

Readings and Devotions
for
Advent,
the Twelve Days of Christmas,
and Epiphany

Introduction to Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

OUR CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

Advent and Christmas seasons are with us again. Like the seasons of the year in nature, the season of the ecclesiastical calendar and the national calendar come full circle. This is only appropriate since: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. ¹⁸And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:16-18). These are seasons of annual focus and remembrance. But as is true of all liturgy or form, it can point to a true or a false declaration. There is much in the national liturgy that points away from the advent of Christ. Our purpose, in these next few weeks, will be to draw attention to the true message of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. These are central events in the life of Christ and are profoundly significant for all of human history. God became a man. He came to rescue His people. This is worthy of all our celebratory efforts.

ADVENT

Advent is that period of great anticipatory joy—it is a time of preparation for the celebration of Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25th—the Sunday closest to November 30. The annual commemoration of Jesus’ birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle that runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany. The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four different ways that Jesus comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant at Bethlehem, (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers, (3) at his death, and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day. Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Jesus at Christmas.

CHRISTMAS: ALL TWELVE DAYS

As we celebrate Christmas, few of us think of Christmas Day as a beginning. For most families Christmas is the culmination of weeks of planning, shopping, and anticipation. Many are not aware that

Christmas is but the first day of the twelve-days of Christmas. Ever since the Council of Tours met in 567 and proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany as a sacred and festive time, the Church officially has observed both an Advent season in preparation for, and a Christmas season for the celebration of our Lord’s nativity. Recognizing how the Church year dramatizes the biblical story of what Christ has done for the salvation of all people, we have been trying to recover some of the richness of these celebrations. The church year forms an annual curriculum that tells the story of our faith: those who understand it understand the basics of the gospel. The Christian calendar, therefore, is a great way for families to focus their worship and tradition. Repeated traditions (within biblical boundaries) help all of us know and remember who we are, developing our identity as God’s covenant people. And celebration of the themes and seasons of the life and work of Christ helps families express their faith.

EPIPHANY

The twelve days of Christmas traditionally end with the celebration of the eve of Epiphany on Twelfth Night, January fifth. Broadly speaking, the word “epiphany” means a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization. In the context of the Christian Church, Epiphany has a more specific reference: it celebrates the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. The feast of Epiphany is observed on January sixth, twelve days after Christmas.

NOTE: Scripture quotations below are from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

NOVEMBER 29—First Sunday of Advent

JOHN 1:1-5

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Our Advent meditations begin with the recognition that in the ancient pagan world, this gospel proclamation begins with a statement that the Greeks might misunderstand and therefore accept in the wrong way. The philosopher Heraclitus had used the term *Logos* in his speculative philosophy, and so when John starts out by saying something apparently inscrutable—the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God—the sentiment might have seemed suitably opaque to them. But John is doing something quite different. He is engaged in overthrowing the ancient wisdom, not compromising with it.

In v. 14, we will discover that the *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us. For the apostles, and for all faithful Christians since, the Incarnation means that ultimate Truth has a birthday, and a mom, and ten fingers, and a liver. This kind of thing was absolutely appalling to the ancient philosophical mind—foolishness to the Greeks, as Paul noted.

There are indications that this is where John is deliberately taking us, right from the start. He begins with the same language that starts the book of Genesis (v. 1). We are talking about a new creation here, not another ethereal world elsewhere. The Word was with God in the beginning, and the Word was God. Lest there be a mistake, John repeats it. He was in the beginning with God (v. 2). And then the philosophical Greek encounters his first great difficulty. The earthiness of God's Word is seen in the fact that He made every single thing, and not one created thing was made apart from Him (v. 3). Ultimate reality is not contaminated by matter, but rather rejoices over its origin, calling all of it good. Not only was this Word creative, but He was filled with life. He is no impersonal principle, and His life is the light of men (v. 4). He is the living God.

When this Spoken God, this Word, comes into the world, He shines in the darkness of this world. And as He does so, the darkness cannot comprehend what is going on. But fortunately, the darkness is not there to be persuaded, but rather to be banished by the arrival of the Light.

And so this is what we anticipate every Advent, and this is what we are privileged to see celebrated yet again. The Word was with God; the Word was God. The Word is with man; the Word is man.

