



The Gospel of Advent: Devotional Readings from Christianity Today
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SACRIFICE & SALVATION

God spoke through the prophets in the Old Testament, using poetic words and imagery, to describe the hope of salvation. This week, we contemplate prophecies pointing toward the Messiah—the servant, the light, the promised one God’s people longed for.

12 12

Read Isaiah 52:13–53:12



He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

ISAIAH 53:3

The God Who Suffers

HANNAH KING

During Advent, it is easy to sentimentalize the Incarnation. We imagine the God-man as a baby with his mother; we anticipate his ministry as “Wonderful Counselor” and “Prince of Peace” (Is. 9:6). These are true aspects of Jesus’ identity and humanity, and are certainly appropriate scriptural themes for this time of year. But Isaiah’s prophetic words in this last of his Servant Songs—which describe a coming servant of the Lord who will be found faithful to lead the nations—augment our understanding of Christ’s incarnate life: Jesus was born to suffer and die.

Jesus’ path to glory was not straightforward. Instead of being accepted by the world, he was despised and rejected (53:3). Instead of being exalted as king, he was tortured and murdered (53:5, 9). This is not merely a human tragedy—it is mysteriously part of the divine plan (53:10). Christ’s voluntary suffering reveals his willingness to be not only our High Priest, but also the sacrificial lamb.

This profound reality is more than a theological concept. Jesus suffered as a human being in a physical body, sharing in the most painful and dark aspects of the human experience. He knows what it is to be brutalized and humiliated (52:14), oppressed and abandoned (53:8). In the Incarnation, Jesus identifies with us even

in our worst forms of suffering. For those who experience the holidays as painful or lonely, this aspect of Jesus’ life can be strangely comforting. No human tragedy extends beyond his understanding or his solidarity.

But Isaiah also makes it clear that Jesus’ story does not end in suffering and death. Rather, his affliction is the means through which he achieves his victory: “After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (53:11). This is more than personal vindication. As God’s righteous servant, Jesus establishes justice and redemption for the nations of the earth. In other words, Jesus shares in our suffering so that we can share in his resurrection. His wounds redeem our own and become the very source of our healing (53:5).

As we contemplate the Incarnation in all its beauty, we can also be thankful for its grit. Jesus came down from heaven and then went further still: to the very depth of human shame and suffering. He did this for our sake. And when we meet him in our own suffering, sin, and shame, we can be confident that he will not leave us there—for by his wounds we are healed.

Meditate on Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

What draws your attention most? How does this poetic prophecy deepen your engagement with gospel? Pray, reflecting on how these dark descriptions of what the servant would suffer are crucial in our observance of Advent.

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Read Luke 2:8–20



Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

LUKE 2:10–11

Great Joy for All People

RACHEL GILSON

The overwhelming tone of this passage is *joy*. God had sent his Son to earth, and heaven’s celebration spilled down to the world with praise and stunning glory. And to whom does the joyful announcement come? Not to the most glorious of humanity, but rather to the most normal, mundane, and even earthy. The text reeks of animals, from the sheep being watched by the shepherds to the feeding trough that cradled Jesus. Christmas is a stunning picture of the gospel: God did not abandon his creation, but went a great distance, at great cost, to personally redeem it.

Luke records a variety of responses to the proclamation. Understandably, the first feeling of the shepherds is fear as they are confronted by creatures so unlike themselves. But their fear was soon replaced by eagerness. After all, this first coming was not like the second will be. While the second coming of Christ will usher in the judgment of all, this first was an offer of joy to all people, which would result in true and lasting peace for those who responded to it (vv. 10, 14).

The shepherds’ diligence to seek out the sign was rewarded with finding the family, just as the angels had said. But

the shepherds did not keep the news to themselves. They were just as diligent in reporting what they had been told as they were in seeking out the child. This is the heart of gospel proclamation: hearing it for ourselves, experiencing that God has kept his word, and sharing the very good news of sure salvation with others.

Those who heard the shepherds’ testimony were amazed (v. 18). This doesn’t necessarily mean they comprehended the full gravity of what the angels had told the shepherds about the infant: Savior, Messiah, Lord. Perhaps, hearing only average shepherds (and not an angelic host) and seeing only a common newborn, the glory was too obscured for some. Yet God calls us to live by faith in him, not by sight.

Mary, for her part, took it all to heart, turning it over in her mind. And the shepherds rounded out their spontaneous missionary journey by praising and glorifying God. Christ the Lord, our Savior, took on human nature for us and came to be our peace. May our response today—like the shepherds—resound in joy, praise, and glory!

Read Luke 2:8–20.

Reflect on all you’ve read and considered during Advent. How do you desire to respond in praise to God? How might you, like the shepherds, share this Good News with others? Pray—and rejoice!

01
06

Read Matthew 2:1-12

They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

MATTHEW 2:11

A Light to the Nations

GLENN PACKIAM

Who is the Good News for? When we get deals and offers in the mail, they sometimes call their sale or promotion a “friends and family” special. Some things are too good to keep to yourself, but they’re also too radical to open up to everyone. This marketing approach highlights how we’re conditioned to think that if something is exclusive—if we somehow have insider status—it’s valuable. And conversely, if it’s universal, it’s not.

