

ADVENT READING PLAN

REDISCOVER *Christmas*

GOOD NEWS IN TROUBLING TIMES



REDISCOVERING

Hope

IN OUR
UNCERTAINTIES

REDISCOVERING

Peace

IN OUR
STRUGGLES

REDISCOVERING

Joy

IN OUR
DISCOURAGEMENTS

REDISCOVERING

Love

IN OUR
DIFFERENCES



ReDiscover Christmas: Good News in Troubling Times Advent Reading Plan

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Cover Design by Tim Downs
Interior Design by Alexia Garaventa
Written by Jeremy Jones

Introduction:

GOOD NEWS IN TROUBLING TIMES

We've made it! We've made it to Advent and the Christmas season! And wow, can we certainly use some Christmas! It's been a year like no other, to put it mildly. Global pandemic, economic recession, mass unemployment, political division, cultural upheaval, racial reckoning, record wildfires, extra powerful hurricanes, devastating floods. Did I miss anything? Maybe whatever personal struggles you are facing are a result of those wide-scale events or completely unrelated. In whatever form they've come for you, the realities of life have been heavy and humbling. We have been aware of the darkness around us.

It's the ideal setting for some light.

It's just the kind of backdrop for a Savior to come.

It's the perfect time to rediscover Christmas.

Because no matter how troubling the times, and no matter how heavy our hearts, there is good news. The greatest news!

As the angels proclaimed it on the night of Jesus's birth long ago:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:10-14)

This is the news of the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. This is the news that drives away fear and fills us with joy and holds us in peace. It's news of the reality we are invited to step into and experience.

And Advent is the time of our journey into this rediscovery of hope, peace, joy, love, and of Christ himself.

Wherever you are this year on your level of anxiety, uncertainty, or pain—

Wherever you are on your own spiritual journey—

Wherever you are in the midst of holiday stress or pressure—

Let me invite you into this journey of Advent.

HOW TO CELEBRATE ADVENT

Advent is a season that is officially observed in many churches. The four weeks before Christmas are set aside as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of Jesus's birth. The term advent is a version of the Latin word that means "coming." But Advent is not just an extension of Christmas; it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming. It is a season to explore and experience several key traits embodied in the arrival of Christ: hope, peace, joy, and love.

While the core concept of Advent remains the same, some traditions and practices vary. This reading plan is based on common practices, and we invite you to adapt it to match the traditions of your own church. One of the main traditions of Advent is the weekly lighting of the candles on an Advent wreath. A circular evergreen wreath represents God's unending love for us. And the lighting of five candles throughout the season represents Jesus's coming to a world lost in darkness. Isaiah 9:2 says, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." This can be both a meaningful and fun tradition for kids of all ages, and it can be easily adapted to fit individual, group, or family needs.

This reading plan contains devotions for each of the four weeks before Christmas. Based around the weekly themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, there are seven devotions for each theme. There is also a devotion for Christmas Eve and one for Christmas Day. These emphasize the rediscovery of Christmas in the practice and experience of each trait, and they lead us in reminders of good news in our troubles and uncertainties. Practical questions help to spur us toward ways to apply hope, peace, joy, and love in our own lives.

In addition, each weekly section contains an introduction page with a song to sing, verses to memorize, a question to ponder, and a verse to focus on throughout the week. We encourage you to use these sections as a guide for a weekly lighting of your own Advent wreath. Whether you do this alone, as a family, with friends, as a small group, in person, or virtually, the tradition of the lighting of the candles will add to the richness of your Advent experience. And singing the songs can make the experience especially fun and meaningful if you have kids.

In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts. The tradition and the devotions in this book are designed to help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own—the story of God’s redeeming love for our world. The story of His presence with us always.

So no matter what the department stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. May this be a season of wonder for you. May it be a rediscovery of Christmas. And may the Holy Spirit lead you on a journey of peace, joy, and love—and ultimately to a deep encounter with Jesus.

Advent Week 1

REDISCOVERING HOPE IN OUR UNCERTAINTIES

The first Sunday of Advent signifies the hope people felt in their hearts for the promised Messiah to lead them out of dark and hard times. We all have one of those days, weeks, or years. As we begin this season of Advent, we will spend the next seven days rediscovering the hope in our hearts that Jesus continues to bring to our world. In addition to the daily devotions, take time this week to light the first candle in your Advent wreath. (See Introduction for instructions.) Remember all that is fulfilled in Jesus, express your desires for this season, and place your hope in the light of the world, who was born a baby in Bethlehem and who is coming again.



