

## Lamentations

Lamentations 3:19-26

Mark Vroegop

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*<sup>19</sup>“Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! <sup>20</sup>My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup>But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup>they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup>“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” <sup>25</sup>The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. <sup>26</sup>It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lam. 3:19-26 ESV).*

I want to invite you to take your Bible and go to the book of Lamentations this morning. For those of you who are a part of our regular church family here at College Park, we're taking a break from our study of the Gospel of John. Instead, I want to just offer some thoughts and some hope from the book of Lamentations. And for those of you who have been around at College Park for a while, some of the things that I'm going to say today might be a bit familiar. In fact, one of the things that the Lord is teaching me through this season is that it is not new things that I need. It's that I need to be reminded of things I've always believed. So, our Scripture reading today is Lamentations 3:19-26

Before I get into the message this morning, there are just a few housekeeping and church announcements I need to make. I want you to know that after we made our announcement about canceling this particular Sunday morning service, the governor requested that all gatherings cease for the next thirty days. So, we are canceling all services and all ministry events through April 10 in compliance with our governor's request. The church offices will be closed, and our staff will be working remotely. Second, at ten o'clock and two o'clock every day this week, we will be posting material and hosting various video events in order to walk with you through this season. Our desire is just to help you and for there to be a little bit of a rhythm within our church family so that you know when you can receive some additional spiritual care.

The third thing is that in terms of caring for our church family, I want to encourage you to practice the “one-anothers.” A number of you have asked: *What is our church doing?* And there are a number of things that we're considering doing and things that we're already doing. We're using our benevolence fund and things of that sort to be prepared to meet the needs of our church family. So thank you for giving in the past, and I encourage you to continue to give, because we're going to use those resources to serve our church and people in our community.

But the thing you need to know more than anything is that you don't need the church's help to practice the one-anothers. You don't need the church's help to call an elderly friend or to check in on a family

member who is hurting or who is vulnerable in their health. Just do that. Be a good Christian during these days. The second thing is that we will be using the networks of relationships that we already have with Small Groups and classes, as well as our parish model with elders and deacons to facilitate care in our church over the next number of weeks. We'll discover new ways, I'm sure, to find opportunities to care for each other. So stay tuned on that.

The final thing is that we're committed to doing whatever we can to try and help serve our community; and a new opportunity has emerged that we think is going to materialize next week. Tuesday we've been asked by the [inaudible] and IU Health if they could use our facility in order to provide child care for medical professionals whose children have now all come home from school but who need to be on the front lines providing medical care to people. So we'll be using our facilities in order to meet that rather urgent need. Our posture in the community is if we can say yes to help, we absolutely are going to—so they're handling all the logistics, the cleaning, the screening, all of those things. We want to use our facilities in order to help serve our community, especially those in the medical profession because of the urgency of this need. So pray with us about that and other opportunities that emerge—that we could be not only those who are caring for one another but also those caring for people in our community.

If you're older than twenty-five years old, my guess is that you can remember the exact location of where you were when you learned that two planes flew into the twin towers in New York City on September 11. Others of you who are older will remember where you were when you learned about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, or perhaps you have images like I do of TVs in school hallways.

As when the challenger exploded on January 28, 1986, there are some moments in our lives that are so challenging that they mark our lives forever. Sometimes those moments are personal, like the passing of a family member or a tragic diagnosis of cancer or the announcement of job cuts. But then there are other moments that affect the entire community and the entire nation, and this is that kind of moment. Years from now, we will remember where we were and what it was like on March 15, 2020—an unprecedented day when our church Sanctuary was empty and you were watching this service online. You may be watching this service on your phone. You may be watching it alone. You may be watching it with friends, or you may be watching it with your family. But I just want you to take a moment and realize what an extraordinary opportunity this is in a moment that we'll never forget.