—Pastor Douglas Wilson, Christ Church,
Moscow, Idaho

PRAYER

Our great Father, we rejoice before You as the God who fulfills all Your promises. We glory in the mystery of the Incarnation, knowing that we worship You through the one who is fully God, and fully man. We remember that He is Your apostle, representing God to man. And we call upon You to remember that He is our high priest, representing us to You. We receive Him by faith, as the Creator, as the Spoken God, as the life of men, as the light of the world, and as the conqueror of all the darkness in the world. We pray to You in His strong name, the name of Jesus Christ, and AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Prepare the members of your family to think of Advent and Christmas in very material terms. This is not a season that celebrates vague spiritualities, but rather the season that celebrates God taking on flesh. The instinct to give gifts, to eat chocolate, to cut down a tree in the woods to bring it home, is therefore all very healthy and in line with the holiday. Matter enables us to give, and not just to grab.

NOVEMBER 30—Second Day of Advent

JOHN 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

After a long, tiring day of shopping, Jim and Sue came upon the gift they had been looking for. There was one particular bicycle that their son, Bobby, had wanted. Now, at last, they found what must have been the only one still available. It was a Ranger Racer, complete with all kinds of shiny gadgets and sparkling features. Quickly, they latched on to the bike and started pushing through the store to the check out area. Unexpectedly, Jim stopped, looked at Sue, and said, “What are we teaching our son about the real meaning of Christmas?”

A couple of weeks later, Bobby woke up extra early on Christmas morning, ran downstairs, and woke the whole household with shouts of joy over his discovery of something special near the Christmas tree. Bobby was grasping not just the handlebars of a new bicycle, but something greater—the meaning of Christmas. The Advent of Jesus Christ is the most materialistic, the most physical, the most worldly message of the Bible. The Word, who we know is Jesus Christ, became flesh. He became human, a person, a baby, flesh and blood; yes, a real, live, crying, eating, sleeping baby boy. For a period of some thirty plus years, God the Son lived here on planet earth. John says that he and his friends beheld Jesus’ glory. Like Bobby squealing with delight over a new bicycle, the disciples experienced the excitement of standing next to Jesus, eating lunch with Jesus, sitting at a lesson listening to Jesus, and watching Jesus teach, preach, and perform miracles.

Jesus is the ultimate Christmas gift. But the gift of Christ is not something that we can put into a holy box labeled “Spiritual.” Rather, a flesh and blood Christ came into this physical world to save us in the here and now, as well as in eternity. His coming here on earth in the flesh gives us the greatest of reasons to truly enjoy all the physical gifts of God, including bicycles.

—Pastor Ben House, Grace Covenant Church,
Texarkana, Arkansas

PRAYER

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our earthly condition, we thank You for sending Jesus to us, for making Him a human, just like us, for showing Him to us. We behold His glory and rejoice. We thank You for all the physical gifts of this season, for the feasts and the presents, the decorations and the celebrations. Thank you that in Christ, we can enjoy all things. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how Christians can truly enjoy material gifts in ways that non-Christians cannot enjoy them. Discuss what the disciples must have felt and thought when they were spending their days with Jesus.

DECEMBER 1—Third Day of Advent

JOHN 1:18

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Just as we saw from verse 14, that the Word, who is God, took on human flesh, and lived among men and was seen by men, as the glorious one who is from the Father in heaven, so this verse teaches us that the ministry of Jesus upon the earth was a ministry of revelation. What kind of revelation? A revelation of God himself, particularly the Father. The incarnation of Jesus was not something outside of God's character. It was not something done by Him that was foreign to His nature. Not at all. In fact, Jesus, in His incarnation, was expressing and revealing the very character of God. By taking on our human flesh, and living in it for thirty-three years, Jesus was revealing to us, was telling us, about our Father in heaven. Even though no man has seen the Father, as He is a Spirit and does not have a body like men, nevertheless, through the life of Jesus we do see and come to know the Father. Jesus could do this because He is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who has been in communion with the Father for eternity. And so through His life on earth, the love and community that He enjoyed with the Father is displayed for us, even as we are invited into that community ourselves! Through Jesus, we come to know the Father in heaven as our own Father.

—*Pastor Burke Shade, Cornerstone Reformed Church, Carbondale, Illinois*

PRAYER

O heavenly Father, we thank you that you have not left us alone to wonder in ignorance about your love and character. We thank you that you have revealed yourself to us through the sending of your Son in our flesh, that we may know you, love you, and obey you. Teach us to believe and to remember at all times that no man comes to you but through your Son Jesus. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with family members how knowing Jesus reveals the character of God the Father in heaven. Point out that in knowing and trusting in Jesus as our King and Savior, God's people are also placed into relationship with God the Father as their own Father. Point out how Muslims don't and can't know the Father and His love because they don't believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

DECEMBER 2—Fourth Day of Advent

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

This Advent text looks back on the coming of the Son, the second person of the Trinity. The “coming in the likeness of men” refers to the Incarnation; the Son’s taking upon Himself a human body and nature at His Advent. The statements about the Advent are introduced with a command to “let this *mind* be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” What we are told about the Advent is to result in an attitude in us that reflects the attitude of the Son. So we are forced to think a bit about what verses 6-8 tell us about Jesus’ attitude. It is important that we get this right. We certainly want to imitate the right attitude, not the wrong one.

