

JESUS IS COMING

Advent Devotionals



a light shines in the darkness
and the darkness has not overcome it



INTRODUCTION

The word “Advent” means “arrival.” The Advent season is a time of preparing for the arrival of Jesus. Celebrating Advent helps us step away from the hustle and bustle of the holiday season and turn our focus towards Jesus, his arrival in our lives, and how to prepare ourselves for him.

All of the best things in life are worth preparing for, and Christmas is no different. When we are rushed and hurried into the Christmas season it quickly becomes a source of anxiety and stress. Advent helps us to slow down and reflect on what this season is all about so our hearts and minds will be prepared to welcome Jesus on Christmas Day.

These devotionals are intended to help you and your family prepare your hearts and minds for Christmas. Each week’s devotional concludes with a Scripture passage to read and a few questions for reflection and discussion.

Adults and teens may read the devotionals on their own or as a family. With younger children, consider focusing on just the Scripture passage and reflection questions. The last page contains suggested activities that could help you or your family focus on Jesus during the Advent season.

ADVENT CANDLES



Candles are a traditional symbol of Advent. Christians used to use candles to decorate their homes at Christmas to remind themselves of the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World. This is where we get the tradition of Christmas Lights, though now we power our lights with electricity rather than flame.

Many Christians light one additional candle each week of the Advent season, so that the light gets brighter and brighter, until a fifth candle is lit on Christmas day. Others simply relight the same candle each week as a symbol of Jesus’ presence in our dark world.

You don’t have to light any candles to celebrate Advent and prepare yourself to welcome Jesus, but it can be a fun, tangible way to remember that even in the midst of great darkness, we have the hope of everlasting light.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

December
3rd



Then they will see the Son of Man coming clouds with great power and glory.
Mark 13:26

Sitting in the Dark

Every fall the days get shorter, the nights get colder, and even Daylight Savings can't keep the darkness at bay.

Marketers do their best to help us ignore the darkness by rolling out the Christmas trees, decorations, and lights earlier and earlier each year. Stores stock their Christmas sections in mid-October, and by Halloween afternoon the Reese's Peanut Butter Pumpkins have been replaced with gumdrops and Candy Canes.

Advent invites us to practice patience with Christmas. Before we switch on the red and green lights, it's worthwhile to spend some time in the dark.

Advent is not the same as Christmas. During Christmas we celebrate Jesus' arrival, but during Advent we *prepare* to celebrate Jesus' arrival. And for Christians, Advent is just as much about anticipating Jesus' promised *second* arrival as it is about the manger in Bethlehem.

In this darkest time of the year we're reminded that we live in a dark world full of brokenness and sin. Just as God's people eagerly anticipated the coming Messiah, we continue to eagerly anticipate his promised return.

But when Jesus talks about his second coming, it's not all sunshine and daisies. He describes intense, all-encompassing

darkness: "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." (Mark 13:24-25).

What could be darker than the sun, moon, and stars being extinguished? You'd probably noticed if that happened, right? But sometimes we don't pay attention to all the darkness right around us. If we spend too much time in the dark, we'll forget how much we need the light.

We can distract ourselves with mindless entertainment. We can befriend the darkness, growing ever more comfortable with the sin in our culture and in ourselves. We can become desensitized by the endless stream of negativity, scary news stories, and problems around the world. Spend enough time in the dark and your eyes will adjust. Before long, it doesn't seem very dark at all.

Before we flick on the Christmas lights, Advent invites us to reflect on just how dark our world truly is. There is pain, hurt, and evil all around us. There is sin, addiction, and selfishness that consume us.

We need someone to come in and turn on the light. We need a savior, because try as we might, we can't seem to figure out how to save ourselves. All we can do is wait.

But we do not wait as those who have no hope. Jesus tells us that when the world seems darkest the light of the world will arrive: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." (Mark 13:26-27)

We believe the ancient promise: Christ has died, Christ has risen, *Christ will come again*. As the author Wendell Berry once said, "It gets darker and darker, and then Jesus is born."

Read Isaiah 64:1-9

- Why do you think Isaiah is so eager for God to "open the heavens and come down"?
- Is the second coming of Jesus something you eagerly anticipate? Do you think about it much? Why or why not?
- How do we stay aware of the darkness in our world without letting it consume our lives?

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

December
10th



The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

Sin and Repentance

John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, wearing camel skins, eating locusts, and raiding wild bee-hives. Not exactly the first person we think of at Christmas-time. Yet there's no better example for how to prepare for the arrival of Jesus than this eccentric, grungy prophet.

