

Seek the LORD and Live!

† **Unquenchable fire for the cruel (vv.6,7,10-12)**

† **Christ comes with mercy for the Remnant (vv.6,13-15)**

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Advent King, dear Remnant of believers:

One of the great dilemmas that has always troubled God's people is the presence of evil in God's world. We easily forget how our first parents brought suffering and death to God's perfect creation by their rebellion. And though we can feel when others hurt us, we are often very cold to how we hurt people around us. Even less can we feel how we hurt the tender heart of God. So we sometimes ask questions such as, "Why does God let suffering continue?" – as if He either can't see it or does not have the love or power to end it. A whole book of the Bible is devoted to that. Habakkuk's complaint and the LORD's answer only takes a few minutes to read. Likewise Psalms 37 and 73, where the holy writers also complain and in one case almost lose faith in God because of suffering.

One of the most helpful answers is in Peter's Second Epistle where the Lord assures us through His holy Apostle: *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."* (2 Peter 3:9 NIV) Did you catch that? God just wants to give everyone a chance to repent while there still is time. That's why for us during this Advent season before the last trumpet sounds, God has given us this call from the Old Testament prophet Amos: **Seek the LORD and live!** Don't worry. God will see to it:

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Amos was a farmer with a good life down south until God's Word came to him: *"Go, prophesy to my people Israel."* (Amos 7:15 NIV) If he could have traveled north with touchy-feeling, entertaining message for the masses, it would have been easy. But God's faithful prophets never have that luxury. And people got so sick of Amos up in the Northern Kingdom, that Amaziah the priest of Bethel reported him to the king, then told Amos to go home and prophesy there. Rejection, cruel rejection, is the price every prophet pays for speaking God's Word plain and clear.

Has anything changed? We live in prosperous times much like those of Amos and his contemporary Isaiah. Even in what some call a "depression" or at least a "recession" we still enjoy some of the most clean and beautiful cities in the world. One of our pastors was in China a few weeks ago and the Chinese headmaster was almost in tears to Ting Wang. "We cannot even give our guests a bed to sleep in. Can the American pastor sleep on the floor?" Pastor Witt did. But as Ting mentioned in our China Partner Board meeting today, "We may have to sleep on the floor one night. But all their professors and students sleep on the floor every night just to go to school. They don't even have beds."

Such hardships and worse could be headed for our country too for the same reasons the LORD warned through Amos: *"You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground... You hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth. You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts."*

Do we want to give ourselves a pass by calling this, "Social Justice," and then ignoring the plight of the innocent unborn? Who like unborn babies and developmentally disabled and increasingly the elderly are more abused in our society? In both major political parties it's rare except from a few

courageous individuals to ever hear a pro-life word, much less see it in the party platform. Yet our God commands us, ***“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”*** (Proverbs 31:8f NIV)

The question of the holy writer James also stands: ***“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”*** (James 2:14-17 NIV)

Wasn't Jesus' forerunner John the Baptist saying the same thing as God used him to call the people of Jesus' day to repentance? After calling them ***“a brood of vipers”*** and commanding them to ***“produce fruit in keeping with repentance,”*** John warned about trusting in your ethnicity or social status or church membership. ***“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*** ***“What should we do then?”*** the crowd asked. John answered, ***“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”*** Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ***“Teacher,”*** they asked, ***“what should we do?”*** ***“Don't collect any more than you are required to,”*** he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, ***“And what should we do?”*** He replied, ***“Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”*** (Luke 3:8-14 NIV)

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Personally, I'm very grateful when the Lord calls me to repentance. It shows His patience and love for me. Sin is like a sliver that will keep festering until you find it and pull it. Leave it for a while and it could get so infected you don't want me to describe it. Especially those tiny metal slivers are really a relief to get out. But these old eyes need a magnifying glass. And my sinful soul needs the bright light of God's law to show me my sin. But this is pure Gospel when God's prophet leads off with this: ***“Seek the Lord and live...”*** Jesus died for all our sins then rose again from the dead precisely so that we could live with Him. He put His Name on us in our Baptism as a pledge of better things to come when He finally returns. But this old sinful nature also needs the warning, ***“Or else... – “he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire; it will devour, and Bethel will have no one to quench it.***

“Bethel” was the center of false religion up north. Amos' point is that when God's judgment finally comes down, there will be no idol or political power, that can quench the Lord's burning judgment. Many movies have been made of man's idea of “Armageddon” and the hard bitten, jackhammer character who defies the odds to sacrifice himself to save the planet. Man always wants himself to be the hero and his own science the solution. But whether you build your idols in Bethel or Hollywood or Washington D.C., God's purpose will prevail. Judgment will come when God declares. Now is the time to **Seek The Lord And Live!** as we prepare for His second and final coming.

We live in times when ***“the prudent man keeps quiet...for the days are evil.”*** But the Lord does not want us to fall into the sin of presumption. So He says, ***“Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.”***

The **Remnant** are the believers who keep serving Jesus in spite of the odds because we trust God's Word to come and take us home to heaven soon. But why does God say, ***“Perhaps...”***? He does not want us to presume on His promises or take them for granted. Living in Advent repentance means daily drowning our sinful nature with its evil deeds and desires, in order that rising with Christ in our Baptism, we too can walk in newness of life. If a fireman reached from the ladder and said, “I think I can get you out,” you'd push to help. Christ's strong arms are reaching. “Thy will be done.” Amen.