

PIERCE THE NIGHT

Overcoming Darkness With the Light of Christ

READINGS FOR ADVENT

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It starts, In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God, and he was God.
The story of Advent is the record
Of supernatural invasion. He trod
With us this journey, emerging from Light.
Bright is the True—the First—the radiant Voice
Commanding nothing: Be everything!

White-
Splendored in holy and pure sov'reign choice
Fashioning the heavens, molding the earth,
And breathing into Adam his life-breath,
(For in him was Life and infinite worth)
But this Light of men we traded for death.
Darkness dug deeper, this cancerous root spread,
Our hope: the resurrection of the dead.

**The Word shines in the Night, and the darkness
Does not overcome the One who spoke, Let
There be. Yet this Speaker climbed down to dress
In cursed clay and wore our shattered signet—
He was pierced for our transgressions; the blight
Of each our rebellion crowning his head,
When Father crushed his Son with all the might
That vibrates into being all he said.**

**The long-expected savior of nations
Came first in humble swaddling, but returns
In bloodstained regalia, then his patience
Spent—eyes gleaming with Jealous Love that burns.**

**We join this ancient Advent cry in plight
Of warring present dark:**

O God, pierce the Night!



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Introduction

The weeks leading up to Christmas can often be caricatured with syrupy sentimentality and canned commercialism. Between tinsel, trees, cocoa, Santa's sleigh, presents, and travel, we inhabit a world of distractions each December. The popularity of pithy sayings like, "Remember the reason for the season," only serve as evidence that we need constant reminding.

Advent is one way Christians across the ages have fought hard to keep focused on Jesus amidst a world bent on pointing our gaze anywhere and everywhere else. The value of setting aside a particular season for sustained meditation on eternally relevant realities is not decreasing today, but increasing. Advent was historically a season of fasting and preparation. We remember the longing of the saints of old for the first coming of Christ even as we yearn for his return.

This collection of short, daily Advent readings follows weekly themes drawn from the opening verses of John's gospel. We journey through the full spectrum of Old and New Testament Scriptures as we trace the light of God, the night of sin, the dawn of Christ, and the Day drawing near. We kept these readings short in hope that they would provide launching pads for personal meditation and group discussion.

We pray these meditations on Jesus's First and Second Advent will help you and your family to pause and prepare worshipful hearts this Christmas season. In the midst of all the surrounding worldly holiday cheer, may Christians be a people who clearly see the warring, ever-present darkness of our age with enlightened vision. And may that sight not lead to despair, but compel us to cry out together, "O God, pierce the night!"



November 27

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 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. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before

me.”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (John 1:1-18)

WEEK ONE
The Light of God



THE CREATIVE POWER
AND MORAL PERFECTION OF GOD



November 28



RYAN SHELTON

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

My computer screen is filled with a large white box, and in the upper left hand corner a skinny black line blinks at me, impatient for me to just get on with it and start filling the document with words. I am sure many of you know exactly what this feels like. Maybe it is a term paper, or an important e-mail to a friend, but it feels like just behind your fingertips is a flood of things to say. Where do you even begin? The first words can make all the difference.

Even the greatest authors in the world agonize over the first words in a novel. Sometimes the effects are unforgettable classics:

- Call me Ishmael. (Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 1851)
- Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 1877)
- There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it. (C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 1952)

Imagine for a moment you were going to write a book about—well, everything. How would you begin? If you wanted to send a message that was applicable to everyone who has ever lived, to explain their purpose, their condition, their hope, purpose, and destiny, where would you begin?

Scripture begins with God, “In the beginning, *God*.” Don’t let the familiarity of this passage obscure its significance. The Bible—the most important book in the history of the universe—does not begin with you, or even your problems. That does not mean that you do not matter to God! Rather, it means that in order to understand the role of your life in *God’s story*, you must believe that God’s Word is not first and foremost a story about you.

Genesis is a story of beginnings. You could call Genesis the “seedbed” of Scripture because it contains hints and glimpses of almost every theme that will develop throughout the other 65 books that make up our Bible. You could think of it like the overture to a grand opera, or a trailer to an epic movie. And the opening theme is the most important one—God comes first. There was a beginning to everything except God. *In the beginning, God created*. Even at the beginning of the heavens and the earth, God is already there. He precedes the beginning! In the beginning, God has already rolled up his sleeves, ready to work.

It is appropriate, then, to begin a book of Advent readings here, with God. In order for the groaning and waiting for the coming of the Son of God to make sense, we must know the God we lost access to in the Fall. In order for the night of sin and rebellion to feel truly dark, we fix our eyes on the light of God who is so powerful he could command the *nothing* to be *everything* we know in heaven and earth. Christian, behold your God.



November 29



REGAN MARTIN

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:16–18)

The light of God’s glory is a clear radiance—the splendor of unimpeachable righteousness. The Law that comes from his mouth is as perfect as he is and stands as a measuring rod for human morality. Perfect obedience to the Law is the Lord’s requirement. No commandment is to be amended or compromised. Jesus said that if you relax even the least among them, you “will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

Immediately following this passage, which comes from a sermon of Jesus, he gave this warning: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (verse 20). This statement would have shocked those who heard Jesus say it. The scribes were scholars of God’s Law, and the

Pharisees were devoted adherents to it. “If only two men went to heaven,” a popular saying went, “one would be a Pharisee.” Yet, they engineered a legalistic system of ironically relaxing God’s commandments by adding more to them, and their zeal to keep the Law of God tore their hearts from God himself.

These same scribes and Pharisees accused Christ of being “a glutton and a drunkard” because he loved sinners. In their minds, he was a revolutionary against the Law of God. But in this mountain sermon, Christ clarifies that he came “to fulfill” the Law, which means he came to see it all accomplished down to the smallest iota and dot (verses 17–18).

This sermon signifies one way Jesus fulfilled the Law: in his teaching. On the mountain, Christ preached with authority as the righteous King who interprets God’s Law and reorients us to its radical demands (Matthew 7:29). Jesus searches our hearts and calls us to be “the light of the world” (verse 14). How is this calling fulfilled? By *obeying* the Law of the Lord and *teaching* others to do the same. This way of obeying and teaching is the touchstone for greatness in God’s kingdom (verse 19).

No one enters the kingdom except by perfect righteousness, and so we need Christ to fulfill God’s Law *in every way*, so that in him we might become God’s righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). We glorify our Father in heaven by being perfect like him (verse 48). Advent is a season to remember that Jesus came to be perfect in our place when we could never be, and he is coming again to make us perfect like him forever.



November 30



AARON ADAMS

The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me.... And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. (Exodus 25:1-2, 8-9)

The Tabernacle was not like a contemporary church building, constructed to fit our needs. It wasn't big enough to hold the worshipping community. The acoustics weren't carefully planned to carry the sound of the musicians to all the Israelites. No, everything about the Tabernacle was designed to teach Israel about God. It taught God's holiness and humanity's sin.