The gospels tell us that Isaiah's ancient prophecy about a "voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight,'" is referring to John. Like Israel's prophets before him, John's life and ministry are entirely focused on preparing people for God's redeeming power to arrive. When Jesus himself shows up on the scene, John recognizes that his work is at an end, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

John's ministry shows us what it looks like to prepare for Jesus to arrive. John's preparation doesn't involve stringing garland, decorating cookies, or practicing Christmas carols. His directions are simple: repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.

During Advent we anticipate the coming of the Messiah, who brings hope, justice, and love. Our world is broken and needs a savior. But it's easy to forget that one of the main things the world needs to be saved from is us.

The darkness isn't only out there, in whatever group, movement, party, people, or culture we despise. It's also very close to us: in our homes, in our churches, and in our hearts. We are part of the world's problems. We've sinned against God in word, in thought, and in deed. We've sinned in what we've done, and in what we've left undone. We have not loved God with our whole hearts, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Advent provides us with the opportunity to follow in John's footsteps and prepare for our coming savior by repenting of our sins and turning back towards God. The Good News is that we don't have to rely on our own strength to do so. John tells us that while he baptized with water, Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit, giving us God's own power to overcome our sin.

Read Mark 1:1-8

- How is John the Baptist's call to repentance an essential part of preparing for Jesus?
- Do you see confession of sin and repentance as a one-time thing, or an ongoing process?
- How could you practice repentance this week?

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

December
17th



For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

2 Peter 3:9

Euchatastrophe

If you pay attention to most of the popular stories being told in movies and TV shows, you'll realize that we no longer believe in "fairy tale endings." We've decided that happy endings aren't realistic. In the real world life is hard, bad things happen to good people, and we rarely overcome our worst problems, so the stories we tell are gritty, harsh, and bleak. The bad guys win, Prince Charming doesn't exist, and no one lives happily ever after. Are you in the Christmas spirit yet?

Despite our modern distaste for happy endings, it's interesting how many of the most enduring stories have fairy tale endings. Right when the heroes are desperate and doom seems inevitable, some sudden or miraculous event saves the day. Eagles fly in to carry Bilbo Baggins to safety, the *Millenium Falcon* returns and sends Darth Vader spinning into space, Prince Charming arrives to revive Snow White. Joy arrives, when it's most needed, from an unexpected, impossible place.

J.R.R. Tolkien, one of the literary masters of the last century, invented a word for these unexpected, positive turns. He called them *euchatastrophes* (literally: good catastrophes). In a *euchatastrophe*, the heroes of the story cannot achieve victory on

their own. Their only hope is a sudden, unexpected salvation that comes from beyond themselves.

Modern storytellers have abandoned fairy-tale endings because they seem unrealistic, but in fact there is nothing more real. Left to our own devices we cannot hope to solve the problems in our world. Our only hope is for sudden, unexpected salvation that comes from beyond ourselves.

That is the hope of Advent.

No matter how bleak things appear, no matter how much we fail to solve our own problems or even make them worse, Advent offers us a hope that goes beyond ourselves. As Tolkien himself writes: "The birth of Christ is the *Euchatasrophe* of Man's history."

When Jesus shows up, either in a manger in Bethlehem or at the head of a host of angels at the end of time, it doesn't happen because we've earned it or deserve it. It's not the natural progression of the world left to its own devices. It's not provable or predictable, but it is inevitable.

Jesus is coming. Joy is coming. Let's get ready.

Read John 1:19-28

- Do you like stories with happy endings? Why or why not?
- Why did people think John the Baptist was the Messiah?
- Why is it good news that the Messiah is God in the Flesh?

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

December
24th



My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in
God my Savior.
Luke 1:46-47

Here Am I

Many of our most significant commitments are made despite the fact that we don't know what we're getting ourselves into. When you're starting a new job, getting married, moving to a new city, or having a child, you've got to be prepared to follow through even if everything doesn't go precisely as planned. Chances are, it won't.

When we read the Gospels, it's clear that no one really understood what the birth of Christ would mean. Many Jews expected their savior to be a king or ruler, not a peasant born in a barn. The religious leaders expected their savior would be a careful rule-follower, not a free-spirited merchant of grace. Even Jesus' mother, Mary, did not anticipate how much she would have to sacrifice for her son's mission.

Yet Mary submitted to God anyway, becoming the first example of submitting one's life entirely to Jesus. Despite being full of uncertainty and doubt, despite questions about what would happen, how it would happen, and what it would mean, Mary speaks the essential words of true faith, the only words that really matter: *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* (Luke 1:38)

Jesus makes it clear, again and again, that we cannot know

when, where, or how he'll show up. He'll arrive like a thief in the night, like an unexpected wind coming to carry us off towards the will of God. The question is not whether we understand exactly what Jesus may ask of us, the question is whether we'll say "yes" anyway.

