

Good evening, church family. How are you doing this evening? It's good to see you again. I really want to do something different tonight than what we normally do at services. Normally we come in and take about 30 minutes to walk through and unpack a bit of Scripture, and at the end of the sermon, typically there are some exhortations or some implications drawn out and there's an encouragement for you to go out in your lives and be obedient to the things we've read in Scripture. The different thing that I want to do tonight is I want to spend the first 10-15 minutes looking at a Scripture, and instead of sending you out to be obedient and to live in light of what we just read, I want to actually be obedient to what the Scriptures say together. And so we're going to wade through Hebrews 10-11 and listen to the exhortation that the writer of Hebrews has for the men and women, and I think there are just amazing implications for us as well. It's just a crazy, relevant passage for our church family. So that's what we're going to do.

If you've never read Hebrews, it was written about 70 A.D. and nobody knows who the author of Hebrews really is. There are some guesses, but nobody knows for sure. The author is writing to this Christian community who is just kind of in the wilderness, literally and figuratively speaking. They're getting kicked out of their homes, there's lots of suffering and there's lots of persecution. So he's writing to them and just encouraging them in their faith, he's correcting them a bit and he's teaching them doctrine. But in the little passage that we're going to read together tonight, he really is exhorting them. These men and women he's writing to are staring darkness in the face. And I know some of you can relate to that personally and as a church family corporately. They're looking darkness in the face, and it really seems that this darkness really is hovering around them, at least in a couple of ways. The first way is in regards to them being tempted to sin. So these are men and women who are in the face of temptation. And also, they're being tempted to shrink back in their faith as persecution and suffering is happening to them. So there are visibly distressing circumstances in their lives that are testing them and tempting them to shrink back in their faith. So the writer of Hebrews is going to exhort them not to do that. He's going to speak right into their darkness, and he's going to remind them of the hope we have because of Jesus Christ. And again, I think it's just an extremely relevant passage for where we are right now.

So in Hebrews 10, he starts by talking about Jesus being the sacrifice once and for all. So he's making reference to the sacrificial system and saying, "Hey, the Lord's not taking sacrifices anymore. Jesus Christ paid the sacrifice once and for all. He's made atonement for your sin." And then he says out of that truth, "Therefore, don't continue to sin deliberately." And then out of that exhortation is where we're going to pick it up in verse 32. He says this to them. "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." And then he's going to quote the prophet Habakkuk. "For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." It's just an amazing thought that he's exhorting them and saying, "In the face of trial, in the face of darkness, don't you dare lose hope, don't you dare shrink back in your faith. Have faith and walk in faith."

And then going into Hebrews 11, he begins to name all these people from generations past in the history of God's people that have had faith in the middle of trial, in the middle of temptation. We're not going to read Hebrews 11, but that's what it is. And I know some of you have read Hebrews 11, but perhaps not in context. This is the context. This Hall of Fame list is sandwiched in between two exhortations. He's saying, "Don't shrink back in your faith. In fact, remember these men and women who were in the same position or a similar position and didn't shrink back and they walked by faith." So he begins to name them. He goes through this list of people who by faith endured. They didn't shrink back; they walked with the Lord. And if you want to flip the page, we're going to pick it up in verse 32 of Hebrews 11. "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. . ." So I wouldn't have time to talk about all of God's people who have persevered in faith. This is a normal thing that we do as believers of Jesus Christ. We persevere in faith in the midst of darkness. He's saying, "I wouldn't have time to talk about all these men and women who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection." By faith all these men and women did these things. And then it turns and says, "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

And then he picks up again his exhortation that he began before chapter 11. In Hebrews 12:1, he says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." I love that the author of Hebrews talks about thinking about Jesus Christ, considering Him with the eyes of our hearts and gathering together and remembering His sacrifice. Because quite honestly, a lot of worship is simply remembering. We're just so prone to forget. And a lot of worship is just coming in here and remembering, recalling in our minds, recalling in our hearts and preaching the gospel to ourselves in songs and sermons and in conversations over and over again. And the author of Hebrews is saying, "Remember Jesus Christ lest you grow weary or fainthearted." And so as we continue to move into this unknown season as a family where we don't know what's going to happen, as we continue to stare that in the face, we need to consider and marvel at Jesus Christ and remember who He is and what He's done so we don't grow weary, so we don't shrink back in our faith and so we don't walk as people with no hope.