The Tabernacle gave the Israelite a chance to approach the Lord in faith. But note where Hannah went to pray for a son: not into the Tabernacle, but outside, near the doorpost (1 Samuel 1:9). The closest an Israelite could come was the altar of burnt offering, out in the courtyard.

Out of all the Israelites, only the Levites could come near to the Tabernacle to serve; of the Levites, only the sons of Aaron could act as priests, entering the Tabernacle to present the people's offerings. Of the sons of Aaron, only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place. These separations were a constant reminder that Israel's sins separated them from their Lord.

The Tabernacle also showed God's saving mission. In spite of human sin, the Lord established the Tabernacle as the place where God would meet with his people (Exodus 25:22, 29:42). But the Tabernacle was not merely a rendezvous point—the Lord called it his dwelling place (Leviticus 26:11).

The Garden of Eden was not a momentary blip lost forever in the Fall, but a clear revelation of God's intent for humanity, which was accomplished finally in Jesus Christ. The Word was made flesh and dwelt, literally "tabernacled" with us (John 1:14). This Jesus died for us, and is now preparing a place for us to dwell eternally with him (John 14:1-3).

The Tabernacle shows the preciousness of the relationship God intends to have with his people. The Creator of stars and mountains has chosen to dwell with us. In case the immensity of that fact is lost on us, God honored his people with the opportunity to contribute their valued things to the construction of the Tabernacle. This was not a hastily-built lean-to. "From every man whose heart moves him," Moses received precious metals and stones, beautiful heartwoods and tapestries, tanned hides or fine oils.

This place is grace enacted and prophesied, and the love of God is lavished upon his people here. Every time Israel saw or considered the beauty of the Tabernacle, they were reminded that they had received a gift that surpassed all others: God himself.



December 1



LUKE HUMPHREY

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite." (Isaiah 57:15)

Israel and Judah were a sinful people. Chosen to be a display of God's glory, they had instead traded the glory of God for idols. This wicked people chose to rebel against the Holy One of Israel in exchange for common idols like the rest of the nations.

And yet, this Holy God—a God who is justly offended by the smallest and subtlest rebellion—does something spectacular. Though he is high and lifted up, though he inhabits a sphere of time that is unfathomable to finite humanity, though his very name is "Holy", *this God promises to dwell with his unholy people*. Those who humble themselves in repentance receive the blessing of fellowship with the Holy God.

As the Holy One, God is exalted higher than any sinful man could hope to ascend. Earlier in Isaiah, God compares the

nations to dust on the scales opposite the weightiness of God (Isaiah 40:15). He looks down on every square inch of his creation and shouts his glory through his stars. He is infinitely and perfectly *transcendent*.

But he is not only transcendent. Our God is just as comfortable dwelling with humbled people as he is in the highest heavens. This exalted God does not wait for us to climb up to him, but instead *he climbs down* to us in order to revive the lowly among us. He is infinitely and perfectly *immanent*.

Then God does something unthinkable: he gives formerly unholy people his Holy Spirit. Those who deserve condemnation instead become the very dwelling place of God. This seems backwards to the human mind; it is truly Divine logic—the Holy God exalts the humbled. The far away God becomes eternally close to his people.

Do you know where we see this the clearest? In the incarnation of Jesus Christ that we celebrate on Christmas. Though he enjoyed *transcendent* fellowship within the Trinity, Jesus humbled himself and became *immanent* to people who hated him. Therefore, God highly and exalted him and gave him the name above every name so that we may praise and delight in King Jesus forever. The Holy God exalts the humbled Christ for all eternity, and we will spend eternity dwelling with him.



December 2



HILLARY KOLSSAK

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? (Job 38:31-32)

Our family enjoys taking weekend trips to rural Wisconsin, and one of our favorite nighttime activities in the country is stargazing. Far from the light pollution of the big city, the nights are dark, and as a result, we are able to view thousands upon thousands of stars in the inky sky.

As we lie on our blanket, gazing up at the heavens, we enjoy picking out constellations and searching for “shooting stars.” Sometimes the stars seem so close, and the canopy of the heavens so near, it feels like you can almost reach out your hand and touch them. But then, as we discuss the immense vastness of space, I realize that those little points of light are actually enormous suns that are millions of miles away.

The universe is indeed beyond our comprehension. When I behold the breathtaking beauty of the night sky, my heart cries out like David in the Psalms, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the

stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:3-4)

The heavens declare the power of the God that created the universe with his spoken word. He is the God who made the great lights, the sun and the moon, and set the stars in their place (Genesis 1:16). He is the God who "binds the chains of the Pleiades and loosens the cords of Orion," the One who "leads forth the Mazzaroth (i.e., the constellations) in their season and guides the Bear (i.e., the Big Dipper) with its children" (Job 38:31-32). What an awesome God we worship!

On those dark, rural nights as I contemplate and reflect on God's awesome, creative power and the vastness of the universe, I can feel so small and insignificant, and sometimes—if truth be told—a little fearful. But as I reflect on the character of God, the God of the heavens of the earth, I remember that he is mindful of us, and of me.

In all that vastness, God sent his Son, the true light that comes into the world, the Morning Star, Jesus, to this earth to live among his creation. The glorious light came to lead a perfect life, to shed his blood on a rough, wooden cross, and to have victory over the grave in his resurrection from the dead. And if I believe in Jesus, the light of the world, I can have a relationship with the Creator God, who "binds the chains of Pleiades." The God who is vast, who is infinite, who is more awesome than the universe, has come so close that I can be in relationship with him. Praise be to God for both his creative power and for his love for his creation!



December 3



AARON ADAMS

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:3-7)

Walking in darkness is a poignant word picture for a life lived apart from fellowship with God—going our own way and blinded by our sinful desires, we have no guide and no hope. This is the natural state of everyone born into this fallen world, until the light of Christ breaks through the darkness of our hearts and makes us alive together with Christ by grace. But something remarkable happens when God rescues us from the darkness—we are brought into fellowship with the Triune God and with one another!

Rescued sinners rejoice in these things. They know the darkness from which they've been saved, they know the surpassing greatness of the Lord who saved them, and they know the price by which they have been purchased. Walking in the light—that is, following and pursuing Christ—will continue to expose our sins.

And though being awakened to our sin is often painful, and potentially embarrassing, it is a cause for joy as well. The exposure and removal of sin is a reminder that we are in fellowship with the Holy One, in whom there is no darkness at all.

But John has a warning for us: you can't be in fellowship with God without being in the light. Imagine leaving Egypt with Israel in the Exodus, and then promptly taking a hard right after the Red Sea. While Israel is following the pillar of fire, you would be wandering into the darkness. Can you say you're walking with God? Sure, you can say it. But the shadows at your feet give you away.

