



The Gift of Waiting

AN ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL

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WESTERN
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

WORDS
OF HOPE
Good News. All Ways.

Introduction

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Advent is a favorite season for our community. This time of year is muted and dark and waiting is the major theme. We often presume we are waiting for Christmas, but let's be honest, we aren't really waiting for Jesus' birth. He was already born, and we know his story.

The event we are actually waiting for in Advent is, as our passage from 2 Peter illustrates, the second coming of Jesus. I don't know about you, but at times I have a hard time feeling confident that Jesus is actually going to come again. When I read Peter's assertion "that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing" (v. 3), it doesn't take much translation to apply those words. They hit close to home. Maybe I'm not a public scoffer, but at least I am a private doubter. And then I remember that's why it's called *faith*. It takes faith to believe Jesus will come again. It's hard for some of us, yet Advent calls us to it. And so we acknowledge that we are waiting in this season, taking comfort in Peter's words that the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises but patient. Thank God for that.

–Jeff Munroe

This Advent devotional series was written by faculty and staff from Western Theological Seminary. Our community is thoughtful and reflective, and we fully embrace the liturgical seasons of the church year as we worship together. Learn more at westernsem.edu.

Waiting for Jesus

... to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (v. 10)

“Early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable.” One of my professors drilled this into me when I was in seminary. Showing up early for a meeting was a way of showing respect, but making someone wait was the height of selfishness. In this passage, however, Paul commended the Thessalonians for their waiting. He praised them for their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope, and went on to say they were an example to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia not only because they turned away from idols, but because they were waiting for Jesus.

In this Advent season, we also find ourselves waiting. We wait for all the Christmas decorations to come out, for our favorite Christmas hymns and carols, and some of us might even sheepishly admit that we are waiting for those Hallmark Christmas movies. For others, however, Christmas is not necessarily a happy time, and we wait for God to show us that he remembers us.

We don't just wait for Christmas, though; ultimately we wait for Jesus. When he returns again, he will come to judge the wicked and deliver the righteous. To those who have placed their trust in Jesus, his return will be a joyous occasion. In this Advent season, we wait for our Savior, the Messiah, who will return to renew all things.

–Felix Theonugraha

As you pray, ask God to strengthen you as you wait for the return of Christ, our Savior.

An Advent Prayer

*He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full
of the steadfast love of the LORD. (v. 5)*

I remember the moment when an older, wiser Christian asked which psalm was my favorite to pray. I had no answer. Praying the psalms was an entirely new idea to me, but I decided to give it a try. After years of cultivating a prayer life rooted in my own words, it was hard to make the shift to praying the words of Scripture.

Through this practice, I have discovered that the Psalms allow me to prayerfully name the gap between God's promises and my experience. Psalm 33, with its beautiful reminder of how God's love is deeply interwoven with his vision for righteousness and justice, points to this gap. The earth is full of God's steadfast love, but I lament that this is often hard to see. I join God in longing for justice to fill the earth, even as I name how broken the world continues to be. I hope that "all the inhabitants of the world [will] stand in awe of him!" (v. 8), even as I am aware of the need for us to continue to spread the good news of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

These hopes not yet realized turn this psalm into a beautiful Advent prayer as we remember that we can depend on God's steadfast love to answer each and every longing we name until Christ comes again.

—Kristen Deede Johnson

As you pray, ask God to help you remember that the steadfast love of God is the true source of our hope.

A Different Perspective

*The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established
as the highest of the mountains. (v. 2)*

The summer before our first child was born, my wife and I decided to take a vacation (some call it a “babymoon”) to the Pacific Northwest. We spent a day hiking in Mount Rainier National Park. Mount Rainier rises 14,000 feet above sea level. We had been to Colorado and Montana earlier and had hiked some large mountains, but Rainier seemed so much bigger. I learned later that this was due to perspective. A 14,000-foot mountain viewed from sea level is much different than a 14,000-foot mountain viewed from a starting altitude of 5,000 feet.

In today’s passage, Isaiah looked to the day when the house of the Lord would be established as the highest mountain. Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled, but in a way that didn’t match people’s perspective. Jesus is that high mountain, but the people of Israel were expecting a Messiah who would establish a new political order, not one who would die on a cross. In his humiliation, Jesus lowered himself, and at his resurrection rose as the highest mountain for our sake. In Advent, we wait for the final day when, “every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10-11).

In this season, we relive Jesus’ first coming and anticipate his final coming. He is the one who stands above all others yet lowered himself that we might be saved.

—Andy Bast

As you pray, thank God that Jesus Christ came to redeem us in a totally unexpected way.