But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

—Luke 1:29-33

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’).”

—Matthew 1:21-23



What do you hope for this season?



For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

—Jeremiah 29:11



“Oh Little Town of Bethlehem”

1

HOPE SEES BEYOND

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
—Romans 8:24-26

Have you ever seen the movie *A Christmas Story*? You know, the one with Ralphie and his friend who gets his tongue stuck to a frozen flagpole? The 1983 holiday classic centers around Ralphie’s longing for a Red Ryder BB gun. He has built it up as the be-all, end-all of his nine-year-old existence, and there is nothing he wants more. For most of the movie, other people, including a department store Santa, pour cold water on his dream, but he continues to keep hope alive. When Christmas morning comes, it seems Ralphie’s hope is crushed when all the presents are opened and there is no Red Ryder. Spoiler alert: Of course, there is one more hidden gift, and Ralphie’s greatest wish comes true.

At that point, Ralphie doesn’t need hope anymore. He can’t hope anymore. His hope is fulfilled. As Paul writes, “Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?” Paul is talking about the completion of God’s work within and around us, the fulfilled restoration of our bodies and souls and all of creation. Paul explains that this is reality already, made possible because Jesus has come, and lived, and died, and risen. Now, with help from His Spirit, we wait patiently to see His work fulfilled. This was the promise God gave at the beginning and continued through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the history of the Jewish people. Our hope is fulfilled in Jesus.

What is your deepest hope this Christmas? What step can you take to experience the strength of God’s Spirit to renew hope and realize His work all around us?



HOPE TO CARRY ON

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.
—Isaiah 40:31

The pictures show him sharply dressed in a navy blue blazer, decorated with military medals, behind the walker that he uses to get around. That walker didn't stop Captain Sir Tom Moore. Neither did his 100 years of age. Captain Tom, as he became famously known, walked 100 laps around his backyard and became a viral sensation who raised \$40 million for the British health care system in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It started as a challenge from his son-in-law and went viral when posted to a fundraising website. Captain Tom's sense of steady perseverance inspired Great Britain during a time it needed hope. "The first step was the hardest," Captain Tom told reporters after. "After that, I got into the swing of it and kept on going."

Isn't that always true? The first step is always the hardest. But hope gives us the push to get going. Captain Tom began walking with the hope that he might be able to help someone. Hope spurs us to take that first step in a difficult time. Hope enables us to keep walking, one more step at a time. And hope sustains us with the vision that there is a better ending. Isaiah reminds us that our strength is renewed when we put our hope in the Lord. The hope that Christ has brought into the world allows our spirit to soar like an eagle. It fuels us to keep walking, one step at a time.

Where is hope leading you? What is the next step God is leading you to take this Christmas season?

3

HOPE CONQUERS FEAR

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

—1 Peter 1:3-4

It was the night before the Christmas Eve service when church organist Lewis Redner came up with the tune to “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Waking in the night, he felt like he had heard the whisper of an angel, and he wrote down the melody of the beloved carol we still sing nearly 150 years later.

The lyrics were a poem written by Phillips Brooks, minister at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. Several years later, in 1865, Brooks had visited Bethlehem on horseback during a trip to the Holy Land. He saw shepherds tending their flocks in the countryside surrounding the small village and attended a Christmas Eve service in the Church of the Nativity. He remembered the moving experience several years later as he prepared for Christmas Eve worship. Brooks and Redner thought their combined composition would only be sung for that evening’s service, but, as we know, the song quickly spread and endured.

Among the song’s beautiful lyrics is this line: *The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight.* It’s a reminder that no matter how great the fear—even the fears of all history—the hope that Christ brings is greater. In Jesus, hope overcomes all our fears, and this hope is alive. Peter calls it a living hope. Because Christ has come to live and die and rise again, this hope of life conquers the fears of death. Because of Jesus, when fear and hope collide, hope wins.

How is fear darkening your life? How can you grab hold of this living hope in Jesus?

4

WHEN HOPE SEEMS GONE

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

—Isaiah 43:1-2

When commercial fisherman John Aldridge went sprawling overboard 40 miles off the coast of New York in 2017, he knew his partner, Anthony Sosinski, sleeping belowdecks would never hear his cries for help. When the boat motored ahead on autopilot and disappeared over the crest of a wave, Aldridge knew he was alone. As he tread water in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean without a life vest, he knew this was the way he would die.

