

# ADVENT

The Coming King



Devotional Guide

# HOPE



We were breathless by the time we reached the peak of Mount Olivet. Jesus scanned the landscape unfolding before us, a curious look of nostalgia crossing his face. Seeing him stand there was still surreal to me. We watched with wonder as he ate and walked and gestured as he talked, nothing betraying the past horrors except the ugly scars on his wrists. At times, the bloody nails and rasping breaths would return to me in a painful flashback. But I would brush it off, drawing near to him again and reaching out for a reassuring touch.

Over a month had passed since he first appeared among us as a ghost. At first, we were shocked, then joyful, then curious. Now we felt restless. “What’s next?” None of us dared rush him, but we couldn’t help but wonder if Israel would at last be freed from its oppressors. Surely Rome would fall in the presence of God’s son, the defeater of death.

We looked at him now, expectantly. Why had he brought us here? He examined each of our faces in his peculiar way, making us feel totally exposed yet completely safe. The bravest of us asked the question itching in our minds. If we weren’t sure before, his answer convinced us then that he truly was our Jesus. We never could predict that man.

Caesar would have surrendered in a moment. All would have been set right with a single word, just as he had calmed the stormy sea all those months ago. But instead he abandoned us on the earth, with nothing but a promise. He rose before our eyes, I blinked, and all that remained was clouds against the stark blue sky. I couldn’t tell you how long I stood standing there, staring up, feeling empty as air.

“He’s coming back, you know.” My neck popped as I lowered my gaze to the two angels observing us with quizzical expressions, no doubt perplexed by our human small-mindedness. The frank statement made me wonder for a desperate moment if I had dreamt it all and was finally coming to my senses. But I looked around at my companions and they were all as bewildered as I was.

In that moment, we had a choice to make. Either steel ourselves to fight our own battles, losing our friend for the second time. Or to hope in Jesus, our mysterious Messiah, and wait for the Holy Spirit he promised.

We were quiet on the walk back to Jerusalem. Over and over in my mind, I reviewed the wonderful things this Jesus of Nazareth had said and done. As we passed through the thick city gates, we made our decision: to wait and hope and pray in preparation of his promise.

-Adrian Patenaude

In Revelation 22 you'll notice two major themes:

- (1) The hope that is to come in heaven when we're in the presence of God
- (2) The strong encouragement to persevere in faith until the day of the return of Christ or of our return to Him

I want to break down those two themes in our Advent today. Before we get started I ask that if you haven't already, take 3-5 minutes to ask God to open your heart to the scriptures and what He's desiring to show you.

The hope of heaven: When I reflect on the Advent season, I often think of the humility of Christ. Creator of heaven and earth coming down in the form of a babe to ransom His people with His sacrifice. What I don't think of most years is that Jesus was and is the Lord of angel armies. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Revelation 22 is the last chapter of the Word of God, and it closes out the New Testament canon with a bang (pun intended).

As you can see from reading the chapter, it is loaded with promises of the hope that is and is to come. The hope of being in the presence of our Lord. A place where darkness, pain, hurt, sadness, hardship, disease, and disappointment are no more. A place of eternal worship of our God. This is a promise for you, believer. The return of our King Jesus is not a thing to be feared. No! Much more it is to be eagerly desired! Praise God for His faithfulness and loving kindness from generation to generation. Praise God that He has not forgotten and will ransom His people.

Now take 3-5 minutes to pray a prayer of praise to God for this hope that we have because of the love of God the Father in the work of Christ. Do this before moving on.

The hope that our labor for the Kingdom is not in vain: One of the most encouraging pieces of this chapter is the continual promise that Jesus gives us about His return. There are three different occasions in this chapter where Jesus offers us a promise of His return and promises that He is coming soon! In His coming He will bring recompense and bring His people to the tree of life, the healing of nations.

12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes [do His commandments], so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates."

I encourage us as a body, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23). May we continue to persevere in our faith and our obedience to Christ in our hope that we know our King is coming. Let us hasten the return of our Lord Jesus!

Take 3-5 minutes, close your eyes and ask God to examine your heart with this question: Am I living my life to hasten the return of Christ, or am I living as though Christ will never return?

"And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." Romans 5:5

Brothers and sisters, we have eternal hope in Christ. I pray we might live in that hope.

-John Mann

Hope.

The word “awaiting” here is an active and involved word. It is highly personal, describing someone who is alert and ready to receive all that is coming. If this were a pregnancy, it would look like a mother waiting at the hospital with doctors at the bedside and everything necessary nearby. If it were a jackpot winner, it would look like someone who has buckets at the ready, waiting to catch every last coin. This is someone who understands and is prepared for what is about to happen.

Some of us view salvation only in the present—a day-to-day grace to help us live with the trials of earth. Some think only of the long term—an eternity with our King in heaven. But the truth is more interwoven—this “present age” is a preparation period for us, bringing us freedom on earth from the bondages of sin and cultivating holiness in us as we prepare to “reign with Christ” in the coming Kingdom. He urges us to look forward with expectation and hope to what is coming. You are not just a trophy wife, already clean and perfected to make Jesus look good. No. We are instructed: be active and engaged in the process of righteousness. Turn from sin. Embrace holiness. He has things specifically for us to do. We should allow ourselves to be made ready. “Appearing” means to be physical manifest. Jesus came 2000 years ago, bringing the first peals of freedom and grace to the Earth through salvation, and we can await in hope for Him to come again.

I love this line from one of Francesca Battistelli’s songs. It’s from Mary’s point of view, but true for all of us:

“I’ll hold you in the beginning, You will hold me in the end,  
Every moment in the middle, make my heart your Bethlehem—  
Be born in me.”

Through His humble birth and selfless death, we see Him creating a way for us. In His grace, we can make our hearts a Bethlehem, where He can renew and redeem us until we see Him face to face again. What a hopeful, glorious gift.

-Kymberly Richard

At times it can feel very dark, even hopeless in this world. Wars, rumors of wars, our current political, economic, racial, and social climate, disease, death... this world can suck the life out of us. Jesus promised this! Even before the battle of the end times, people will be “fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world...” (Luke 21:26). There is, indeed, a lot of evil in this world.

Jesus is no stranger to this reality. In fact, he was born right into it. Fearful of Jesus’ supremacy, King Herod attempted to murder him by having every boy in the region aged two and under killed (Matthew 2:16-18). Jesus and his parents fled, becoming refugees in Egypt. And even though he preached love, joy, peace, and hope, he was ultimately killed. The light and hope of the world, by darkness slain.

This fulfills the promise in Genesis 3:15. Because of the brokenness of humanity and the pure evil of Satan, Satan’s “seed” (a.k.a. the evil that would be produced in the world because of his wickedness and deception) is running wild, and the effects of it often suck the hope right out of us.

