

I Will Send You Elijah

A daily devotional for Advent



Saint
Barnabas
House

PREFACE

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of Mark, the Lord proclaims, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” The other evangelists describe his preaching in similar ways. What we see here is that we must believe in the gospel. But believing in the gospel begins with repenting. And repenting has an essential reference to sin.

This book is about sin.

Why should an Advent study be about sin? Because knowledge of our sin precedes repentance.

This book is about repentance.

As we crawl through the prophet Malachi, we will be called to examine ourselves. Not our culture. Not our neighbors. Ourselves. Am I responding to God’s love appropriately? Or am I profaning His name, despising His table, and being faithless to His people?

In the end we will find ourselves at the feet of John the Baptist asking, “What should we do?”

The Kingdom of God is at hand. The Lord is coming.

This book is about the gospel.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

A few notes about how to use this book and what you will need for this study:

1. This is designed to be a small group study running for three weeks in Advent. Ideally, you will do the readings Monday through Saturday and take Sundays off.
2. Each lesson will begin with a Scripture reading. Always start with this reading, even if it is the same passage that you were asked to read yesterday. If you do not have a Bible, there are many free options available online. One such option is usccb.org/bible.
3. The best way to engage this is to do the readings then discuss them with your small group *every day*. You might find conference calling or an online group helpful. If you are not able to meet with your small group every day, that is fine. Do what works with your schedule.
4. After discussing with your daily small group, spend twenty to thirty minutes meditating on the material and letting the Lord speak to you about how you should respond to what you've read.
5. When forming a small group, you will likely want to gather people who share a lot in common with you. You will probably get people who are of roughly the same age, marital status, and socioeconomic group. As much as possible, I recommend that you *do not do this*. Instead, try to form as diverse a group as possible. This will help you to access perspectives different from your own, which will make your discussion more profitable.

6. If you do not have a small group, you can still get value from this book. You might find it helpful to write out your thoughts, discussing it with the paper instead of other people.

7. Advent is a busy time. Try to set aside a certain time each day to do the readings and meditate on them. Setting this time aside will help you to be consistent and complete the study.

I pray that God will bless you as you slow down this Advent and spend time with Him. In the end I hope you will be able to more fully welcome the Lord into your heart and your home at Christmas.

“How do you love us?”

Day 1

Read Malachi 1:1-5

The Lord tells us, “I love you.” We ask, as the ancient Israelites asked, “How do you love us?” This is a perfect place to begin our study. We are not looking at an angry and vengeful God who is waiting for us to fail so that he can blast us with thunderbolts from the sky. He does not begin by saying, “You have transgressed my Law! You have violated my covenant! Mend your ways or expect my wrath!” He begins very simply, cutting right to the heart of the matter:

“I love you.”

The response from the people is remarkably honest: “How?” This is not amazement that God could love such a people. It is not the humility of “What is man that you are mindful of him?” This is disbelief verging on outright denial. “How do you love us? In what way do you show your love for us? Prove it.”

We might find ourselves in the same boat. We look around at other nations prospering, at other religions gaining adherents while the numbers in our own churches are dwindling. There is political and

social pressure on the Church to abandon the faith. The surrounding culture rejects our teaching and even us. Meanwhile, many of us labor under difficult conditions, even finding it difficult to make a living or find some sort of security.

“Is this love? Would a loving God allow us to suffer like this?”

This question can be difficult to address. The Lord addresses it by drawing a comparison between two brothers, Jacob and Esau: Abraham’s son was Isaac, and Isaac’s sons were Jacob and Esau. Jacob’s descendants became the people of Israel. Esau’s descendants became the people of Edom. Both nations were given their land by the Lord. Both nations were eventually conquered, judged by the Lord for their wickedness. But Israel was allowed to rebuild. The Lord promises that Edom will never be allowed to rebuild.

“How do you love us?” The Lord says, “I restored you, but I will not restore your brother.”

I do not recommend that we go around pointing fingers at everyone outside our group, declaring that God loves us and hates them. Without direct revelation from God, we cannot say whom He will bring down or whom He will raise up. But we can look at His faithfulness to us.

Through God’s kindness to us, He became a man. Through the work of Jesus, we have been redeemed and brought into the people of God. By His abundant grace we have been cleansed of our sin. Out of sheer kindness He has poured out His Holy Spirit upon us, filling us with power to love and serve Him. Throughout history nations have risen and fallen, heresies have come and gone, and the Church has endured. From the beginning to the present day the Lord has remained with us, coming to us in His body, blood, soul, and divinity every time we celebrate the Eucharist. He has never left us. He has never forsaken

us. What is more, He has spread His Church throughout all the world, bringing in people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

“Great is the Lord, even beyond the territory of Israel.”

It is helpful before proceeding with the rest of the study to dwell on how God has loved us. We may be inclined toward a “count your blessings” sort of approach, which is not bad. It is helpful to see that God has been faithful to provide me with my daily bread. He has blessed me with friends, family, certain talents and skills, prosperity, or any number of things that show His love and generosity to me personally.

I encourage you to broaden your scope. How has God shown his love for *us*? We can think about what he has done for humanity in general, but specificity is helpful: What has He done for His Church? What does the Incarnation demonstrate to us about God’s love?

