



# GRACE CHURCH

## Paying Attention

2 Peter 1:1-21

Grace Church Waco | 12.3.23

As we have said already today, Advent simply means “coming” or “arrival”, and it is the time of special preparation we take in our hearts before the season of Christmas. For us, of course it’s enjoyable to prepare for Christmas. We get a big kick out of the season—only scrooges would admit that deep down they secretly are not still the child who barely sleeps on Christmas Eve because of the anticipation of Christmas morning. The Roman Catholics just get right to it: they have Mass at Midnight, just a few more weary hours left after that.

But the season of Advent is not just meant to pull our hearts to better enjoy the truths of Christmas. It’s also meant to teach us how to wait for another Advent, a second arrival: the arrival of Jesus Christ again in the world. Jesus was not ambiguous as to his plans, but promised that the cross was not the end, and that the empty tomb signified simply the first fatal blow to the enemies of his kingdom: sin, death, and Satan. Matthew 16, Matthew 24, Luke 17, Luke 21, Mark 13, all are examples of Jesus making it clear—he will be coming again, and this time, it won’t be in a manger. This time, he will be wearing the robes of victory, not humility. The first advent signified and announced the instigation and fulfillment of the kingdom of God, the second advent will signify the full realization, or consummation, of the kingdom of God.

Or you could just say it this way: when Jesus comes back, it will be Christmas all the time.

But in the meantime, sometimes a little dark in here. Part of waiting is the necessity of that question kids on roadtrips know how to ask so well: how much longer? How long, O Lord, until you come again? And what are we supposed to do in our waiting? Can we prepare for the second coming like we prepare for Christmas? How do we decorate our lives like we decorate our living rooms?

Which brings us to the book of 2 Peter. The apostle Peter is writing at the end of his life, which we see in **verse 13-14**, and he really wants his readers to hang onto his words. He’s got some serious stuff to say about getting ready for the coming of Jesus. And the first lesson we will focus on today can be summarized through Peter’s words in **verse 19**: we prepare for the second Advent by paying attention to the Word of God.



**We prepare for the second Advent** by paying attention to the Word of God.

A day is coming that is like the dawning of the day or the rising of the morning star. The morning star is a colloquial name for the planet Venus, which becomes most bright and visible in the East just before sunrise. It is called the DayStar or MorningStar because it ushers in the morning. Jesus actually calls himself the “bright morning star” in Revelation 22:16. Peter is reminding us that Jesus’ second advent is coming, and it will be like a dawn in our hearts: a full realization of Jesus and his kingdom.

Until then, how we prepare is by *paying attention* to what Peter calls the “prophetic word”, which is to say as he defines in **verse 20**, “the prophecy of Scripture”. The Holy Scripture, which is compiled for us in the Bible, does not come, **verse 21**, by the will of man, but from God himself by the Spirit. Theologically, this is called “divine inspiration”, as the authors of Scripture speak in their own words and personality but are carried by the Spirit to speak *from God*. It’s not just Peter, it’s not just Paul, it’s not just Luke—it is God speaking through them. The truth of the Scripture, as they speak about Jesus, is not something, **verse 16**, that Peter and others have cleverly made up: they experienced it and were real eyewitnesses to Jesus.

The experience that Peter pintpoints is what happens in each gospel account when Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray and is transformed before the eyes of Peter, James, and John to where they see him radiating with the glory of Heaven, literally glowing and majestic and outwardly divine, and then they hear the voice of Heaven affirming Jesus’ moral uprightness, that the Father is *pleased* with him. So Peter has these dramatic experiences to pull from, which for him is a confirmation that the teaching of the apostles, given to us in their letters, is from God and not made up or suspect.

So we can trust our Bibles, giving us the word of God. The Word of God is then the “lamp shining in a dark place” that we are to pay attention to. Until the dawn comes and all is bright, we live in a dark and waiting world. But we have light now, as the Psalmist puts it famously in 119:105; “Your word is a lamp to my feet//and a light to my path.”

How do we get ready for Jesus, the morning star? By paying attention to the light.

So you might think this is a sermon all about reading your Bible. And in some sense, you would be right. But this goes way deeper. Our definition of “reading” is pretty thin, I’d say. We think reading is all about gaining head knowledge. But if the Bible is *the Word of God*, I think it’s more appropriate to assume that it has far more to do with transformation than improvement.

Take a look at what I mean in **verse 3**. Peter says that Jesus, being divine and therefore all powerful, has given us *everything* we need for fullness of life and godliness, or put another way: happiness and holiness. And he has given it to us *through the knowledge* of Jesus himself, who has



called us (like Jesus called Peter) to share in glory and excellence, or to put another way: his happiness (glory) and holiness (excellence). Peter calls this *the divine nature* in **verse 4**, something that we are created to take part in as we image God.