As you're watching today, I want you to know if Jesus doesn't return, you'll talk about this with your grandchildren. You'll remember this day. You'll tell them about the day when an unseen virus called COVID-19 altered every one of our lives in some way. When church buildings all over the nation were vacant, store shelves were bare, major events that mark our lives were suddenly canceled, and household names in sports, politics, and entertainment were in self-quarantine or isolation. In the middle of this kind of moment, when we're sort of glued to the news feed and trying to figure out what's going on, what's happening around the world and even in our own community, I want to take a look at a book of the Bible, the book of Lamentations, that reminds us of how God's people thought when the world around them seemed to be in chaos.

Lamentations is an important book because it marks a confusing moment in Israel's history. It was very uncertain, and people wondered what was going to happen. The book of Lamentations is a memorial meant to help God's people remember and practice important truths that are intended to be rehearsed. What I want to do today is to talk to you about the unsettled world and the context of Lamentations. And there are some really interesting parallels. Then I want to talk to you about the unshakable, steadfast love of the Lord so you can see how the prophet Jeremiah—who wrote the book of Lamentations—thought about this moment, because there are some incredibly helpful lessons, and I think, some amazing principles of comfort. So, for this unsettled world, the book of Lamentations records, at a high level, a number of really important statements. Now, my guess is that if you've not studied the book of Lamentations, you probably know at least one verse.

It says, “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.” And then it goes on to say, “great is your faithfulness.” A lot of people know that particular text. There's even a favorite hymn that many of us have sung that takes its theme from that particular verse. But what you need to know is that that particular statement is not made in the best of seasons. It was actually a statement that Jeremiah proclaimed over a situation that looked like a disaster. It was one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. The book of Lamentations was written not because of a viral infection, but rather because of a foreign invasion. After repeated warnings from God that the people of God should turn to the God who had rescued them out of their bondage from slavery—after repeatedly warning them about the need to practice a right relationship and right worship with their God—God sent the Babylonian empire. They formed a siege around the city of Jerusalem. They cut off all supplies, and the city of David slowly began to wilt under economic and physical pressure. Eventually, the city was so weak that the Babylonian army was able to penetrate the city. They decimated it, tore down the wall, and destroyed the temple. It was the darkest day in Israel's history, and Lamentations is written to reflect on this terrible moment.

Let's look at a few verses in the first chapters of the book. We're going to spend some time in Lamentations 3, but I want to set this up just to see how dark and dreary it was before we look at those verses. I want to set the context textually, though, because we have to be careful not to make too close of a parallel between Lamentations and our present-day context for a number of reasons. First, because this was written to the people of God (Israel), not the United States of America, there are lessons for us to glean from here, but it's not the exact same thing. Second, the country of Babylon sent an army, and God used that army as discipline for very specific sin in the life of Israel for which they had been warned over and over and over. Therefore, this army came in order to turn the nation back to God through their exile.

The fact of the matter is that the virus that is a part of our world is just another emblem of how broken our world is. It's an example of the fallenness that we all are a part of. So, this is a moment not like the Babylonian armies coming to conquer us, but rather to realize that the enemy had already been among us in the brokenness of our sin. The brokenness of our world creates things like viruses and death and cancer and relational conflict. When we look at the book of Lamentations, we need to see the generalized nature of suffering and difficulty because the world is broken. There are some amazing parallels in terms of what was happening in Israel—the grief that they felt. But we also need to acknowledge the contextual uniqueness of what's happening there.

We can glean some truths that I think are applicable to all of God's people, regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. So, just looking at a few verses beginning in chapter one, notice that chapter one begins, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people. How like a widow she has become. She was great among the nations." What are the things that any kind of suffering does in a cultural crisis like we're in? Does it remind us of how isolated we can so quickly become, and it also reminds us of the fact that even in the midst of our greatest moments, the things that we trust in aren't ultimate, that our economy and our government and our systems that we trust in every single day have weaknesses baked into them. Look at verse four: Interestingly, the text says the roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival.