Fellowship with God transforms people, and this transformation is only possible with Jesus. We must ask ourselves, "Has God begun this life-changing work in me, or am I actually walking in darkness?" Those brought to the light are not without sin (see verse 8!), but they are a continually repenting people, being cleansed by the blood of Christ. The enemy would have us believe that we may have fellowship with God without following Christ, without repentance, and without holiness. This Advent, let us reject these lies and find true joy in the light of God.



December 4



KEITH DOYLE

*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.
(John 1:4)*

Have you noticed the obsession our culture has for extending life? We will pursue any formula, vitamin, exercise plan, marketing strategy, or business opportunity that claims to lengthen or enhance our lives. Our inboxes are filled with spam about the newest, latest, and greatest ways to live longer.

The Scriptures offer only one true way to find life, and it's not in some product or plan. If we are to truly grasp life and its fullness we must know its Author. Jesus is God's "Living Word," and as John tells us in this Gospel this "Uncreated One" took on human flesh and embodied human form. Nobody made him the way he is. No force or power, no pill or supplement, contributed to his stature. Even in his coming in the flesh, Jesus is what he has forever been—the Author of life.

This is what Peter meant as he spoke on Solomon's colonnade, "and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses" (Acts 3:15). Jesus

is the very essence of life, and therefore he is not subject to the dominion of death.

This life-giving Jesus is eternal. As far back as you can go in eternity, there is one changeless reality—one divine, unending life. Jesus was willing to share with us everything that he has within himself; he gives life to all created beings. Think about this: the life Jesus shares with us is a life that preceded the creation of the world!

But he also brings light to our lives so that we are not left in the darkness. In our material world light is the condition for life, and without it life quickly degenerates and expires. This is also true in the spiritual world. Without spiritual light, spiritual life cannot last. The life Jesus provides comes with radiant truth and glorious demands for what it means to exist in fellowship with him.

But is this only about living longer? Is Jesus offering us the equivalent of vitamins or supplements? The life Jesus speaks about is spiritual life, saving life, eternal life, which is the opposite of spiritual death now and final condemnation later. Jesus freely gives the life he has in himself to mankind whose very existence depends on it. All of our knowledge, and our affections, and our joy in God spring up and grow from this everlasting life he gives. Jesus is the Author of life, and through the life he provides he brings light and pierces the darkness of death and sin. This is what we celebrate this Advent season.

WEEK TWO

The Night of Sin



THE GROWING REBELLION OF SIN
AND THE DARKENING OF MANKIND



December 5



RYAN SHELTON

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:2)

We are not told in Genesis exactly how this dark, formless, empty deep came about. The text moves straight from “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” which is the first verse, to a chaotic, watery deep in verse 2. That doesn’t mean the earth was somehow eternal. John’s gospel tells us, “without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3) and we already know God created the earth because verse 1 of Genesis told us so.

God chooses to act in such a way that the story of creation shows us wonderful things about himself, so he does not immediately create a garden of light. The story of creation begins with emptiness, darkness. A pitch black canvas of night makes the perfect setting for a fireworks display. God is about to show off.

These words show us what things are like without God’s active creative presence. Before God begins speaking the world is *without form*, meaning there is no shape or distinction. Life without God’s creative presence is like the

Nickelodeon slime I used to play with as a kid. Apart from God's active ordering of reality, our lives deteriorate into purposeless wandering. Also, before the six days of God's working, the world was *void*, empty, and vacant. Living rooms full of family members laughing around the fire, wedding feasts full of happy friends and family member—these are the results of a God who has not only formed, but *filled* his creation. Away from God, our lives are lonely and hollow existences.

The backdrop of creation is darkness over the face of a shapeless, empty deep. This is crucial for the Christian story, because darkness has no real power. Christians are not dualists, believing in two rival forces of good and evil that duke it out in equal strength. There is no duel of the fates when you switch on the light in your bedroom. Darkness exists only in space where light has not yet pierced, and where light shines “the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

How tragic, then, when God's people chose to reject the forming and filling light of God. Shortly after God shapes the world and fills it with pictures of him, his most magnificent portraits—the man and woman made to be just like him—they reject the light of life and choose the night of sin. As a result, creation now fights back against being cultivated, as thorns and decay constantly pull it toward a state of formless, wild chaos. Death and barrenness rob creation of its intended fullness, and even our best relationships too often tend to leave us feeling alone and isolated.

What makes sin so destructive is that we are rebelling against the Creator. To walk away from the one who forms and fills the world with his light and goodness can only go in one direction: empty darkness. The trajectory of mankind's rebellion is a path to de-creation. But even over our darkness, the Spirit of God is hovering with plans for New Creation. This is what we wait for in Advent.



December 6



ROHAN JOHNSON

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. (John 3:16-19)

Some utterances and sentences are nothing short of heavenly. *Jesus Loves Me - This I know, for the Bible tells me so.* Have sweeter, more assuring words ever been sung? Whether from the mouth of a young child, or the thoughtful reminiscence of a mature Christian, the statement is sublime. I may know very little about a great number of things. But one thing I do know - Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so!

The takeaway from this song is clear. Jesus loves us. How do we know that Jesus loves us? Well, the Bible says so. The inquiring mind will undoubtedly have some issues

with this logic. Aren't you begging the question with that type of circular reasoning? Has this song set up a logical fallacy that cannot be supported or relied upon for truth?

Thankfully, Scripture doesn't leave us hanging. Not only does the Bible tell us that God loves us, it tells us exactly how God loves us. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son that we might not perish. What you and I deserve is condemnation, death, and separation from God. Why is condemnation our just judgment? One need look no farther than their own loves to see the answer.

How many times have we walked away from a sinful behavior just to be drawn back in? We love darkness more than we love light. We love our sin more than we love the holiness of God. And so, we deserve condemnation. But God shows his love for us in this: rather than sending his son to condemn us as we deserve, he sent Jesus to die that we may have life.

Though our hearts are still prone to love darkness, God sent light into the world on our behalf. Christmas is part of the most remarkable love story in the history of the world. In this, the epitome of love is exemplified. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Not only do we not receive the death we deserve, we receive the life that only Jesus deserves. Rest in this sweet gospel truth today:

*Jesus loves me—this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak, but he is strong.*

*Jesus loves me—loves me still,
Though I'm very weak and ill;
From his shining throne on high,
Comes to watch me where I lie.*



December 7



MIKE JOHNSON

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” (Genesis 3:6-8)

For a generation like ours that is constantly looking at life through a screen, whether it be our smartphone, tablet, or TV, it can be easy for us to keep a safe distance reading a passage like Genesis 3. We see ourselves as onlookers of a horrible moment in human history, feeling an urge to yell at the characters like we would during a horror film: “Don’t do it!” “Run!” “Someone stop her!”