That’s what makes the birth of Jesus so shockingly revolutionary. It is the best news the world could receive: God had come to save his people! But this salvation was not just for the people with whom God had made a covenant. It was for everyone—all people, in all places, at all times.

We see an early glimpse of this in Matthew 2 and the contrast it draws between King Herod and the true Messiah, King Jesus. Herod infamously rose to power through political opportunism and brutality. When word was going around that a new king of the Jews was born in Bethlehem, Herod would do everything in his power—including killing innocent babies (vv. 13–18)—to protect the power he had schemed to gain.

But where Herod’s story is about a rise to power, Jesus’ is about a descent from

power. There in the manger was the one who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,” who “emptied himself” for us (Phil. 2:6–7, NRSV). Where Herod lied and murdered to keep people away, Jesus in his infancy and early life was already *drawing people near*.

And not just some people, or even just God’s covenant people. Matthew tells us about Magi—astrologers or philosophers or men of wisdom—who came from afar, bearing gifts for this child. The worship these non-Jewish visitors offered Israel’s Messiah as they bowed down before him signals the expansive scope of God’s promise. The Christ child would be “a light for the Gentiles” so that God’s “salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). In this scene from Jesus’ early childhood, we see the global reach of the gospel: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isa. 60:3).

Despite Herod’s efforts to grasp at earthly power, there is only one King who at whose name every knee will bow (Phil. 2:10). Only one whose rule is Good News not for some, but for all. The Lord reigns—let the *earth* rejoice! Come and worship King Jesus!

Reflect on Matthew 2:1-12.

(Option: Also read Isaiah 49:1-6; 60:1-6; Philippians 2:6-7.)

Why is this early scene of Gentiles worshiping Jesus so significant? What does this scene convey about the Good News? How do you desire to respond to God?

*IDEAS FOR
FAMILIES
&
GROUPS*

IDEAS FOR FAMILIES

THROUGHOUT ADVENT

- With teens or preteens, read and discuss the devotions together each evening. With younger kids, focus on just the Scripture passages and reflection prompts.
- Launch with a family discussion on this question: What is the gospel? Read the introduction (p. 5) and share that you'll be looking together for ways the themes and scriptural readings of Advent emphasize core aspects of the Good News. Then, throughout Advent, use different colored sticky notes to create a large "stained glass" window together on a sliding glass door or large window of your home. Each night, jot down notes about key gospel ideas or other responses to your readings and add them to the window.
- Print out the lyrics of Charles Wesley's "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" and take time each week to discuss phrases in the hymn that connect with central ideas in the gospel and in the daily Advent readings. Sing the song together throughout Advent and Christmas.

WEEK 1

- Have each family member secretly pick a favorite book (such as a beloved picture book or a chapter book family members are familiar with). Give each person a turn reading aloud the last sentence of their book (without showing the book to the family) and then work together to guess which book it might be. Once you've guessed all the books, use this experience to talk about the way Advent begins at the end. Discuss: How does the end—Jesus' return and our hope of eternal life with him—impact our lives now?
- Ask: What are some things in life that upset you, are unfair, or make you feel angry or hopeless? (Option: Use newspapers or online news sites to generate ideas regarding current events.) Record on a posterboard some of the evils, injustices, and painful realities of life, like war, abuse, cancer, poverty, racism, stress, personal conflicts, and so on. Then tear up the poster together as you talk about our ultimate hope in Christ's future reign described in Revelation 21:1–5.

WEEK 2

- Go outside to watch a sunrise together. Use the experience to talk about Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67–79 (and especially vv. 78–79). Discuss the ways Zechariah described John the Baptist's role and the image of the rising sun that points toward the coming of Jesus.
- Go on a family drive to look at area Christmas lights, but do it in a creative way. At each intersection, let a different family member make this decision: Will we keep going in the same direction or will we turn and go a different direction? At the end of the drive together, use the experience as an object lesson on repentance. As Jen Pollock Michel put it on p. 31, "Repentance is a call to turn *from* our sin and turn *toward* God." Repentance doesn't just mean saying "sorry"—it means turning and going in a different direction. Discuss why the call to repent is good news and emphasize God's generous forgiveness and grace.

WEEK 3

- Use a telescope or binoculars to look at far-off objects. Discuss how God used Old Testament prophets to see some of what God would do in the future. Talk about some of the truths the prophets foretold about Jesus.
- Turn off the lights in your house (other than Christmas tree lights) to play flashlight tag or flashlight hide-and-seek. Have fun together, then discuss Isaiah 9:2 and John 1:4–5, 9 and Christ's identity as the light promised in Isaiah 9.

WEEK 4

- Try this challenge: a family dinner without any talking. Communicate only with hand signals, facial expressions, and writing. Afterward, talk about the experience, imagining what Zechariah thought or felt during many months of silent waiting.
- Reflect on the shepherds' immediate response to seeing baby Jesus: telling others about him! Create a Christmas card as a family that tells about Jesus, then mail it to someone to share the Good News.

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