

First and Second Advents

According to the Christian calendar, Christians do not celebrate the Christmas season in the weeks leading up to Christmas Day. We celebrate Advent.

A quick look at Merriam-Webster reveals two principal definitions of the word "Advent": 1) "The period beginning four Sundays before Christmas and observed by some Christians as a season of prayer and fasting"; and 2) a: "the coming of Christ at the Incarnation" and b: "SECOND COMING." "Advent" derives from the Latin *adventus*, "arrival." It customarily translates the Greek word for "coming" (*parousia*) employed throughout

the New Testament to refer to the second coming of Christ.

Today, then, we identify Advent as a season in the Christian liturgical calendar designed to prepare worshipers for "the coming" of the Lord. Our observance of Advent immerses us in the rich biblical history of Israel's expectations of His coming, as well as the Christian celebration of Christ's first coming and eager anticipation for His second coming.

The Old Testament and the Coming of God

Advent has its roots in Israel's deepest yearnings for God's justice and salvation. The Hebrew prophets looked forward to "the day of the Lord" as God's decisive coming as Warrior, Deliverer, and Judge. God would bring destruction to Israel's foes and salvation and blessing to His people (e.g., Isa. 13:6, 9; 14:1-2).

Isaiah may rightly be called "the Advent prophet." Clearer than any other prophet, he saw a complex series of events surrounding God's coming. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. . . . Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end" (9:6-7).

Isaiah also set the tone for how God's people would await this coming. God's coming would bring comfort to a people enduring the grievous penalty of exile for their sins (40:1-2). Thus, they would celebrate with shouts of expectation: "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (v. 3). However, God's coming also would be met with lamentation and penitence in light of the hard-heartedness and disobedience of God's people (64:1-12).

Isaiah is the only prophet who spoke of "the servant" of the Lord, God's "chosen one" who was specially endowed with God's Spirit (42:1). He would restore Israel (49:3-5) and be a light of salvation for the Gentiles (v. 6). Most surprising, this servant would suffer and bear the sins of God's wayward people: "He was crushed for our iniquities" (53:5).

Clarified by the New Covenant

The Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming of God, or the day of the Lord, are often difficult to decipher. It is usually unclear as to when and how prophetic events will unfold. Biblical scholars commonly understand the "prophetic perspective" of the Old Testament to be like someone

looking far off into a range of mountains. In the field of vision, the prophet sees many features of the landscape clustered together, as though all of them were in the same location. Yet, in fact, one mountaintop may be many miles more distant than another that looks as if it were right beside it.

Thus, the prophets saw the day of the Lord as one historic event or a series of events happening in quick succession. The New Testament clarifies this perspective, revealing that God's coming is separated into at least two separate events: Christ's first and second advents.

The author of Hebrews provides us with the most explicit reference to Christ's coming in two stages. First, Christ "appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9:26). Then: "He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (v. 28). This understanding is basic to the message



In the weeks leading up to Christmas day, Christians celebrate a season called Advent. Advent is the Christian celebration of Christ's first coming and eager anticipation of His second coming.

of the whole New Testament on the “already and not yet” character of the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection inaugurated God’s reign. Jesus began His ministry with the proclamation: “The time has come, . . . the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). The exorcisms Jesus performed signaled the presence of the kingdom (Matt. 12:28 // Luke 11:20). His teaching, preaching, and healing were crucial to its inauguration (Matt. 4:23—9:38). Jesus came as the Servant of the Lord (3:17; 17:5; cf. Isa. 42:1), who bore the suffering and sin of God’s people already in His healing ministry (Matt. 8:17; [cf. Isa. 53:4]; Matt. 12:18-21 [cf. Isa. 42:1-4]). However, the fulfillment of the role of the Suffering Servant was in Jesus’ “ransom for many” (Mark 10:45 // Matt. 20:28 [cf. Isa. 53:10]) which took place when He was crucified. His resurrection and exaltation to God’s right hand sealed His position as the Son of David, the Messiah, and Lord (Rom. 1:3; Acts 2:33-36).