If we’re honest, this story feels all too familiar. Eve sees something that looks good, a *delight to the eyes*. She buys into the promise that her object of desire, the fruit, will

give her wisdom. Although she knows that God has forbidden man to eat of this tree, she decides it can't be all that bad. She sees a logic in the Serpent's persuasion, and it makes sense to her. But we often find ourselves in this situation, too. And like Adam and Eve before us, we set aside the clear instructions of God in order to steal his good gifts in our timing, for our own imagined benefit.

In this moment, Eve has joined the serpent in open rebellion of God. She has actively denied that he alone is good, right, and wise. She isn't alone in this sin; Adam sat idly by, and joined her in sinning. Adam's passivity is just as dark as Eve's, for he was the one God actually commanded not to eat of the tree.

Sin, at its core, denies God's role as God, pretending he is less than what he is. It is saying to God's face, "You are not my God!" It is fitting that Adam and Eve respond the way they do after their shameful act. Their eyes are opened, and they immediately see what a wicked thing they have done in sinning against God and each other. Their innocence is tarnished and they attempt to *cover up* their shame.

Finally, they hear the footsteps of God Almighty walking near them and they hide. They hide from God. Don't they know that he sees *all*, that there is no hiding from Him? But they have not yet heard of his mercy, his power to save, or his plan to love a rebellious people. Filled with guilt, grief, and shame, they hide from the impending judgment of the God who has already planned their redemption.



December 8



REGAN MARTIN

And he said to me, "Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here." So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel... Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. Then he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, 'The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.'" (Ezekiel 8:9-12)

In the well-known hymn *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*, we find the happy assertion that "hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above." The sun in this metaphor is the "God of glory" and "Lord of love" the hymn addresses. But sadly, the hearts of men do not naturally open to the light of God's glory and goodness.

The knowledge of God's loving lordship should be greeted with the flower of joyful faith, but our God-despising hearts are closed to him into the darkness of idolatry. Paul writes that men have "exchanged the glory of the immor-

tal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Romans 1:23).

We are given a cinematic portrait of this tragic exchange in Ezekiel 8, in a vision given to the prophet by the Spirit. It is the sixth-century B.C., and the shadow of Babylon lies over Jerusalem, the city of God. The temple still stands, but worship of the Lord is in ruins.

In one scene, the prophet digs through a little hole in the temple wall, where he encounters a room full of engravings, with “every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel” (verse 10). Standing before these grotesque images are 70 men, elders of the house of Israel, each with a smoking censer in his hand, worshipping other gods “in the dark, each in his room of pictures” (verse 12).

This ancient idolatry of looking at pictures in a dark room indeed has unsettling contemporary parallels, but this text has a far more reaching application than image-viewing. It speaks to *all* the abominable false saviors we court in secret imaginations, deceiving ourselves that “the Lord does not see us” (verse 12). But he does see.

The text tells us that “the glory of the God of Israel was there” (verse 4), beholding their great offense. A few chapters later, these idolaters would be slain, and God’s glory would depart the Temple. The light would go out, but not without the breathtaking promise that God would remove our idols and give us a new heart—a heart of flesh to replace our hearts of stone (Ezekiel 11:18–20).



December 9



LUKE HUMPHREY

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD... If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. (Psalm 130:1, 3-6)

Christmas is a time of brightness. Everywhere we turn we see stunning lights adorning houses in our neighborhoods. We light candles and plug in the Christmas tree lights and bask in the radiance, knowing that this splendor is justifiable only once per year. The lights bring a sense of peace, of hope and anticipation—Christmas is coming!

And yet, in order for the lights to be fully appreciated, we have to feel the darkness throughout the rest of the year. If we kept our Christmas lights up all year-round, then there would be no need for celebrating during December. No one basks in the beauty of the kitchen lights.

Psalm 130 shows us the darkness that makes the brightness of Christmas so great. The psalmist starts in the depths of darkness and despair. He knows that his sin is an offense against a Holy God. He knows his sin should crush him—*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*

Our sin is our chief problem. We worship the things of this world rather than loving the things of God. We set our minds on temporary pleasures rather than taking hold of Christ as our eternal reward. The consequence of this is darkness—separation from the light of salvation forever. That is the despair that the psalmist feels, that we should all feel.

Psalm 130 does not resolve the darkness. At the end of verse 6 we see the psalmist comparing himself to a watchman in the night who is waiting for the morning. The psalmist is still waiting for the darkness of his sin to be dealt with. But he does not fixate on the darkness; instead he turns his gaze to God and his mercy.

The psalmist remembers that God does not leave us in our darkness, but instead offers his free grace of forgiveness (verse 4). God does not leave us fearing the consequences of our sin, but instead draws us to fear himself. And the way that God offers this forgiveness—the way that he shines his light—is through the advent of his Messiah:

The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. (Matthew 4:16)

The psalmist may remain in darkness at the end of Psalm 130, but he is hoping in the Christmas lights to reveal God's plan of redemption. He's waiting for the dawning of the Light of the World.



December 10



LOUIS KOLSSAK

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

On a summer vacation a few years ago, our family decided to visit one of the largest caves in the southern United States. The cave was a welcome relief to the 100 degree heat that day, and we were delighted to learn that the management had installed an electric system to provide lighting for the tour.

As we descended into the cave, we were fascinated by the cave features, as the spotlights highlighted things we wouldn't have seen without them, including a vast room that could fit several hundred people. At one point in the tour, our guide informed us that he was going to turn off the lights for a moment, so we could experience the cave without the light.

I remember that moment vividly because I had never experienced a darkness like that before. The cave instantly disappeared, as did all the people around me. Even after a few minutes, my eyes couldn't adjust to the darkness. I simply could not see anything. I couldn't even see my outstretched hand in front of my face. I was lost and alone in total darkness.

So it is with those who don't know Christ. They are surrounded by darkness and simply cannot see him.

As believers, we are familiar with the light and accustomed to the notion that Jesus is the "light of the world," but we often forget what the darkness was like before we knew him. Some of us meet him early in life and spend most of our years in the light, but some of us wander in darkness for years, not finding him until later. However, all of us rejoice in the light when we find him.

For those who have not yet found the light, Paul says that the enemy has put a veil over their eyes and is at work, using a full armory of worldly weapons to keep them from seeing Christ. In fact, it's as if they were born in a cave and have lived without light for so many years that they don't even recognize that they need it. The darkness keeps them from seeing the most obvious truth—that they just cannot see. Just like that moment of darkness during our tour in the cave, they are shrouded in darkness and unable to find their way.

There is hope, however, for those still in darkness. In that moment of helplessness in the cave, had someone lit a small candle, or even just a match, all of us could have seen the light and been drawn to it. Advent is a season for us to be thankful for the light, and to be at work to bring the light of Christ to a world still surrounded by darkness.