However, there is hope found in a person. In Genesis 3:15, there’s promise of a man who would come. A “seed” who would crush the head of the serpent and bury all evil under his feet, defeating the devil and the works of evil once and for all. This hope is not found in government, education, a country, politics, or money. This hope is a person, and his name is Jesus. At Christmas, we celebrate Hope. We celebrate with the saints of old the Messiah who would come and deliver us from evil. We anticipate, wait, and eagerly long for the Savior to come, bringing with him hope from this darkness.

He already brought this hope to the earth once. In fact, we’re currently in a season of Second Advent. We’re awaiting his return again, and with him an ultimate end to the evil in the world. An ultimate end to tears, and sorrows, and pains...we, like the saints of old, hope.

Romans 16:20 gives us an even deeper revelation to this promise. Because of the work of Christ on the Cross, we don’t just hope that a Savior will deliver us...we already have that in Christ. Though this deliverance is only partial now, we know he will bring it to perfect completion one day. What’s more, we are active participants in this hope. Because of what Jesus, our Living Hope over sin and Satan, did on the Cross, we will also crush the head of Satan. Not only will we be delivered from evil, but we will actively crush it along with Jesus. I’m feeling like Gladiator right now typing this!

Jesus’ work on the cross not only delivered us from the evil within us and freed us from the works of Satan, but it also made us partakers of his very promise. His life, his promise, his victory becomes completely ours, including our reign over evil and the evil one—our crushing of the serpent’s head.

Your hope is majestic, dear friend. And even though at times the reality of this can be like a shadow in the twilight, barely recognizable, we know for a fact that this is true because of the resurrection. One day, all pain will be gone. Our hope was perfected in reality in the past, and it will be perfected completely in reality in the future as well. And we will become active participants to this head crushing...Praise our Living Hope!

-Tory Mayo

Studies say...

Noise fills my head  
Miss independent says,  
Chivalry is dead  
We married  
Mr. Bitter  
Thinkin' it was an herb  
To heal our ailments  
Too focused on hard soil  
Groans of soreness  
swearing it kills  
Didn't realize  
I was consuming weeds  
not wheat  
Malnourished we  
inhale processed wheat  
murmuring will it help me  
now we are all intolerant  
To the Bread of Life  
Consuming  
fake news  
tragedy all around me  
Lord help me

He answers,  
"A few persist  
to resist  
the days of evil  
They shout  
draw near  
Look Up  
not down  
Idle hands will kill you  
so keep pushin'  
lean in to the grind  
that's how you come out shinin'"

Then I remembered,  
my brothers told me  
my sisters showed me  
I remembered a dream about a mustard seed  
Jon, I took this mess of me  
holding it under fire  
like a Foreman takes dirty gems  
needing guidance  
Vision to know  
how to make it  
shine brighter  
Patience and persistence  
are my daughters  
Whether it was my momma  
prepping my hands for the world  
or Ms. Jackie tellin' me kindly to get over myself;  
go Home, talk to the Father, know my worth  
Go grab that recovery drink,  
Olympians get tired too  
Dr. Alma filtered the water for me  
Began quenching this thirst in me  
So I could keep singing

Siblings woke me up  
As if Christmas morning on repeat  
Kids ask, "you awake yet?"  
Parents yell, "I'm awake I'm awake. Ugh."  
Coach sighs, "this is just conditioning"  
Part one, eyes open.  
Part two, keep it movin'  
Sing with me  
Its Final act,  
Take a knee, for the

True King

-Mai Ho

Have you ever forgotten why you're doing something? I'm extremely familiar with that feeling! You're doing a task—maybe it's on a computer or around the house—you're in the zone, and then you look up and think, "Why was I doing this again?" For me, it seems to take place most often when what I'm doing something that's a really LONG activity or part of a series of activities that accomplish a bigger goal. It's just super easy to forget. You throw in a job, a spouse, or a kid, and who knows why you're doing anything anymore!

Unsurprisingly, that feeling isn't limited to work or repairs around the house. It's something we experience in our spiritual lives as well. Often, what starts as a beautiful time reading scripture and praying each morning becomes the arbitrary routine we follow as we wake up. Soon after, for a lot of people, it becomes that thing we used to do and should really try to get back into. It might even become our next New Year's Resolution! In many instances, we forget that beautiful feeling of drawing closer to God in quiet time, learning something new about the mercies of Jesus in scripture, or experiencing his grace as we seek him in prayer. It's not that we just don't want to; we simply forget why we were doing it.

Why we're doing something is so critically important. It's the motivation to finish. In the moments when we fault, in the moments we don't want to do something, remembering why we're doing it can be the fuel that we need to push forward!

Paul helps us see the motivation for fighting to follow Christ. He understands that living every day, fighting to be faithful to God and obedient to Christ, can be difficult. Yet, he has one reason he fights to continue making that pursuit his own: "because Jesus Christ has made me His own." That's why Paul fights every day. He knows he wasn't perfect yesterday, and he knows he won't be perfect tomorrow. Even so, he presses on. Yes, there's something to look forward to in heaven.

Yes, there's a great joy to be shared in where we're faithful to God. Yes, it's super encouraging when we see progress in our own obedience to Christ. But those things aren't the main drive. What Jesus has already done in Paul's life is the main thing that drives him day in and day out. Knowing that his life had been snatched from the darkness, remembering he was now a "citizen of Heaven," understanding that he was now a part of God's family, all because of Jesus, was the driving factor.

What's driving you today? Is it the desire to be better than yesterday? Is it the desire to prove yourself a good follower of Jesus? Or is the reality that the Creator of the universe, the King of Kings, has made you His own pulling at your heart? When you fail to be obedient, does your heart jump at the opportunity to make it up to God, or does it jump for joy that despite what you've done you're still His?

That's such a beautiful reality to rest in. You and I, brothers and sisters, who have placed our faith in and are following Christ, are His. He's called us His own. And it wasn't easy; it cost Him something. It cost Him His own life.

Is the fuel in our hearts the overwhelming reality that when Jesus lived a life that earned Him every right to be God's own, He gave that life—crying out "Father, Father, why have you forsaken me"—so that we could be called God's own? Though we haven't earned it, do we allow our heart to rest and be grateful for the gift of being God's through Christ?

Though we ought to enjoy Christmas with all of its family fun and festivities, let's also dwell on the reality that we celebrate the arrival of the one that made us God's: Jesus, our hope. His love and affection have given us a hope that goes far beyond this world and this life. He gives us forevermore. He gives a hope that's eternal. He gives us a hope that can only be found in knowing that we're His.

-Josh Guerrero

PEACE



In this season of Advent, we prepare to remember and celebrate the birth of our King, Jesus, and in Isaiah 11 we hear the words of a prophet, and a people who are longing for and looking ahead to celebrate the same joyous event we remember at Christmas, the coming of a Savior.

