

O Come, O Come
EMMANUEL



A·D·V·E·N·T

“What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent?”

Karl Barth

Every December¹, we celebrate a season called Advent. But for Christians, Advent is more than just a season of the year. It is what separates the Christian faith from every other religious tradition. We are people who believe in and expect the coming of God into our world– which is what Advent means– “coming” or “arrival.”

Many people today see Advent simply as a season of preparing for Christmas, the day we celebrate that God indeed came into our world as one of us. It “gets us in the mood,” so to speak, as we sing Christmas songs, decorate the house with Christmas trappings, etc. But this is to muddle the meaning of Advent.² While it is true that we use the season of Advent to remember the longing of the Jews for the Messiah and the faithfulness of God to his promises, the primary sense of Advent is not looking back but forward. Even our remembering his first coming is to give us confidence that he will surely come again.

This year we are structuring our celebration of Advent around the verses to the greatest Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” The text of this song has an ancient history. As far back as the 8th century, and perhaps even earlier, “the Great O Antiphons” were in use among monastic communities during Advent.³ Each verse bids Jesus to come using a different Scriptural title for the Messiah.

- O Sapientia (O Wisdom)
- O Adonai (O Lord)
- O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
- O Clavis David (O Key of David)
- O Oriens (O Rising Sun/ Dayspring)
- O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations)
- O Emmanuel (O “God with Us”)

1 Actually, Advent begins on the 4th Sunday before Christmas which is why, depending on the year, Advent sometimes begins in late November and other times early December.

2 Advent, properly understood then, is related but distinct from the Christmas season (or Christmastide) which follows Advent.

3 An antiphon is a sung or chanted refrain. The Great O Antiphons were typically used during the week before Christmas Eve.

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In a bit of disputed history, some have made the case that there is even a hidden promise within the arrangement of these verses (in the Latin). If one starts with the last title (Emmanuel) and takes the first letter of each title in reverse order, the Latin words “Ero cras” are formed, which means “Tomorrow, I will be” or more poetically “Tomorrow, I will come.” So as we cry out, “O come, O come!”, the Lord Jesus gives us the encouragement– Yes, I’m coming soon!

Sadly, most of us know all too well the numbing effect that the pressures and obligations and comforts of daily life can have on our sense of expectancy for the coming of Christ. But this is why we celebrate Advent! Over the course of the next month, we will consider the great truths contained in these song verses and, more importantly, the many Scripture passages that lay beneath them. The point of all this is that the longing and anticipation expressed in the Scriptures (and in the song) might become more fully our own.

Each week of Advent, we’ll use one verse of the hymn as a starting point for the Sunday teaching and another verse to guide our homegroup or personal study. Now it goes without saying that it is the Scriptures, not the song, that is the inspired word of God! So these studies, like the song itself, are meant to help us explore the truths found in God’s word and bolster our confidence in him. In doing so, we pray that God himself will continue to fill us with his hope, peace, joy and love as we eagerly await his appearing.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Schedule for Advent 2020:

Week of	November 23	no study (Happy Thanksgiving!)
Sunday	November 29	Advent, Hope
Week of	November 30	Advent study #1
Sunday	December 6	Advent, Peace
Week of	December 7	Advent study #2
Sunday	December 13	Advent, Joy
Week of	December 14	Advent study #3
Sunday	December 20	Advent, Love
Week of	December 21	Advent study #4

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week one
H·O·P·E

This Sunday, we looked at the opening and best known verse of the hymn:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.

This verse captures so much of the longing and waiting and hope that characterizes Advent. But for this study, we want to ponder the words to a lesser known verse:

O come, O come, great Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.

1. This verse of the hymn is drawn from the scene described in Exodus 19:16-20:21. Read this passage and make note of some of the things you would have seen, heard, and felt if you had been there.
2. Such a terrifying picture—combined with a modern perception of laws as restrictive—may keep us from appreciating how important the giving of the law is to the Jewish people. For the Jew, having received the law of God was the greatest of privileges. Read the following verses:

Psalm 1:1-2

Psalm 19:7-11

Psalm 119: 72, 97

3. Do you feel this way about the law of God? Why or why not?

In the Jewish mind, the law was much more than an impersonal list of rules. It represents the perfect will of God which is for our good. Moreover, the giving of this law was part of the establishing of a covenant relationship between God and his people. In giving the law, God was not just giving them a code of conduct— he was offering himself to them!

H·O·P·E

Ironically, Israel's response to God's advent at Sinai was to implore Moses to meet with God so they wouldn't have to! Our dilemma, like theirs, is we want to live in a world that is filled with goodness and yet we are not good. We are intensely aware of and grieved by the many problems in our world, yet we are part of the problem. Advent invites us to make a fearless inventory of the darkness in our world and in our lives.