December 11



KEITH DOYLE

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5)

I like to write lists. They are often my feeble attempt to bring some semblance of control to a disordered world. Each Monday morning I slavishly go through the routine of creating a tidy column of things to do, as if somehow I can master it all by checking off little boxes. Those check marks do give me brief comfort that somehow my chaos can be tamed!

The Bible also has its share of lists. The most famous one is perhaps the list Moses brought down from the mountain. There are other lists, like the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), lists of desired virtues (2 Peter 1:5). Even Jesus's sermon on the mount includes a list, followed by the incredible command, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48).

All these lists announce components of God's unchanging truths. They tell us about God's sovereign perfection in who he is and in all he does. God is holy. In fact the Scripture says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1

John 1:5) – Who then can grasp or challenge his perfect moral light? Who would dare try?

This passage reminds me of a story I heard of a battleship. The ship had been at sea in heavy weather for several days. Night had fallen and visibility was poor in the thick fog.

A report came to the captain, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain called out.

The lookout replied, “Steady, Captain.”

The captain then called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: ‘We are on a collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees.’”

Back came the signal, “Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees.”

The captain said, “Send: I’m the Captain, change course 20 degrees.”

“Well I’m a seaman, 2nd class” came the reply. “You had better change course twenty degrees.”

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send: I’m a battleship. Change course 20 degrees!”

Back came the flashing light, “I’m a lighthouse!”—the captain changed course immediately.

Just like the captain approaching the immovable lighthouse, when our battleships of list-keeping run up against God’s perfect Son, we will lose every time. We will always fail under the weight of His Holy uprightness. God’s light-bearer, Jesus, is far brighter than any rule-abiding

attempt of ours. His immovable moral perfections stand like a resolute lighthouse. We must surrender our sinful rebellion to the light and perfection of the Son of God to not be overcome by darkness. The light of God will always win the contest against our flesh. He will overcome.

WEEK THREE

The Dawn of Christ



GOD'S PROMISE AND PROVISION
OF JESUS'S FIRST ADVENT



December 12



RYAN SHELTON

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

As you recall, the situation in the immediately preceding verse was rather bleak. The earth was a place of watery darkness with no form and nothing in it. The entire physical universe resembled our spiritual condition in the night of sin, lost in empty chaos. The Spirit of God, however, was brooding over the waters like a dove hovering over her nest, which ought to give us great courage. Often it is in our darkest moments that the Spirit of God is preparing his greatest works of creative power.

The silence is broken with a voice: "Be, light!" — word is God's chosen vehicle to work in our world. Throughout all of Scripture, we see God accomplishing his purposes by speaking. This should not surprise students of the Bible because word is something integral to God's nature and character, and precedes creation itself: "In the beginning was the Word... and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

So for God to *speak* creation into being is apparently nothing unusual for the eternal God. It's as though for an eternity before this world came to be, God has been speaking

to himself and communicating truth about who he is in everlasting, radiant beauty. And suddenly, this God decides that the glory is so wonderful, he would like to share it with the world—so he makes a world to share it with!

This sharing of pre-creation glory is what Jesus told his disciples about in his last hours with them before his crucifixion. Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also... [may] see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). And so when God spoke these very first recorded words in history, he took the private love of the Trinity—between Father, Son, and Spirit—and shared it with the world.

Whose voice, exactly, broke the foreboding silence? Whose light pierced the tumultuous night? The Bible’s answer could not be more clear: Jesus, the eternal Son of God, is the agent and the object of God’s display of glorious light. Jesus is the very Word of God (John 1:1). Jesus is the one who upholds the universe by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3). By Jesus, all things were created (Colossians 1:16). Not only is Jesus the voice who speaks, but he is the light that shines. John writes of Jesus that in him was light and life (John 1:4). In Jesus, light has come into the world (John 3:19). Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory (Hebrews 1:3).

Advent is a season where we look forward to the coming of the light of Christ. For generations, the saints of old longed for the Day of the Lord to come and invade the long night of sin and exile. But to the surprise of many, when Christ’s light first came, it did not come in the blazing day of noon, but like the first rays of dawn on the eastern horizon. We marvel at mangers and shepherds, a baby and a cross. Nevertheless, we celebrate that God said, “Let there be light,” and the light has come.



December 13



LUKE HUMPHREY

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29–32)

Simeon had been waiting his whole life for this moment. As a Jew in exile, he longed to see Yahweh’s Messiah who would restore Israel to her former glory. However, his situation was even more unique than his fellow Jews— “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (verse 26). So, the day that the baby Jesus showed up to the Temple was a big day for Simeon.

When Simeon looks on this helpless baby brought to him by these two new parents, he sees something remarkable—the salvation of God. This bundle of joy before his eyes is the climax of God’s plan of redemption.

You can imagine Mary’s reaction to this declaration. By this point, the miraculous conception was over 9 months ago. The memory of the shepherds racing down the hills

to see the new King has faded by sleepless nights with a crying infant. And yet, in her weariness, this new mother is reminded that God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. Mary and Joseph marveled at what Simeon said about their son.

Simeon had been waiting for the son of David who would bring Israel out of exile and establish an eternal Kingdom, yet as he gazed upon this child he saw more than just the glory of Israel. This baby's light would shine to the ends of the earth. This baby's words would be proclaimed to every tongue, tribe, and nation. The glory that this child would bring to Israel would extend to those who were far off in order to bring them near (Ephesians 2:13).

Simeon eventually died and the Lord gathered him to eternal rest. But the vision that he saw is still being spread two thousand years later. Far away nations continue to see the light that Simeon saw. The light is shining in Iran, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia. It is shining in Indonesia, America, and Brazil. And it will continue to shine until the good news of the gospel is heralded to the ends of the earth. A Day is drawing near when Simeon will stand with all nations and sing again about the Lord's salvation:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-11)



December 14



RYAN SHELTON

"By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." (Genesis 22:15-18)

God must love patterns, because the Bible is full of them. Have you ever enjoyed a story so much that you wanted to read a book or watch a movie again? When you read the Bible, you will see certain plots repeated over and over. This is because the story of God's plan to save the world in his Son, Jesus, is so marvelous it deserves to be told in different ways and at different times. Even though God planned this story before he even created the world, he gives pieces and teasers starting as early as Genesis, so that when Jesus finally arrives in the gospels, we have been taught how to see him through pictures and types.

Abraham and Isaac get to tell part of the story of Jesus hundreds of years beforehand. Abraham trusted God's promise that his son, Isaac, would be the channel through

which God would provide a land and a nation. So when God tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain, Abraham believed God was capable of keeping his promise by raising Isaac from the dead, and obeyed (Hebrews 11:17-19). It is in light of this act of faith, that the Lord renews his promises to Abraham (verse 15). Abraham would have a multitude of offspring through Isaac and beyond. And one particular son of Abraham would "possess the gate of his enemies" (verse 17).

