

222 November 29, 2023
Advent Week 1-Hope

Welcome to the first Wednesday night study after Thanksgiving. We are officially entering the church season of Advent. Here at Everyday Christian Fellowship, we want to take time before Christmas to focus on coming of our Savior into the world. As believers have done in centuries past, we want to focus on the coming of our Savior into the world in contrast to our culture's often corrupting influence and powerful commercialization of the holiday. Certainly, recognizing the great gift of our Messiah's birth should prompt our hearts to gift giving, but our American culture has shifted that aspect into overdrive, and we often get caught up in great-gift performance pressure, with ever escalating expectations (and sometimes demands) for the popular gift-du-jour each Christmas, and the personal need to incrementally increase our Christmas extravagance from year-to-year. By focusing on Advent, we want to help you focus on Advent as well. And just what is Advent?

Advent is a translation of the Latin ***adventus***, meaning 'coming; arrival' which is translated from the Greek ***parousia***, or 'coming'. In the New Testament, parousia often refers to the future second coming of Jesus. Most Advent observances are from three simultaneous perspectives: 1) Jesus coming at birth in Bethlehem; 2) Jesus coming into the lives of believers at salvation, and: 3) Jesus Second Coming.

Like most events that have taken place over two thousand years, the exact when and why and how have been lost in the mists of time. There are early references to select days of fasting over four or five or six weeks. By the time the Pilgrims had come to America, most fasting had ended and the duration was set at 4 weeks. Each of the weeks had a focus, which tended to be hope, peace, joy, and love, in varying order.

Here at Everyday Christian Fellowship, we want to take these next four Wednesdays as a time to set aside all of the holiday and shopping craziness to focus on what we think the original intent for Advent is—to quiet our racing minds and re-center our anxious thoughts as we look at Christmas. Let our efforts draw us closer to our Lord and Savior, recognizing the great things He has done, is now doing, and will one day do.

Week 1-Hope or Prophecy

The first week of Advent focuses on the prophecies declared in the Old Testament about a coming Savior. We focus on the hope that sustained the faithful through difficult times before His birth in Bethlehem. The fulfillment of that hope in Jesus' birth. The hope He gives the redeemed when he comes to live within us through the Holy Spirit, and the hope we can have in His Second Coming.

And our hope is not just wishful thinking about things we have no control over. Biblical hope has God as its author, source, sustaining power, and object. Because hope is God-grounded, God-sustained, and God-directed, hope is a reality in which His people may dwell. Hope is the response of God's people to God's activity in their lives. Biblical hope is expectation expressed in faith, confidence, patience, endurance, and eagerness. Our hope is an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which enables us to bear our burdens and infuses strength when we are weak and worn.

Because this Biblical hope cannot be reduced to specific objects of future desiring, it is not immediately destroyed by unexpected shifts in human fortunes. Biblical hope is expecting God to act, and being ready to respond when He does. This is not always easy, since God acts consistent with His nature and His will, and not as we may want or expect Him to act. But this is the history of God's interaction with His people—He is always doing the unexpected, even when it is exactly what He tells them He is going to do.

Prophetic Messiah passages

Isaiah 7:13-14

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.<God with us>

Micah 5:2

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 11:1-10

¹A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. ²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; ⁴but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. ⁵Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. ⁶The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. ⁹They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Christ in the hearts of believers

Romans 5:3-5

³Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And 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 15:12-13

¹² And again, Isaiah says, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.”

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Second Coming

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

This Sunday, December 3, will be the first Sunday of Advent. Twenty-one shopping days until Christmas. My hope, is that your hope will not be the oowie-gooie, ickie-squishy, wishful thinking that usually goes along with wishin’, and hopin’ and dreamin’ for something. My hope is that you will have real hope—biblical hope—that is based on what we know God has done, God is currently doing, and what God promises to do in the future for us, and to us, and through us. What I want for Christmas is hope. I hope you do, too.

Week 1 Prayer

Heavenly Father, Advent is a time for remembering and reflecting on the birth of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus. Father, I pray you will turn our hearts toward you as Christmas approaches. Let us not get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the season this year and miss the chance to celebrate the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love that you sent to us on that first Christmas.

Father God, every word in Scripture points to the gift of hope we have because of Christ Jesus. The Christmas story wasn’t the beginning of that message of hope, because the Old Testament is full of glimpses of your plan to redeem your people and restore them into a relationship with you, but we are able to truly begin to see and understand just how great Your love for us is when we read the story of Jesus’ birth in Scripture.

