

You, LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. Why, LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance. 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.

In the name of our coming Lord—our Savior Jesus Christ, dear friends,

I love watching kids when they are just SO excited about something coming up that they can hardly contain themselves. They'll smile and talk about it...and talk about it...and talk about it! And to be honest, parents know that while it can be cute and precious, it can also get a little irritating. I mean, making the Christmas "wish list" in late November you can understand, but in July?! And talking about it every day?! THAT is eagerness! That is exuberant expectation! That's REALLY wanting something and looking forward to it!

Today is the first Sunday of Advent—the beginning of a brand new Church year and a time of joyful anticipation for God's people—children and adults alike. We eagerly wait to celebrate our Lord's birth on Christmas Day. We also eagerly await his promised return on the Last Day as he comes to bring all believers to heaven.

On this first Sunday in this season of anticipation, God gives us words from his prophet Isaiah. You heard those read earlier and I would invite you to follow along with them in your worship folder as we discuss the prophet's pleading with God. As Isaiah pleads with and begs God, you can tell how badly he wanted God.

This Advent message of Isaiah invites you to consider

HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT GOD TO COME TO YOU?

The situation was this: God's people had decided that they didn't really need God in their lives. If you were to look in on them day by day, you wouldn't have been able to tell that they were God's people. And really, because of their wandering ways and their lack of love for the Lord, they weren't God's people anymore. Their hearts were hard, not full of love for their Savior-God. They didn't want God anymore—even after he had shown them perfect love and perfect faithfulness. That's a pretty sad story, isn't it?

At this time, with the vision of a prophet, Isaiah looks into the future and he sees the Lord allowing the enemies of his people to overtake them, even trampling over their magnificent temple and taking them off into captivity. If you ever think you've got a tough job or bad days at work, think about Isaiah having to tell all this bad news to the people! This was his job as God's messenger.

What we have recorded here today are the words of this prophet as he speaks to God about all of this. It is obvious HOW BADLY HE WANTED GOD. Though many had turned away from God, Isaiah was still faithful. And on behalf of the people, he pleads with God to return to the people who were abandoning him.

Now when you see those first verses, you might get the impression that Isaiah is blaming God for some of this. He says, **Why, LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?** Did God MAKE them wander and HARDEN their hearts? Not exactly. They went astray on their own and God LET them wander. When they continually refused to love him, he hardened their hearts, cementing them in their unbelief. As Isaiah goes on, you see that he in no way blamed God for the sinful actions and unbelief of the people. He knew they were squarely to blame—no excuses.

In these awful conditions and with the Babylonian conquest of the kingdom looming in the not-so-distant future, Isaiah WANTED GOD SO BADLY! He wanted him to come back to his people and save them. HE WANTED SO BADLY FOR GOD to reveal his power in a quick and awesome display so that they might be spared that judgment for their sins. So when he asks the Lord to *return*, he's looking for God's mercy—that he would not treat them as their sins deserved. He wanted God to step in for the sake of his “**servants**”, those who remained faithful to him. He cried out, **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!**

There was another reason why Isaiah would ask God to reveal himself this way and come to his people's rescue. Because he had done it in the past! **For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.** You know some of those times when God did awesome things to rescue his people, don't you? You remember the plagues God brought upon the Egyptians as he led his people out of captivity! And how he, with great power, divided the Red Sea to provide escape for his people, but then brought the waters crashing down upon the Egyptian army! You remember the great victory God gave his people at Jericho when God made the walls of that fortified city crumble at the shouts and the sounding of their trumpets! The almighty God could stop the invasion and destruction and the captivity Isaiah saw coming up for Israel—if he wanted to. It was with great faith that Isaiah called out to the Lord, wanting him to come to the rescue.

Listen to how trusting Isaiah was as he praised God: **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.** We have to admit too, don't we, that we cannot begin to comprehend the way God takes action for us? We don't know all that he does in the backgrounds of our lives—how much danger he keeps away from us...the way the Spirit works in us to ward off temptation...how great his love is for us that moves him to reach out to us at the very same time we are running away from him! You can't fully know or measure or gauge the height and depth and width of God's love for you, his child! But you can love and praise him for it.