So that's the exhortation, and I want to do that together with the rest of the time we have here this morning. I us want to think about Jesus Christ. I us want to marvel at who He is and what He's done. And specifically, I want us to think about His advent. And I know we're Evangelicals, and so many of you probably didn't grow up in mainline Protestant churches, so the word "advent" may be a little foreign to you. It's simply a word that means "the coming." I want to think about the fact that Jesus Christ came. And my hope is, as we think about Him coming together in this season where we celebrate Him coming, that the Holy Spirit would so move our hearts and cause our hearts to be in awe of Him that He would develop and cultivate a hope in us that stares darkness in the face and assaults it with faith. And so I'm not a good enough preacher to cause that to happen in your heart, and we don't have good enough songs to do that, so can we just take a moment and pray for the Holy Spirit to do that? It really is going to have to be a work of His Spirit for us to see Jesus Christ, for us to think about Him in such a way that enables us and empowers us to look at darkness and not shrink

back in faith but instead run the race that's before us with endurance. So let's just take a moment, bow our heads and ask the Holy Spirit to do these things.

"Father in heaven, I know that You know my heart and my prayer all week long for myself and for my brothers and sisters. I pray that You would help us tonight. By Your grace, help us to do what the great hymn exhorts us to do, to 'Come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem. Come and behold Him.' Help us to behold Your Son tonight. 'Born the King of angels. O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him. O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.' And so Holy Spirit, I pray to that end tonight, that You would help us, that You would blow upon us Your grace now and help us stand in awe and adoration of who Jesus Christ is and what He's done to such a degree that You change the way we function, that You change the way we live our lives day to day. And so by Your grace, do these things, I pray, in these next few moments. Amen."

One of the things that we've talked a lot about here as a church staff is that we want to be a group of men and women who are masters and experts at noticing the evidences of God's grace that are all around us. So we talk about evidences of grace really often. We walk among the supernatural so much here. And by "supernatural" I'm talking about God taking stone hearts and changing them to flesh, God taking stubborn, rebellious hearts of men and women who hate Him and changing and transforming those hearts to such a degree that they love Him more than anything else. I see that and the implications of that so much that it's really easy for me to become numb to that, to how miraculous that is, to how beautiful that is, to how holy that is. It just becomes common to me and the rest of our staff. So we don't want to be men and women who just get so numb to that that we don't ever notice it and we're not grateful and begin to feel entitled. So we talk a lot about evidences of grace and pointing out to each other the evidences of God's grace that are all around us. And so even today there are so many examples I could give you. Driving into the parking lot this afternoon and noticing so many of you driving shuttles and parking cars, that's an evidence of God's grace here, that He would so stir the hearts of men and women that they would get here early on a Sunday afternoon, skip the Cowboys game, put on orange vests and begin parking cars for the glory of God. That's a simple thing, but you can see how if I'm not noticing that and thinking about that, I just get used to it and I begin to take you for granted. It's not normal that God would change people like that. Or yesterday, I got to be a part of the wedding of Brad and Elyse Wilkerson, and I got to stand and lead them through vows. And it's real easy for me because I've done so many weddings over the last year, which I love, to start to be numb to that. But it is amazing that God, before the foundations of the world, led this man and this woman to this moment and I get to be a part of that. Every joy, every smile, every moment that's good is a grace of God, and I just want to notice that. So this is the language we use on our staff just to keep ourselves from becoming hard and numb to these things. In fact, it may be something to institute into your family, into your friendships to be able to talk about the evidences of God's grace so that it just cultivates a grateful heart. So it's something we do all the time.