You showed us a glimmer of that hope as you chose to send your Son into this world through a family tree with some bent branches. We glanced it again as you chose a small tribe and a lowly city. We see when we recognize you didn't send your son to be born in a fancy palace among the wealthy and elite, but our King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born among common shepherds and livestock in a barn.

Help us to see that you are with us. Nothing is too difficult, too messy, or too dirty for you. Jesus came to give us the gift of eternal life through salvation that only you, our Heavenly Father, can give when we believe in your Son, repent of our sins, and confess Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

That first Christmas you gave us the gift of hope wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Father, thank you for your immeasurable gift. In Jesus' precious name, we pray. Amen

Group discussion questions:

How does the name of God in Isaiah 7:14 give you hope?

Does Isaiah 9:6-7 give you hope for the future?

Why do you think it matters that the Messiah is born from Bethlehem?

How hard is it to focus on the true spirit of Christmas?

What specific things might you do to strive for Biblical hope this Christmas?

Addendum 1

Observing Advent at Home

You can use the 222 study guides to observe the four weeks of Advent at home. Use the Scripture readings as listed and the weekly Advent prayer, or adjust them as needed along the same weekly focus.

You will probably want to add the traditional Advent candles to your observance. There are usually four or five advent candles, although some traditions light a candle for every day December 1-25. Typically one candle is lit on the first Sunday, two are lit on the second Sunday, three are lit on the third Sunday, and four are lit on the fourth Sunday. All five are lit on Christmas day. The candles are arranged in a circle, with the Christ candle in the center. The candles can be tapers or pillars. If you mix them, at least the Christ candle should be the tallest/largest. Jesus is the light of the world and we light Advent candles to signify this. It's also a way to build anticipation for the celebration of the first coming of Jesus. The closer one gets to Christmas, the more the candles get lit, and the brighter it shines. Advent moves us through the prophecies about Christ, to the hope he provides, to the joy he brings, and the love he gives. As we move through each week, the candles glow more brightly with significance.

The traditional candle colors are:

First Advent Candle: The first purple candle symbolizes hope. Also known as the "Prophecy Candle" in memory of the prophets, particularly Isaiah, who prophesied the birth of Christ. It symbolizes the anticipation felt in awaiting the coming Messiah.

Second Advent Candle: The second purple candle symbolizes faith. Also known as the "Bethlehem Candle," signifies Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem.

Third Advent Candle: The third candle is ordinarily pink and represents joy. This candle is pink because the rose color represents joy, also known as the "Shepherd's Candle." The third Sunday of Advent is meant to remind us of the world's joy at the birth of Jesus and that believers have arrived at the midpoint of Advent.

Fourth Advent Candle: The final purple candle marks the last week of Advent as we anticipate the birth of our Savior. This final candle, also known as the “Angel’s Candle,” signifies peace. It reminds us of the angels' message: “Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men” (Luke 2:14).

Fifth Advent Candle (if used): A fifth white candle is placed in the center and is lit on Christmas Day to celebrate Jesus’ birth.

Prayers for Lighting the Advent Wreath Candles

Observing Advent at home gives all your family an opportunity to take part in the observance together. A traditional prayer for lighting the Advent wreath candles follows. Feel free to modify your prayers focusing on the weekly theme.

First Week (Hope): "O God, as we light the first candle of this Advent wreath, we open our hearts in hope. May the light of this candle remind us of the hope we have in you. May it inspire us to prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, our hope and our Savior. Amen."

Second Week (Peace): "Gracious God, as we light the second candle of this Advent wreath, we seek your peace. In a world filled with turmoil, may the light of this candle remind us of the peace that only you can bring. Help us to be instruments of your peace in our homes, communities, and the world. Amen."

Third Week (Joy): "Loving God, as we light the third candle of this Advent wreath, we rejoice in your presence. May the light of this candle fill our hearts with the joy of your salvation. Help us to share this joy with others, spreading your love and happiness to all we encounter. Amen."

Fourth Week (Love): "Heavenly Father, as we light the fourth candle of this Advent wreath, we are reminded of your boundless love. May the light of this candle shine forth as a symbol of the love you have shown us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Fill our hearts with your love, and help us to love one another as you have loved us. Amen."

Christmas Day (Christ’s birthday): “This Christmas, Jesus, come to the manger of my heart. Break into my world like you did at Bethlehem, bringing peace to every part. Dwell within and around me, as I unwrap Your presence each day. Keep me

close to You, Lord. Keep alive in me the desire for Your return. It's in Your wonderful Name I pray. Amen”

May you be blessed this holiday season as you prepare your heart for Christmas!