“Out of the stump of Jesse...” (Is. 11:1)

Our King, our Savior, did not come with great fanfare or ceremony. He was born to simple parents, of a tribe that had been conquered and persecuted and subjugated again and again and again. He was born not in a palace, but in a barn amongst the livestock. From the midst of brokenness Jesus came to bring hope and peace. “And a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.” (Is. 11:1)

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; ... and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Is. 9:6)

Isaiah 11 prophesies the coming of a great King. This is a King who will be wise and understanding, mighty and upright, righteous and faithful. A King who will bring justice, and who sees not as man sees but who sees the truth in men’s hearts. A King who when he comes will bring a peace beyond anything we can even imagine. A peace that brings together natural enemies (the lion and the lamb) to coexist together in unity. A peace in which the meek and the young will be safe from the deadliest harm. How lovely is this peace and how do we even begin to comprehend such a thing? A peace that bridges impossible divisions, that defies the most entrenched of expectations and prejudices. How great, how mighty must be the King who establishes such a peace. Can we even imagine what it will be like to be part of such a kingdom?

In Ephesians 1:3-10, Paul reminds us that by Jesus’ blood, by His sacrifice, we are forgiven and redeemed. That through the love of our King we are adopted into this heavenly kingdom that we may be part of his plan to unite all things in him. This is our Kingdom. Not a kingdom of blood and steel, tanks and planes, politics and power, but a heavenly kingdom.

If we are sons and daughters of the Prince of Peace, then what does it look like to live for that kingdom? How do we, through our words and actions, reconcile this vision of unimaginable peace and unity with the world we live in?

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matt. 5:9)

Every Sunday in the Episcopal church that I grew up in, I remember my family pausing in the middle of church to turn and greet those around us, much as we do at The Well. Every Sunday we all turned to our neighbor and greeted them with “Peace be with you.” It strikes me now how profound that seemingly inconsequential tradition was. That despite any differences and disagreements we were reminding ourselves that we are called to set aside our pride and our need to be proved right and to try to live in peace and unity. God has placed each of us exactly where He has with a purpose for His Kingdom.

In what way can we be peacemakers in this holiday season? What seemingly irreconcilable divisions can we help to bridge? In this politically, culturally, and racially divisive time how can we be the voice of peace? In what ways can we allow God to use us, to place us in the midst of division to say to both sides that whether I agree with you or not you are loved? That I love you because our Father loves you. As we gather with friends and family, what feuds and arguments can we lay aside so that we can show them, both through words and actions, that we are united in love? I wish I could give you an answer, a three-step process to bringing peace, but I too wrestle with how to live this out. Every day I must remind myself to strike down my pride and allow God to direct my heart and hands outward and trust in Him to work through my imperfect life to accomplish the impossible. So, I must leave you now with many questions but few answers, but just as my childhood priests once spoke blessing over me I now pray over you in this holiday season, “Go into the world in Peace, to love and serve the Lord.”

-Matt Weigers

True peace of mind, heart, body, and soul. This seems to be the ultimate goal of so much of our self-help/self-care obsessed culture. And understandably so. The natural result of taking in the latest news/political climate/racial tensions/catastrophic natural disasters of the day is an enormous weight of stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. To be quite honest, I have lately wrestled with both the desire to see deep change and healing happen in our world, and the reality that I do not see it happening; instead, things only seem to be getting worse.

But then I read passages with visions like Daniel describes, of the Ancient of Days (God being described as eternal and before all things) bringing final and complete judgement to evil. While this passage is full of imagery and prophetic vision I will not pretend to be able to unpack fully, I am struck most by the power and authority God has to ultimately destroy and conquer evil not just temporarily, but for eternity. I have recently come to see that true peace is only possible by means of a perfectly righteous God, who can both do justly and love mercy in a way that I cannot even begin to understand. My desires are often so limited, focused on the current tragedies and injustices of our world, when the Creator of all things has long suffered with humanity and the presence and power of the devil and death since the fall. His plan has always been for redemption, to bring back the reign of righteousness and justice in a new heaven and earth.

How great a King, to send His own Son to defeat sin and death and in the process reconcile all of creation back to Himself, bringing light to darkness and healing the brokenhearted. What a good, good King. This just King has done and will do more than any human could ever attempt to do to make peace. How I long for my mind and heart to be ruled by the truth that the peace found in His kingdom, because of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, is a peace this current world cannot give.

His is full and complete and perfect. Let us look to our King, Jesus, in full anticipation of his peacemaking work and for that work to begin in our hearts and minds. As we take hold of the true peace and rest Christ offers us now, we wait and yearn for ultimate peace on earth, the renewing of creation. The King of Kings will take his seat, the books will be opened, and peace will come at last through his perfect judgement. I eagerly await that glorious day where Revelation 11:15 says:

“there were loud voices in heaven, saying,  
‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom  
of our Lord  
and of his Messiah,  
and he will reign forever and ever.’”

The final stanza of my favorite Christmas hymn, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” describes this reality so beautifully:

Hail! the heaven-born  
Prince of peace!  
Hail! the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
Risen with healing in his wings  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
Born that man no more may die:  
Born to raise the son of earth,  
Born to give them second birth.  
Hark! the herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!”

Scripture for further reflection and contemplation:

Isaiah 9: 1-7  
John 14:25-31  
Colossians 3:15  
Hebrews 9:12  
Revelation 21:1-8

-Maria Ege

We are a people prone to the troubled heart. Countless internal and external factors provoke anxiety within us and threaten the peace that God promises. The troubled or anxious heart is something we feel. It's inevitable, uninvited, and difficult to navigate on our own. Often times we can know truths about God but our hearts continue to feel troubled. Our feelings can't always catch up to what we know to be true.

To bridge this gap, we must relinquish the control we desire over our feelings. To remedy the troubled heart, we must trust in God.

John 14:1-2 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" (v2)

Just before this, Jesus' disciples had been told some heart-troubling news. One of them would betray Jesus (Judas). One of them would disown Jesus (Peter). And to top it all off, their beloved Jesus would leave them. They had every right to let their feelings rule over their hearts. But Jesus wanted them to trust Him. He seems to be saying here, "Trust me! Go away from that dark place in your head. Don't pay too much attention to what you feel. Cling to truth that you know! Cling to me! I am the light, look to me like you look to God. I have something better for you. Endless rooms in my Father's house, a true and better house. Won't you trust me on this one?"

"And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (v3)

He promises that one day he will come back for us, and we can experience his everlasting peace in full. What a beautiful and generous promise! As we await that glorious day, we must also be prepared for the here and now. The troubled heart does not discriminate; it comes and goes as it pleases. While we cycle through the escalations and de-escalations of our hearts, we must deliberately choose to relinquish control over our feelings and trust in God. When we choose to trust in the Lord instead of our feelings, over and over, God will pour over us the peace that He promises.

Here is a Puritan Prayer that I think articulates how Christ shows up when our hearts are troubled, if we choose to trust Him. It reminds us that one day we will have a perfect and complete peace. One day Jesus will come back to take us to the precious rooms He has prepared.

