

# A D V E N T



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# COMMUNITY CHURCH

2019



# INTRODUCTION

For centuries, much of the Christian world has divided the year up into multiple seasons that make up what is known as the Church Calendar. Rather than marking the passing of days and weeks (the role of winter, spring, summer, and autumn), the seasons of the church calendar remind Christians of the God who has ordered our days and weeks and has, indeed, entered into them in decisive fashion. The events that shape our remembrance and observance of periods such as Lent, Pentecost, and Easter are evidences of God's ever-present rule and activity in and among his people.

Many throughout Christian history have found the Church Calendar to be a helpful means of reminder for creatures who are, by nature, forgetful. Laurence Hull Stookey notes, "As Christians we ought continuously to be aware that we live at the intersection of time and eternity, but often we are not; for one thing, our preoccupation with the pressures and demands of time itself obscures the presence of the Eternal One in our midst."<sup>1</sup> The Church Calendar, then, becomes a means of anchoring our stories in God's story, unfolding throughout history through particular events and in the lives of particular people and, especially, in the life of Jesus Christ.

When considered this way, Advent has a peculiar role in the Church Calendar. The term Advent comes from a Latin term meaning "coming," or "arrival." Because of its proximity to Christmas, much of the Advent season can be spent looking back on the arrival, after a very long season of waiting, of the promised Messiah (Savior) who was promised to the people of Israel. Advent calls us, again, to "Come to Bethlehem and see/him whose birth the angels sing," and invites us to join in the chorus of praise.

Yet, whereas most seasons in the Church Calendar call to mind the historical activity of Christ, Advent assumes a posture of tension in which the worshiper is called to look not only to history, but also to the future promises of God that propel us onward in our Christian journey. For the hope of the Christian isn't fulfilled in the baby lying in a manger, but in the future return of that Holy One and the complete unveiling of a promised kingdom in which sin, injustice, and even death are no more. The promises of things yet to come compel God's faithful ones to join Paul in declaring that we are "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

Advent, then, is a season of tension and waiting. Fleming Rutledge helpfully points out that tension and waiting are distinctly Christian experiences and, therefore, Advent is—in some ways—more than a single season, but every season. She writes,

In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in the time between the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead...Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our faith requires...The disappointment, brokenness, suffering and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that

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1 Laurence Hill Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN), 17.

Advent tension, the church lives its life.<sup>2</sup>

In this spirit of tension and waiting, we turn our attention this year to the life and ministry of John the Baptist. As we will see in coming days and weeks, John's life was structured for the tension that Advent highlights. On the one hand, John came to call wayward Israel back to their God in repentance; on the other hand, John's entire life was intended to point to one coming after him. As the promised forerunner who would go before the Messiah—bridging the gap between the Old Testament prophetic tradition and the future unfolding of the kingdom of God through Jesus—John lived and ministered, it would seem, in the dual spirit of Advent all of his days. His brief but remarkably impactful life (see Luke 7:28) will help us to give shape to our own Advent journey.

This study guide is designed to be used either for a group discussion or as an individual guide. Should your homegroup wish to investigate together the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, the Scriptures and questions that follow should provide sufficient material for that endeavor. If, however, the crush of the coming Christmas season has fully overtaken your homegroup and you have already decided, collectively, to see one another again in 2020, individuals should discover plenty here for their own study.

In the days and weeks to come, let's consider what exactly it is that we're waiting for and, significantly, the manner in which we are called to wait. Let's allow the example of John the Baptist to shape our Advent by pushing us even deeper into the experience of Christian tension and waiting. As we endeavor to simultaneously look back and look forward, with hearts fully engaged, may we be able to look back and sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight," and to look forward with expectation as we sing, "Let earth receive her king."

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2 Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 7.

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# H O P E

Can you remember something you hoped for when you were younger? What impact, if any, did that hope have on your day-to-day living?