Faithful God, Fearful Followers

When I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. (v. 5)

As parents, we love, teach, guide, and mentor our children and, when it is time, release them into the world—only to circle back in a panic to check on them again and again, afraid, like Paul, that our good work was in vain and the tempter has tempted beyond endurance. When my children went to college, I made regular pilgrimages to visit them. Sure, I missed them, but I was also afraid. Afraid that their bathrooms were health hazards, that they ate only Doritos, that they forgot about classes, never washed their hands, and disowned Jesus. Stepping into their dorms, my eyes took in every detail hoping to lessen my fear.

It gives me comfort that Paul suffered similar anxiety. He sent Timothy to check on the Thessalonians because he feared for this young church. Had the tempter gotten to them? Had Paul's work been in vain? When Timothy returned with glowing reports of their faith and love, Paul rejoiced, gratefully entrusting their future spiritual growth and strength to a faithful Lord.

I am fearful and God is faithful. I am grateful that the Holy Spirit had more influence over my daughters during those years than any instruction I could give them. I fear it was never my work in the first place. Thank God!

—Jill English

As you pray, ask God for strength to release your fears and trust in God's faithful work.

The Language of Lament

*In my distress I groan aloud and am reduced
to skin and bones. (v. 5 NIV)*

I don't lament well, especially compared to people in some other cultures and countries, where weeping and wailing are on public display. I subscribe to a keep-it-between-you-and-your-Kleenex theology. Wipe away the tears as quickly as possible. Clean up. Get it together.

This isn't really the way I want to be, but it's what I was taught and what I'm prone to. When my first-grade-best-friend Bobby died, I sat in the back of the car and shed quiet tears by myself. When the church secretary, Mrs. Rose, was run over, we were allowed to grieve for about five minutes before the praise songs began again. "Turn that frown upside down," someone said.

The psalmists, on the other hand, teach us to lament, to grieve, to wail, and to make some noise doing it. As it turns out, lamenting is an act of hope, not resignation, longing for a better day, when the Lord returns to vindicate and bless, to rescue and restore. The psalmists give both permission and language to bring our deepest angst before a God who is more than capable of holding it all. Lament is an act of courage, of faith.

Make a mess if you need to. Live your Advent hope through messy tears and loud longings. Raise a voice, and maybe even a fist, before a God loving enough to hold it all.

—Chuck DeGroat

As you pray, ask God to accept your lament and hold you in your tears.

The Gift of Hope

The dead in Christ will rise first. (v. 16)

It has been a long journey! My husband, Javier, has been waiting for a heart transplant for two years. This is a matter for prayer, but it's hard to pray because someone has to die for my beloved husband to receive this life-saving gift. We feel selfish asking God for a heart. Yet my husband's lack of energy, the sense of his life slipping away little by little, and the uncertainty of waiting evoke anxiety and sorrow.

The Thessalonian Christians wondered how long they would have to wait. They sent a letter to Paul expressing sorrow about those who died and didn't witness the second coming of the Lord. Paul answered, reminding them that the Lord's resurrection guarantees our glorious future. He gave the Thessalonians the gift of hope, hope in Christ's resurrection, and the confidence of new life.

We tend to focus on the length of our waiting rather than what we should focus on: confidence in God's gift of hope through Christ's resurrection. Indeed, nothing can separate us from God's love and presence. Javier and I cling to the certainty of God's grace and care amid the uncertainty of whether or not a heart will be provided. For all of us, the season of Advent is a time to lean into God's good gift of hope, knowing that in the not too far away future, we will see God face to face.

—Gretchen Torres

As you pray, give thanks to God for the gift of hope and ask for peace amid the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

The Unrestrained Mercy of God

Behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. (v. 9)

At the age of 39, a politically hopeful New York lawyer fell ill, struck with fever, nausea, and pain. Eventually, the affliction deepened, paralyzing him from the waist down. He nearly died, and likely felt like the psalmist, in “the pit of destruction,” in a “miry bog” (v. 2). His name was Franklin D. Roosevelt, and though he recovered in part and went on to serve as the 32nd president of the United States, he was never cured of his paralysis.

Like Roosevelt, David was a leader who knew what it is like to be in the pit. In this psalm, he spoke as Israel’s king who was repeatedly on the run for his life. Yet, David was also confident that a greater King would hear his cry. David brought heartache and lament, as well as joy and thanksgiving to the Lord, whose name he praised among his people.