"Heavenly Father, when I am afraid of evils to come, comfort me by showing me that in my self I am a dying, condemned wretch, but in Christ I am reconciled and live; that in my self I find insufficiency and no rest, but in Christ there is satisfaction and peace; that in myself I am feeble and unable to do good, but in Christ I have ability to do all things. Though now I have his graces in part, I shall shortly have them perfectly in that state where thou wilt show thyself fully reconciled, and alone sufficient, efficient, loving me completely, with sin abolished. O Lord, hasten that day." -Prayer of Contentment, The Valley of Vision

-Maddy Orr

Y'ALL, this is such exciting news. JESUS, The King of kings, The Lord of lords, is coming back! Close your eyes and let this realization settle in for a moment. Can you feel your adrenaline pumping through your body? Can you feel your heart thumping faster and faster? Because we all should be jumping up and down for JOY that The Faithful and True decided to come back for us.

If you connect with the Lord through music, check out "Shout It Out" by Vertical Worship. This song will get you moving and grooving through this devotion!

There are 3 words that spoke to us as we read through this passage together and we would like to share them with you all, so let us get started, friends.

#### REUNITED

We are hand-picked to stand with our Lord against this hostile Earth. We are a chosen race to be known as God's people, it states in 1 Peter 2:9-10. This thought brings such comfort and peace, because God is coming to be with us. According to Rev. 17:14, "The armies of heaven... were following him on white horses" is talking about us. The main idea is that the Son of God is leading the people of God from Heaven against Earth. No weapons or armor are mentioned, because we are now fighting with the Lord. He only needs us to be dressed in "fine linen" and to be "white and pure". The Lord is our weapon. How cool is that?!

#### GLORIOUS

In the beginning, Jesus was simply a carpenter, now he is coming back revealing himself as our ultimate King. In Biblical times, most soldiers were foot soldiers so the Lord riding on "a white horse" represents a significant advantage.

The color white represents victory and the animal horse represents honor and power. "On his head are many diadems" is an expression of unlimited sovereignty. The word "diadems" is the Greek word for crowns and crowns represent royalty and authority. Jesus left this world wearing the crown of thorns and is coming back wearing many crowns. This is a visual representation of his ultimate authority and power.

To sum it all up, this passage tells us that the Lord is a BA.

\*mic drops\*

In all seriousness, be U N A S H A M E D of our Lord. Even in full glory, he chooses to be "clothed in a robe dipped in blood." The Lord is proudly telling the world that He is unashamed to have given up his life just for us to enter into eternity with Him. We want to challenge every single one of you today, to simply remind one person that Jesus loves them deeply. You can write it, text it, say it or SHOUT IT. Do it up your style!

Love You Friends,

Alexis Tarpley & Shannon Chen

Made alive in Christ because He lives. One of my favorite hymns growing up, "Because He Lives," proclaims: "God sent His son, they called Him Jesus; He came to love, heal and forgive; He lived and died to buy my pardon, An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives! Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future, and that life's worth living just because He lives." Singing this song, with its sweet and beautiful truths, I can feel the warmth of deep thankfulness work its way through my heart.

Friends, our faith and our eternity hinges on the powerful reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The Gospel– the saving work of Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection from the dead for us all (Matthew 28)– brings hope and unity to and among all believers who believe in the truth of the Gospel.

The Corinthian church is not unified when we dive into our passage. Paul shows us how divided this church really was. Divided not only by the prevailing rivalry, immorality, arrogance, immaturity, and selfishness found within the church, but also divided on several foundational, essential truths of the Christian faith. Namely, Paul addresses their unbelief in the Christian's– thus Jesus'– resurrection from the dead.

At that time in history, it was common in Greek culture to not believe in the physical resurrection of an earthly body after death. Here, Paul is logically arguing if there is no principle of resurrection, then Jesus--being fully God and fully human-- could not have risen from the dead. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, as Paul says in verse 17, "your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." Death would have then had power over Jesus. Can you think or even imagine what it would be like for our faith to be worthless and for us to still be in our sins with no hope? It would feel exactly like Paul's statement in verse 19, "we should be pitied more than anyone."

Thank you, Jesus, for not leaving the story to end there! Earlier in chapter 15, Paul proves beyond all doubt how Jesus did rise from the dead, saying more than 500 witnesses saw Jesus– including Paul himself (Acts 9:1-19). Paul then with certainty states, "But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead" (emphasis added). Paul goes further and explains in the last days, Jesus reigns in His kingdom and will put all enemies under his feet– the last enemy to be abolished is death. Jesus has victory over death by His resurrection, which means He has victory over death forever because He lives!

Reflection: This Advent season, join us in joyous anticipation in celebrating the birth of Christ and His coming again. Celebrating Christ who took on flesh and became fully man. In becoming fully man and living a sinless life, He was the perfect and needed substitution for us in our sinfulness. Have peace knowing that while Christ was fully man, He resurrected and defeated death, not just for Himself but for all mankind. Rest knowing we will one day be resurrected with Him.

-Mikayla Garrison

## A New Heaven and New Earth

The search for lasting peace has been taking place since the beginning of mankind. Throughout history and across the world, there have been significant movements of people taking action to try to bring about peace in times of intense conflict. Regardless of the focus, effort, and sincere intentions of people, the hope for a sustained peace seems as elusive as ever.

A review of Scripture shows us much of the same. About 600 years before Christ, most prophets were predicting peace. Jeremiah reminded the people that God had said, "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people" (Jeremiah 7:23). Though this was as clear and direct as Jeremiah could be, the people continued to ignore the Lord and His commands. Their false prophets said, "Peace, peace" (8:11), but Jeremiah predicted disaster for not following God (which ultimately came true with the fall of Jerusalem).

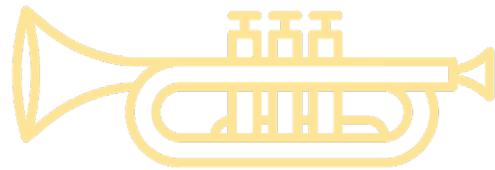
Our God is a God of love and peace, but conflict comes into our lives and the world because of our rebellion against Him. Sin destroys the world's peace and robs each of us of inner peace. Jesus came to this world to reconcile us to God and give us that inner peace. Paul captures this in his letter to the Romans: "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). His words are among the most hope-filled ever written.

Peace is rare, but as we read in Revelation 21 today, we know that an everlasting peace will ultimately be the final outcome of God's plan for those who believe in Him. In verse 4, we are reminded that when the new heaven and new earth are created, we will be in the presence of God and there will be no tears, death, grieving, crying, or pain because the conflict that we now live in will be replaced by the inner peace that is our promise.

As we continue through the Advent season, let's trust in and call upon the peace made possible by the Holy Spirit and look forward to the coming again of our Savior and a new heaven and new earth that will bring everlasting peace.