All her gates are desolate, her priests groan, her virgins afflicted, and she herself suffers bitterly. There's a sense of devastation that has come to the people of God. The things that were normally true are not true anymore. I'm sure this last week, just as an example, you probably remember when you saw that the NBA had suspended all games until further notice, and then one by one, we saw all of these other events being canceled. It was in the course of this last week that I think most of us got our head around how really serious a situation we were in. Look at verse six of chapter one: "From the daughter of Zion, all her majesty has departed. Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture.; they fled without strength before the pursuer."

The idea is of people having to scatter because of the devastation. Verse 11 of chapter one says, "All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised." There is a scarcity of resources. Look at chapter two and verse two, where it says, "The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath, he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers." One of the unsettling things that I'm sure you feel, as I do, is that the things that we normally place our hope and confidence in have been shaken. And then look at chapter four, verse one. This book, by the way, is like a mountain, and chapter two build on that until we reach the message apex in chapter three. Then, chapters four and five kind of go back to the dark situation. One of the reasons I love the book of Lamentations is because it doesn't end with sort of a happily-ever-after word. It realizes that this moment that we're living in is going to be challenging.

In chapter four, verse one it says, "How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold has changed! The holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street." Some of us realized—maybe not with the canceling of events, but with the plummeting stock market—how serious this moment really is. Why do I share all these verses? These verses are pretty dark, aren't they? Trust me, I'm going to get to some hopeful news in just a moment. The reason that I share these is just to realize, first and foremost, that the church of God has been here before. The people of God have walked through seasons that are extremely difficult—frankly far more difficult than what we've presently experienced. I don't know about you, but it does my heart good to know that the Bible has been there before. God's people have walked through those sorts of seasons, so when I see the Bible talk like this, I see this not as a way to add misery to already difficult situations that I'm dealing with, but I realize that the Bible actually speaks into the reality of the pain that I feel is important.

If you're not yet a Christian, maybe this situation is causing you to think, well, maybe I need to consider the claims of Christianity, and you may wonder whether Christians are legit in terms of how they deal with challenges. Or are they just sort of happy, pie-in-the-sky sort of people? If that's how you think, I would encourage you to read the book of Lamentations or some of the songs that are called Lament Psalms in the Bible because they will show you the way in which the Bible speaks in the midst of gritty, hard and painful moments.

One of the reasons that this book is important is because it's candid about the struggle and the hardship that we face, while at the same time looking to God for hope. So that's what happens on either side. That's the unsettled world. Sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? Well, what about the steadfast truth? So that's the second thing I want to look at. If that's the context, if that's where we live, that's where you're living. What are the things that we need to remind ourselves about when or if circumstances either don't change or if they even get more challenging? How do you survive spiritually when the pressure of a cultural crisis is in play? What are the thoughts that you should have when you walk through a season of widespread destruction? What theological truth should guide your thinking when you live in what feels like a wasteland?

How do you fight the daily battle to keep these truths foremost in your mind and heart? Let me show you what Jeremiah did. Look at verse 19. After rehearsing his affliction, his wanderings (where his heart kept going), the wormwood and the gall (bitterness or internal angst that he feels), he just has this sick-in-his-stomach feeling. He says, in verse 20, that his soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within him. The idea is that it's all-encompassing. It has just taken over. What does he do? Look at verse 21, because this is incredibly important for every Christian to get in their mind. This will help you tomorrow morning when you wake up and anxiety begins to hit your soul. He says, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope."

That's a very, very important passage. Jeremiah says that all of this is true. We have a cultural crisis that's happening. He doesn't diminish it in any way. He highlights that this is a really bad situation, and yet, just because the situation is bad, it doesn't mean that he has no spiritual strength. What is the thing that he goes to? He goes to this truth: *But this I call to mind*. What does it mean to call something to mind? =It is a Hebrew word meaning to return to. Remember the word focuses on what is inside of one's soul. It means to call to mind truths that you believe. This is one of the things that a crisis does. Do you really believe that God is sovereign? Do you believe that God will help you? Do you believe that he is trustworthy? And if you're not a Christian, this is what a crisis does.