Sadly, there has been a general confusion in evangelicalism at just this point. All too often, we are told that the Incarnation was an exception, something out of the ordinary for God’s character. The text is misread to say something like “*in spite of* Him being God, He emptied Himself of His godly nature and instead came to die for us.” This leaves us with a distorted view of God, implying that Jesus acted different from His basic Divine Nature. We end up thinking that God is usually not of a mind to serve others, but did this one time because sin had messed up things so badly. God will, in really tough times, have a mind to serve others, but we are led to believe this is not His normal mindset.

This mistaken view of the text has a direct result on our sanctification. We are told in Psalm 135:16-18 that men take on the characteristics of the gods they worship and trust. If we think that God only occasionally and exceptionally acts in sacrificial service to others, then we will be like that sort of God. We will think of serving others as an exception to our normal lives. Isn’t that, after all, the Divine Nature?

No. The facts of the Advent are prefaced with a simple declarative statement that Jesus is God’s Image-bearer. He possesses the Divine Nature, and this explains what follows. The first thing the text tells us about the Incarnation and Advent of Jesus is that it is a *result* of Him being God. *Because* He

existed as God, *because* He has the mind of the triune God, He is by this Divine Nature moved to not to seek His own glory, but rather, to seek the well-being of others. *Because* He is God, the text tells us, He became human, and then humbled Himself to die for sinful men. The Incarnate Son’s mind of self-sacrificial service was not an exception to the Divine Nature. John 1 tells us that Jesus came to “declare” the Father. The Greek word translated “declare” is the origin for our word “exegete.” The Son has come to exegete the Father, to show us the sort of God it is that we worship and whom we are to imitate. John’s Gospel climaxes with the death of Jesus, the great revelation that we serve a God whose mind and nature is to self-sacrificially serve others. This is the mind of Christ Jesus that we are to have as well. We are to see all of our lives as ones of service to others. This is the great message of Advent, according to Philippians 2:5-9. God has come, He is indeed love, and we are to be like Him.

—Pastor Dennis Tuuri, Reformation Covenant Church, Oregon City, Oregon

PRAYER

Gracious Father, please forgive us for believing Satan’s lie that you are selfish, and not loving towards us in all things. Thank you for the wonderful message of Advent. May our Advent celebrations inform our minds, attitudes and actions not just in this joyous season, but in the balance of our lives. May we be self-sacrificial image-bearers of our blessed Savior, in whose Name we pray, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Help the individual members of the family think of practical acts of service to others this Season, and to commit themselves to these actions in prayer. Additionally, select one project this week for the entire family to perform in self-sacrificial service to others.

DECEMBER 3—The Fifth Day of Advent

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. ¹⁸ And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. ¹⁹ For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, ²⁰ and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Have you ever wondered what God is like? Do you think of Him as a kindly grandfather or as a stern King with a fearsome countenance? The Bible answers this question by pointing us to Jesus. Paul makes plain that Jesus is the exact image of the invisible God. When we see Jesus, we are seeing what God is like. He is not indifferent or unfeeling. Rather, He is grieved over our suffering and sin. He is not filled with frustration or bitterness toward us. Rather, He is one who sympathizes with our weakness and our sorrows and calls us to repentance and obedience. In Jesus we actually see the invisible God in all the glory of His sacrificial love, humility, and mercy – as well as in His saving power. In Him the fullness of God dwells. God not only reveals His nature in His Son but through Him accomplishes His loving purposes for the world. The world was created through Him and for Him and He constantly upholds it by His power. By His death, He reconciled the world to God making “peace” through the blood of the cross. By His resurrection, He has been made the “head” of the Church and given the preeminence over all things. Above everything else, Paul wants us to see the supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ in all things. The more we see Him and know Him, the more we understand who God is and what He has done – and, the more clearly we see this, the more clearly we understand who we are and what it means for us to live for the glory of God. Jesus shows us what it means to be truly and fully *human*. We, therefore, are to imitate Him. As He was the full image of His Father, so we must be conformed to His image. We must live in the way He lived among men. As He laid down His life for the world, so we must live lives of sacrificial love

for the world. As He has been exalted over all things, so we must seek to glorify Him in everything we say and do.