The history of Advent is the tradition of looking for this great son of Abraham. All the nations of the earth will be blessed in this son, and he will triumph over his foes. Just like Abraham did not withhold his son, his only son, and received blessing, God the Father did not spare his Son, but gave him up for us all, and in him has given us all things (Romans 8:32). God loves patterns that point us to Jesus.

It was through stories like this one that faithful saints, like Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:22-38), learned to look for the coming of Abraham's heir. It was through Jesus of Nazareth, who came not only for the children of Abraham, but as a light to the nations, that God kept his promise to Abraham that by him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Before Jesus was even a boy, wise foreigners began to seek out this child of Abraham—the light of the world has dawned.

*O star of wonder, star of light,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.*



December 15



MIKE JOHNSON

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God." (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 14)

The role of a shepherd is twofold: to guide and to care for the sheep. In guiding, he is tasked with keeping the sheep from straying. And if a sheep got lost, he would seek it, rescue it from any dangerous situation, and bring it back to safety.

More than guiding, the shepherd also cares for the sheep. He protects the weak sheep from the strong sheep, calmly leads them with his staff, and brings them into pasture for feeding and rest. The sheep are supposed to feel safe in the presence of the shepherd.

Right before our passage (in verses 1-10), God commands Ezekiel to “prophecy against the shepherds of Israel,” because they have utterly failed as shepherds. Instead of providing for the sheep, they provided for *themselves* to the detriment of the sheep. Instead of guiding the sheep, they have scattered them, leaving them to be food for wild beasts.

We ourselves are like straying sheep and need to return to a true shepherd (1 Peter 2:25). The people of God, his sheep, need a better shepherd. Where can we find one?

Emmanuel, *God with us*, came as a man—a baby—to be a shepherd for a people in deep darkness. God declares, “I will seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”

When Christ came into the world, a new dawn appeared for a people who were in darkness, scattered and filthy from their shepherd-less wandering. God hasn’t just sent us new shepherds, but rather has come to *be* the Shepherd. Oh, the beauty and wonder of the intimate love of God for His people, that he should humble himself and declare, “*I myself* will be the shepherd of my sheep.”

Who were the first people to come greet the baby boy born in that Bethlehem manger? They were shepherds, keeping watch over their flock in the darkness of night (Luke 2:8). This boy would grow in wisdom and stature, and stand in front of these wandering people and say to them, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep... I know my own, and my own know me” (John 10:11, 14). Do you know him?



December 16



AARON ADAMS

Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments! ... Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with the man who deals generously and lends; who conducts his affairs with justice. For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever. He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD. (Psalm 112:1, 4-7)

What happens when the light dawns in the darkness? Here's the astonishing thing we see in Psalm 112: God is making us like himself. The one who fears the Lord is clothed in the forever-enduring righteousness of Christ, which is why the psalmist can say of the believer that "his righteousness endures forever" (verse 3). But God doesn't stop his work in us when he declares us righteous by faith. The fear of the Lord—the faith-filled, adoring reverence for God which salvation produces in us—is accompanied by great delight in God's commandments (verse 1).

By God's grace and the Holy Spirit's work in us, the believer becomes gracious and merciful, just like the Lord (verse 4). Notice how God's faithfulness to His covenant (see Psalm

111) is reflected in the steadfastness and justice of the believer (Psalm 112). The fear of the Lord (verse 1) means the believer need not fear anything else (verses 6–10).

Why does the believer become like his Lord? Because the light has dawned in the darkness! The fear associated with sin and death flees like the shadows before the sun. The believer knows the darkness from which he has been rescued and rejoices in the light. How could he not be transformed by it? In the hymn, “And Can It Be,” Charles Wesley wrote:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

When the light of Christ dawns in the darkness of our sin, the Holy Spirit makes us alive together with Christ, so *that* we would walk in good works like those of Jesus himself (Ephesians 2:4–10). This is his goal in our salvation—not merely to rescue us, but to “re-image” us. As a result, saved people become Christ-like people, and a God who can transform sinners like you and me can surely preserve and protect us from anything else that comes our way.

This is why the one who fears God need not fear anything else. Note how verse 1 begins with the fear of the Lord, and verses 6–7 end with trusting the Lord. Paul says the same thing in Romans 8:29–31:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he

justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

The light has dawned in the darkness. Fear not! You are redeemed. Follow your Lord. It's what you were made for.



December 17



MIKE JOHNSON

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near... For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said...“Behold, I have come to do your will.”... And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified... Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. (Hebrews 10:1, 4-7, 10-14, 18)

The existence of a shadow points to the existence of something greater, something more complete. Not only do shadows show only a portion of the reality, but they often can be a distortion of the real thing. Because of this, the people of God often see the Law, or even the sacrifi-

cial system, as their means of justification or reconciliation with God.

The author of Hebrews, however, reminds us that these things are but a shadow of the good things to come in Jesus. Clearly the sacrifices offered by the people of God did not *actually* deal with the real problem of the sinfulness of man. Nor could the sacrifice offered by the high priest every year for all the people truly fix the sin problem. Rather, these institutions existed to show us a picture of the way that we would actually be justified, that is, by a sacrifice made once and for all.

The sacrifice of Jesus carries finality. When Christ offered a single sacrifice, he “sat down,” and by that action we see Christ’s enactment of his final words on the cross, “It is finished.” By one offering, Christ has “perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” The forgiveness that all those people of God would seek every year through the sacrificial system can now be found, completed, in Jesus.

Why then do we sometimes try to continue offering sacrifices to God in an attempt to make things right? Why is it that when we feel at odds with God, we go straight to our list of good deeds or religious acts to try to fix things? After all, God never ultimately wanted our sacrifices or our burnt offerings in the first place (see also Psalm 51:16, 1 Samuel 15:22).

Rather, he wants us to see our sinful wretchedness, our needy hopelessness, and look to the only one who could possibly save us from ourselves. Our utter weakness to rid ourselves of our darkness of sin ought to turn our heads toward the shining hills—toward the light of the dawn of Christ.



December 18



ROHAN JOHNSON

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:9)

There are moments in your life that are so memorable that you are certain that they will be burned in your brain for as long as there's breath in your lungs. It could be major life-changing event like exchanging vows with the love of your life, witnessing the birth of a child, or maybe even the death of a loved one. Or perhaps it could be a seemingly insignificant occasion such as your first taste of ice cream, or a Christmas carol that has been stuck in your head for years.