It asks you what you really trust in. What is your hope in? You see, the Bible calls us to call to mind things we know to be true. In fact, the New Living Translation renders this verse this way: "Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this." So here's the thought, and if you've been around College Park for a while, this will not be a new thought for you. It's been helpful for me to be reminded about this even this week. Here's how you walk through a dark moment like this. Hope springs from truth rehearsed; hope Springs from rehearsing. We remind ourselves of what we know to be true and rehearse it over and over and over. One of the reasons that you need to know your Bible, one of the reasons you need to listen when the Bible is taught, one of the reasons you need to dig for promises in Scripture is so that

when things like this happen, you have truths that you can grab hold of and stake your claim on. We need to be able to plant your heart firmly on the bedrock of what it is that we know to be true.

### **Hope Springs from Truth Rehearsed**

So, hope springs from three truths rehearsed from this text. Look at what Jeremiah says. Here's the first one, from chapter three, verse 22: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. Think of this. Jeremiah says this, not over a scene that looked all nice and happy. This was not a scene at the beach. This is not a scene at vacation. This is a scene that is a disaster, and yet Jeremiah has the strength, the confidence, the belief system, the theology to say, even in this, the Lord's mercies never end. I want to encourage you that every morning when you wake up and your feet hit the floor, to have some truths that are ready and maybe it could be this one God. Today your mercies are never going to end. They are new every morning. What does it mean that they're new? It doesn't mean that they're brand new or that they weren't there before, but rather what it means is that they are ready to be received.

They are new evidences of God's grace that we're going to see. And I'm telling you what's going to happen in the midst of this cultural crisis. We're going to see new evidences of God's mercy that we would have never seen had things not turned out like they have over the last six days. And over the next four weeks, we're going to see the way in which the Holy Spirit is going to call the church to action, the way in which God's people are going to serve one another. We're going to see the truth that we've held dear become so true to us. They're going to be ingrained in our souls because we're going to have to work these truths into the context of our heart like we've never had to before, and Jeremiah is going to help us by reminding us that the Lord is our portion; therefore we will hope in him.

Sufferings or hardships remind us that underneath our lives there's a floor for those who are followers of Jesus. We know that there's a floor underneath all hardship and suffering. The Bible promises in Romans 8:28 that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. Because of his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus established this floor in all our lives. Jesus dealt with the bigger issue in our lives—way beyond some virus or cultural crisis that's going on. Jesus addressed the sin that separates us from God. The Bible tells us that Jesus has done this for us, so how will God not then also graciously give us all things? In other words, at the end of the day, there is a floor to all of our hardship and all of our suffering, and Jesus purchased that floor.

Jesus bought the right to make all this right, and a Christian's life is built on that firm foundation. That firm foundation has words connected to it like God's steadfast love, his mercy, his kindness, his goodness. In the midst of suffering or pain, we have to remind ourselves that God's mercy is always available to us. There's a lot of situations in your life, if you're a Christian, where you will lack grace to deal with whatever you face, whether it's in your employment, whether it's with your kids who are now home and you're trying to figure out what do I do with them, whether it's the uncertainty medically, or for some of you in the medical field who are walking into kind of scary environments. God's going to give us grace. We never run out of his grace. The Bible tells us that it's new every morning, so I don't know

how the next couple of weeks are going to unfold, but here's what I do know. God's mercy is never going to cease.

### **Waiting Is Not a Waste**

Yes, we're going to do a lot of waiting in the next few weeks, but waiting is not a waste. Let's look at verse 25: "The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait . . ." Why? At least ". . . for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth." Waiting is not a waste. You can't see it in your English translation, but if you were to look at it in the original Hebrew, you would see that the word *good* is at the front of every verses, so it reads like this: "Good is the Lord to those who wait for him. Good. It is. That one should wait quietly. Good it is that young men should bear the yoke in their youth." So there's something that's important for us to recognize here—the Psalmist is saying that it is good to wait on the Lord.

