

GLENKIRK CHURCH



WEEKLY DEVOTIONS

# The DEVO

NOV 27 - DEC 1, 2023

# A *light* in the Darkness

ADVENT SERIES • 12/3 - 12/24

# MONDAY

Read **Isaiah 9:2-6; Micah 5:2-4; Luke 2:1-21**

On Sunday the 2023 Advent season commences. Contemporary Christians link Advent to Christmas—gift shopping kicks into hyper-gear, travel plans solidify, lights go up, and trees get decorated in expectation of presents. For most American children, this anticipated season is capped by a supposed visit from Santa Claus, the Messiah peripheral at best. However, Advent has not always been associated with Christmas.

“The word ‘Advent’ is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning ‘coming’ ... During this season of preparation, Christians ... spend 40 days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this celebration; originally, there was little connection between Advent and Christmas. ... By the 6th century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. But the ‘coming’ they had in mind was not Christ’s first coming in [Bethlehem’s] manger ... but His second coming ... as the [world’s] Judge [and King].” (Christianity.com) For example, attention to the lyrics of the beloved carol “Joy to the Word” reveals an emphasis upon the second Advent, not Jesus’ first.

“The Advent season was not explicitly linked to Christ’s first coming at Christmas until the Middle Ages. ... The Church, during Advent, looks back upon Christ’s coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when He returns for His people. ... The four weeks of Advent are broken down into four themes:

1. Hope (or promise) First Week, December 3: Isaiah 9
2. Preparation (waiting or prophecy) Second Week, December 10: Isaiah 30
3. Joy (peace) Third Week, December 17, Matthew 2
4. Love (adoration) Fourth Week, December 24th, John 3” (Christianity.com)

Though commercialism has overwhelmed the story of Jesus’ first Advent mission among most, even hardened unbelievers often have fond memories of this season of “*goodwill toward people*” (Luke 2:14, paraphrased). Accordingly, the Advent season is among the best times of the year to share your faith with family, friends, neighbors, and others not walking with Christ.

During Advent, believers celebrate the Redeemer. And here’s some good news, which is also this week’s theme: the living God can redeem anything.

## QUESTIONS

What will be your emphasis during the coming Advent season? Will you decouple it from Christmas’ rampant commercialism, instead gratefully celebrating and declaring God’s salvation in Christ?

## PRAYERS

Father God, thank You for the most precious Gift ever given, the Savior Jesus! Lord, help us to walk in joyful anticipation of His return, while also embracing every day and every meeting as an opportunity to celebrate our joy in Christ. Prepare our hearts to receive Him anew and share His Gospel with all we know.

# TUESDAY

Read **Psalms 135:13-18; Romans 8:28; 2 Timothy 4:1-5**

Given Advent's anticipation of the Redeemer, have you ever thought of Christmas and Easter as needing God's redemption?

"The name 'Easter' was derived from 'Eostre' ... a Saxon word denoting a goddess ... in honor of whom sacrifices were offered about the time of the Passover." (Christianity.com) In Babylonian and surrounding cultures, this goddess was known as "Ishtar," the goddess of sex and fertility. Rome's parallel was "Venus", the "goddess of love" whom Greeks called "Aphrodite". Canaanite phallic Asherah poles were tributes to their version of this goddess, representing sexuality, potency, and an aggressive threat to outsiders. The fertility theme is why this pagan holiday occurred as spring commenced, thus symbols including rabbits (prolific procreators) and eggs.

Christmas on December 25 likewise has pagan precursors, traceable "back to ancient Roman and Norse civilizations. ... [who] had celebrations of the pagan god Saturn or ... Odin ... to mark the shortest day of the year (the winter solstice) ... [celebrating that] the last planting season had been completed. ... In the Saturnalia festival, the 25th of December ... [its] climax, ... all social hierarchies were overturned. The people, including the Roman slaves, indulged in widespread merrymaking. ... Odin, the ... king of the Norse gods, was a bearded old man who was believed to leave gifts for children." (Rittika Dhar)

"In ancient pagan times, the last day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere was celebrated as the night that the Great Mother Goddess gives birth to the baby Sun God. It is also called Yule. ... Roman Emperor Aurelian proclaimed [December 25th] as ... the festival of the birth of the invincible sun. In 320 AD, Pope Julius I specified the 25th of December as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ. ... In 325AD, [Roman emperor] Constantine the Great ... [mandated] Christmas ... on December 25 [and initiated] movable feasts (Easter)." (Didyouknow.org)

My brother-in-law, John, as an atheist (more here Friday) once declared that "Christmas' and Easter's roots are pagan," attempting to discourage me. Not only was I unsurprised, but I added some related facts which John didn't know. Then I reminded him, "And God can renew anything—even you!"