Likewise, we can approach our heavenly Father with confidence since we belong to Jesus Christ. The King of the universe wants to hear our griefs and joys. Our King of kings cried out to the Father in the garden of Gethsemane. His heartfelt prayer parallels this psalm’s sentiment, “Behold, I have not restrained my lips.” Similarly, we don’t need to restrain our lips—our joys, our sorrows, our longings, and our hope. We need not restrain our lips because God doesn’t restrain his mercy.

–J. Todd Billings and Katlyn DeVries

As you pray, bring your burdens and joys before the Lord. Rejoice that he is full of mercy and delights in hearing our prayers.

Living while Waiting

Hold fast to what is good. (v. 21 NRSV)

Advent is the season of waiting. Waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Waiting for the day of the Lord. God's people have done a lot of waiting. We're waiting for the One who will put *all* wrongs to right so the whole world—every person, every bird, every blade of grass, every *thing*—may experience nothing but peace: calm, rest, shalom.

We have been waiting ever since Genesis when we plucked fruit from a certain tree in a certain garden, thinking we would be holding fast to what is good when instead we were opening the way to evil. Ever since, we've been waiting—waiting on God's promises to deliver us from evil and for good to be all in all.

In Advent, we're drawn alongside God's people of old who were expecting the Messiah, and we're drawn alongside Paul's anxiously apocalyptic Thessalonians who were expecting the Messiah to come *tomorrow*. To those waiting for the Messiah the first time and to those awaiting him again, God's prophets deliver the same message: the Messiah is coming. When? Only God knows. For now, stay on the edge of your seat *and* repose on God's promises. Be faithful *and* strain ahead for the life to come. How? As Paul proclaims: Stay connected to the household of faith. Do honest work every day. Practice encouragement, patience, joy, prayer, and gratitude. Hold fast to what is good, resisting evil. This *is* the way of the Messiah's blessing.

—Sue Rozeboom

As you pray, seek to discern what is good as you carry on until the day of the Lord.

Here I am! Send Me

Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? (v. 8)

Life as a pastor's kid can be tough. I was expected to be a model for all the kids at church and felt pressure that my behavior was a testimony to my parents' abilities as pastors. But life as a pastor's kid can also be filled with memorable moments.

When I was nine, I attended a revival conference. This was a conference for adults, but since the speaker was staying in our home, I attended also. At the end of the gathering, the speaker did the usual things, asking for people to commit their lives to the Lord or recommit their lives or repent of their sins. But then he did something unusual. He asked people to raise their hands if they thought the Lord was calling them to full-time ministry. Next thing I knew, my hand was raised. Soon I was at the front of the church, alongside many others, and that night, at the tender age of nine, I committed to serving the Lord for the rest of my life.

I wonder what Isaiah thought when he heard the voice of God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" I get the sense that Isaiah did not wait long to answer, "Here I am! Send me" (v. 8). How about you? It's never too early or too late to respond to God's call.

–Felix Theonugraha

As you pray, ask God to show you how he wants you to respond to the question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Joy and Sorrow

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! (v. 5)

During Advent, we are deeply aware that we live in between Christ's coming for the first time and his coming again. In this "already, not yet" time, we know that Jesus Christ came to begin his reign and invite all to become children of God, even as the world does not yet fully reflect his kingdom and many do not recognize God as Father. How do we hold these two realities—one of which leads to joy and the other to sorrow—together, in Advent and beyond?

Psalm 126 shows a way. God's people had experienced great loss and tribulation when they went into exile, but when they returned to their Promised Land, their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy. This did not erase the suffering they had experienced, but it points to the enduring truth that life this side of Christ's return combines both sorrow and joy.

Eugene Peterson, reflecting on this psalm, says that "laughter does not exclude weeping. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow." And he points to the Advent hope we cling to when we are confronted with sorrow: "The joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears, and, in his resurrection work, create the smile of new life" (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, pp. 94, 96). May God's grace help us find the smiles, laughter, and joy that God extends even in the world's sorrow.

—Kristen Deede Johnson

As you pray, ask God to give those in sorrow hope that joy and laughter might also be theirs.

Don't Hold Back!

But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." (v. 12)

In the spring of 2009, I lost my job as a high school music teacher. My district was closing several schools, and I happened to be one of the newest people hired. I was “last in, first out.” My wife was pregnant with our second child, and we were pretty worried. I remember praying for a new job yet making sure to pray, “not my will but yours.” That sounds good, but I didn’t really mean it. It was my semi-pious attempt to pray correctly, as if my humble prayer would impress God enough so he’d respond in my favor. My calculated prayer was a bit like Ahaz’s response in this passage.

God told Ahaz to ask for a sign, but Ahaz refused, saying he didn’t want to test God. Ahaz’s shaky faith was showing through his insincere prayer. God was saying, “Go ahead, ask for something amazing, just see what I can do.” Ahaz was using a false piety to disobey God. While he was doing that, God promised the greatest sign of all—Immanuel, God with us!