What does that mean? It means that it's good when things in our lives, like the props that help us to feel confident, have been shaken or even kicked out, because it reminds us that at the end of the day, our only hope really is in God. But we have other things in our life that help make us feel comfortable. We have a stock market that's was taking off. We have sure employment in terms of the jobs that we have, we have good physical health. All of these things are good graces. They're not bad in and of themselves. But here's what happens. Our trust can be too much in those things. And when they're shaken, that's when it's good to be reminded. These weren't the things that I trusted in anyway, or at least not the things I was supposed to trust in. So how has waiting not been a waste?

Because waiting aligns us where our true hope comes from. There are going to be things that we learn in this season about ourselves and about our trust in God. I had a conversation with my wife just the other night about just have this low level internal angst because I'm trying to both care for our church and our family, trying to figure out what's going on, and I'm always worried that I'm going to miss out on some news bulletin. And as a result of this sort of internal angst, it's easy to be short and snippy with people. It's easy to let anxiety take over. You see what happens when God sort of bumps our beaker. There's stuff that emerges. In fact, waiting kind of reveals what's really inside of us.

Can I encourage you to use the season of waiting, when life is just a little different than what we've anticipated, to ask yourself, God, what are you? What are you revealing in my heart? How are you using this to form me more into Christlikeness? How are you using this in order to shape me more and more into the kind of person that you want me to be? Lead me into the waiting, not away from it. I was talking with an executive at a consulting firm, and he was telling me this story that when he was interviewing candidates for a particular vice president's position, he would put the candidates through a little test. He would invite them to come in for an interview and then he would sit them across the lobby from the receptionist and make them wait a long time—thirty minutes, forty minutes, forty-five minutes—and it was a test to see how the vice president would treat the receptionist when the appointment was delayed. So the receptionist was asking things and just trying to dialogue with the person, but if their blood began to boil and they began to get antsy and started to get snippy with the receptionist and treat her poorly, the candidate wasn't going to get the job

What they did is they put the vice presidents through a test of what would happen when they were in a season of waiting. You know, throughout the history of the church, throughout our own histories individually, there have been seasons when God has asked us to wait, and when that happens, can I just encourage you to remind your heart that there is much good that come up that can come out of waiting for the Lord? There are lessons that God wants to teach us, but friends, often those lessons come slowly. They come painfully when we have stopped trying to do it in our own strength. There are things that we're going to run into at so many levels that we're going to have to say, "Lord, I need wisdom." Did we not need wisdom before? The fact of the matter is that this crisis reminds us how we need wisdom far more than we ever imagined.

So, in the midst of suffering, preach to your heart that waiting on the Lord is not a waste. Waiting is not a waste.

### **God Is Always Good**

The final truth is God is always good. Look at verse 31-33: "For the Lord will not cast off forever, and though he caused grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men." The third truth to be rehearsed here is that we need to interpret this sorrow, this difficulty, through a lens of God's goodness. The text tells us that God has good purposes behind everything that's happening. There are sovereign boundaries to what is taking place within our culture. The text tells us that there are good reasons behind what is happening, and some day, perhaps not until eternity, we'll know what they are

We'll see the plan that God is unfolding right now. It's just a matter a time, a season for us to trust that behind this is what some songwriters call frowning Providence. God hides a smiling face. Those of you who've personally walked through seasons like this, maybe you've seen God's goodness. We need your voice. We need you to help those who've not walked through a season like this to know how to think. We know we need you to help remind people about God's specific goodness in the way that he cared for you, the way that he's always cared for us. We need you to use that life experience to live out what this text is saying, that God is always good.