But over the last few months, I've been just as aware of the evidences of sin and the implications of sin all around me. In the same way, because I walk through the ruins of sin every day as a pastor, there's a temptation for me to just become numb to that as well and to really forget how horrific sin is. So over the last few months, the Holy Spirit has been so faithful to bring different circumstances and moments into my life that I want to share with you. There are a few of them that have reminded me of how horrible sin is. And these are moments outside of the normal, day to day, perpetual way in which wickedness surfaces in my heart and acts out through my hands. Those are daily reminders that I have. But there have been some specific occurrences in my life over the last three months that have really softened me up again and reawakened me to the magnitude of how devastating sin is. The first one was the birth of my child. And I'm not talking about the actual birth, which was one of the most joyful moments of my life, but I'm talking about the pain that led up to the birth. My wife decided that she would do natural birth, and so I decided with her that I would just keep my mouth shut and be an encouragement in that. And her labor was between 45-48 hours long, and it was just unbelievably

clear how much God doesn't like sin in that moment. In fact, my wife wrote some things down in her blog that I'll just read to you. She wrote:

*It was obviously the most painfully brutal and incredible day of my life. . .In the middle of the pain several thoughts ran through my head. Thoughts of God's hatred for our sin, which is why there is pain in birth in the first place. Thoughts of how Jesus "endured the cross. . .for the joy set before Him." I was reaching for all I could to encourage me to keep going. . .My husband and I later reflect on some of the mental photographs we have both taken, and he tells me what was going through his mind during the laboring process. He tells me about Romans 8:*

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.*

*My heart is stirred within me. I hold in my arms the prize, the hope, the reward that has come at the end of long groaning and deep pain. And I think of this world. I think of the laboring that is still going on, in creation, in my own heart. The very reason things in this world are broken. The purpose behind pain.*

And now nobody knows what childbirth and labor was like before Adam and Eve rebelled against God and sin entered the world. And as Christians we believe the Bible is true. So if you're a guest here, we believe every word of the Bible is true and that God created everything and it was good and that man, in his rebellion against God, fell from relationship with God, fell out of relationship with each other and fell out of a harmonious relationship with creation. We believe that man's rebellion against God fractured and ruined everything. It tainted everything. So no one knows what childbirth was like before that rebellion, but I can guarantee you that it wasn't like what I saw. And in that moment, as I've thought about it, it's amazing to me that God was so offended by sin that He looked at the woman and said, "Surely in pain you're going to bear a child now." And as I watched my wife go through that pain, I was unpleasantly reawakened to how horrible sin is.

The next thing that kind of reawakened me to that is when my wife and I began the adoption process. I don't know if you know this, but we have an adoption ministry here at the church. It's the Foster and Adoption Ministry (FAM). And one of my hopes out of mentioning this today is that maybe some of you may be compelled to adopt. If there is a better tangible picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I don't know what it is. I'm not saying there's not one; I'm just saying I can't think of it right now. As aliens, as strangers to the family of God, as men and women who are outside of His family, He adopted us into His family through Jesus Christ. And what better way is there to express that and display that than through adoption? So we've started the adoption process and I've been reading some books, and it's really forced me to start thinking about orphans to a degree that I've never thought about orphans before. And I'm not the kind of guy to just throw statistics out to shock and awe people, but a 2008 estimate is that there are 145 million orphans worldwide who have lost at least one parent. Just to give you a grasp of that, that's about half the population of the United States. That's one child for every 47 people on planet earth. And out of those 145 million children, 15 million don't have any parents at all. I've just been reading these numbers and it's overwhelming. And then I wonder why. Why are there so many? Well let's go through the list: disease, genocide, warfare, domestic abuse, abandonment, etc. Do you know what all these are rooted in? Sin. One of the implications of sin is it just makes orphans all over the world. How horrific is sin that it creates 145 million orphans?

So I thought about that and how that's another evidence of sin around me, and then obviously the last one has been over the last few weeks watching my friend get a brain tumor. I vividly remember the day after the surgery. I was sitting up in the ICU room with Matt's mom Janet, who is also my assistant. Matt was sleeping and I was just kind of prayerfully thinking, and a thought that marked me early on was, "Every physical evil that I see and experience is rooted in a spiritual evil." I've known that, but sitting there and praying for my friend and thinking about the whole situation, that took on a whole new weight and meaning for me. Brain tumors exist because of my rebellion, our rebellion against God. It's awful, and sin is awful. So in the same way that I try to notice evidences of grace all around me, I've noticed these evidences of sin and the implications of it and how it has completely marred our world and it's just a dark, dark world. Anybody that says that it's not doesn't know what the world should be like or will be like, right? It's not that you can't say this is beautiful or that is beautiful or that's amazing, but anybody that would say that the world is not that dark doesn't really know what it's supposed to be like. And I don't say that to be arrogant; I say it because it's true. If you're amazed by this, just wait if you're a believer in Jesus Christ.