Do we trust God enough to ask him to supply our needs without reservation, even when circumstances are against us? We have a God who says we can rely on him completely. After all, in Jesus Christ he’s already met our needs. How might you trust God more deeply and rely on him more completely today?

—Andy Bast

As you pray, leave nothing back. Ask God to be present, to heal, and to make things right.

A Fresh Start

Simon, stay on your toes. Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me, like chaff from wheat. Simon, I've prayed for you in particular that you not give in or give out. When you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start. (vv. 31-32 MSG)

Most translations render this passage with language about Satan “sifting Peter like wheat.” What does this mean? Typically, I think of “sifting” as sorting through or mixing something. Maybe sorting beach sand while looking for shark teeth, or sifting flour into a recipe. But Jesus doesn’t say “sift like sand or flour,” he says, “sift like wheat.” Sifting wheat is the process of separating wheat from chaff. *The Message* paraphrase, cited above, expresses that meaning. Jesus is telling Peter that Satan wants to separate them from each other.

Separation is Satan’s work. Satan does this by deflecting our attention away from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Satan uses many things including busyness, religion, politics, fear, rules, pain, and other people to take our eyes off Jesus.

Good news came as Jesus prayed for Peter. Jesus not only anticipated Peter’s failure but also that Peter would come through it and be able to offer a fresh start to others. In Advent, we anticipate all of this in our own lives—both times of failure and fresh starts. We know ultimately that Satan cannot separate us from Jesus, nor from our redemption.

—Jill English

As you pray, ask the Spirit to reveal Jesus’ redemptive work in your life so you, in turn, can encourage others.

Increasing and Decreasing

He must increase, but I must decrease. (v. 30)

There was an old-time baseball manager who once said of his team, “I managed good but boy did they play bad.” That’s the opposite of how leadership should be measured. What matters is not the brilliance of the head but the tone of the body. Great leaders take the spotlight off themselves.

John the Baptist illustrated this in these verses. A question about purification quickly devolved into a question of popularity. Did it bother John that Jesus was drawing bigger crowds? Was he jealous? Envious? His answer is a model for Christian leaders, especially leaders who may notice that another church’s parking lot is full while theirs has plenty of room.

First, John said, don’t forget that everything comes from God. As one commentator puts it, “The best antidote for envy is the conviction of the sovereignty of God” (Frederick Dale Buner, *The Gospel of John*). Second, John reminded them that his ministry was never about him. He was the best man at this wedding, not the groom. Narcissism is a temptation leaders face, and John’s humility modeled the right attitude. It had always been about Jesus: he must increase while John decreased.

If church growth in other places bothers you, who are you serving? If the congregation crumbles after the charismatic leader leaves, who were you following? Our role is the same as John’s: to bear witness to Jesus. Indeed, Jesus must increase while we decrease.

—Jeff Munroe

As you pray, ask for John’s humility.

Advent Longings

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels." For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you." For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity. (vv. 6-9 NIV)

Our Advent longings are shaped by our needs. Yet, many of us remain disconnected from our needs. A busy executive goes all day without a meal, living off of coffee refills. A stay-at-home mom collapses on her bed at midday, exhausted after a week without a break. At some point, we awaken to a hidden longing for space or security, connection or comfort, refreshment or rest.

The Psalms reveal our deepest needs if we listen carefully. Do you hear them? I hear needs for security, peace, assurance, solidarity, connection, and more. And perhaps you, like me, can relate to these needs. As I write these words, I'm in a busy season, longing for rest, desiring peace, hungry for connection with my wife and kids, let alone my God. What are your needs? Can you imagine God receiving them, just as God receives the deep needs of the psalmists?

When we express these deep needs, we're participating in Advent longing. We are trusting that God is better at this than we are, and so we're rejecting self-sufficiency as a way of coping. It's an Advent practice that might just shape our prayers for the whole year.

—Chuck DeGroat

As you pray, confess your self-sufficiency and express your longings for rest, refreshment, peace, security, and connection.

Light in Uncertain Times

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light . . . (v. 2)

The devotional you are reading today was written in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As I write, it is a time of fear and anxiety, and my concerns about my family's health and well-being are very real. We are fighting a strong and invisible enemy, and we have no idea how long we will have to wait before we return to our normal lives. These are dark days, and I wish I could know now what things will be like when you are reading this.