## QUESTIONS

Would a "John" you know unsettle you with some of the pre-Christian history of pagan festivals that predated and influenced the celebrations of Easter and Christmas? How might you turn such a test around for God's glory, as He has done Himself?

## PRAYERS

Father God, Giver of life and all that is good, thank You for Your redemption and salvation knowable only in Jesus Christ through His sacrifice and resurrection! Lord, please stir hearts—including ours—to draw closer to You during this Advent season. Help others that we know come to know You by finding and following the true Redeemer.

# WEDNESDAY

Read **Genesis 1:26-31; Psalm 8; Luke 15:3-7**

The Advent season points us toward Christmas, where we affirm and celebrate God the Son coming to join us in our fallen plight on a redeeming mission. Our Creator paid the ultimate price so that we could exchange our broken, sinful lives for Jesus' perfectly-lived life and righteous standing with the Father. The Redeemer is fully Man; thus, He is our suitable Substitute, restoring what another man (Adam) had broken. The Savior is fully God, thereby having the capacity to take the sin and rightful punishment of all humankind.

Why does God care so much for the likes of us? Israel's King David pondered this in Psalm 8. Among the reasons: because "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8); because redeeming us fulfills God's purpose in creation—needing nothing and as an expression of His generosity and creativity, God created humans to be in endless, intimate relationship with Him in Christ.

"God is a great artist ... But God's greatest masterpiece isn't [any of countless natural wonders; rather, it] ... is you. ... We are His work of art, ... His poem, ... God's greatest creation ... [and] crowning achievement. ... We look at ourselves and say, 'I don't get it. ... [I'm nowhere near] a perfect person ... [nor] a work of beauty.' But you are a work in progress. ... It is going to take all of your [earthly] life ... [and] won't be completely finished until you get to heaven. Then you will see that you ... are a perfect work of art—God's masterpiece." (Greg Laurie)

Anyone embracing what the Redeemer has done and wants to continue working in His people can realize reconciliation with God and increasing transformation into Christlikeness. There are no qualifications—IQ, social standing, income, and background don't matter. One need only surrender to his or her need for the Savior, renounce sin and follow Jesus Christ to know redemption.

"The crown of God's creation is a new creation ... that can sound the heartbeat of its Creator. That creature, made male and female, reflects God's own relational richness." (BibleGateway) Celebrate this, sharing it with others during this gift-giving season.

## QUESTIONS

Why does Jesus need to be "fully God and fully Man" (John 1:1, 14) in order to be our Redeemer? Why does God care so much for fallen humankind? What does "You are God's masterpiece" mean and how will you manifest this?

## PRAYERS

Lord God Almighty, I cannot comprehend Your goodness and love, but I thank You for the gift of Jesus Christ and the redemption knowable only in Him! If there are any areas where I am impeding the work You wish to continue in my life, please help, Lord, to remove such obstacles. Enable me to bless others in Jesus' name, for Your glory.

# THURSDAY

Read **Lamentations 3:22-23; John 11:11-15, 21-27; 2 Corinthians 5:17-18**

Have you ever pondered the gift that is each day, thanking God with renewed joy and zeal? People who've had a close brush with death often do, even some pre-Christians moved by such events to open their hearts for the first time to God's salvation in Christ.

There are many Bible verses wherein death is compared to sleep: Job 14:12, Daniel 12:2, Matthew 9:24, etc. Such passages anticipate the resurrection from the dead which all—both Christ followers and unbelievers—will experience upon Jesus' return, *“when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out”* (John 5:28-29).

When I arise from sleep each morning, it is a bit like resurrecting to a day of new possibilities. Such a daily fresh start enables me to die to myself increasingly, to *“take up [my] cross daily and follow [Jesus]”* (Luke 9:23) anew. I am grateful that God's mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23)—I need them to be, given my continuing need His forgiveness and enablement for fruitfulness.