-Paul Carlson

JOY



In this passage in Zephaniah, the people of Jerusalem are given cause to rejoice—the Lord is rescuing them from oppression and destruction. They were suffering because of their rebellion against God, but God promised to bring justice to their oppressors. As a response, Zephaniah encourages the people to rejoice by singing and exulting the Lord. This praise was because of 1) what God was doing presently to rescue them (“He has taken away the judgements...”—v. 15), and 2) what He promised to do in the future (“will save...rejoice...exult...”—v. 17).

Like the Israelites, we also have reason to rejoice today. God fulfills His promises to us daily. However, unlike the Israelites, who were still looking forward to experiencing the fulfillment of God’s promise to save them, we can look back and see that He has already fulfilled His promise to save us and restore our relationship with Him—through the person of Jesus Christ.

The Advent season is a time to pause and celebrate God being born in the flesh in order to reconcile us to Him. The joy that we have in Christ flows out of experiencing His presence, not only presently, but also for eternity. Let’s allow this truth to bring joy to our hearts as we look forward to celebrating the birth of Christ.

Questions for reflection:

How does reflecting on the coming of Christ move you to joy?

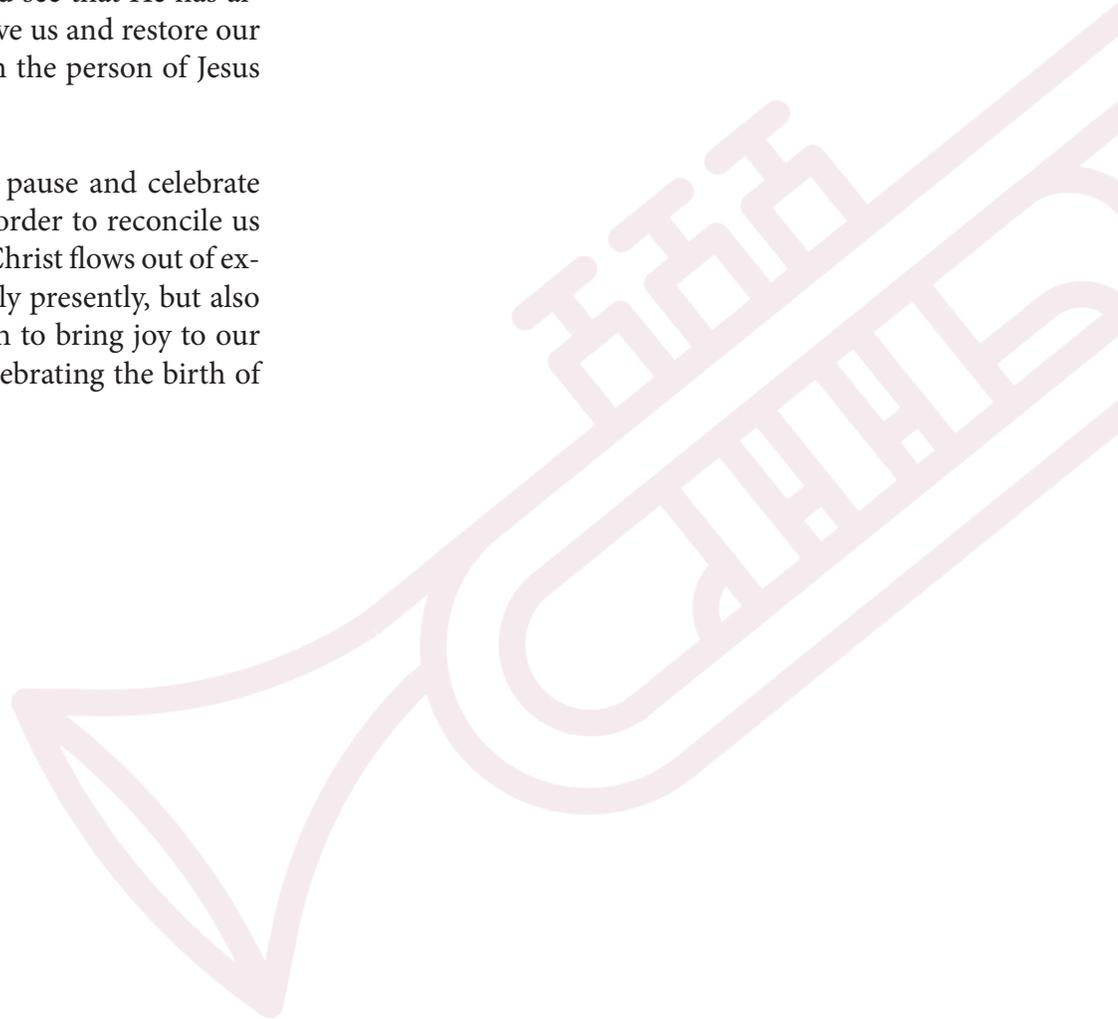
What does joy look like in your life?

What are some circumstances that distract you from having joy in God’s faithfulness to fulfill His promises?

What is God presently doing in your life that you can rejoice about?

How will you maintain expectant joy in your life after the Advent season is over?

-Daphne Wilson



We sat behind a young family with a 6-8 month old daughter during the child dedication service at The Well.

The baby paid no attention to the sermon! She was content in the arms of her father, mother and grandmother. She focused on a necklace her grandmother was wearing.

The joy a baby brings to a family is a picture of the gift of joy Christ gives to our heart and lives. Parents proudly display their bundles of joy in baby carriages and cute baby clothes, as you would expect. Just ask a new father or mother for baby pictures on their ip-hone; be prepared to ooh and awh for a few minutes.

In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus tells the parable of the talents. He told faithful servants who were entrusted with talents and gained more, "Well done! You were faithful with little and I will put you in charge of more." Jesus called the one who hid his talent "wicked and evil".