Isaiah's poetic prophecy gives words of hope to Israel at the time of the exile, which was also a time of uncertainty and darkness. Things looked bleak, yet God promised to send a light that would shine on anyone living in the shadow of death. People wondered whether God would keep his promise, and Isaiah responded by announcing the coming birth of a royal son who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

While fear, panic, and anxiety may accompany uncertainty, one thing is abundantly clear: the light of Jesus shines upon us. The promised Son has been born, and, as Isaiah said, the rod of the oppressor is broken and our joy has increased. This is good news, and a sure and certain faith to hold on to in uncertain times.

—Gretchen Torres

As you pray, thank God that he keeps his promises, and thank God for the gift of Jesus and a faith to hold on to in uncertain times.

A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

You thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. (v. 21)

This psalm presents a scathing critique of the wicked, naming “classic” sins like thievery, adultery, and slander. When the Bible presents lists like this, I tend to feel a little self-righteous. Surely, I’m one of the “faithful ones,” not “the wicked” who are being rebuked. Then I read: “These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.”

How often do I assume that God is “silent” because I have attempted to follow the rules? Haven’t I proven that I’m faithful because I pray and give money to Christian causes? God answers, in effect, do you think I *need* your sacrifices or acts of faithfulness? Is God poor without them? God reminds us that he doesn’t need food to survive, and he doesn’t need our religious devotion to make a name for himself. We cannot impress God with our goodness or religious devotion. Instead, Jesus Christ alone is our true righteousness. He has paid our debt.

In response, all we can do is give thanks. Paul told us to offer our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1). Because of Jesus, we can give our whole lives as an offering to God. For as the Lord says, “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me” (Ps. 50:23).

–J. Todd Billings and Katlyn DeVries

As you pray, offer a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” for the gift of God’s grace in Christ.

An Invitation to Turn

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand . . .
Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. (vv. 2, 8)*

Last Tuesday we reflected on “Living while Waiting,” prompted by Paul’s letter to a church harried over the second coming of the Messiah. Now, here we are again, though with an eccentric prophet in the desert shouting about the coming of the Messiah for the first time. Eccentric? That’s putting it mildly for a weather-beaten guy who lives alone in the woods, wears homemade clothes of animal pelts, rarely shaves, and lives on honey-crisped insects. Does this sound like someone we might be inclined to ignore?

Through him, God captured the spiritual devotion of hundreds, even thousands, of average, respectable and even not-so-respectable people—people like you and me. They had come from the city, the villages, and the countryside, along all the byways between, compelled by a simple invitation to repent. It’s an invitation to *turn*: to *turn away from* violence, judgment, gossip, hate, and all *evil*, which resists the kingdom of the Messiah; and to *turn toward* hospitality, encouragement, patience, faith, joy, gratitude and all that is *good*. This is the essence of living while waiting for the Messiah to come, and to come again.

As you wait, who is calling you to turn? Someone you ignore? What are you being called to turn away from? What to turn toward?

—Sue Rozeboom

As you pray, listen for God’s responses.

What a Year!

*The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea. (v. 9)*

The last two years have been difficult. The COVID-19 pandemic altered our lives, and we have been gripped with anxiety, fear, grief, and several deep losses. I have wished at times that we could just start these years over again and write a new script for them.

Fortunately, no matter how difficult our lives are, we know how the story ends. Jesus reigns with wisdom, understanding, and holy knowledge. He is righteous and faithful, remembers the poor, and lifts up the meek. When Jesus returns, he will establish a new heaven and a new earth, and he will dwell with us. On that day, the whole earth will be filled with God's all-encompassing peace—his shalom. There will be no more tears or sadness. There will be no more sickness or death. Destruction, enmity, and hatred shall be no more. Those who belong to the Lord will live in peace, in full knowledge of the Lord.

No matter how difficult this year has been, let us hold fast to the deep and unfailing love of God, who gave his Son for us, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish but dwell with God in eternity. This is the good news. In Christ, we have received the promise of eternal life with God.

Isn't that worth waiting for?

—Felix Theonugraha

As you pray, ask God to help you keep your eyes fixed on him, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Not the Light but the Lamp

*John was a lamp that burned and gave light,
and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. (v. 35 NIV)*

In today's passage, John the Baptist is described as "a burning and shining lamp." He gave off light, but he was not the primary source of the light. We read this same conviction in the opening of John: "He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:8-9).

The true light is Jesus Christ. In Augustine's words, "John was only a lamp; everyone, including the apostles and prophets, is only a lamp in comparison with Christ, who is the true light" (quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*).

