

## Hope in the Time Between: An Advent Reading Guide

If you've ever been lost while walking through a forest, then you'll know just how alarming that sense of disorientation can be. The trees seem to cloister, their branches reaching out, as you scramble to find anything that looks familiar, anything to push back the rising panic threatening to crest and fall like an unrelenting wave. The light filtering through the leaves no longer carries the soft warmth it once did but, rather, serves as an ominous reminder of the fading daylight and approaching dark. Things bear a sinister edge when you're lost.

What you need in those disoriented moments of panic is perspective. You need the vantage point found at the top of a hill or in the upper limbs of a tree to provide purchase for your sanity as you regain a proper sense of direction. Only when the miles behind and the destination ahead become clear are you able to move your feet confidently toward home.

It is a terrible thing to be lost. Perhaps you have felt that way a great deal over these last several months, hoping that once you finally come over the next rise in the road, you'll feel confident but, instead, find yourself more confused than ever before, holding questions that pound like a drum over and over again in your mind. What's true? How should I respond when it seems like conflict is the only language anyone speaks? Why is there so much fear? What does it mean to be a Christian in this mess? What might God be doing in all of this?

We need high ground, a space to consider where we've been and where we're heading so that we can rightly fix our location and forge ahead. Advent offers us that vantage point. Conflict, confusion, and a sense of disorientation are nothing new for the Church. Karl Barth once said, "What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent?" What did he mean by that? Fleming Rutledge answers for us:

"Advent calls for a life lived on the edge, so to speak, all the time, shaped by the cross not only on Good Friday but wherever and whenever we are, proclaiming his death to be the turn of the ages "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The gospel is incarnate in our lives in "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4), not in a faraway empyrean but in "the sufferings of this present time," which are endured because of the promise that they "are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18)

In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time. It can well be called the Time Between, because the people of God live in *the time between* the first coming of Christ, incognito in the stable in Bethlehem, and his second coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead...Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our

faith requires.

The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that Advent tension, the church lives its life.” (Rutledge, *Advent*, 7.)

The tide of ages has transformed the curve of the coastline where the Kingdom of God meets a world groaning in anticipation of a coming glory, but it is here that the Church remains stationed. There is still the siren song of idols that has been sung for innumerable generations. There is still the intoxicating aroma of power and wealth that invites us to abandon all in our pursuit. There is still the language of pride with which we recite our corporate creeds as we worship at the shrines of our base desires. This is the ground the Church occupies. This is the ground the Church has occupied since Christ told us to wait and watch, and so we wait and watch and hope.

Here we find the somber beauty of Advent: as we wait, we remember. We remember that our Savior's hard-won victory over sin and death and our Enemy is assured but not yet ours in full. We remember that the pain we might feel now vanishes like a vapor when held up to the glorious light of eternity. We remember that love and peace and joy and hope aren't just seasonal vocabulary embroidered on dish towels, but they are the language of the Kingdom that has come and one day will come. So as we anticipate our celebration of Christ's birth, let us get our bearings as men and women who are situated precisely in this in-between, acknowledging the grief of sin, anticipating the glory of eternity, and allowing the holy beauty of our promise-keeping God to shape our hope in the midst of it all. May we, filled with joyful anticipation at the coming of Christ, spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere this Advent season (2 Cor 2:14).

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*It is our sincere hope that this guide provides you with a tool which will serve you well as you dedicate time and space in your life to sit with the Lord this Advent season. These meditations, musings, and questions are intended as a means of encouraging you, challenging you, and pointing you toward the power and beauty of communion with the Lord as you spend time in God's Word. We all need hope and comfort and rest right now. We trust that the Lord will be faithful to meet you as you seek Him. May the somber yet hopeful honesty of Advent, and the celebratory joy of Christmas, strengthen your faith and heighten your anticipation of the glorious return of King Jesus.*

## Advent Week 3

*Where Are We Now?* | 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

The Apostle Paul loves athletic imagery. In Philippians 2:16, he speaks of wanting to make certain that he has not run his race in vain. He says something similar in Galatians 2:2 and, in his second and final letter to Timothy, he says, famously, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” If the race that we’re running is life, there is a sense in which the biblical exhortation is to lift our eyes to the finish line, to make certain that we keep the prize of eternity before us so that, with *that* future before us, we press on. That’s a bit of what we sought to do last week as we considered Revelation 21:1-4, seeking to juxtapose the light of eternity with the lamentable darkness of sin and suffering in the world. And that is right and good.