When reminded of how far I remain from Christlikeness, I am convicted to know that God will take me only as far as I allow Him. At such times I can relate to the Paul's lament, *“For I have the desire to do what is right ... but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ... Wretched man that I am!”* (Romans 7:18-19, 24). We are implored to redeem the time that God graciously provides (Ephesians 5:16,

Colossians 4:5). Some days, particularly when I am in selfless servant mode, I reflect back at day's end and feel progress in honoring God and growing. Other days—when I've not redeemed the time, perhaps entertaining myself with some fruitless amusement—I am frustrated by my continuing, wasteful self-absorption.

In Christ, God has fashioned me—and continues to—into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). When tempted to ask Him to work faster here, I am reminded that God has provided all that's needed to do His will and follow Christ. Lord, help me redeem the new day tomorrow, honoring Jesus throughout!

## QUESTIONS

Why does the Bible often represent death as sleep? How is awakening with each new day a bit like resurrection? How will you ask God to help you in redeeming the time He gives?

## PRAYERS

Precious and faithful Creator and Giver of good gifts, please forgive me for poorly stewarding my time and Your other blessings. Help me to see each day as an opportunity to serve You, to reflect Your goodness and love to a fallen world. Thank You that Your mercies are new daily—please help me redeem each day gratefully and faithfully!



# FRIDAY

Read **Proverbs 29:9; Matthew 7:6, 28:19-20; 2 Peter 3:9**

On Tuesday I shared a bit regarding my anti-Christian brother-in-law, John. Today, a bit more regarding John, including a recent shift in his beliefs.

John was raised in a dutiful Catholic household. His mother was a heavy-handed religious legalist. Her ways impacted her 10 children significantly, generally negatively. In John's case, his mother's example drove him far from the faith, fashioning him into an outspoken atheist for the 41 years I've known him. In the nearly 29 years since I've accepted Christ, John and I have had numerous faith-based exchanges. Our conversations have not been hostile, but have featured some tension absent apparent fruit.

After years of avowed atheism, John has very recently embraced selected New Age beliefs—he maintains that psychoactive drugs have enabled newfound “enlightenment.” At a recent family gathering, he declared, “Your children choose you.” (This made me wonder, silently, “Did you choose your own mother then? How'd that work out?”) Is John's recent “increased spirituality” progress? The opposite?

In reading today's featured Scripture, note the tension between the first and final two passages. How do I synthesize these regarding my misguided brother-in-law? Should I simply ignore him, avoiding arguments and thereby not “casting ... pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6, NKJV)?

Do I engage John regarding his error, mindful of Jesus' Great Commission in recognition that God is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9, NKJV)? Are my motives loving or driven by a selfish need to be right? Perhaps my right response is situational: Jesus clearly demonstrated that “one size does not fit all” in drawing others to Him—His method with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:6-39) varied from His saving interaction with the repentant thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-42) and the man born blind (John 9), etc.

Honestly, I'm unsure. I continue to pray for John regularly. I try walking with Christ faithfully myself, available to “speaking ... truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). I know that John was made in God's image—however distorted—and loved by Him. And I realize that God can redeem anything or anyone, particularly encouraging as Advent approaches!

## QUESTIONS

Do you have any “Johns” in your life? How do you engage them? Will you pray for them, asking the Spirit to quicken and draw them toward the Redeemer?

## PRAYERS

Loving and sovereign Yahweh, You are mighty to save—thank You for not forsaking us when we err! Among the ways You show Your love, Father, is that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Grant us hearts like Yours, hearts aching for the lost. In gratitude for Your grace, help us love the unlovable even as You do!

## Sources

- Christianity.com's quotes are from <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/what-is-advent.html> and <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/what-are-the-pagan-roots-of-easter.html>.
- Rittika Dhar's quotes can be found at <https://historycooperative.org/pagan-origins-of-christmas/>.
- Didyouknow.org's quote is from <https://didyouknow.org/christmas/history/>.
- Greg Laurie's quotes can be found at <https://www.oneplace.com/ministries/a-new-beginning/read/articles/gods-masterpiece-12125.html>.
- BibleGateway's quote is from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:29-31&version=VOICE>.



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