4. What are some of those things, personally and globally, that are in desperate need of setting right?

Our hope is that all things might be set right, and yet we fear what that will mean for us as lawbreakers. God's solution to our dilemma, and the answer to our hope, comes in the person of Jesus. The first coming of the Lord Jesus as a baby was quite a contrast with this terrifying picture at Sinai. No wonder it was unrecognizable to most as the entrance of the mighty God into the world!

5. Consider the following verses. What sort of hope does the incarnation of the Lawgiver bring us?

Romans 5:1-11

Romans 8:18-25

Read Hebrews 12:18-29, which contrasts the scene at Mount Sinai with the greater glory of Mount Zion, a representation of our heavenly hope.

The covenant established at Sinai was enacted with the sprinkling of blood. But the new covenant is established through the sprinkled blood of Christ, which unlike the blood of Abel that cried out for vengeance, is given for our reconciliation.

6. The "shaking" represents the end of the world as we know it, with all its dysfunctions. Since the kingdom we hope for is unshakable how might that encourage us to endure difficulties and trials in the present?

John Newton, famous for writing the hymn Amazing Grace, also penned these lyrics:

Let us love and sing and wonder,
Let us praise the Savior's Name!
He has hushed the law's loud thunder,
He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame.
He has washed us with His blood,
He has brought us near to God.

Spend time in prayer giving thanks for the hope that we have because of the coming of Christ in the flesh. Praise God that, in Christ, the Law has been fulfilled so that lawbreakers like us can find hope. Ask God to make you more ready to live according to the law of love (see Galatians 5:13-14).



week two
P·E·A·C·E

This past Sunday, we considered the promise of peace associated with the coming of Messiah. The 3rd stanza of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” pleads:

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.

The biblical concept of peace, while inclusive of an end to conflict, is more robust than mere ceasefire. The Hebrew term shalom—often translated as “peace” in Bible translations—suggests a comprehensive wholeness, when all things are in their proper places and all is “as it should be.” The 4th verse of the hymn picks up on this theme:

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.

1. This verse draws on imagery from the great Messianic promise found in Isaiah 11. Read Isaiah 11:1-9 and, as you do, jot down any parallels to the words of the hymn.

2. The peace promised at Messiah’s reign is not limited to a cessation or lack of hostility, though that is an important aspect of Messiah’s shalom. How does the Isaiah passage fill out a more comprehensive picture of peace?

3. Which of the varied aspects of peace included in this passage most resonates in your heart? Why do you think that is?

P·E·A·C·E

4. Biblical peace is not just something that happens “out there,” as it were, but something that is a reality for those who belong to God’s family by faith in Christ. Read the following passages that speak of God’s peace. What do you find in each about the experience of peace in the lives of God’s people?

Ezekiel 34:25

John 14:27

Romans 15:13

Philippians 4:4-7

Now that we’ve considered the promise of godly peace to “order all things, far and nigh,” let’s turn our attention to the second half of the hymn’s 4th verse which insists that God can reveal the path of knowledge and nudge his people to walk in it.

5. Look again at Isaiah 11:1-9. How does that passage connect peace and the knowledge of the Lord?

6. Each of us knows that there is a difference between possessing knowledge and living according to it. Jesus critiqued those who amassed knowledge but whose lives showed little proof (see John 5:39-40). How does each of the following passages further that thought?

2 Peter 1:3, 5-8

James 1:22-25

7. What does the picture of God’s people, filled with knowledge of him and walking in his ways, contribute to the concept of shalom?

8. In what ways does your life reflect pursuit of shalom? How might you better align your ways with God’s ways?

9. What avenues has God opened for you to be an agent of peace even as you wait for the greater peace promised at the return of Christ?

As you wrap up this study, spend time in prayer. Thank God that he is a God who sees and who has promised to bring peace to our troubled world. Ask that he would show you how you might be a peacemaker. Ask for the empowerment of the Spirit to seek peace. Commit yourself anew to be a student of the Word that gives knowledge and to faithfully walk in the ways of the Lord as an aspect of God’s peace.



week three
J·O·Y

There is perhaps no more cathartic moment in literature or film than when a long-troubling enemy is finally vanquished. In that instant, the reader or viewer is ushered into the joy of those who have struggled to bring about victory.

1. Can you remember a moment when you felt relief at the defeat of a fictional enemy? If so, write about what you remember.

The entirety of Scripture tells the true story of a great battle and, like any great battle, there is an enemy. The next verse of the hymn highlights the conflict for us:

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave.

