

How Long?

Read to these words of lament and longing:¹

*If only You would rip open the heavens
and come down to earth—*

*Its heights and depths would quake the moment You appear,
Like kindling when it just begins to catch fire, or like water that's about to boil.*

*If only You would come like that so that all who deny or hate You
Would know who You are and be terrified of Your grandeur.*

*We remember that long ago You did amazing things for us
that we had never dreamed You'd do.*

You came down, and the mountains shook at Your presence.

*Nothing like that had ever happened before—no eye had ever seen,
and no ear had ever heard such wonders,*

But You did them then for the sake of Your people, for those who trusted in You.

*You meet whoever tries with sincerity of purpose to do what You want—
to do justice and follow in Your ways.*

*But You became so angry when we rebelled and committed all sorts of wrongs;
we have continued in our sins for a long time. So how can we be saved?*

*We are all messed up like a person compromised with impurity;
even all our right efforts are like soiled rags.*

We're drying up like a leaf in autumn and are blown away by wrongdoing.

*And it's so sad because no one calls out to You
or even bothers to approach You anymore.*

You've been absent from us too long;

You left us to dissolve away in the acrid power of our sins.

Still, Eternal One, You are our Father.

We are just clay, and You are the potter.

We are the product of Your creative action, shaped and formed into something of worth.

Don't be so angry anymore, O Eternal;

don't always remember our wrongs.

Please, look around and see that we are all Your people.

The places that You sanctified are reduced to nothing.

Zion is a wasteland; Jerusalem sits in eerie desolation.

*Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors worshiped You,
has been burned to the ground;*

*Everything we loved is ruined by our enemies,
a smoking pile of ash and debris.*

Now with all this, Eternal, will You just stand by and watch?

will You keep silent and let us continue to suffer?

¹ Isaiah 64:1-12, *The Voice*.

“If only You would rip open the heavens and come down to earth.” I imagine a version of these words has been prayed daily somewhere since the earliest days of human life on this planet. Who of us hasn’t yearned for a God who would tear open the heavens and come down to deliver justice for the wronged innocents? A God who would upend cruel rulers and usher in a kingdom where the hungry are fed, the dispossessed have shelter, and the children sleep in peace?²

“Everything we loved is ruined by our enemies, a smoking pile of ash and debris.” As I read these words, I can’t help but think of pictures and stories coming out of Israel and Gaza – civilians massacred at a music festival, people of all ages taken hostage, 1.7 million people displaced, homes and buildings leveled, humanitarian aid denied, people far from the fighting confined to their homes. Israelis and Palestinians crying out, “Please, look around and see that we are all Your people.”

Isaiah wrote this prayer after the Exile when Babylon conquered Israel or, more exactly, the southern kingdom of Judah. Recall the history. The kingdom of Israel formed under King Saul and continued under David and Solomon. Then there was a power struggle and the country divided, forming the northern kingdom, still called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. Later, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. More than a century later, the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, devastated Jerusalem (the most holy city), destroyed the Temple (the most holy place in the most holy city), and took the best and brightest of its citizens into captivity in Babylon.

“Please God,” the prophet prayed, “Rip open the heavens and come down to earth like you did when our ancestors were slaves in Egypt. You freed us from slavery. You delivered us from the Egyptian army. You fed us while we wandered in the wilderness. You gave us instructions about how to worship and how to live our lives. You led us into a new land where we could live as your people. We know we’ve made many mistakes; we’ve messed up repeatedly. But please, look around and see that we are your people. You created us, all of us. We need you. Please come down.”

The prophet is convinced there is no hope without decisive action from God. It’s not enough to urge God’s people and the nations to do better next time. The world can’t be repaired this way. In fact, it can’t be repaired from below at all. It must be made new from above. So, the prophet turns to God and prays, “Rip open the heavens. Come down. Do for us what you did for your people in times past.” This is what it will take to restore God’s people, bring light to the nations, and repair a desperate, broken world.³

Many of the psalms contain similar prayers. These words are from Psalm 80.⁴

*Turn Your ear toward us, Shepherd of Israel,
You who lead the children of Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned above heaven’s winged creatures,
radiate Your light!
In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
arouse Your strength and power, and save us!*

*Bring us back to You, God.
Turn the light of Your face upon us so that we will be rescued from this sea of darkness.
O Eternal God, Commander of heaven’s armies,
how long will You remain angry at the prayers of Your sons and daughters?
You have given them tears for food;
You have given them an abundance of tears to drink.*

² Melissa Miller, “A God Who Shows Up” in the December-January-February 2023-24 edition of *Rejoice!* ©2023 by MennoMedia, p. 7.

³ Adapted from notes on Isaiah 64:1-12, *The Voice*.

⁴ Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 *The Voice*.

*You have made us a source of trouble for our neighbors—
our enemies laugh to each other behind our backs.
O God, Commander of heaven's armies, bring us back to You.
Turn the light of Your face upon us so that we will be rescued from this sea of darkness.*

*Let Your protective hand rest on the one who is at Your right hand,
the child of man whom You have raised and nurtured for Yourself.
Then we will not turn away from You.
Bring us back to life! And we will call out for You!
O Eternal God, Commander of heaven's armies, bring us back to You.
Turn the light of Your face upon us so that we will be rescued from this sea of darkness.*

This psalm may have been written more than a hundred years before the prayer of Isaiah. It is a communal lament – one written to be prayed together by an entire assembly of people. It may have been composed in Judah, the southern kingdom, after the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria. This psalm would have been used often as a prayer of lament in times of national calamity.