Jesus’ teachings point to a future coming of God’s kingdom—what theologians associate with the second coming and final judgment. We articulate Jesus’ vision when we recite the words from the Lord’s Prayer: “Your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10) or when we repeat future blessings promised in the Beatitudes (5:3-10).

Whereas Jesus’ first coming was a triumph over evil and death through His suffering, His second coming will be marked by glory. This coming will occur at “the end of the age” (13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20), the time of the final judgment (19:28; 25:31), and the consummation of God’s kingdom.

Meaning for Today

It is clear from Scripture that the coming of God’s kingdom occurs in connection with Christ’s first and second advents. What does this mean for us today?

Jesus’ first coming means that we can experience the kingdom of God as “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17) and as the presence and “power” of God in our midst (1 Cor. 4:20). Believers can be confident that they have already passed from death into life (John 5:24), that God “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col. 1:13).

Each of us ought to expect the second coming as the time when all wrongs will be judged (Matt. 25:31-46; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15) and when the Lord “will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:18). The interval of time between Christ’s first and second comings gives us ample time to re-

spond to the gospel offer of repentance and forgiveness of sins (Acts 17:30; 2 Pet. 3:9).

In the meantime, we need to await Christ’s second advent with eager anticipation. Whether in times of persecution or of peace, we need to live in accordance with our holy calling, so that we are ready for His coming.

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Think about it . . .

- ✓ How does the Christian season of Advent reflect the Bible’s teachings about the coming of God’s kingdom?
- ✓ What are some behaviors and activities we should be engaged in during this “in-between time” in response to Christ’s first coming and in anticipation of His second coming?
- ✓ How does the two-phased coming of Christ affect our approach to suffering, injustice, and evil in our world?
- ✓ How has your understanding and appreciation of the Advent season been changed or enriched as a result of this study?

COMMENTARY *John 17:13-19; 18:33-38*

Our two Scripture passages for this week come from two very different sources. The first passage, John 17:13-19, derives from Jesus’ final prayer, a prayer that fills the entire 17th chapter. The second passage, in 18:33-38, derives from Jesus’ trial before Pilate, just before Jesus’ crucifixion. Although the passages are separated by more than a chapter of prayer, dialogue, and narrative, they are united by a common theme—the theme of Jesus’ heavenly origin.

1. Jesus’ Final Prayer (17:13-19)

13 *I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.*

14 *I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.*

15 *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.*

16 *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.*

17 *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*

18 *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

19 *For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*

These verses come in the middle of Jesus’ longest recorded prayer. The setting of this prayer in Jesus’ ministry is important. Jesus offered this prayer after His teaching ministry was completed. According to John’s Gospel, as soon He finished this prayer, Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem and walked the half-mile or so across the Kidron Valley to settle in the garden at Gethsemane for the night (18:1). Apparently, they had spent the night in this garden on other occasions because Judas knew he could find them there. Judas took a “detachment” (480

troops) of soldiers (v. 3) to confront and arrest Jesus and His disciples. Ironically, Judas and his support troops came with lanterns and torches to arrest the Light of the world!

13. Of course, when Jesus uttered this prayer, He knew what was about to transpire. He was prepared to face Judas with courage. Jesus initiated the conversation, then quickly acknowledged that He was indeed Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom they had come to arrest (18:4-5). So, when Jesus told the Father, *I am coming to you now*, He knew that the route of His return to the Father would demand crucifixion, suffering, and death. Yet, even with so little time left *in the world*, Jesus did not pray for himself. He prayed for His followers—for the *full measure* of His joy.

Who doesn’t want *joy*? However, we should think more deeply about His request for His followers to *have the full measure of my joy within them*. What exactly was Jesus’ joy in this context? It has nothing to do with what one of my friends calls “the gospel of emotional prosperity.” It is not the joy of being giddy with glee all the time. Remember, Jesus would be hanging on a cross in less than 12 hours and would be dead in less than 24 hours. The joy that Jesus possessed—and the joy He prayed for His followers to experience in full measure—was not the sense of emotional inflation that we all experience from time to time. This joy He spoke of is completely unlike the fleeting, temporal pleasure we sometimes experience.