We are meant to share in the glorious happiness of God and to showcase the holy excellence of God.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.<sup>1</sup>

And how is that we get the same happiness and holiness as Jesus? Through his very great promises, which he gives to us after rescuing us from the corrupted, evil desires of the world.

What you have to understand is that Peter is painting a picture of the gospel that he summarizes as “the knowledge of God”. You see this phrase in **verse 2, 3, and verse 8**. All of these images and words are connected. It’s as if he has in mind a great drama of salvation, an enticing good news that he is trying to present to his audience in a fresh way. He is using terms and language like virtue, divine nature, and even knowledge, that are unique to Biblical Greek and used far more in Greek philosophy. Next week we will see how he aims to prepare us against false teaching, and we know that those false teachers were Greek sensualists, whose narrative of the gospel of Jesus negates his return and gives them freedom to pursue the pleasures of sin while trying to hold onto the teachings of Christianity.

But Peter out Greeks the Greeks by showing how the good news of Jesus death and resurrection can be defined as “knowledge of God”, similarly to how Jesus defines it in John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” But this knowledge is not a head knowledge only, it’s not a mental ascent, it’s not an empty philosophy. The knowledge of God and of Christ is a knowledge of the person of Christ, the one who Peter witnessed and saw his glory on the mount of transfiguration, the one whom he says has all “glory and excellence”, who has both happiness and holiness. It’s a knowledge of God and a paying attention that leads to real, identifiable, moral uprightness. As one commentator puts it: “The whole New Testament unites in denouncing a profession of faith which makes no difference to behavior.”<sup>2</sup>

The knowledge of God that comes from careful attention to the Word of God is not simply a knowledge of the head, it’s a *soul* knowledge. It’s like **verse 10** says, a “confirmation” of your calling and election to share with Jesus in his image, to be like Jesus. If Jesus is the happiest and

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*.



the holiest, so when we really follow Jesus, we too become both gloriously happy and excellently holy.

I've got another picture for you. Are you ready for that? Forgive me later for my inability to resist! At least it is memorable.

eternal kingdom

happiness holiness  
GLORY AND EXCELLENCE  
( THE DIVINE NATURE )

**THE  
KNOWLEDGE  
OF JESUS  
CHRIST**

"Our Calling and Election"

advent  
2023

This graphic features a stylized city skyline with spires in shades of grey and gold. Below the skyline is a circular icon of a white figure with arms outstretched against a gold background. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with varying font weights and sizes.

eternal kingdom

happiness holiness  
GLORY AND EXCELLENCE  
( THE DIVINE NATURE )

**THE  
KNOWLEDGE  
OF JESUS  
CHRIST**

"Our Calling and Election"

corruption in  
the world

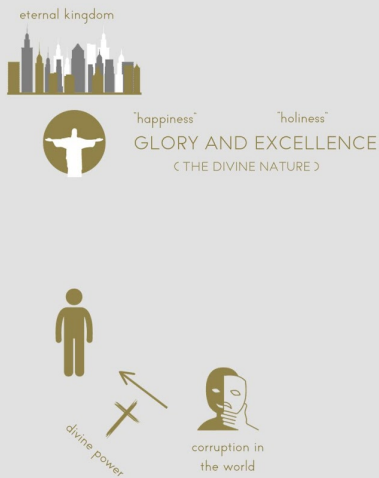
advent  
2023

This graphic is identical to the one above but includes an additional icon in the bottom right quadrant: a stylized profile of a face with a hand near the chin, rendered in gold and white. The overall design remains consistent with the first graphic.



# THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST

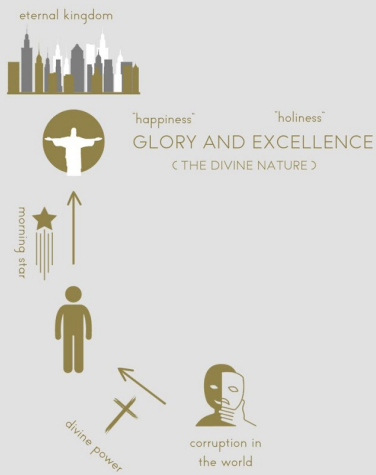
"Our Calling and Election"



advent  
2023

# THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST

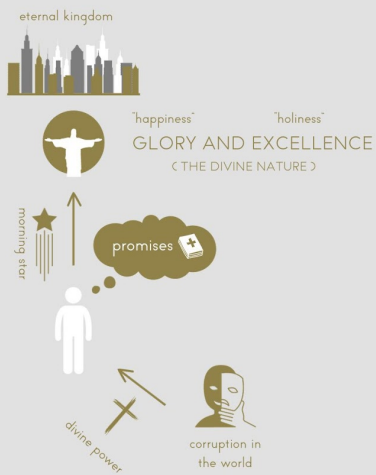
"Our Calling and Election"



advent  
2023

# THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST

"Our Calling and Election"



advent  
2023



So you can see how in this image we both become like Jesus through the divine power of his cross and resurrection, saves us from the corruption of the world—but we also *are becoming* like Jesus, taking on his “divine nature”, his happiness and holiness, his glory and excellence, until one day the morning star dawns fully and our journey to God’s kingdom is complete.