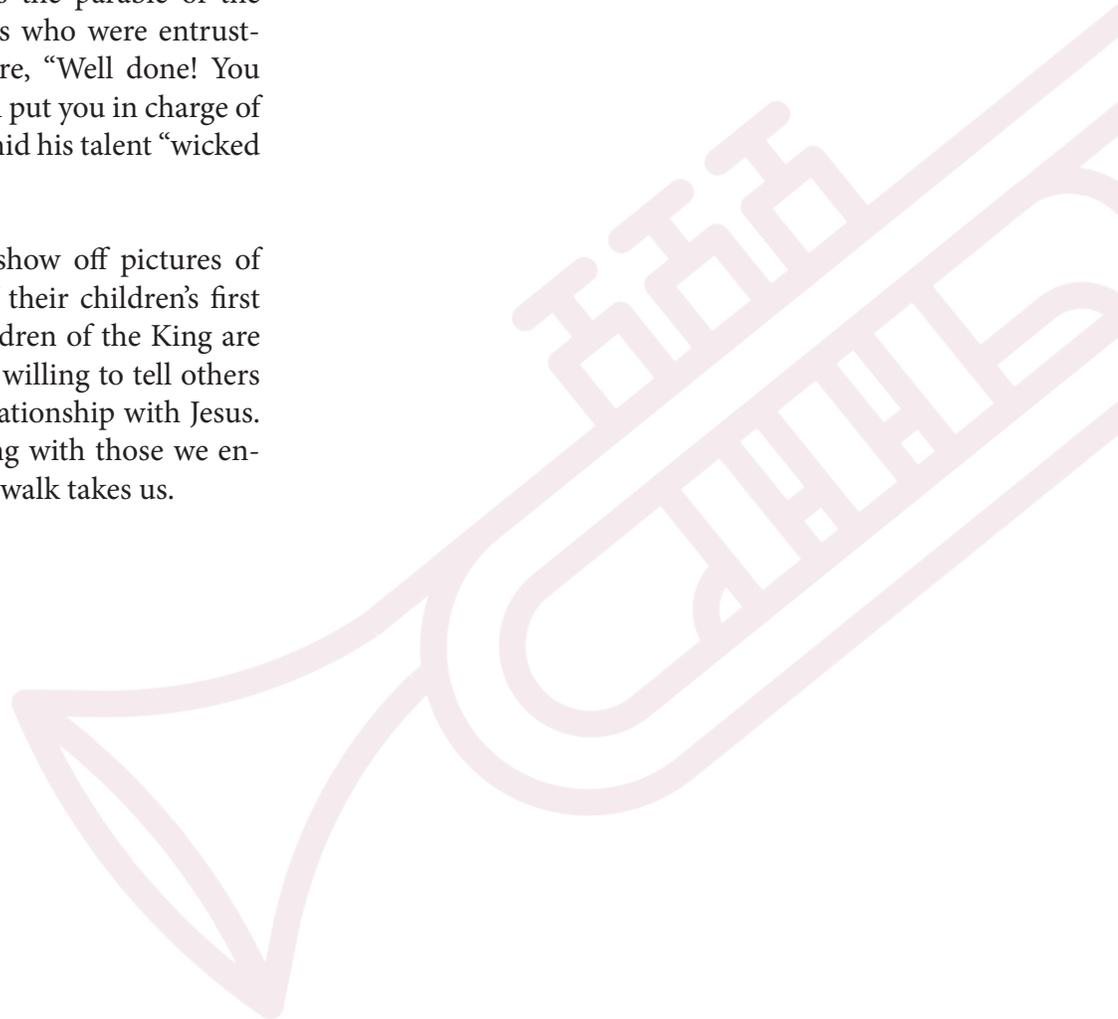
Just as proud parents joyfully show off pictures of their babies and proudly tell of their children's first words and first steps, we as children of the King are called to live joyful lives and be willing to tell others that our joy comes from our relationship with Jesus. Joy is a gift we should be sharing with those we encounter every day wherever our walk takes us.

This is being written the week before Veterans Day when we remember those who served to protect and defend our country, as well we should.

May we also remember and celebrate the freedom, hope, abundant life, and joy our Savior brings during the weeks ahead and throughout our lives.

Joy to the world!

-Paul Hulsey



Jerusalem was an empty city, torn down and oppressed by neighboring nations.

The city was a representation of its people, who were torn down and oppressed by the temptations of life and prosperity outside of God. The forefathers of Jerusalem ignored the word of God, and as a result, God brought about righteous judgment.

Sing and rejoice says the Lord.

The Lord knew Jerusalem's struggle, and He was not far from them. God began to call on the hearts of a new generation as He opened their eyes to remember and trust His promises.

Sing and rejoice says the Lord.

As God drew His people in, they returned. They listened, called on His name, and believed God was righteous and true.

Sing and rejoice says the Lord.

As His people returned, God fulfilled His promise. He showed His commitment and dedication to His people, a dedication full of mercy and comfort. The prophet Zechariah received a vision from the Lord of a New Jerusalem, where the Lord Himself would dwell in their midst.

Sing and rejoice says the Lord.

God showed Zechariah a vision of Jerusalem restored. It was a city flourishing with so many people who trusted God that the city walls could not contain them all. The city was a portrayal of its people—a people who had a restored relationship with God, flourishing with renewed reverence and belief in the Lord.

Sing and rejoice says the Lord.

When God instructed His people to sing and rejoice, it was not because He declared that money, health, and good fortune would be brought to them. God instructed His people to sing and rejoice because their spiritual suffering came to an end, because He was with them and He was dwelling in their midst.

As believers in Christ, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, so God is with us always, always dwelling in our midst. We have the power to continually sing and rejoice because we have the power of Jesus!

Pray during the Advent season that Zechariah 2:10 will remind you to continually sing and rejoice because God is with us and dwelling in our midst forever. Psalm 90:14 echoes this sentiment: Lord, "satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days!"

-Angie Vital

For many people, it is relatively easy to feel joyous during the Advent season: December air is electric with the hope and expectation of rest and unity, of family and friends, of warmth and rich food. Yet after Christmas and New Year pass, we often find our joy was as ephemeral as snow in Texas.

Why is this?

Perhaps we let our Christmas joy stray from the permanence of Christ's advent (arrival) into our lives to the fleeting joys of the season.

In Psalm 24, David declares through song the joy of the Incarnation which reveals no momentary delight but rather a deep, relentless joy that promises to abide forever.

“Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,  
That the King of glory may come in.” (v. 7)

David is literally proclaiming the joyous entry of the arc of the covenant — God's manifest presence to the Jews — into the temple at Jerusalem. This picture prefigures the entry of Christ — God's manifest presence to all people — not only into the remote village of Bethlehem, but also into Jerusalem, on what we know now as Palm Sunday.

What a picture of joy David shows at the coming of the presence of the Lord, which is so beautifully mirrored by the angels declaring, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people” (Luke 2:10) and by the shouts of, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the Highest!” (Matt 21:9) almost five hundred years later.

Is that the joy we have when we consider Christmas? Are we beholding Christ coming into the world, entering our hearts, storming our souls? If so, our joy will not be one bound by time or circumstance, but instead be as boundless as the very love of God.

So may our hearts be satisfied with nothing less than the King of Glory! May the ancient doors of our souls, so long sealed by worldly desires and distractions, by past hurts and pain, by skepticism and fear, be lifted up that our loving Savior might enter. And that He might enter not for a brief spell, not for the remaining days until school or work starts again, but forever. Jesus became incarnate not to dwell among us for a short time, but to dwell within us forevermore.

So remove the guards, unfasten the locks, release the chains, and lift up our souls to Christ!

As Henry Francis Lyt wrote, “In life and death, Lord, abide with me.”

-Christiana Sullivan

## Plucked from the Fire -- Joy in Judgement

In the book of Jude, we see a type of advent. More specifically, the author pens a letter highlighting anticipation for this second coming of Christ in the last days.