So I thought about this darkness, and then I thought about advent. Into this darkness, into a world of orphans, of God-belittling rebels, of brain tumors, of pain that is unimaginable to most of us, into this world Jesus Christ came. The light of the world flooded the darkness and changed it forever. And I've just been overwhelmed by that the last few weeks, that He really came. In fact, the prophet Isaiah says it like this, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The light came into the darkness. The picture that has been in my mind as I've been preparing for this message and thinking about the fact that Jesus Christ came is a clip from the movie Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves. Robin Hood's bride to be, Maiden Marian, has been captured by the Sheriff of Nottingham, who's this evil, dark figure. He's captured her and has taken her into his kingdom and she's enslaved there. The scene starts off where he is about to physically ravage her. And into this scene comes Robin of Loxley. Kevin Costner breaks through the window and it's really heroic and graceful, and there's this fight and he slays the Sheriff of Nottingham. He kills the dark prince and then through tears, through sobs, the only thing that lady Marian can get out of her mouth to her husband who has come to rescue her is, "You came for me." And I've just been thinking about that over and over about how Jesus Christ came to us. It's just amazing.

And everybody's amazed by the millionaire that will go down to the soup kitchen. And I know many of you may have read the book *The Same Kind of Different as Me* by Ron Hall. I haven't gotten the opportunity to read the book yet, but I hear it's a great book and really moving. It's about this millionaire art dealer that lives in Ft. Worth began to go downtown and met this homeless guy named Denver Moore, and he just befriended him and started serving him. We're all just so moved by it. But the thing we find out is that the rich man is just as poor in a different way. But it's not like this with Jesus Christ. It's not a millionaire going down to the soup kitchen or a millionaire who is actually poor in a different way. It's someone who is completely other. It's the other becoming like us except for the sin. That's what happens in the advent.

J.I. Packer wrote a book called *Knowing God*, and if you're a new believer in Jesus and would like to know what we believe and how that works itself out into the way we act and live, *Knowing God* would be a great place to start. In it he says this about the incarnation, "The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man — that the second person of the Godhead became the 'second man,' determining human destiny, the second representative head of the race, and that He took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as He was human. . . It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. 'The Word was made flesh; God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby. . . The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation."

He came into this world. And it's not just that He came, but it's why He came and it's what He came to do that should astound us and really encourage us and empower us to not shrink back in our faith in the face of darkness. This is what Jesus said about Himself coming in Luke 19, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." In Luke 5, He says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." He says in Matthew 10, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." He came to redeem the root of every problem that has implicated everything else around us, namely sinners, rebellious sinful people. He came to redeem us.

And if you're here and you're not a believer in Jesus Christ, I'm so glad that you're here, and I hope you know that you're always welcome here. You're always welcome to come and ask questions. But by Jesus of Nazareth coming, He has made a way for you to be reconciled to God. You need to be reconciled to God. By your nature, you have sinned against Him, not to mention the actions of your life. You know this if you really dig deep into your heart. You have sinned against Him and His wrath is towards you, but Jesus came to save us from God's wrath and reconcile us to Him. And if you've never believed that, I've been praying for you all week long. Even though I don't know you, I love you and I just pray that today would be the day where the Holy Spirit would awaken your heart and cause you to believe that. Jesus came to save sinners.