This is Peter’s point in **verse 5-9**. We don’t instantly have the perfection of Jesus outwardly, but we are, **verse 9**, cleansed from our sins. To forget that would be to be blind. So we start from the foundation of salvation, which Peter says is gained by faith in **verse 5**, and then we *make every effort* not to add to our faith, but to supplement, literally “furnish” the house of faith with virtue, or excellence, with knowledge, (which is a different knowledge [gnósis] than before, so notice that head knowledge is good, just not enough), with self-control, or mastery of our desires, with godliness, or right reverence to God, with brotherly affection, and finally with the chief virtue: love.

The point is this: in order to be ready for Jesus’ return, we need knowledge of God, which Peter says is gained by paying careful attention to the Word of God. And the sign that we have true knowledge of God is a holy life, is a true growth in faith leading to love.

So I want you to breathe here for a second, because we come to that classic problem we have as Christians. I have just told you, as Peter does, that the only way to not fall, but to have entrance into Jesus’ eternal kingdom, **verse 10-11**, is to practice the qualities and virtue that leads to love. And although I’ve said that the foundation is faith, there is still a temptation here, I know it, to assume that the way practice virtue is first by taking action, by setting a new agenda, by going out and *being virtuous*.

But Peter never says that. He says that we must *make every effort*, but he doesn’t say that effort is an effort of sheer will. That is because Christian virtue is never formed by our will. It is formed by our desires. And the reason Peter tells us to pay close attention to the Word of God is not because it will give us instructions on what to do, but rather because it will shape how we see. A lamp in a dark place is not at all similar to an instruction manual. But it is far more appealing, and far more necessary, isn’t it? What good are instructions if you don’t have the light, or the heart, to read them?

Look again at **verse 9**. This is why Peter says that a lack of the virtues of Christ is not a sign that someone is lacking the right practical steps, but a sign that they are forgetful of the truth. And it’s why Peter’s goal in writing in **verses 12-15** is not to instruct or admonish or inspire, but to *remind*.

Jesus is coming back. We prepare for the second Advent by paying attention to the Word of God. But we pay attention to the Word of God by remembering the promises of God.



We pay attention to the Word of God **by remembering the promises of God.**

Go back to **verse 4** and see how Peter refers to the truth of the knowledge of God as his “precious and very great promises”. And see how in our image, we mature in Christ by recalling to mind the promises of God, given to us in Scripture.

But why does Peter place such an emphasis on remembering? Well, one reason is that the human heart is naturally forgetful. Notice in **verse 12** he says that his audience is “established in the truth”. So they are not novices—these are mature Christians. But even mature Christians are naturally bent towards remembering the bad and forgetting the good.

Just this week one of our pastors shared how a close friend of his confided in him his sorrow in seeing many of his children leave the faith and the church. One new development is that one of their daughters posted on social media how she is doubting God because of the spiritual abuse of her parents, who rigidly forced their beliefs on her. Now this man and his wife were not perfect, but from my knowledge have done their best to teach their children the Word of God and the promises of God faithfully. Why would their daughter accuse them of this? Without knowing all the details, it’s obvious that because she is hurting, and in her past with her family there is both real hurt and sorrow and pain and real joy, truth, and goodness. But sin taints our memory in order to gain further control over us, to rewrite our narrative by omitting the goodness of God.

This is the primary evil of the world that Peter notices in **verse 4** that we have been delivered from. The world *corrupts*, it deals with pain by pointing the finger and forgetting the grace of God, just as Adam and Eve point the finger in the garden after doubting the goodness of God.

So how do we overcome this tendency? The good news of Jesus Christ is that we don’t have to be blind to the goodness of God, because we have a storehouse of memory of God’s goodness to draw from.

In his book *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo devotes a whole section to the role of memory. He is wrestling with how it is he can really *know* God, since Like Peter, Augustines sees knowledge of God as the good life. He knows it can’t just be some sort of mental knowledge alone, because he knows how fickle his own brain can be. A mental knowledge of God is important, but Augustine knows what the Enlightenment thinkers forgot, that reason alone can’t prove anything, that true knowledge can’t just be seen with the eyes but must be gained through an experience of the soul.



So Augustine pinpoints memory as the knowledge (reason) of the soul.<sup>3</sup> Our memories are what really shape us, because unlike our physical minds, they are eternal. We will have old memories in the new heavens and earth when Jesus comes, even though we have new minds. The reason memory must be eternal, says Augustine, is because without it, we wouldn't recognize God when we saw him: "how shall I find thee if I remember thee not?"