The final books of the Old Testament were written by prophets who simultaneously diagnosed the darkness around them and pointed forward to the promised light to come. Those promises centered on a particular person, the Messiah, who would come and bring God's kingdom to the world. The prophets wrote in hope, yet silence followed. For 400 years afterwards, God's people waited for the first glimmer of light signaling the dawn of God's promises.

Into that period of silence and longing was born a man named John.

## **Read Luke 1:5-25.**

1. Luke takes pains to root this story in history with both historical and personal details. What do you learn about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and their situation in life from these verses?
2. What promises does Gabriel make about the child to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth?
3. Gabriel says that John will operate "in the spirit and power of Elijah." Read Malachi 3:1-4 and 4:5-6, where this reference is drawn from. What hopes do the promises in Malachi point to for the people of God?



**Now read Luke 1:57-80.**

- How does Zechariah's song of praise add to the hopeful picture painted by Gabriel's announcement back in verses 5-17?
- Luke indicates that the events surrounding John's birth were talked about "through all the hill country of Judea" (1:65). Try to imagine yourself as 1st century Jew anticipating the arrival of the kingdom of God. Which aspects of the promises around John's birth would have spoken to your hopes?
- Let's apply the same lens to our lives. Which of the promises in Luke 1 awaken hope in you?
- If you are a Christian, how are your hopes different than the hopes of those around you who are not yet a part of God's family? How might what you've considered here in Luke 1 open up new ways of speaking about hope with others?
- Ultimately, the hopes articulated by both Gabriel and Zechariah point beyond John to Jesus. How has Jesus already satisfied the hopes outlined here? In what ways are you still looking forward to greater fulfillment of these promises?

Close your time by reading Titus 2:11-14. Allow Paul's description of Christian hope and its resulting impact in the lives of believers to inform your prayers for yourself, your homegroup, your neighborhood, and our church. Consider writing down one or more ways you long to see hope in Christ increasingly shape your life and the name of one or two people you want to see find their hope in Christ.



# P E A C E

What images or phrases come to mind when you think of peace?

Last week, we considered Zechariah and Elizabeth and the promises made about the life of their yet-to-be-born son who would come to be known as John the Baptist. About 30 years later, the one that Zechariah celebrated with the proclamation, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76) is fulfilling his ministry.

## Read Luke 3:1-20.

1. Look closely at verses 1-3. This is now the second time that Luke has gone to great lengths to demonstrate the historical reliability of his Gospel account. Why do you think this matters to him? (Hint: See Luke 1:1-4).

From last week’s study, re-read Luke 1:76-79. There—among many other promises—Zechariah proclaims that John would be the forerunner of the one who would bring peace. For many of us, the term “peace” means, simply, the absence of conflict. For Jews, however, peace was multi-faceted and was best expressed by the term *shalom*. Philosopher Cornelius Plantinga Jr. helps clarify that *shalom* means,

Universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

2. What elements of the description of John’s ministry in Luke 3 point to this fuller description of shalom?
3. How might this description of John’s ministry have surprised those who at the time were longing for God’s shalom to come?

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 10.

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4. How does John point to a peace even beyond what he offers?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Read Isaiah 9:1-7. Jesus, the one that John pointed to, is the fulfillment of this great prophecy. How does this passage further the picture of God's promised shalom?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What are some ways that you find yourself longing for God's comprehensive shalom in your life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. How do the gifts of the kingdom of God—demonstrated in John and Jesus—speak to these longings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. At a time of year in which "Peace on earth" is a common phrase, this passage points to a very different and deeper kind of peace than we typically settle for. Who is someone you would like to see experience shalom in their life? How might this passage embolden you to share about your peace?

Consider closing your time of study by watching The Bible Project video on "Shalom" (<https://thebibleproject.com/videos/shalom-peace/>) and by praying through Isaiah 9:1-7, thanking God for his provision of peace now and promise of even greater peace to come.

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# J O Y

Describe a time when you received a good surprise. How about a bad surprise?

After centuries of waiting for God to break his silence, John the Baptist came to the people of Israel and announced the coming of the promised Deliverer. It's not hard to imagine the joy that accompanied such great news! Yet, as Jesus' ministry played out, the nature of his work caused many to re-examine their true hopes. As we will see, John was among those affected in this way.