This is part of the good news that we receive in Christ. Jesus himself said, "I can do nothing on my own" (v. 30). When Jesus invites us into the relationship he shares with the Father, he is calling us, too, to do nothing on our own, but to do everything through the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's not our witness that gives light but the power that comes from the true light of Jesus Christ made known by the Holy Spirit. We, like John, are not the light but the lamp. God uses us to bring the life-giving light that shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome.

–Kristen Deede Johnson

As you pray, ask God to help you bear witness to Christ's light through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pure Grace

The home of God is among mortals. (21:3 NRSV)

I started this series of devotionals saying that the event we truly await during Advent is not the birth of Jesus but the second coming of Jesus. Our Scripture today takes us beyond that to the culmination of history in the final judgment.

A lot of fear and anxiety has been created over the centuries by John's graphic vision of a second death in a lake of fire, but it is best not to focus exclusively on these verses. If we do, we will have big problems with John's assertion, repeated twice here, that we are judged according to our works. Without Christ, it's the lake of fire for every one of us!

Better to focus on God's love than our worthiness. There are wonderful images here. May the glory of John's vision wash over you today: God will wipe away every tear; death shall be no more; and there shall be no mourning, crying, or pain. That's the vision of heaven I cling to. This is pure grace. We have not earned God's love, we cannot earn God's love, and we will not earn God's love. He gives the water of life freely, without pay. He makes all things new. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and his dwelling is not in some distant heaven inaccessible to you and me: the dwelling of God is with people. This is why we yearn for *Immanuel*, God with us, in Advent.

—Jeff Munroe

As you pray, thank God that grace is a gift freely given, and ask God to be with you.

An Unexpected and Delightful Gift

*And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one,
the Lord is with you!" (v. 28)*

When was the last time you were totally surprised in a wonderful way? I often travel on behalf of Western Theological Seminary, and this past winter I had the opportunity to go to Uganda to experience the enthronement of the new archbishop, Stephen Kaziimba. My wife, Katie, happened to also have a business trip then and so my parents agreed to watch our children. When we returned to pick up our kids and retrieve our car, we discovered that my parents had installed new snow tires on our car! Their generosity caught us off guard—we were quite surprised by this unexpected and delightful gift.

Our surprise pales next to Mary's. The angel Gabriel appeared and greeted her as "favored one." The Bible says she was "greatly troubled," which is understandable. I'd be greatly troubled too if I saw an angel. On top of that, there was his curious greeting. What had she done to earn God's favor? This is the nature of grace. It is an unexpected and delightful gift, one that we do nothing to earn, one we cannot earn, yet given to us anyway. God smiled on Mary, and through Mary's Son, God smiles on all of us. The angel's simple message: "Do not be afraid . . . for you have found favor with God" is not just for her. It is God's Advent message for us too.

—Andy Bast

As you pray, cultivate an awareness of the unexpected and delightful gifts God has given you.

Unrestricted

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. (21:22)

The unseasonably warm winter day was remarkable. Enjoying a sunny walk through the dunes along the Lake Michigan shoreline, I stuffed my hands deep into my coat pockets and looked up to the sky. There, above the gray, barren tree branches, a bald eagle soared with unmistakable elegance, his white feathered head brilliant against the deep blue sky. As he searched for food, his only barrier was the branches and grass between him and the food he sought.

Theologians speak of the “already, not yet” nature of the kingdom of God. In one sense, with the advent of our Lord, the kingdom is already here. Yet the kingdom’s most complete expression is still coming. This passage gives a vision of what’s coming: there will be no temple, no particular people in control, no need for the light of sun or moon, no shut gates, no barriers. Our access to God’s temple and the Lamb will be unrestricted, for God and the Lamb *are* the temple.

Our experience of the already, not yet is like the eagle soaring unrestricted yet forced to look through nature’s barriers to find life-sustaining food below. We are unrestricted in our access to God through Jesus, but we also deal with sinful barriers of our own construction. We live in between what has come and what is yet to come, in between Christ’s first and second advents.

–Jill English

As you pray, thank God both for what’s here and what’s still coming.

Trustworthy and True

The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”
“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.” (vv. 6-7 NIV)

Just after God painted a picture of a new Eden, in a great city, with a new tree of life for the healing of all nations, John hears the words, “These words are trustworthy and true.” Trustworthy and true. Listen to this in an age of fake news. Hear this confident assertion in a day when misinformation spreads like wildfire. Take it to heart—God’s words are reliable.

Occasionally, my mom sends me emails. She’s 85. I’m 50. She wants to make sure I’m rightly informed on the issues, you might say. Often, she’ll forward something someone sent to her, and I’ll copy and paste the content into Google only to find that it’s a proven lie. It makes me sad because my mom believes it. And when she responds to my plea not to listen to those sources, she says, “Well, who can you trust nowadays?”