For Augustine, we all have a deep inherent longing for God because we have a memory inside of each of us of Eden, of life with God. This memory is implanted in human nature, and is an eternal desire to get back to what is happy and holy. In other words, being made in God's image, we all have the capacity for faith, for remembering God.

Another way to think of memory is using the word Imagination: the mind's process of making an image. Imagination is a kind of knowledge that goes beyond what we can physically see or reason. In her new book *The Evangelical Imagination*, Karen Swallow Prior shows how it's our imaginations that shape what we desire and eventually how we act, and it's *what we pay attention to* that drives our imagination.

The images our minds make are drawn from the objects we perceive... what we perceive depends on what makes up our surroundings. It also depends on what we are paying attention to. What we pay attention to derives from a host of experiences, associations, emotions, thoughts, practices, and habits... just as our dreams are filled with the things that fill our days, so too is our imagination formed by the things we perceive.<sup>4</sup>

Imagination is like memory because it is how our brain uses what we have seen or known in the past to make new images, even if we aren't currently seeing that image. It's why when I say "no one think of an elephant" you immediately do: because all of us know what an elephant looks like, we can remember it at any time by drawing its image into our mind. And imagination is compelling: you *want* to think of one, even when I say not to!

Christianity is a faith of imagination. This does not mean that the Christian faith is not reasonable or is fanciful. Far from it! Remember Peter *saw and witnessed* Jesus: this is not a made up story. But our reason always serves as a supplement to our faith. Imagination and memory are the God

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<sup>3</sup> "What then is it that I love when I love my God? Who is He that is above the head of my soul? By my soul itself will I mount up unto Him. I will soar beyond that power of mine whereby I cling to the body, and fill the whole structure of it with life. Not by that power do I find my God; for then the horse and the mule, which have no understanding, might find Him, since it is the same power by which their bodies also live. But there is another power, not that only by which I quicken, but that also by which I endow with sense my flesh, which the Lord has made for me... I will soar, then, beyond this power of my nature also, ascending by degrees unto Him who made me. And I enter the fields and roomy chambers of memory, where are the treasures of countless images, imported into it from all manner of things by the senses." Augustine, *Confessions*

<sup>4</sup> Karen Swallow Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination*





given ways we take on eyes of faith and gain true knowledge of God that shapes our desires, habits, and actions towards true happiness and holiness.

I think it's very common for all Christians to feel that knowledge of God is a dry task. Perhaps we have tried it in the past and exhausted our interest: "I've come to the end of my knowledge of God, or at least my desire for it. I feel like I know a lot about God, but I still struggle to pray or feel like I know him personally." Perhaps we have more interest in "practical" Christianity, that is "I don't really get much from prayer or worship or Scripture, I feel God is calling me to do things for him". No matter where you are, I am exhorting you like Peter by way of reminder: you will not get very far without the lamp in the dark! **Why is the Word of God so important?** Why is it the light shining in the dark place? Why must we pay attention to it? Because in order to desire the things of God, we must have our memories soaked with the Words of God, with the promises of God. We must have, as Lewis says, "baptized imaginations".

When you begin to think in this way, you will find it everywhere. Why do we hang a cross behind the pulpit? Because the image of the cross stirs our memories and our imaginations to the goodness of God—even though we weren't there 2000 years ago when Jesus Christ died in our place! Why do we baptize new believers? Because as we witness the drowning of their sin and their emergence anew, we imagine their spiritual death with Christ and resurrection with Christ. And why do we take the Supper every week? Because it is the image Jesus has given us to remember him, and through the power of holy imagination, to meet him there and be changed.

So remember how I said that this sermon was about reading your Bible? That is true. But more than that, it is about paying attention to Jesus so that you are ready for the return of Jesus. When we read the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and teach the Bible to others, we are not just storing it up in our minds, but as the Psalmist again says in Psalm 119:11, we "we store up [God's] word in our heart, that we might not sin against him."

When we remember again the promises of God, we are introduced to ideas beyond our senses, like Triune love and salvation for the lowest of low and best of all, full union with Jesus Christ by his Spirit. These aren't just brain teasers, this isn't just religious jargon: these are the images of God given to us to stir our hearts by way of reminder, to teach us again and again about the magnitude of the grace of God in the gospel.

When we read the Bible, we read the words of God, which tell us by the Spirit of God, about the grace of the Son of God. Jesus is the exact image of God and imprint of his nature. And the apostles saw him, touched him, heard him. And their imagination for who God was expanded into truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they wrote of him, and teach us that he is coming back again soon, the morning star rising with the dawn.

Why do we pay attention to the Word of God? So that we can know Jesus, prepare our hearts for his coming, and increase our joy when he comes again to get us. This is keeping true Advent.