—*Pastor Steve Wilkins, Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana*

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, in Your infinite love and mercy, You sent Your Son into the world so that we might know You and be restored to our true callings as Your children through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Enable us to know Him and to increase in our love for Him, so that we might be conformed to Him and live for His glory throughout all our days. All for the glory and honor of Your Son who is the King of kings and Lord of lords and who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what Jesus was like during His life and how that reveals God’s nature. How can we grow in likeness to Him? Where do we fall short? How may we love one another as He has loved us? How can we love our neighbors and show the love of God to them?

DECEMBER 4—Sixth Day of Advent

HEBREWS 1:1-2

¹ God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

God is not silent. He speaks to His people. In the Garden He walked with Adam and Eve. After the Fall, God spoke through signs, wonders, stories, and prophets. From a burning bush to a man robed in camel's hair, God continued to speak. From a donkey to educated men to a shepherd and a fruit-picker, we learn that God does not leave His people alone.

These signs, wonders, and prophets speak the word of God, the gospel of the coming Christ. Each repeats the Proto- Evangelion, the message heard from the beginning that a victor would arise to crush the serpent. With Moses this repetition took the form of, "The LORD God of your fathers . . . will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt . . . unto a land flowing with milk and honey . . . and, you shall not go empty." Isaiah declared that "unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end."

Standing on the shoulders of these men, John the Baptist linked their words to Jesus. He prepared the way of the Lord by calling Israel to "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near." Jesus, he declared, was the mighty victor—one so mighty that John felt unworthy to even untie His shoes.

Now the writer of Hebrews tells us that God still speaks. To that of the prophets God adds the voice of his Son. Jesus repeats and then fulfills their words—a messenger better by far. Let us rejoice in the Advent prophecies for they stand fulfilled. And as Jesus goes forth victoriously, let us heed the Father's command, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear Him."

—Pastor Todd Davis, Christ Church, Searcy, Arkansas

PRAYER

Almighty God, you are not silent; therefore, give us ears to hear that which the Spirit says unto the Church that all your words might be fulfilled as we worship You, who together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit rules in a kingdom without end, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how the Living Word is made known through the written and spoken word. Discuss how sermons, studies, and readings strengthen our faith. Discuss Jesus' authority as the Living Word of God and the surety of His word's fulfillment.

DECEMBER 5—Seventh Day of Advent

ISAIAH 9:6

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In the verse we have just read we heard one of the greatest prophecies concerning the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Throughout this prophecy we have a wonderful display of the Person of our Lord Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at this time of the year. First, Isaiah declares that He will be *a child born*. Jesus entered into human flesh just as you and I do, through birth. As we heard in our first reading this week *the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*. Jesus is fully man.

But then Isaiah declares that He is also a *son...given*. Jesus Christ is more than a mere man like you and me; rather, He is the eternal Son of God who has been *given*. Jesus is more than just a child, He is *God of God, very God of very God*, as our Nicene Creed declares and which we confess in our worship each Sunday. Jesus is fully God, for only God could *accomplish* what Jesus accomplished.

And what did Jesus come to accomplish? Look closely at the important phrase added to each of the two statements: He was *born* and *given to us*. Jesus Christ was born and *given to us*; He came to save His people (see verses 3 & 4), *us*, those whom the Father gave to His Son from all eternity; those whom the Father gave the Son as His inheritance so that they might be brought into the eternal covenant of salvation through the saving work Jesus accomplished on their behalf. Again, we confess this very truth every Sunday in our worship service using the Nicene Creed, when we say, *who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven*. Jesus is our Savior.

In this season, set aside by the Church, we celebrate the birth of Jesus and the reality that God gave Jesus to us and for our salvation. As St. Matthew will write, and which we will read in a couple days, Jesus came to save His people from their sins. He was given to us to do what we could not and cannot do for ourselves—save ourselves from our sin and God’s judgment against our sins. Let us also celebrate the reality that God has given us, you and me, each of us, to His Son for our salvation, and that He is mighty to save.

—Pastor Galen Sorey, Christ Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

PRAYER

Our eternal and most blessed God and Father, we thank You for the gift of Jesus, given by You, and for our salvation. We thank You that in Your eternal and unchanging love You have given us to Your Son, to save and to keep through all our lives. Thank You for the gift of Your Son and thank You for the gift of our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family how each of us can know with assurance that Jesus Christ came for us and to save us. Discuss the magnitude of our own sinfulness and our total inability to save ourselves. Discuss the unchanging love of God displayed to us in the person of Jesus Christ and His being given to us and for us and for our salvation.