These words are trustworthy and true—that God is coming to make all things new, with designs for a global garden-city in which all nations will dwell together in peace. God is coming to make all things new. Count on it.

—Chuck DeGroat

As you pray, thank God that his words are trustworthy and true.

The Joy of Restoration

Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! . . . everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (vv. 4, 10)

In April 2020, my husband, Javier, had a stroke. As the paramedics were putting him into the ambulance, I grabbed my purse to ride along. One of the paramedics said the hospital would not allow family members to accompany patients because of the pandemic. I felt my world collapsing! Javier and I looked at each other wondering if it was the last time. Tears rolled down my face and anxiety overcame my heart.

Isaiah's prophecy speaks to our anxious hearts. Imagine a time when sorrow and sighing shall flee away! This is a beautiful poem and a soothing vision of joy in the glory of the Lord and majesty of our God. I find comfort and hope knowing that the wilderness will bloom, and everlasting joy shall be on our heads!

As I mentioned earlier in the month, my husband needs a heart transplant. He's had several small strokes, and was able to leave the hospital three days after this latest one. Each of these medical emergencies brings me to my knees, praying, of course, for my husband's health but even more for the advent of the glory of the Lord and ultimate fulfillment of his promises.

—Gretchen Torres

As you pray, ask that hope will remain in your heart even amid difficulties and give thanks that tomorrow we celebrate Jesus' first advent.

The Coming of the Lord

And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. (v. 11)

The day is here. Christmas. During Advent, we've longed for the presence of the Lord. At times, we have ached for his coming, for apart from the Lord we are left in darkness, stumbling in the shadow of death.

Today we celebrate that the Lord has come. Many years before Mary and Joseph, the prophet Zechariah envisioned a glorious day when the Lord of the heavens would come to dwell on earth, *and* "many nations shall join themselves to the Lord." With breathtaking drama, the holy Lord will make his home with creation—not *just* with his promised people of Israel, but with Gentiles as well.

The day is here. The God of Israel, the Lord of the universe, has come—in the humble form of Mary's baby. The God of Zechariah comes to dwell in human flesh. Yet, the day is coming. Even as we celebrate the coming of Christ, the story is not complete. Zechariah's vision has not fully come to pass. Until Christ returns to set things right on the final day, we continue to live in a world that aches for the presence of God. Until that day, we have glorious, good news of God's love to proclaim to all nations.

—J. Todd Billings and Katlyn DeVries

As you pray, rejoice that the Lord of the universe has come in Jesus and long for the glorious day when he returns.

What Shall I Render?

What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? (v. 12)

This psalm reflects on a narrow escape from death. An illness almost slayed the psalmist. The sting of death was felt, the victory of the grave imminent. Through every restless night and anguished sob, the psalmist kept faith. The sting of death was felt, but alongside this assurance, the death of God's children is precious to God. Whether he lived or died, he belonged to God, but he longed to live, so in faith he prayed, pleading for mercy, crying out for deliverance.

God delivered. Humbly mystified, the psalmist wondered: "What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?" What could I possibly give? Hymnwriter Isaac Watts offers a fitting reply:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

That's what the psalmist vows to give: his soul, his life, his all.

As I write this, the coronavirus is wreaking havoc. Cases are rising around the world, and everyone is experiencing the crisis in different ways. So on the day after Christmas, what story will the numbers tell? What stories will *you* have to tell? If someone you love died, know their death is precious, not only to you, but also to God. If you have been spared, before God and the world, live life with grateful abandon.

—Sue Rozeboom

As you pray, believe, remember, and give thanks.

Foreshadowing

... he, for whom and by whom all things exist ... (v. 10)

Even after four decades, I still remember when I learned in college about foreshadowing. We were reading John Steinbeck's classic novel *Of Mice and Men*, and our professor showed us how the story's tragic conclusion was suggested earlier in several places throughout the book. Later, I learned the dramatic principle called "Chekov's gun," attributed to the Russian writer Anton Chekov: a playwright shouldn't place a gun on the fireplace mantle in the first act unless it's going to be fired in the final act.

There is a lot of foreshadowing in Christianity. Today, a couple of days after Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus knowing full well that the grim specter of his death is always present. Poems and songs have even been written about how the crude wooden manger foreshadows the crude wooden cross.

But there is more. Our passage from Hebrews speaks of the death of Jesus destroying the power of death. He is called the "founder" of our salvation; other translations use "pioneer" and "leader" to describe how Jesus goes before us. The death and resurrection of Jesus foreshadow our death and resurrection. In this season as we celebrate, worship, and adore the beautiful baby Jesus, never forget how that baby grew into a man who was bruised for our iniquities and wounded for our transgressions. Praise God for that!