As we go through the study, we will be faced with many examples of why God is displeased with His people. But we must remember where it started. All of this is predicated on the first statement of God to His people through the prophet. It is all built on the one solid fact at the heart of His covenant and the heart of the Gospel: “I love you.”

Reflection Questions

1. How does God love us? I have given you a few examples. Write them down along with any other examples that come to mind.
2. For each of the examples, consider the question “Do I really believe this?” If any are difficult to accept, ask the Lord to help you believe them.

“How have we disdained your name?”

Day 2

Read Malachi 1:6-10

Yesterday we looked at God’s love for us. Moving from there, we see some relationships where we might expect love and faithfulness. One is the relationship between a father and his son; the other is the relationship between a master and his servant. In the first case, we expect a son to honor his father. In the second, we expect a servant to fear his master. “Fear” here means that he will respect and obey him, knowing that the master has power over him.

The Lord asks the questions, “If I am a father, where is the honor due to me? And if I am a master, where is the fear due to me?” The fact stands that God loves us. But this does not mean that we are free to treat him in any way we please. He is not our servant. He is not our son. We are His. As such, we owe him a life of gratitude, honor, and obedience.

The implication in these questions is that the people are not giving the Lord the honor due to him. He makes it clear: “So says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who disdain my name.” They ask the question, “How have we disdained your name?” This is this question that we will be exploring for the rest of the week.

Today we will look specifically at God's first point in answering this question: By offering defiled sacrifices.

In Israel, under the sacrificial system, the people were supposed to offer unblemished sacrifices. That is, when they offered an ox or a lamb or any other animal, it was expected that they would be offering a good animal. Blind, lame, or sick animals were basically junk animals that would have had difficulty surviving. This passage presents us with the scenario of offering these animals as sacrifices to God.

The logic might run something like this: "I have to offer a sacrifice to God. This animal is only fit to be slaughtered anyway. So, I might as well kill two birds with one stone and get rid of this animal while also doing something to please the Lord. That way the animal won't be wasted." A sort of divine recycling scheme. Waste not, want not. What could possibly be wrong with that?

The Lord's reply is simple: "Try offering garbage animals to your governor. Will that get his favor?" Of course not. You would never expect someone to be grateful for receiving your trash. Would you?

In fact, we often expect people to be grateful when we give them our leftovers or the things that we were going to throw away anyhow. If I have an old pair of shoes that I am tired of or that are a little worn out I might decide to buy new shoes. I might then decide to give the old pair of shoes, which are trash to me now, to a poor person. And I will expect the poor person to be grateful for receiving the shoes I discarded. If the person is not grateful for the shoes, I am likely to consider it an affront and never give anything to that person again. We expect people to praise us for giving them our garbage.

We often do the same thing with the Lord. We may not offer animals as sacrifices, but we do offer other resources, such as money,

time, or skills. And let us not forget that the Lord considers the things we give to the poor to be given to Himself. This gives us a whole range of sacrifices to examine.

To begin our examination, let's consider the things we offer to God directly through the local parish. Start with money. Do I give the best of my money or do I give what I have no use for? Do I give my surplus or do I give my capital? Giving a whole beast out of a flock means that you will be sacrificing something that could contribute to producing wealth in the future. Giving a lame, blind, or sick beast means sacrificing something that could not. The sacrifice that the Lord asks for is the capital, the thing that could produce wealth. The one that could not produce wealth is as useless to the recipient as it is to the giver.

Next, consider time. Do I give my parish the best of my time? To put it another way, do I make time for my parish or do I simply fit it in where I have room. Do I offer usable parts of my day to the Lord? Do I give up doing things that I want to do in order to serve my parish? Do I adjust my work schedule or my recreational schedule not only to make sure that I can attend, but also to make sure that I will have the energy to sufficiently engage? Or do I give the best parts of my time to myself, my family, or my employer?

Finally, consider skills and talents. Do I put these at the service of my parish, or are they all reserved for personal use? If I am a carpenter, will I offer building or repair work to my church? Would I even sacrifice time on money-making jobs to get it done? If I am a musician, will I offer my skills? Or will I refuse so that I personally can focus on the Mass? Do I offer all that God has given me to His people as a member of the Body? Do I hoard it? Do I only offer the skills that do not cost me?

After considering what we offer to the Lord through the parish, think about what we offer to those in need. We already discussed the example of the old shoes. Do I only give what I am done using, or do I give new, good things to those who need them? Will I forego a meal or a new wardrobe item so that I can give them to someone whose need is greater than my own? Or will I only give my excess, the things I do not need anyway?

A practical application of the shoes scenario might look like this: Jack is thinking of replacing his shoes because they are worn out, but he feels they are good enough for someone else to wear; he has determined that he has enough money to buy a new pair of shoes. So Jack buys the new pair of shoes, gives them to the poor person, and keeps the old shoes for himself. After all, he has determined that they are still usable. This can be a small sacrifice. It is giving the new shoes, the whole animal, instead of offering the sick ones.

The temple sacrifices were required by God. But He says that He would prefer that the temple gates be shut to the vain sacrifices that people offered. What is more, He said that He takes no pleasure in these half-hearted, leftover sacrifices. They are vain, and He will not accept them. May that challenge us to consider our own sacrifices and spur us to offer what pleases the Lord.

Reflection Questions

1. Do I offer God my best or my excess?
2. Are there any resources (money, time, skills) I should offer to my parish that I am keeping for myself?