We don't have to look far to see evidence of national calamity – people fleeing their homes and countries to escape violence and unbearable living conditions, places and systems overrun with refugees, large areas destroyed by fire and natural disasters, increasing frequency of mass shootings, dwindling water and other resources, widening divisions between political parties. People of all nationalities, races, and creeds lament, "Turn the light of Your face upon us so that we will be rescued from this sea of darkness. If only you would rip open the heavens and come down to earth. Please, look around and see that we are all your people."

I imagine the Jewish people who were living under Roman rule in the time of Jesus would have prayed this together with great emotion and longing. Jesus often told his followers that things are not right in this world. There are those who lead people away from God. There are wars. There are natural disasters. There are man-made disasters. There is persecution. But in Mark 13, Jesus challenged his followers not to be afraid if the temple falls or if their lives are put on trial. These are not endings, Jesus says, but beginnings of what is to come. Slavery in Egypt was not an ending – the Exodus happened. Exile in Babylon and the destruction of the temple were not the end – the people returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Restoration may not happen during your generation, but it may happen in the next one or the one after that.

Jesus used the example of a common plant to instruct his followers.⁵

Learn this lesson from the fig tree: When its branch is new and tender and begins to put forth leaves, you know that summer must be near. In the same way, when you see and hear the things I've described to you taking place, you'll know the time is drawing near. It's true—this generation will not pass away before all these things have happened. Heaven and earth may pass away, but these words of Mine will never pass away. Take heed: no one knows the day or hour when the end is coming. The messengers in heaven don't know, nor does the Son. Only the Father knows. So be alert. Watch for it [and pray,] for you never know when that time might approach.

Be alert. Watch and pray. These are instructions about how to wait for something to happen. But we don't like to wait. We live in a society of instant gratification. Our phones provide us with information, entertainment, and mindless distractions all in an effort to make waiting bearable. However, there are still things in our lives that we are unable to speed up or resolve instantly. Examples include waiting for weather to change, waiting for a child to be born, waiting for test results, waiting for voting results, waiting for an addict to get clean, waiting for a relationship to improve. While we often don't know an exact time when these things will end, many eventually resolve themselves or we learn to make peace with the way things are.

⁵ Mark 13:28-33 *The Voice*.

Our wait for the kingdom of God to be realized is the same. Scripture shows us that while we are waiting as individuals, all creation waits with us. God does not leave us alone during our waiting. God is still active in our world and still sends help in our times of need.⁶

Mark 13 is an apocalyptic text, one that talks about how everything will happen at the end of time. After the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians continued to have questions about what would happen next. It wasn't unusual for Paul to talk about the end of time in his letters. Usually, his goal was to bring comfort to his readers, not to bring fear.

This is what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of the grace God has given you in Christ Jesus. I thank God because in Christ you have been made rich in every way, in all your speaking and in all your knowledge. Just as our witness about Christ has been guaranteed to you, so you have every gift from God while you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to come again. Jesus will keep you strong until the end so that there will be no wrong in you on the day our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.⁷

Amid all the things that might have discouraged him (read the rest of his letter to the church in Corinth to see what those are), Paul finds hope in God's faithfulness as lived out in the ordinary lives of the believers. Their lives are a daily witness to their friends and neighbors. They are waiting for a fuller revelation of the Lord, even perhaps the return of Jesus in the flesh. But in the meantime, they are not idle or aimless. With the presence of God and the gifts of the Spirit, they are the living body of Christ in their community. Not perfect, of course, but faithful.

Jesus, too, offered words of encouragement and advice as we heard in the passage from Mark. He urged his disciples to be watchful, alert, and awake. Believers need to dig in, stay faithful, and prepare for the future. They need to live as though everything will end tomorrow and, at the same time, they need to dig in for the long haul because the timetable is known only to God. Hope will triumph. There are even signs of hope right now. The world belongs to God, and it can be changed. It will be changed.

If only You would rip open the heavens and come down to earth. Everything we love is ruined by our enemies, a smoking pile of ash and debris. Turn the light of Your face upon us so that we will be rescued from this sea of darkness Please, look around and see that we are Your people, all of us.”

In the words from Isaiah, Psalms, Matthew, and 1 Corinthians, we hear the stories of those who have been waiting, waiting, waiting to hear from God, who have felt the silence of God as they long for restoration, for vindication, for hope. We, too, have been those who wait. When we watch the news, when we hear of wars and rumors of war, when children don't have enough to eat, when cancers and illnesses impact lives, we cry out with our spiritual ancestors, “How long, O Lord?” How long must we wait?

The answer is not forthcoming, yet we know: Jesus will keep us strong. God is faithful. God is with us in the waiting. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Adapted from Advent 1 Sermon seeds in *Leader, Fall 2023*, MennoMedia, p. 41.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 *New Century Version*.