This week we're preparing our families and homes for a joyful celebration of Christmas. We're wrapping presents, baking cookies, setting dinner tables, packing suitcases. But with every outward act of preparation, let us also prepare our hearts to make room for Jesus' will to be done in our lives. We do not know when he'll show up or what appearance he'll take. We don't know what he'll ask of us, or how much it will cost. But we pray that when God shows up our response will be the same as Mary's before us: *"Here am I, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

Read Luke 1:26-38

- How do you think Mary was feeling when the angel visited her?
- Why would Mary be so willing to freely submit to the will of God?
- How do Advent and Christmas help us prepare to submit to God's will?

CHRISTMAS

December
25th



Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace
among those whom he favors!
Luke 2:14

Tidings of Great Joy

Everyone knows that person (or maybe you are that person) who always walks around humming, whistling, or singing a tune. Many of us have music stuck in our heads throughout the day, but most of us have the decency to keep it to ourselves. We hum the tune or sing the lyrics in our heads, but we don't subject the people around us to off-key serenades. But some people simply can't keep the music contained. Wherever they are, whoever they're around, it's like the songs are bursting out of them.

When Jesus Christ is born, the heavenly hosts are so caught up in their excitement that their celebration spills out onto the Earth. They can't keep the music to themselves. A group of shepherds, watching over their flocks by night, spots a chorus of angels shouting praises to God for the birth of Jesus, but this must be only a glimpse of the divine celebration at hand. Finally, the salvation of the world is here!

What's more, the joy of the angels is so great that the shepherds can't help but find out more, and when they do encounter Jesus, they can't help but tell everyone else about him. True joy bursts out of it whether we like it or not, and authentic celebration is contagious.

Christmas is the time when our joy should be more clear and apparent to the world than ever. During Advent we acknowledge the world's darkness: to ignore the world's pain is to be dishonest. But during Christmas, just for a season, we set aside the struggle of life in order to praise our God who has promised us a great salvation!

Our celebration of the coming of Christ should be bursting forth in our faces, in our attitudes, in the music we sing and hum and whistle to ourselves. Christmas is a time to set aside our inhibitions, our self-absorption, and our fears and share the best news that the world has ever heard: in the city of David a child has been born who is our Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

So shout for joy! Sing and dance and cry out in the streets. Make sure that every nation, tongue, and tribe has heard this good news! The night is over and the dawn has come. A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not, can not, and will never overcome it.

Read Luke 2:8-20

- How do you think the shepherds felt when they saw and heard the angels singing?
- How can you share your excitement about the birth of Jesus with someone else?

Family Activities

Throughout Advent

- Set aside time for a weekly Advent devotional. Adults and teens can read these devotionals aloud together. With younger children, consider focusing on just the Scripture passage and reflection questions.
- Pick out 1-3 of your favorite Christmas Hymns to sing together each week. Singing together as a family can feel uncomfortable, but it's proven to deepen family bonds. Talk about the meaning of the songs.
- Invite someone you don't know very well into your home for a meal. Afterwards, talk about how extending hospitality to others is a good way to practice for the arrival of Jesus.

Week 1

- Turn off all the lights in your home except for Christmas lights. Play flashlight tag or hide-and-seek by the light of the Christmas tree. Afterward, sit in the light of the tree and talk about what it means to call Jesus the "Light of the World."
- Make a list of people you know who are going through difficult times. Pray for them by name. Put the list somewhere you'll see it (fridge, etc.) so you can pray for these people regularly.

Week 2

- Drive around town together to look at Christmas lights and decorations. Every time you arrive at an intersection let a different member of the family decide which direction to turn. Afterward, use this as an object lesson to discuss how repentance means "turning" from our sin and towards God.
- Cook a meal together as a family. Make sure everyone has a job. As you wash, cut, season, and cook, talk about what it means to be prepared for something. How can you prepare for Jesus to show up?

Week 3

- Pick out a feel-good Christmas movie to watch. Afterward, talk about the ending: is it a happy ending? does it feel realistic? is the ending a twist or surprise? Talk about how Advent gives our world the promise of a "happy ending" when Jesus returns.
- Ask this question: What are some things in the world that make you feel sad, hopeless, or angry? Consider using news stories to help you come up with ideas. Right down a list of the injustices and evil of our world (sickness, violence, loneliness, poverty, etc.). Talk about how Advent gives us hope that Jesus will make these things right again.

Week 4

- Make one of your favorite Christmas treats (cookies, fudge, etc.) together. Take what you've made and deliver it to someone you know. Talk about how following Jesus often means being willing to sacrifice what we want for the sake of others.
- Have everyone pick out their favorite Christmas song (whether religious or not) and listen to them together. Talk about how the words of the song produce Joy.