## **Read Matthew 11:1-6.**

1. This passage may be jarring to consider on the heels of what we've already seen about John's purpose and his passion. What clues does the text provide as to what might have prompted the question John poses?
2. John refers to Jesus as, "the one who is to come," an uncommon but clear reference to the Messiah. How might the ministry of Jesus as described in verses 4-5 have challenged even John's expectations of what the Messiah would do?
3. Jesus' response to John draws on Isaiah 35 and 61. Read Isaiah 35:1-10 and 61:1-7. How do those passages serve to help answer John's question?
4. How does Jesus' warning in verse 6 relate to the rest of his response in verses 4-5?



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5. How might a person be “offended by” Jesus and his ministry today?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Biblical joy is often described as deep, gospel-informed contentment that transcends circumstances. With that in mind, how does Jesus offer John joy in this brief exchange?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What are some circumstances in your life that might threaten your joy?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. How do the Scriptures and the gospel speak to those circumstances?

In Advent, we are reminded that much of our joy is still future, since the deepest longings of our heart will only be satisfied at the second coming of Jesus. Ironically, one of the best-loved Christmas songs, “Joy to the World,” is actually an Advent hymn that looks forward to Christ’s glorious return. Read Isaac Watts’s powerful words and allow them to inform a time of prayer in which you ask God to shape your heart to find joy in his gifts and to live for his kingdom.

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come:  
let earth receive her King;  
let ev’ry heart prepare him room,  
and heav’n and nature sing,  
and heav’n and nature sing,  
and heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns:  
let men their songs employ;  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
nor thorns infest the ground;  
he comes to make his blessings flow  
far as the curse is found,  
far as the curse is found,  
far as, far as the curse is found.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders, wonders of his love.*

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# LOVE

Have you ever been mistaken for someone else? If so, how did you resolve the confusion?

Throughout our brief consideration of John the Baptist's life and ministry, we have seen again and again his relentless efforts to point attention away from himself. John is, as prophesied about him, the one who went "before the Lord to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76). That trait reaches its crescendo in today's passage.

## Read John 1:19-34.

1. "The priests and Levites from Jerusalem" question John with a sense of urgency. What do you think motivated these questions?
2. John's response in verse 23 draws on the powerful and hopeful imagery of Isaiah 40. Read Isaiah 40:1-5. What was John indicating about himself and about Jesus with his answer to the religious leaders?
3. When questioned further, in verse 25, John doesn't directly answer the question posed to him. What does he say? How does this response further verify John's role and ministry?
4. Make a list of the claims that John makes about Jesus in verses 29-34.



The imagery of the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” would have resonated deeply with John’s devout Jewish audience. Sacrifice of lambs and goats featured prominently in Jewish religious ceremonies. For a poignant example, see Leviticus 16.

5. How does John’s declaration in verse 29 serve to explain the humility he demonstrated in verses 26-27 and 30?

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus will declare to his disciples, “Greater no love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (15:13). Richard Phillips notes,

If Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” then he is the Savior that every sinner needs. There is no other way to be reconciled to God. In loving grace, the holy God of heaven sent his Son to die as the Lamb for your sins.<sup>1</sup>

6. Have you responded to God’s loving grace offered through the sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God? If not, what obstacles make it difficult for you? If so, how has the sacrifice of Jesus changed your life?
7. Is there someone in your life that you desire to see encounter the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? If so, how might you, like John, serve to point to Jesus?
8. In the spirit of Advent, how do you find yourself longing for even more of God’s promised hope, peace, joy, or love?

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas this week, spend some time in prayer dedicating your heart to recognizing the great gift of Jesus, given for sinners to be reunited with God the Father. Ask the Spirit to remind you, in the midst of a busy time, of the Father’s sacrificial love for you.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Phillips, “John, Vol. I” in the Reformed Expository Commentary, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg: NJ), 88.