So, what exactly was the joy that Jesus possessed even as He faced the cruelty of death on a cross? It was the joy of knowing that He was living His life—even giving up His life—in service to God. The deep and profound joy that Jesus possessed—and that Jesus prayed His followers might possess in full measure—was the joy of self-giv-



Habitat for Humanity volunteers building a home in North Carolina. It is the greatest irony—and one of the profoundest truths—of the Christian faith that true and lasting joy comes only to those who do not seek their own joy. True joy is not found in fulfilling our selfish desires; it is found in following Jesus' example and laying down our lives in service.

ing. It is the greatest irony—and one of the profoundest truths—of the Christian faith that true and lasting joy only comes to those who do not seek their own joy. True joy is not found in fulfilling our selfish desires; it is found in relinquishing those selfish desires. True joy comes only to those who follow Jesus' example and lay down their lives in service.

14. This truth, that joy comes through service, was central to the word that Jesus gave us from the Father. Because the world cannot understand—indeed, explicitly rejects—this message, those who belong to this world often scorn and hate those who proclaim it. The selfish powers of this world crucified the greatest Servant of all. Those who follow Jesus—rejecting the ways of avarice, abuse, and self-interest—will often find themselves hated by the world, because Jesus' followers *are not of the world any more than Jesus was of the world*.

In these verses, we find a stark contrast between the way of the Word and the way of the world. Those who follow the way of the Word, though innocent in both deed and intent, pose a mortal threat to the worldly systems of domination and gracelessness. The rhythms of grace not only call all people to enter Christ's kingdom of love, grace, and reconciliation, but also shear away every pretense that stands opposed to redemption. By its very existence, the body of Christ proclaims silent judgment on the temporary and shallow preoccupations of the present age. As He faced death, Jesus made no effort to disguise the immensity of the choice that His life placed before all humanity: Either follow the Word or be of the world.

God created the world; therefore, the world is "very good" (Gen. 1:31). However, in John's Gospel, *the world* is used as shorthand for people and systems that regard the physical world, with both its pleasures and shortcomings, as the sum of everything that matters. Through their denial of the Creator and the Creator's call on their lives, worldly people become corrupted and grow in their propensity

toward evil. Jesus' followers, in contrast, *are not of the world*, because Jesus was *not of it*.

15-17. Jesus prayed for the Father to protect His followers and to *sanctify them by the truth*. The word *sanctify* has many meanings in Scripture. In this context, the primary meaning is to "set apart." Jesus prayed that believers may be set apart or distinguished from the world by the truth. The world proclaims many competing messages, but they all share a common theme. They claim that the way of the cross is wrong; Jesus was misguided; and His followers are foolish to follow in the paths of grace, love, and forgiveness. The world, however, is wrong. *Your word is truth*: For this reason, Jesus prayed that believers would be sanctified (set apart) from the false doctrines of this world.

18-19. Although the world (in its Christ-rejecting, love-evading, and truth-averse forms) has nothing to offer Jesus' followers, Jesus still *sent them into the world*. In spite of its sinfulness and outright hostility to grace,

God has poured out love on the world. God sent Jesus to redeem the world by both condemning and cleansing its sin. Those who accept God's love are called out of the world to be redeemed and sanctified. With their redemption secure, these people are sent back into the world—but with a new outlook on the world they inhabit. They seek the world's renewal by grace.

2. Jesus' Trial Before Pilate (18:33-38)

33 Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

34 "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

35 "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

37 "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

38 "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him."

Having moved forward one chapter and several hours in John's account, we pick up the story after Jesus' arrest when He was brought before Pontus Pilate, an undistinguished Roman governor. Most of what we know about Pilate comes from the New Testament. Like most Roman governors, he had probably secured his office by currying favor with the emperor or some other Roman official. Life could be difficult for midlevel Roman officials like Pilate. They stood at the interface of the mighty Roman Empire and the subjugated peoples. The Romans gave the governors a nearly impossible task.