One such moment for me occurred in Mrs. Rich's fifth grade classroom. Our desks were arranged in a circle around the perimeter of the classroom. In the center of the circle stood a single wooden stool, and on top of the stool sat a tall candle. We looked around the room at one another exchanging confused expressions. The classroom was already fully lit with rows of bright fluorescent lights overhead, doors ajar with light coming in from the hallway, windows open with the sun shining.

Mrs. Rich lit a match and held it to the wick of the candle long enough for the flame to catch. She looked at each of

us and soberly explained “This flame represents the light of Christ.” She gently shut the classroom doors, blocking the light from the hallways. The teacher spoke again, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Mrs. Rich flipped the switch to turn off the fluorescent classroom lights overhead. The darker the room became, the brighter the flame on the candle appeared to shine. She made her way to each of the windows shutting them one by one. Until finally, the only source of light in the room was the candle itself.

We sat in silence, staring at the candle in the center of the room. And again, we looked up to see each other’s faces. But this time, when I looked at the faces of my peers, it wasn’t confusion that I saw. Across from me were faces illuminated by the flickering flame in the center of the room. Not a single face was left in the dark. Every once-doubtful face now glowed from the light of the candle before us.

Light reveals that which was veiled in darkness. It displays truth and reveals deceit. Light does not discriminate against ugliness or beauty, but exposes both equally. *The true light gives light to everyone.* Under the light of the holiness of Christ, the sinfulness of man is fully apparent. No one can hide from the light or remain unaffected by its glow. When the light of Christ came into the world, not a single soul was left hidden. Amazingly, the same light that reveals our sin, shows us the way to salvation.

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth*

WEEK FOUR
**The Day Draws
Near**

ANTICIPATING THE SECOND
ADVENT AND CONSUMMATION OF ALL
GOD'S PROMISES



December 19



RYAN SHELTON

And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:4)

God is not a God of confusion. Over and over again in the first chapter of Genesis we see the Lord separating and dividing, categorizing and making distinctions: light and darkness, day and night, land and sea, heaven and earth, male and female. He may have his own purposes for different items, but shades of gray are more a product of our own fallen human limitations than intrinsic to God's nature.

This ability to separate is one of the ways God manifests his holiness. He makes distinctions in order to preserve his judgments. God saw that *the light* was good, and so he wants the intrinsic goodness of the light to be consecrated from the darkness, and so he separates the two. This theme pervades the rest of Scripture. We saw God's desire to have a sanctified space in the Tabernacle and Temple. God sets apart a people to be his own possession, to be separate from the world in order to reflect his own uniqueness.

But as a result of the fall, de-creation night has blurred what ought not to be blurred. In Adam and Eve's quest

to have the knowledge of good and evil when they were not permitted to do so, mankind has lost the ability to ultimately know right from wrong. We are prone to deception from Satan's influence, and even our own hearts lead us astray (Genesis 3:13, Jeremiah 17:9). For a certain period of time, God has ordained to allow some categories to be less than perfectly clear as a result of our fallen condition. Sheep and goats graze the same field (Matthew 25:32), and wheat and tares grow together (Matthew 13:30).

This confusion is not how God intends for his creation to ultimately be. His patience is a gift to lead us to repentance, but God always intends for the light to be seen as good by separating it from the darkness. Jesus said that when his angels come to gather and toss out of his kingdom all the law-breakers and sons of the evil one, "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43). He will place the sheep on his right hand, and welcome them into "the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). But to the goats on his left, he will send them "into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

The Lord Jesus is far too pleased with the goodness of his New Creation to let it be forever obscured by the chaos of sin and darkness. In the period between the First and Second Advent, we live between the dawning rays of kingdom light and the burning light of noon-day. We share the good news of God's reconciliation by the cross of Christ as long as his patience lasts. All the while, we long to see the Day of Christ's return, when he will wipe every tear and make every wrong right.



December 20



LUKE HUMPHREY

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:29–31)

The first Christmas passed without much notice. Besides Mary and Joseph, only a handful of shepherds caught wind of the Advent of the Messiah—the one who would fulfill all the Law and the Prophets. It was an intimate gathering that was hidden from the eyes of the world.

In these verses, Jesus is not describing his First Advent but his Second Advent. His earthly ministry is drawing to a close and he is moving towards the cross. While the first Christmas symbolized a time of peace and proclamation,

Jesus's ministry also brought a sword in the midst of Israel. Families are divided against each other. And the dividing line is the supremacy of Christ (see Matthew 10:34–39).

There are ultimately only two groups: those who love and treasure the Son of God, and those who rage against him. The group that we find ourselves in makes all the difference for how we receive the Messiah at his Second Advent.

This Second Advent will not be hidden or intimate; it will be on public display. Jesus's glory will not be hidden in the flesh of an infant, but will rip through the clouds and pour out from the heavens. Jesus's power will not be manifested in weakness any longer, but will be painted on the sky.

However, some things stay the same between the two Advents. The world is still divided into two groups. Those who reject Jesus's first coming in meekness will surely reject his second coming in might. We ought not to be fooled in thinking that we will love the return of Christ if we don't love his kingdom now. Those who loved Christ's supremacy in his First Advent will rejoice in his return.

Christmas is a time for celebration and also for examination. Do we love the glory of Christ more than the presents and the pomp? Do we delight in our earthly families more than our Heavenly Father and spiritual brothers and sisters? The good news of the time between the first and second coming is that the day of repentance is still at hand. We can still put down our pride and take up our cross.

And what we will find is that through losing our life we will find it.



December 21



CRANDELL HEMPHILL

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:4-8)

The Day of the coming of the Lord will be filled with the glory of God, as his power and majesty are on full display for the peoples of the world. This is a Day that has been long-awaited since Jesus's ascension. He is coming back again! Is this something we are ready for? As the Day draws near, are we growing in anticipation?

We have been made children of light, entrusted with the Gospel, "not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts" (1 Thessalonians 2:4). And when the Thessalonians heard the Gospel, they became children to a loving Father. As children, they seek to please their Father, who is light (John 8:12, 1 John 2:8), making the Thessalonians

children of the light. For when it is light during the day, the children of the Lord are awake, not sleeping; sober, not overcome by drunkenness. They are alert so that the coming of the Lord will not catch them off guard.

Imagine how hard it would be to respond to a home burglary while you were sleeping. Even if you were to wake, your movements would be confused, and you would be incapable of reacting quickly or appropriately. As children of the light, however, we have been called to the opposite—to be prepared.

By the grace of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been entrusted to us as means of hope and readiness, to prepare for the Day of Christ's return. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to live with the sharpness that comes in the day (verse 8), not the disengaged nature of those in the night (verse 7). To the child who is awake and alert, that Day will come as no surprise, but rather a fulfillment of a promise. So we await that Day awake with eager expectancy, and we work hard to wake up others to the coming of the Lord, wearing the armor of faith, love, and hope.