But this race that we are running, this life of following Jesus, is still difficult. We feel the miles in the aching muscles of our souls. We are wearied from the weight of resisting the pull of this world. We can fix our eyes on the finish line of eternity, to the joy set before us. However, it still feels a long way off, and we wonder — when we let ourselves drop the pretense and be honest — how we’re going to make it.

That weakness we feel, that sense of self-awareness that leads us to recognize our own limitations and shortcomings, wasn’t lost on Paul (or the other biblical writers). Our passage this week, 2 Corinthians 4, is a prime example of that. Here we are reminded that the Kingdom of God is upside down, that perceived weakness is, in fact, the space where the Lord can demonstrate *His* strength. It’s where we are reminded that we cannot muster up the fortitude and will to plod the hills and miles on our own. We need Him. And the Lord isn’t repulsed by our neediness. In fact, He draws us near because of it. He reminds us that it isn’t just a promised future that compels us forward, but the voice of the Spirit also reminds us that the Lord is faithful in the *right now* mess of our lives.

Would you, this final week of Advent, ask the Lord to remind you of your deep need for His sustaining grace, to remind you that His faithfulness to you is not limited by your faithfulness to Him, and allow you to rejoice that this is true: “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

Below you’ll find a suggested schedule for daily time in God’s Word. We hope that this provides helpful handrails, with specific Scripture and prompts related to our text and message each week so that you feel equipped to spend time with the Lord this Advent season. These passages and questions are intended to provide brief but meaningful moments of Scripture meditation and prayer each day. Life is surely busy. Would you be intentional to pause and spend time with the Lord? He knows you, He loves you, and He desires to meet with you.

### **Monday Morning**

*Read* | Luke 2:21-38

*Pray* | Allow Simeon's words of praise shape a prayer of gratitude.

### **Monday Evening**

*Read* | 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

*Pray* | Confess your weakness to the Lord. Offer gratitude for his grace. Prayerfully meditate on heaven.

### **Tuesday Morning**

*Read* | Luke 2:21-38

*Pray* | Consider the Lord's faithfulness and offer a prayer of thanks.

### **Tuesday Evening**

*Read* | 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

*Pray* | Confess your weakness to the Lord. Offer gratitude for his grace. Prayerfully meditate on heaven.

### **Wednesday Morning**

*Read* | Luke 2:21-38

*Pray* | Use the example of Simeon to pray for faithful anticipation of the Lord's movement in your own life.

### **Wednesday Evening**

*Read* | 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

*Pray* | Confess your weakness to the Lord. Offer gratitude for his grace. Prayerfully meditate on heaven.

### **Thursday Morning**

*Read* | Romans 8:18-30

*Pray* | Consider the effects of sin as you see them in the world and offer a prayer of lament.

### **Thursday Evening**

*Read* | 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

*Pray* | Confess your weakness to the Lord. Offer gratitude for his grace. Prayerfully meditate on heaven.

### **Friday Morning**

*Read* | Romans 8:18-30

*Pray* | Offer a prayer of gratitude for the ministry of the Spirit in your life.

### **Friday Evening**

*Read* | 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

*Pray* | Confess your weakness to the Lord. Offer gratitude for his grace. Prayerfully meditate on heaven.

### **Saturday Morning**

*Read* | Romans 8:18-30

*Pray* | Meditate/pray in response to the promised work of the Spirit to carry even our unspoken requests before the Lord.

### **Saturday Evening**

*Read* | 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

*Pray* | Confess your weakness to the Lord. Offer gratitude for his grace. Prayerfully meditate on heaven.

**7** But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. **8** We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; **9** persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; **10** always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. **11** For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. **12** So death is at work in us, but life in you. **13** Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, **14** knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. **15** For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. **16** So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. **17** For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, **18** as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

**2 Corinthians 4:7-18**

**21** And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. **22** And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23** (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") **24** and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." **25** Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. **26** And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. **27** And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, **28** he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

**29** "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;

**30** for my eyes have seen your salvation

**31** that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

**32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel."

**33** And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. **34** And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed **35** (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

**36** And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, **37** and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. **38** And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

**Luke 2:21-38**

**18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. **20** For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22** For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. **23** And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. **24** For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**26** Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. **27** And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. **28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. **29** 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. **30** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

**Romans 8:18-30**