—Jeff Munroe

As you pray, remember that the baby Jesus became the adult Messiah who destroyed sin and death.

How Reckless, How Amazing

And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. (v. 13)

Imagine that you are a shepherd with 100 sheep, and after counting you realize that one of them is missing. You don't know where that sheep went, and now you must decide what to do. Do you leave the 99 in order to search for just one? What if a predator descends on the flock while you are away? Wouldn't that be a far greater loss?

A rational shepherd would stay with the 99 instead of going after one. But not so with Jesus. In fact, the way Jesus tells the story, the obvious choice is to leave the 99 and look for the one. What kind of shepherd would do everything for one lost sheep? The kind who places a high value on every single sheep. The kind who loves the whole flock deeply. The kind who knows each sheep by name. The kind who is willing to lay down his life for the flock.

Jesus is that kind of shepherd, a savior who humbled himself completely, emptied himself absolutely, and denied himself totally, to the point of death on the cross, so that we can be reconciled with God. Jesus made it clear that he would do that even just for one of us. As the praise song "Reckless Love" describes it, God's love "chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, / Leaves the ninety-nine." How reckless. How amazing.

–Felix Theonugraha

As you pray, give thanks to God for his deep and incomparable love for us.

Our Past, Present, and Future God

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God,
“who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (v. 8)*

After my woman’s Bible study group spent a year studying the book of Revelation, we came away convinced that God gave his people this book to be a source of deep hope in uncertain times. This hope comes from the conviction that Jesus Christ continues to live and to reign, even though present circumstances may make that difficult to see and believe. This is connected to the belief that Christ will come again to fully and finally make all things right in this world.

The words from Revelation 1 point to these enduring truths as God makes himself known as “the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come.” This passage is full of past, present, and future tenses. We see the present described in verse 5: “Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness . . .” (NIV, emphasis added). We also see the past: by his death on the cross, Jesus freed us from our sins.

Closely wed to these is the promise of Christ’s return in the future, serving as the source of our hope. “‘Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him’ ” (v. 7 NIV). Christ’s triumphal return will have the final word over all sin, death, brokenness, and suffering.

–Kristen Deede Johnson

As you pray, remember that Christ freed us in the past, loves us and reigns over the world today, and will come again to make all things right.

Savor the Good

Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (v. 9)

I love a feast. We mark the holidays by gathering with friends and family to share a special meal together. The sounds of talking and laughing, of beverage bottles being opened, of the clinking of forks and knives tucking in to delicious food, and music in the background all contribute to that warm feeling of delight as we savor the good in it. I was recently in Uganda, and they talk of the joys of fellowship and “swallowship.” Hear! Hear!

Isaiah prophesied a great feast of rich food and good wine. But there was more than food and drink in this feast. The feast was made possible by the Lord swallowing the veil of darkness and death that covered us. Imagine that!

I am thankful for gatherings of friends and family that rehearse the unending joy we will have one day with our Lord, when God will once and for all swallow up the veil of sin and darkness that hides the truth of the gospel. Isaiah saw a day, echoed in the Revelation of John, when God would wipe away our tears and death would be swallowed up forever. Yes, that calls for a feast. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

—Andy Bast

As you pray, thank God for the earthly reminders of the great feast when God wipes away all tears and swallows death forever.

It's Okay

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (v. 19)

The car in front of me grabbed the last spot in the parking garage while a steady rain pelted and wind swirled outside. Parking in the outdoor lot meant struggling against the elements with a toddler in my arms. Grumbling at the driver who “stole my spot,” wisdom and peace came through a sweet two-year-old voice from the back seat: “It’s okay, Mimi.” For all her inexperience in life, my granddaughter is adept at reconciliation. She is quick to forgive, assumes the best, and smooths the rough spots. “It’s okay, Mimi” brought grace to my wearied impatience, instinctively trusting that I would offer the same.

Our passage is appropriate for the year’s end. It’s time to move past the sins of our world, both those committed with intention and those without. Through the work of Jesus Christ, God reconciled us to himself, making the old new and not counting our sins against us. What’s more, God trusts us to extend that same grace to others. He has made us his “ambassadors,” that is, his representatives, and he makes his appeal through us. We can say, “It’s okay,” not because sin doesn’t matter, but because Jesus Christ has dealt with it once and for all.

May the new year be filled with our attempts to outdo each other in love and forgiveness.

–Jill English

As you pray, ask the Spirit to guide you in the ministry of reconciliation. Pray for the courage, wisdom, and strength to do so.