

[1] Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
thou who leadest Joseph like a flock!
Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
[2] before E'phraim and Benjamin and Manas'seh!
Stir up thy might,
and come to save us!
[3] Restore us, O God;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!
[4] O LORD God of hosts,
how long wilt thou be angry with thy people's prayers?
[5] Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
[6] Thou dost make us the scorn of our neighbors;
and our enemies laugh among themselves.
[7] Restore us, O God of hosts;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!
[8] Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt;
thou didst drive out the nations and plant it.
[9] Thou didst clear the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.

Despite the mounting joy and excitement that accompanies the season of Advent, Christmas can also be a time of immense sorrow for those who look back on the past year and remember the tragedies, losses, and moments of despair that they have felt. For those who have lost a loved one, it is especially a time of bittersweet nostalgia. Or maybe just bitterness, because things are not as they were a year ago.

Although no one close to me died this past year, I can think of other people who lost a friend or family member unexpectedly. At the church where I was doing my field education, a 12-year-old girl in the youth group was killed by a teenage drunk driver in April. A 21-year-old boy from a youth group I formerly led died in September from a drug overdose. The man who was to become the choir director at my father's church committed suicide in March on the same day he was hired. I'm certain there are countless more stories of tragedies like these.

Those of us touched by that person who died are now faced with the harsh fact that they are gone from this life for good, and no holiday or event in our life will ever be the same. Nor will the pain of that loss ever completely fade away. Even though we do our best to enjoy the Christmas season and embrace the excitement of the Messiah's entrance into the world as the infant Jesus, there is still perhaps deeply-rooted anger or frustrated perplexity that this all-powerful, holy God we worship did *not* save *that* person from death.

And then we are "trapped" by people all around us who are joyfully spending time with their loved ones as we inwardly mourn for the person(s) who aren't with *us* to celebrate this Christmas. But are we really "trapped"? Have we forgotten the promises that came with Jesus' birth and God's saving acts on behalf of Israel?

When God chose Israel as a “vine out of Egypt,” he saved them from wilting under oppression. Thus, Israel has witnessed the saving power of God firsthand, and now they implore Him to shine His face upon them once again, so that they may be saved from scorn, despair and feeling abandoned by their Shepherd. All has not been lost. Behind the psalmist’s words of desperate pleading to God for restoration and salvation, there is hope.

Therefore, let us not lose hope in this season of Joy. *No matter what* has happened, God has promised to us through His son, Jesus Christ, an offer of salvation, forgiveness of sins, and restoration in this life and the one to come. This is the greatest gift we could ever receive – May you accept it with faithfulness.

Prayer:

Dearest Lord,

May your face shine upon those who are feeling more sorrow than joy this Christmas season. By your scriptures and the Holy Spirit, may you mend their hearts, bodies and lives with the hope-filled promise that You always remain true to Your Word. Guide us to be a compassionate presence and to lovingly embrace those who need your restoration. We praise your name forever and ever, our King and Savior. Amen.