The name Satan is one of the rare biblical words that originated in Hebrew, migrated into Greek, and eventually into English. In each of these languages, its root meaning is “enemy” or “adversary.” This verse of the song reminds us that Satan—often referred to in the Bible as “the devil”—brings tyranny with him, like any classic villain would.

2. Read the following passages and make a note of what each teaches about the character of Satan's rule.

Mark 4:15

John 8:44

2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

1 Peter 5:8

Yet, despite the gloomy picture of Satan's rule, the Scriptures insist that God's adversary is already a defeated foe. The triumph of God's kingdom over the realm of darkness took place at a most surprising place—a hill of execution outside of Jerusalem.

3. Read Hebrews 2:14-18. How is the first advent of Jesus tied to our redemption?

J·O·Y

4. The author of Hebrews refers to “those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (2:15). How have you experienced this reality? If you belong to God’s family by faith in Jesus, how has Christ’s victory on the cross shaped your feelings about death?

5. In writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul describes death as a de-fanged predator. Read 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. What emotions rise in you as you read Paul’s description of Jesus’ victory over death and the grave?

6. How does this message of Jesus’ victory over the grave contribute to your experience of joy?

As Advent people, Christians recognize that Christ has already overcome death and the grave, yet we still live in the presence of death as we wait for the coming kingdom. Christian musician Trip Lee highlights this tension in his song, “Ready.”

Hey death, we know you so well
Every time we rise up, you fight with no fail
You snatch us down, we so frail
Got no time to pretend
You take on every soul, and only see wins
We got no way to defend

But hey death, please know
We won’t have much to grieve for
When all your wins are repo’d
And the reaper reaps what he sowed
I ain’t gon run from you
What I got to flee for?
Did it hurt your self esteem when you heard your sting was no more?

7. How does this exploration of Scripture orient your heart to long for the joy still to come at Christ’s second coming? If you need help picturing the promise of what more is to come, read Revelation 21:1-4.

Spend time in prayer, thanking God that the great enemy of his kingdom and of our souls is an already-defeated foe. Ask that the truth of Christ’s victory over death and the grave would grow even more joy in your heart. Ask that the Spirit would grant proper perspective on death and loss as we wait for the kingdom to come.



week four
L·O·V·E

Throughout Advent, we often hear of “Emmanuel”- the promise of God with us. The first verse of the great hymn we’ve been examining is but one among many occurrences in the Christmas carols.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.

But seldom do we take the time to look at Isaiah’s prophecy from where this title comes. So let’s do that. But first a bit of historical context...

- Ahaz was a descendant of King David who ruled over the kingdom of Judah from 732-715 BC. His reign was marked by wickedness and idolatry.
- The events described in Isaiah 7 can be dated to about 734 BC when the kingdom of Judah was being threatened by two hostile neighbors to the north, Syria and Ephraim (the northern kingdom of Israel).
- Isaiah the prophet is sent to Ahaz to tell him to trust God for their deliverance and not any other nation.

1. Read Isaiah 7:1-16. What is Ahaz to understand about the sign of the child who will be called Immanuel?

Scholars debate if the child to be born is a son of Isaiah (these scholars would equate this child with the one spoken of in Isaiah 8:1-10) or a son in the household of Ahaz. In any case, this child is to be a proof to Ahaz of God’s trustworthiness even in the face of the most threatening enemies.¹

2. Like many Old Testament prophecies, there is more than one fulfillment. The child born in the time of Isaiah is but a precursor to the greater fulfillment that comes in Jesus. Read Matthew 1:18-25. What is the danger that this child will deliver from?

¹ Isaiah’s words in 7:17-25 show that though God would deliver them from the threat they immediately feared, he would bring devastation because of their rebellion from another quarter- the Assyrian empire!

L·O·V·E

3. The Bible makes abundantly clear that God did not save us because he had to or because of some special quality in us. How do the following passages help us understand the nature of God's love?

Deuteronomy 7:6-9

John 3:16

Romans 5:6-8

4. The glory of the gospel is not just that God saved us from our enemies, but that God has saved us for himself! What do these verses tell us about what awaits us when Christ returns?

John 14:1-2

1 Thessalonians 4:14-18

1 John 3:1-2

5. Read Song of Solomon 2:8-13, which gives voice to the anticipation of a young woman who can't wait to be with her beloved. Can you think of a time when you were eager to see someone you loved? How might we cultivate this sense of anticipation during this last week of Advent for the coming of our Beloved Savior?

Spend some time in prayer, thanking the Lord for his great love for us. Ask that God would purify you from all sin as you wait for him. Meditate once more on Revelation 21:1-4 and rejoice in the promise of Emmanuel- that God is with us and will be with us forever!

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!