Isaiah praised God for helping those who love God and who live by his righteous covenant. But he also acknowledged that God's holy anger burns against sin. And since every person is a sinner, the prophet asks the obvious question that people still ask today—usually as they are getting to know about God: **How then can we be saved?**

Any person who asks that question has a sense of just how serious their sin is before God. They also understand that the holy God cannot and will not tolerate any rebellion against him. That intolerance is why God hardened the hearts of those Israelites who *persisted* in living in their sin, instead of repenting and expressing their love for God. As we think about ourselves, it can sometimes seem hopeless because we realize we can never shake sin from our lives. It seemed hopeless as Isaiah wrote too—the fact was, the people just didn't deserve God's love and his mercy.

How bad was their situation? **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.**

Pretty serious, wasn't it? But you know, it wasn't just Isaiah and the people of 700 BC or so who had sin that made them "unclean" before God. They aren't the only ones to have sins, which like a wind, sweep them from God's presence. It wasn't just those people whose sins cause them to spiritually waste away. Our sins can cause the same things! Our sins are no less offensive to God! If we persist in our sinful living and choose to ignore God and live life as if he is not important to us, then our hearts could be hardened too! And so that there is no confusion, any of our "**righteous acts**"—things that look good and SEEM like they would give us some spiritual credentials are truthfully like disgusting, filthy rags to the perfect God. They do nothing to earn God's favor because they can't make up for sin. Ultimately, persistent sin can lead to a hardening of our hearts also and doing good things will never pay for our sin. Either of those paths lead to judgment, to eternal death and separation from God.

That's all pretty depressing for the beginning of a new Church Year and the season of Advent—the season of hope and joyful anticipation! Well, the truth is, if you don't see how grim the situation is where sin is concerned, then you can't appreciate what God the Father did in sending his Son Jesus into this world to be the Savior!

Though the consequence of his people's sin was captivity in Babylon, God did step in and deliver his people, returning the believing remnant to Israel, so that the family line and the promise of the Savior would remain intact and all the prophecies about the Messiah could be fulfilled in Jesus just as God had said. God was faithful and loving toward his people and his mercy was extended according to his plan and his timeline.

If we have the attitude of Isaiah during Advent, it serves our faith well. After all his prayers for God's help he acknowledges: **Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.** God is in charge—we know our place. We can't boss God around or make him do what we want or command him to do things *when* we want them. He is the Potter, we are just the clay—and we are the work of his hands. He works on us. And he does all things for our good according to his plan and his timeline.

HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT GOD in your life? The fervent prayers and wholehearted trust of the prophet are fine examples for us. HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT GOD to intervene in some situation or help you with some ongoing struggle? What sin or sins are especially difficult for you to avoid? Ask God to intervene like Isaiah did. But do it with humble faith like he did. Copy the patience of Isaiah; he had to wait and you and I might have to also—to see how God, in his grace and mercy, will answer our prayers.

We await our celebration of our Savior's birth with some excitement because that was the greatest act of grace on the Father's part! He sent his Son when he didn't have to. But that's HOW BADLY GOD WANTED YOU! God did the most amazing thing in reaching out to sin-infested, hard-hearted people like us—he sent us a Savior who would pay for all sin and bring life and immortality through his death and resurrection. That work of redemption began with our Savior's birth. That's why we celebrate Christmas each year with parties and concerts and worship and it is why we are so joyful as we eagerly wait for Christmas Day.

And during Advent we also look beyond earthly concerns to the end of our time in this world. As New Testament Christians, we are waiting on Jesus to come again and bring this world to an end, ushering in eternity with him for all who trust in him. HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT JESUS to return? Are you as anxious as the child who makes out their Christmas list in July? Are you that eager? Do you wait with joy in your heart, knowing that the One who has cleaned up your uncleanness and swept away your sin sees, not filthy-rag efforts of yours, but a robe of righteousness given to you by him? Do you wait with joy in your heart because you know for certain that he is going to return to bring you to be with him in heaven?

HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT GOD? You can show it in your life of faith, like Isaiah and the faithful remnant of believers of his time did. But no matter HOW BADLY YOU WANT GOD, it's not as BADLY AS GOD WANTED YOU! For that we can be thankful and happy as we wait for him to come to us again. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.