture of quietly waiting for the Lord?

BREAKOUT GROUPS (5-10 minutes)

After (or as) people move into their breakout groups, invite each group to discuss these questions and pray together:

How is God speaking to you through today's conversation? What steps might the Spirit be inviting you to take? (cultivate an attitude of thankfulness, meditate on God's character, wait patiently for the Lord in a specific area of your life)

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CLOSING

After the groups are finished, call everyone back together for a brief closing. During this time, give any final thoughts you need to share and close with a brief word of blessing.

Blessing: (feel free to use this blessing, substitute your own, or just close with a prayer)

*May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May He make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.*

*May the broad expanse of God's love
and the abundance of His riches in glory,
shape your perspective on your own life and needs,
including those things which disappoint you.*

*May the eyes of your heart be open
to all the blessings which surround you;
may this awareness produce a harvest of generosity in your spirit.*

*May thankfulness rise up within you,
not just during this short season,
but day after day,
from the early morning watch until you retire for the night.*

*May your prayers reflect gratitude,
while also acknowledging the needs of others
whose situations are so drastically different.*

*May thoughts of Jesus fill your mind,
and hunger for God drive your soul,
and love for Lord guide your speech and your actions.*

*And finally, may the grace, peace, and love of the triune God,
protect, defend, and empower you
to run with perseverance the race marked out for you.*

Amen.

(Written by Joe Sherer, pastor of Mount Joy Mennonite Church)