And He came also to point us to a future hope. Because His coming points us to the end of the story. The advent reminds us that Jesus came to save us from our sins, but also there is coming a day that Jesus has promised that He will come again and make all things new. As He saved us from our sins, Jesus has promised that He will come and save us and the world from its groaning. As one pastor said this week in his prayers and thoughts toward our church family and our pastor, the first advent of Jesus brought relief from our sins and the second advent will bring relief from our sufferings. One day there will not be any more orphans, there will not be any more brain tumors, there will not be any more God-belittling sinners and rebels and there won't be any more pain. In Revelation, John wrote it this way, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." . . . They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." The advent of Jesus Christ sets our minds toward the end of the story. And as believers in Jesus Christ, we know the story, and that should affect the way we live in the story today. When darkness comes to our church family, when darkness comes to your life, we don't walk as people without hope. We have hope because we know the end of the story, and it changes the way we fight the darkness.

A couple of years ago, I recorded the Super Bowl, which was the New York Giants vs. the Patriots. I came home around the third quarter and my wife and mother-in-law had waited for me to watch the game. At this time, I had not quit getting e-mails through my phone and I had signed up for the New York Times alert where they would send me an e-mail anytime something important happened. And apparently the New York Giants winning the Super Bowl was a pretty big deal because I heard my phone buzz, picked it up and it says, "News Alert: New York Giants win Super Bowl with last second field goal." I remember being angry and sad, and I didn't know what to do with that. So I went through in my head, "How do I respond to this? Do I act out? No, I'm not going to do that?" I really didn't even care, but I was just disappointed and frustrated. It's like when somebody tells you the end of a movie in the middle of a movie. So I watch the end of the game, but it's amazing what knowing the outcome did for me as I watched the rest of the game. When the Giants didn't make it on third down and they were still behind, I didn't get as nervous, I didn't get as anxious. There was

still a part of that in me, but then I reminded myself that I know the end of the story. I know how it's going to end, but I don't know how exactly it's going to get there because it doesn't look good for them, but I know they're going to win.

And as Christians, that's the faith we walk in. Jesus Christ's coming floods us with hope and arms us with faith to such a degree that now we don't only have to deal with the darkness, but the darkness has to deal with us. We can assault the darkness with faith. We can assault the problem with orphans with mercy. We can assault brain tumors with prayer. And even when it seemingly ends as bad as it could possibly end the apostle Paul said, "Because of the resurrection, because I know the end of the story, death doesn't have any sting anymore. I'm not afraid of death. It doesn't have any sting. I know how it ends." And that's how we're to live. There is coming a day where it's going to end this way, and because we know that, we live this way now. And we live in this tension and this time that the theologians call "between the already and the not yet." Jesus Christ has already come and inaugurated His kingdom but He has not yet made all things new. And this is where we live. We live in this tension where it seems darkness still is all around even though the victory has been won.

And so as we live in this time, what do we do? We run the race with endurance, looking to Jesus Christ, considering Him the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who Himself, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. We are to be and live like that. And Jesus is not just our example in that, although He is that to the infinite degree. But He's also the One who empowers us to be like Him. He arms us with that faith. So as we stare darkness down, just like these men and women in Scripture have, might I exhort you with the writer of Hebrews to not shrink back in your faith. I'm not saying you act like Superman, I'm not saying you act like nothing is wrong and I'm not saying you don't act like things are painful. But don't shrink back in your faith. And lest we grow weary or fainthearted, we look to Jesus, we consider Him, we marvel at Him, especially during this advent season. A great light has stepped into this world and He has changed everything forever and ever for those of us who believe.

I want to give you a moment just to take a breath and think just a bit. Again, obviously there's darkness and uncertainty facing us, but for those of you who really are walking through a dark season in life right now, just take a moment and think about what is causing that darkness. Think about that darkness and think about the advent of Jesus Christ coming into that darkness. Think about a great light of hope bursting forth into it. And as you do, I want to read this Psalm over you. I love the Psalms. No matter where we are in our journey, people have been there before. And this is what David said, "I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands."

Let's pray. "Father, we thank You that in Jesus Christ You have extended Your mighty hand to us. We thank You that, although You could have, You did not leave this world and us in the mess that we got it into. We thank You that You sent Your Son and it's changed everything. So Jesus Christ, we adore You, we marvel and look to You so that we don't grow weary and fainthearted, so we don't shrink back and shrivel up in our faith. We ask that You would help us to run the race that You've put before us, both corporately and personally. We love You. And as we now transition into a time of responding, would You fill our hearts with gratitude and explode in worship? In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."