Jude is writing a letter to a particular group. He addresses a people who have received a great gift in salvation but are anxiously awaiting their Savior's return to tangibly make all things new. This was a dark time when many were being swayed away from the faith by people who were perverting the grace of Jesus. However, this was not a surprise to Jude; the apostles predicted a period when people will be entrenched in their ungodly passions but he reminds readers to contend for the faith and remember Jesus Christ who mercifully plucked them from the fire.

Throughout the entire text, which is deeply weighted by the dichotomy of judgement and mercy, Jude communicates a message of joy, hope, and anticipation. He communicates this message by referencing an Old Testament story in Zechariah chapter 3. In this scripture, Zechariah records a vision of Satan standing ready to accuse a man named Joshua who was the high priest. But the Lord rebuked Satan saying, "Is not this the brand plucked from the fire?" The text goes on to describe how Joshua's filthy garments were removed and he was given clean festal attire. The Lord then declared that he will bring forth his servant, the branch, and he will remove the iniquity of the Land in a single day. In short, Zechariah is describing a vision of Joshua being saved out of a fire. Zechariah is describing salvation.

As Tory Mayo, Lead Pastor of The Well, would say: "This is good news friends!" God is faithful and sent a branch that would remove iniquity! That branch was Jesus. Jesus was judged, convicted, and executed so that those who put their trust in him would never have to be. Believers have received mercy and will receive mercy when final judgement comes. In contrast to the first advent, when Israel awaited a Messiah that would bring salvation and establish his kingdom. We, as believers, await his second coming which will bring judgement, mercy, and establish his throne forever.

As we wait anxiously await for Jesus' return, we can have joy knowing our Lord has removed our iniquity and has clothed us in clean festal attire; a celebration. When Satan stands to accuse the beloved he will be rebuked, because Jesus has already been judged for us.

In conclusion, as we embrace this season of Advent, Jude gives imperatives for readers to follow. Take a moment to consider how you can apply these commands.

Build yourselves up in the most Holy Faith. Pray in the Spirit. Keep in the love of God. Wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ which leads to eternal life. Snatch some out of the fire. Have mercy on those who doubt.

"To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless... To the only God be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

-Krys Henry

Delayed gratification is one of the toughest parts about being human. It factors into so many kinds of sin. We want things now, disregarding long term well-being for short term satisfaction, choosing what feels good in the moment instead of what is better in the long run.

Happiness is immediate and easily accessible. If I want to smile, I can just turn on Netflix and watch Season 5, Episode 14 of The Office, and the funniest five minutes in television history are guaranteed to have me smiling. "THE FIRE IS SHOOTING AT US!"

Joy can be harder to obtain. Sometimes, joy comes after a time of waiting, after hard work, after labor or struggle. Jesus tells the disciples, "Your grief will turn to joy." He compares it to a woman in labor who forgets her labor pain after seeing her baby. Like childbirth, Jesus describes joy as something that is hard won, but worth it. He lived here among us, and he knows firsthand that our time on Earth can be painful. Keep in mind also that Jesus spoke these words originally to the disciples, nearly all of whom he knew would go on to be literally killed for their faith! Jesus knew that they had some dark and difficult times ahead. But he also promised that they would see him again, and that "no one will take away your joy." That promise is for us as well. It's what makes this existence on Earth, at times laborious and painful and full of grief, worth it. What's before us is Jesus.

And even here on earth, there are so many moments full of the beauty of Christ. I think we have to look for those moments and to reach for joy. It can be hard to obtain, and it's easy to see the negativity and pain around us, but God is working in the world, and working for our good. We may have to search to see beauty and goodness in the world, but it's worth that effort.

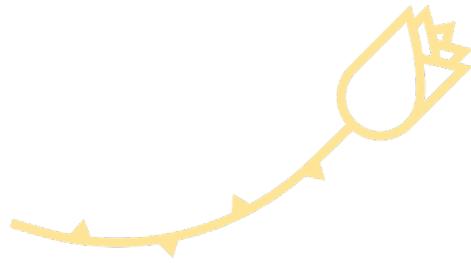
What can you do to pursue joy?

Here are a few things you could do to pursue joy:

- Deactivate your Facebook, or step back from negative social media. (This is kind of a soap box for me, but if your facebook is negative, delete it! It's less of a social necessity than you think!)
- Write John 16:22 out on a card, and put it on your mirror, your desk at work, or your car dashboard so you are reminded frequently that Jesus has promised us joy.
- Instead of watching the news and just complaining about it, get involved in your community and fight for social justice or work toward the betterment of your community. (Consider joining an organization like CASA of Travis County!)
- Keep a daily journal where you write 3 things at the end of each day that brought you joy.
- Make it part of dinner to talk to your spouse or kids about something that brought each of you joy that day.

-Jana Deardorff

LOVE



Start today by praying that God would give you wisdom (James 1:5) and reveal something to you today through His word.

This church had encountered a great amount of persecution and difficulty, so you can imagine the fear this church was currently experiencing. On top of that, the singular hope that they were looking towards was being shaken by the thought that Jesus had already come back. Paul writes this to assure them this is not true and to give them clear signs to look for in preparation for the coming of Jesus. How hopeful and downright excited they must have been for this! It makes you wonder, how often are we thinking about and looking forward to this?

Spend 3-5 min contemplating the hope you have in Jesus' return and what kind of joy you will have when He appears.

The second part of the passage is a great reminder of where to turn during difficult times: the Love that God has for us! Paul encourages the Thessalonians to be comforted by the glory and grace of Jesus. This is how Paul chose to love them in times of difficulty, by reminding the church of the hope that they have in Jesus. This is not the only time this happens, as Peter also reminds the persecuted church of the same hope in 1 Peter 1. The church moved forward in persecution as a result of their love for Jesus and hope for eternity with Him.

I am reminded of how Jesus comforted His disciples:

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

How often do we comfort ourselves this way when we are dealing with any hardship? How often are we loving and encouraging brothers and sisters with those words when they are dealing with hardship?

Ask the Lord how we can encourage others and ourselves with this hope this week. Also, ask Him to remind you of our true hope daily.

-Tony Arcangelini

“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”.

So what kind of supper are we talking about here? Chances are that at Christmas you and those you celebrate with prepare some type of a meal that is special. This can mean lots of different things. Maybe you do a traditional meal with turkey, ham, or tamales. Maybe you have embraced the foodie culture of Austin, and Christmas is your time to experiment with barbecue or your own culinary masterpiece. Maybe you prefer your Christmas meal to be paleo, ketogenic, gluten free, dairy free, vegetarian, pescatarian, or vegan! Regardless of your own take on this meal, chances are that you prepare it with more time and care than an average meal you would eat during the rest of the year. If you are like me, just thinking about it now probably has you looking forward to it. As we close out Advent season the analogy of anticipating and looking forward to a special meal hits home. During Advent we wait in anticipation of the time we celebrate God’s gift of salvation through Jesus, and we look forward to the time where Jesus comes again and restores us fully, as his beloved Bride.