But then he discovered that he could create an air pocket in his fishing boots. They floated. It was a flicker of hope to literally cling to. Aldridge made it through the night. He eventually spotted a fishing buoy and was able to cling to it. Twelve hours after he had fallen into the sea, a Coast Guard helicopter pulled Aldridge to safety. Against all hope, the man overboard survived.

Sometimes we just need something, one thing, to cling to in the darkness and the depths. God's Word is filled with promises, such as Isaiah 43:1-2 above. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." In Jeremiah 29:11, we're told, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." God has given us hope we can cling to. No matter what we are facing, we can turn to the Bible and find His words come alive to renew hope within us.

What Bible verses are speaking to you today? What Scripture can you write down or memorize as a source of renewed hope?

5

HOPE SUSTAINS US

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us.

—Romans 5:5

He had been waiting. The old man was ready. Luke calls him righteous and devout. Simeon had been faithfully serving God for decades and watching for the fulfillment of His promise to send a Messiah. Each morning, he might have asked, “Is this the day?” Then came the day when he felt that nudge by God’s Spirit: *Go to the temple. Something exciting is about to happen. I have a surprise for you.*

When Simeon saw the young family across the temple courts, he knew. This was the moment he had been waiting for his whole life. He probably ran to them, taking the baby from the surprised parents, lifting him skyward, then cradling him in his arms. And Simeon worshiped. He told God he was fulfilled, content; he could now die a happy man. “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32).

Simeon is the perfect example of the man described in Jeremiah 17:7: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD.” Simeon reminds us that hope does not disappoint. Why? Because, as Paul says, “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us.” God’s never-ending love for us will always come through in God’s perfect timing. The hope of Christ will never fail us.

How would your hope compare to Simeon’s? How might you spread a sense of hope by some small expression fueled by God’s love?

6

HOPE OVERFLOWS

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13

There was someone else there that day when Mary and Joseph brought their infant son to the temple. Another who had been faithfully watching and waiting and believing it was only a matter of time before she saw the fulfillment of God’s longstanding promise. Anna was a prophet, eighty-four years old. She had been married once, long ago, for seven years before her husband died. This would have given her a difficult life in ancient culture, making her dependent on others for a well-being that was probably then meager. None of that seemed to slow Anna down. She spent all her time in the temple, worshiping, fasting, and praying. Her service might have even been part of some official group or capacity.

Like Simeon, Anna was ready when Jesus arrived. Maybe she approached the young family at the same time as Simeon. Maybe later. Whatever the timing, her worshipful response was similar. But Luke tells us even more. Like Simeon, Anna was overjoyed to see this long-expected gift from God. She certainly must have felt fulfilled as well. But Anna wasn’t done. Her hope overflowed, and she told everyone she could about what she had seen.

Anna’s hope is the kind described by Paul, when he prayed, “... that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Isn’t that just like hope? It’s the kind of hope we see in children on Christmas morning: expectant, unbridled, uncontainable, overflowing. And it’s the same kind from the God of hope that sustains through the ages.

How is your hope-ometer these days? What hope have you given up on that God is calling to renew in you?

7

HOPE FOR OUR INHERITANCE

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.
—Ephesians 1:18

You’ve seen the movies or heard the stories. Maybe you’ve dreamed of it happening to you. A long lost relative who you never knew you had dies and unexpectedly leaves a fortune for you. Turns out it really does happen sometimes. Take the case of Zsolt and Geza Peladi. The brothers were living in a cave outside of Budapest, Hungary, in 2009 when they learned they would inherit \$7 billion from their long-lost grandmother. The Peladi brothers knew their mother had come from a wealthy family, but she had severed ties with her family and later abandoned her sons. Their grandmother had died with no other heirs, and her next surviving relatives were tracked down: Zsolt and Geza and their sister who lived in the United States. The brothers told reporters they hoped their newfound money would allow them to find love and a normal life.

It’s probably unlikely that you or I will inherit \$7 billion—but apparently not impossible. Regardless, we have the most incredible and satisfying inheritance of all: “the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,” as the apostle Paul describes it. In Ephesians 1, Paul recaps the power of the promise that God has fulfilled in Jesus. One day, we will receive the fulfillment of eternal life, complete restoration to wholeness and unity with God. In the meantime, God’s Spirit fills us with hope for the day when we will see this work complete. In Advent, we expectantly hope for the celebration of Christmas, and we look beyond with hope to Christ’s return and our invaluable spiritual inheritance.

What would you do if you knew you were about to inherit a billion dollars? How will you live knowing the power of Christ to defeat death is alive in you today?