Hope springs from truth rehearsed. So the question we have to ask ourselves today is whether the change of circumstances—the hardship that we're walking through—has gotten the best of us. Have we spent the last week listening to and rehearsing the wrong narratives in our head? Can I invite you today, if you're a Christian, to make the turn from trusting in circumstances and putting your emotional safety in a change of environment or in knowing what's happening? Just don't forget that you need to remind your heart. God is good. He can be trusted. This waiting isn't a waste, and his mercies will never come to an end. Can you preach to your own heart today and remind your soul what is true and right? Can you use a text like Lamentations 3 to just remind your soul. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.

A moment like this tests what we believe. It's a moment for us to rehearse some things. Things like God is Holy. I'm not. Jesus saves, and Christ is my life. If you're not a Christian, this could be a moment for you to take careful inventory of your soul. The fact of the matter is that life always kind of hangs on a



thin thread, but when we see it in the context of a virus like this, we're reminded of our own mortality. And you know what? That's not a bad thing. Scary? Yes. It's terrible that people would die. Yes, but in terms of the thought about your own soul, that's a good moment for you to consider. What do I base my life on? And the hope of the gospel is simply this, that the reason that there's brokenness in the world is because there's sin in the world.

Everything that's wrong with the world all has its root cause in sin. In the fallen state of mankind, the Bible tells us that the Father sent Jesus to die for our sins in order to deal with that brokenness in us and also because one day Jesus is going to return and make everything right that is presently wrong. He bought the right to make it right, as I said earlier, and if you're not yet a Christian, perhaps today would be a good day for you, in a quiet place wherever you are, to say to Jesus, *I know I'm a sinner. This has been used to awakened me to my need. I need you Jesus, to come and be my Lord and savior today. I'm going to repent from my sins and I'm going to turn to you Christ.* If you are a Christian, it's a good day to be reminded of what it means to be a Christian, that these are the truths that we hold. These are the things that are meaningful and that serve as the bedrock of our lives. And you know what? These things have served the church throughout its history when difficulties have come. For example, I was reading an article this week about when Western civilization was devastated by one of the deadliest pandemics in history. The city of Rome is estimated to have lost five thousand people a day at the height of the outbreak. And in the midst of this, the church shone its light brightly. One eyewitness, a bishop, wrote this about the behavior of non-believers. He said that at the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease. But do what they might, they found it difficult to escape. That's what was going on in the world and the culture. And yet the same Bishop wrote about believers that most Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another, heedless of the danger.

They took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ. And you know what the effect was? The effect was so profound that the emperor of Rome, Julian, in 262 marveled not only at the way that Christians cared for their own and the needy in the city, he chided the rest of the citizens because of their failure to follow their example. And the effect was that there was an explosion of conversions, as people flooded into the church because they saw that what these people believe actually worked. Friends, this is that kind of day. Jeremiah proclaimed that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. He proclaimed that over the city of Jerusalem. And so today I proclaim that over you, friends. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. The gospel was made from moments like this. And therefore, this is a time for the church to embrace the love of Jesus for the church of Jesus Christ and to be reminded of what we believe.

And one of the things that we absolutely believe is that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. And we believe that we are free, free to not succumb to fear, free to serve other people, free to open our hands of what we have and to be generous, free to proclaim the good news of who Jesus is to a world that desperately needs to hear it. Church, this is the moment. This is our hour. May God grant us the grace to follow Jesus through every moment in this cultural crisis. Pray with me: "Oh father, we thank you that there is hope in you. And thank you that these truths were true last week. They were true a

month ago. They were true years ago. They were true 2000 years ago. But they feel even more true today because we have need for them, we thank you for your grace. We thank you for your mercy and your kindness to us. And we pray that you would apply your word in our lives. We ask you, God, to minister grace to people in our congregation and to those around our city and around our nation. We need your help today. So, let the love of Jesus shine. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. T

I find that in difficult moments, some traditions become helpful. Some rhythms are just a deep comfort. And so I want to do something that we do almost every Sunday that I say to you as a church, even though you're not here. And it's hard to have you not here today. College Park, I love you. God bless you. And may God's peace be with you.

### **☒☒College Park Church**

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