In this passage in Revelation we gain a glimpse as to what it will look like to be presented pure, as the Bride of Christ, and to be called to the “marriage supper of the lamb.” A passage in Isaiah 25 shows us that God’s people have been anticipating this day long before us and even long before Jesus came.

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,  
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

7 And he will swallow up on this mountain  
the covering that is cast over all peoples,  
the veil that is spread over all nations.

8 He will swallow up death forever;  
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,  
and the reproach of his people he will take away  
from all the earth,

for the Lord has spoken.

9 It will be said on that day,

“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him,  
that he might save us.

This is the Lord; we have waited for him;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Isaiah 25: 6-9.

As our Advent season draws to a close, let us also look forward to the time described in these passages, and remember why we are presented pure and are “blessed” for being invited to this supper. In Ephesians 5 we are told that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” and this is “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish”.

Let us remember in this season the amazing and eternal love of our Savior Jesus Christ!

-Scott Graham

By the time the church reads this devotional, I will be a married man.

I'm getting married on December 16. As I write this, my fiancée and I are steadily checking items off our to-do list to make sure we're ready for our big day: order flower arrangements, hire a photographer, make reception dinner reservations, obtain a marriage license. It's a lot to do in a short amount of time, but we're not rushing. We're working urgently and efficiently, chipping away at these tasks every day to make sure that by the time December 16 rolls around, we'll be prepared and excited to get married.

We should prepare for Jesus' return in the same way.

In 1 John 2:28, John writes, "And now, little children, abide in Him so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming." God desires all people to be saved and accept Him as their Lord and savior. But salvation is not the end goal. It's merely the beginning of a life of fellowship with God and other believers. We don't know exactly when Jesus will return, but we do know how to prepare for it: by regularly reading the Bible, praying, going to church, building community with other believers, and ministering to those around us. Then, when Jesus, the Bridegroom, returns to marry his bride—that's us, the church—we'll be ready.

Just as much as the church is the bride of Christ, we as individual believers are all children of God. 1 John 3:1 tells us, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God." Certain translations change the word "given" to "bestowed," which speaks to the measure and the manner of God's love for us. His love is unceasing and unqualified; we don't have to earn it. (Some might say we couldn't earn it... we don't deserve it...)

This contradicts the world's understanding of love, which is often transactional and conditional. Consequently, the world does not recognize children of God, just as it did not recognize Jesus. That's not a bad thing! Our beliefs, motives, and understanding of love should be foreign to the world because we find grace, justification and steadfast love in God, rather than in our jobs, possessions or relationships.

This can make our day-to-day lives seem uncertain and even painful at times. "What we will be has not yet appeared," John writes, "but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is." We can't plot our destiny, but we can take solace in the fact that when Jesus returns, we will be like Him and see the fullness of His glory. To stand in the presence of God is a far greater promise than any future we could dream up ourselves.

God has beautiful plans for us, and He's working out His perfect will at this very moment. But we don't want to be caught off guard when those plans come to fruition. If we strive to enjoy, express, and live like Jesus now, then we'll stand in awe of Him and receive His endless love in eternity.

-Bryan Rolli

It's hard for me to imagine waiting for Jesus, waiting for God to give me a way back to Him. I can't imagine that I would have expected God's perfect love to be manifested in a human, in Jesus Christ. I can't imagine that I would have thought the Messiah would die on my behalf and suffer separation from God so that He could overcome my separation and death to make a way for me to be with Him. To create, through great pain, a path for me to walk on directly to Him.

I don't think big like God does, though. I don't have the deep, great, enveloping, impenetrable love that God is and has and gives. I can't see His magnificent plan as I imagine He can: a picture woven with billions of threads of lives in magnificent color and intricacy. I think small, and that's why I forget that God's plan is for His glory and our good. I see small pieces of pain, loss, suffering, and I forget that our Lord created the universe out of love, out of goodness, and that His eyes see a complete picture, one that we are very much a part of.

What do you forget when you're thinking small?

The author of Hebrews makes an effort to acknowledge God's masterful plan as he begins by reminding his readers of the old order, the time when God was only accessible in the tabernacle behind two layers of separation by a single priest who could enter once a year with a blood offering. Looking back at Exodus allows the author to see the beauty in the Lord's woven plan that Jesus Christ came as the perfect high priest who "entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). Completing what was incomplete in the blood sacrifices that were offered before Jesus came, where people were only made outwardly clean, Christ's sacrifice of His unblemished self sanctifies us so that we may be made wholly clean. "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Hebrews 9:15).

Take a moment today to zoom out and allow God to reveal some part of His plan for your story. What memories did He call up? What in your life is He using, growing, or redeeming?

The Creator of the universe knows that we can't see what He sees, but that doesn't discourage Him from trying to show us just how great and endless His love is for us. He reminds us in the sweet details of our story. God is fair and purposeful. His plan is better than ours because His is eternal, and His is created out of the purest love. His love saved us once when Jesus Christ died that we may have abundant life with Him in heaven. As Jesus says in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." That same love is coming for us again. We are waiting, still, for the completion of God's magnificent story as it is written in Hebrews 9:27-28.

I hope we can allow the love present in the beautiful Gospel and in the promise of His return to affect us today.

-Julia Gritte

Revelation 1: 4-8 is a beautiful message to the seven churches of Asia about the Second Coming of Christ. We celebrate Christ's coming to earth as not only a celebration of His birth, but also of the gravity that his birth and entire life brought to the world. If you're anything like me, the Advent season fills you with a lot of reminders of God's love, and a lot of the sacrifice that Jesus eventually made for our sins. But Revelation 1 reminds us that Jesus' work isn't finished: He's coming back for us. His love will overwhelm us, His creation will be made new, and His story will be complete. I decided to process this in poem form:

The first time,  
The sky lit up

Compass stars lit the way  
A beacon for wise men, worshippers  
Sinners and saints alike.

Son of Man  
Son of God  
Weak in infant form  
Brought to live with us  
Knowing he would die by our hands.  
Just to wash them clean again.

He substituted our pain with His  
His blood for our transgressions  
He wept so we would weep no more  
He drank bitter wine so we could drink life.

His side was pierced so we could  
be whole. A new creation.  
A restored Adam.  
An Eve made new.

The second time,  
The clouds will part.

And all will see  
The man who drove the nails  
Will lay down his hammer

The accuser crumble at His feet.

His return will come with trumpet sound  
A reveille to saints.  
Every tribe and nation weeping  
At the coming of our King.

We will heed the call.  
Listen closely when He says  
"Son, I loved you at your darkest.  
Wake, dead man, wake."

Alpha Omega  
Beginning and End  
What once gave all and came for us  
Will surely come for us again.

I've created a playlist of contemplative instrumental songs. I've found it immensely helpful for reflection. Maybe you will, too.

It can be found by entering this link into your browser: <http://bit.ly/welladventsongs>

-Zachary Martin