The governors' primary responsibilities were to collect taxes and

to keep the *pax romana* (the Roman peace). Governors who failed in these tasks were quickly relieved of office. So the governors faced the politically tricky task of exploiting the local people for ever-increasing taxes, while also keeping the local people from revolting against Rome.

The Romans managed their empire so that taxes, goods, and revenues were constantly streaming back to Rome. When a province or colony did not sufficiently enrich Rome (or worse, when a people rebelled against Rome), the Romans would send in the legions to reestablish Roman superiority (the Romans fought two wars against the local inhabitants in Israel within two generations in the late AD 60s to the early 130s). However, the Romans typically maintained only about 12 legions (about 60,000 men) to govern all of Europe as well as pieces of Asia and Africa. Therefore, the Romans preferred not to use the legions to enforce their will. They preferred to govern their vast empire through strategic alliances with the local elite and locally-hired mercenaries. (In Jesus' day, the soldiers with whom He interacted were probably not Romans *per se*; they were probably local Jewish mercenaries.)

So the Roman governors had to drain the money back to Rome (lest the governor lose his job for failing to pay his quota of taxation) while also keeping the local people reasonably happy (lest he lose his job for failing to keep the *pax romana*). To make matters worse, the Roman governors had only a handful of Roman guards at their disposal. They were heavily reliant on local hirelings to do nearly all of the empire's policing. If the locals turned against the governor, the governor had only a few personal bodyguards standing between him and the dangerous mobs.

33. When Pilate's conversation with Jesus is read in light of these political realities, the exchange becomes more comprehensible. When Pilate asked Jesus, *Are you the king of the Jews?* he probably had two subtexts to the question. (1) If Jesus really thought himself a *king* to rival Caesar, He might be planning to challenge Rome. That could produce a revolt against Rome (an end to effective taxation). The emperor would deal harshly with Pilate if he failed to nip that notion in the bud. (2) If Jesus really thought himself the *king of the Jews*, He might be planning to challenge Herod. That could produce a civil war among the Jews (an end to the *pax romana*). Again, Pilate needed to nip that idea in the bud.

34-35. Pilate was disappointed when Jesus gave him no clear answer to his question, so he responded by telling Jesus that His *own people* (the Jewish leadership) had handed Him over. Like most Romans, Pilate probably prided himself on the fair administration of justice. He was giving Jesus the opportunity to answer the charges against Him. The Roman legal system did not assume "innocent until proven guilty," and Pilate's ques-

tion demonstrates Pilate's assumption of Jesus' guilt: *What is it you have done?*

36-38. Pilate's political orientation completely failed him. Jesus explained that His *kingdom is not of this world* and that His servants are not militarized. Still, Pilate heard Jesus speak only of having a kingdom, and he pounced on what he presumed to be the unstated assumptions behind Jesus' answer. If Jesus had a kingdom, Pilate reasoned, Jesus must have thought that He was a king! Jesus tried to redirect the conversation toward questions of truth, but Pilate, the politician, was interested only in the political issues at stake—how to prevent both revolt against Rome and civil war among the Jews. With no interest in truth, Pilate retorted, *What is truth?* As is so often the case, a shallow person unwittingly gave expression to the deepest of questions.

Truth is, as we learned earlier, the Word of Jesus and His message of love.

Pilate reached the correct conclusion and informed Jesus' accusers that there was *no basis for a charge against him*. Still, Pilate quickly conceded to political pressure and condemned Jesus to crucifixion. Because Pilate failed to take the question of truth seriously, he came to embody the false ways of the world. The falsehoods of the world—that power and self-preservation are the ultimate good—became the falsehoods of Pilate's life. The greatest legacy of Pilate's brief time on earth is forever inscribed in the creeds of Christendom: Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontus Pilate.

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Jesus and His disciples leaving the Upper Room after the Last Supper in Gethsemane (1888) in a painting by Nikolai Gay. Jesus offered His longest-recorded prayer after His teaching ministry was completed. As soon He finished this prayer, Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem and walked the half-mile or so across the Kidron Valley to settle in the garden at Gethsemane for the night.