Don't let the days leading up to Christmas lull you into a worldly slumber. Let us keep awake and sober. There is hope in the coming of the Lord!



December 22



AARON ADAMS

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, "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." (Isaiah 25:6-9)

The mountain described here is Mount Zion (Isaiah 24:23), but the salvation declared here is for "all peoples!" They all say, "Behold, this is our God!" Here is a gorgeous picture of the final fulfillment of God's promise that in Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). The veil of Death is not just peeled back, but "swallowed up" on Mount Zion, and utterly destroyed forever.

This promise is established, ratified, and guaranteed in the resurrection of Christ—he is the firstfruit, and we are the

harvest which will be gathered in at his return (1 Corinthians 15:22-26). How do we know he will swallow up death forever? Because he has already dealt death the killing blow in his resurrection. And yet, here we are, still under the veil. How should Christians wait for our God?

First, we should wait with hope and longing. Do you think it's any coincidence that the Lord gave Isaiah a message that makes the hearers salivate? The thought of a feast fit for the King makes a hungry belly growl. We are promised a feast, and we should be preoccupied with it. Are your thoughts continually drawn back to our blessed hope, the return of Christ? If not, take a moment to read this passage and Revelation 21:1-4. Savor each promise and consider what this means for you and your loved ones who are in Christ. We hope.

Second, we should wait with tears. Do not pretend that Death is a gentleman. The consequences of sin are devastating, and our tears acknowledge this reality. As Christ wept for Lazarus, we should mourn the consequences of sin. Let our hearts be broken, but not without hope. The hopeful yet broken heart is one that will be serious about the Great Commission, knowing that the Lord is sending us to call others to the feast. Will you join us at the table?



December 23



MIKE JOHNSON

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

When pondering what it means to be “in Christ,” it can be easy to become overwhelmed by the massiveness of the abstract idea, and instead make our home in the world of “practical” thinking. But this mystery should carry with it a sense of awe and wonder.

To be included in Christ, having been raised with him, is such a wonder to the Christian. That a wretched sinful being should be brought so near to God, receiving such wondrous grace, may not always baffle the mind, but it surely confounds the heart.

Paul is declaring that our “life is hidden with Christ” and that when Christ appears again we “also will appear with him in glory”. Our utmost self, the very essence of our identity, has been so united with Christ that Paul says it

is “hidden” with him. On that Day when he appears in the glory of his second coming, we also will appear in glory.

It’s as if a part of us—and not just a part but the centerpiece—is eagerly awaiting his return, awaiting the moment when it can burst to its fullness and overthrow our measly, sin-weakened flesh. We indeed will truly come to life on that Day.

So then, we must trust our hearts when they remind us that we are not fully at home yet. We must not look to the things of this world to satisfy our soul, but rather we ought to “seek the things that are above” and “set our minds” on these things. One way we do this is by looking forward to Christ’s return.

Let us not be caught off guard in a moment of weakness, foolishly clawing for the things of the world when he comes again with eyes ablaze in jealous love. Instead, let us fix our full hope on him alone and join with the multitude of redeemed praying, “Lord, hasten the Day!”



December 24



RYAN SHELTON

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter 1:16-19)

We have been reflecting on the promise of the return of Christ, hoping for the great Day that draws near when Jesus finally brings all of his promises to their completion. Today is Christmas Eve, and many of us can remember (or still experience!) a heightened sense of anticipation on this day. As a child, I certainly hoped in cleverly devised myths on Christmas Eve, listening for hooves on the roof and footsteps in the living room. I was very concerned by the lack of a proper fireplace, wondering if Santa could manage to squeeze through our electric furnace.

As Christians, we have far greater certainty of our hope than poems about new fallen snow and miniature sleighs. Eye-witnesses stood with Jesus on a mountain as the Father showed them what Jesus's radiance would look like when he returned in full glory. They heard God's voice boom out of heaven with praise for his Son. Men and women watched agape as Jesus ascended into the clouds until angels had to come and break up the party and send them all home. You might think to yourself, *If only I had been there on the mountain, all this would be easier to believe.*

In our text, the apostle Peter—one of the men who was on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus—tells us something that seems unthinkable. He says “we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed” (verse 19). As amazing as the mountain-top experience might seem, Peter tells us that as “men spoke from God... carried along by the Holy Spirit” (verse 21) they have left us something even more precious than a vision of Jesus's Second-Advent glory.

Let that sink in. Peter urges us to pay attention to the prophetic word about our Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures. God's word is like *a lamp shining in a dark place*. This is what will sustain our faith until the Day of Christ's return. Let all the anticipation of Christmas Eve be a tutor for your heart. You have more hope of Jesus's return than you do that Christmas morning will come tomorrow. Why? Because Jesus gave us his word, “Behold, I am coming soon.”



December 25



AARON ADAMS

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Revelation 21:23)

Glory is a distinctively religious word. Even in everyday situations, it carries connotations of weight, renown, adoration. A *glorious* sunset shines with awe-inspiring colors. When we say a soldier or athlete receives *glory*, they have done deeds of unusual greatness. Witnessing something glorious is like seeing through the brokenness of the world to the perfection we were meant for—even if we don't know it. Glorious things are weighty, worthy, and bright. This is why the word seems so tied to the religious impulse that even the atheist can't escape. We are meant to see and seek glory.

When the light of Christ dawns in our hearts and calls us out of the darkness, we meet someone more glorious than anything in creation, and we begin to see why those other

things appeared glorious. It was because, even dimly, they reflected his glory.

Christ's genius is mirrored in the astonishing Hubble telescope photos, but apart from the knowledge of God, we honor the mirror. His beauty and love are echoed in Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, but if we have not heard the Gospel, we praise the echo. When he frees us from the chains of sin and the veil of death, we see who we were meant to praise. Our glory is as weighty as a reflection, but his is of singular and unfathomable gravity.

Unlike the selfish glory-seekers among us, however, God intends that his glory would bless others. Paul prays "that our God may make you worthy of his calling... so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you" (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12) When God is glorified in us, we get to bask in and share his glory. In the light of his grace, we shine like stars because his worth will be perfectly shown in us.

The Word made flesh is a foretaste of eternity—God tabernacling with man. Revelation shows us the whole-new-world completion of what Christ began when he came as a child. This dwelling together of God and man is what Eden, the Tabernacle, and the Temple all foreshadowed.

In Christ, the light has already dawned—the night is far gone, and the Day is at hand (Romans 13:12). But there is a Day coming when the last shadows flee at the coming of the Lamb, and we will see him face to face and be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2, 1 Corinthians 13:12). The light of his glory will conquer the darkness of all sorrow. As we celebrate Jesus's first coming this Christmas, let us ache for the last shadows of night to be pierced and overcome by the glorious Day of Christ's return.



