



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT ADVENT SPEAKS OF HOPE

TIM J. R. TRUMPER

Advent is here! A staggering third of the world's population will be celebrating. So, to explain how the celebration began, and what it means for us, we embark on a four-part Advent series of devotionals. Our aim is to affirm the wonder of Christ, to hearten the Christian, and to commend Jesus to you if you are yet to receive him as your Savior and Lord.

The history of Advent.

Advent is derived from the Latin, *adventus*, which means *coming* (or, in Greek, *parousia* [Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor. 15:23]). The celebration refers retrospectively to our Lord's first arrival on earth and prospectively to his return. It originated in fourth and fifth century Spain and Gaul (modern France) as a preparation for the baptisms of new Christians during the Feast of Epiphany. Epiphany was held in January to celebrate God's appearance in Christ as also the events to which it gave rise:

- The visit to Jesus by the wise men or *Magi* (Matt. 2:1-12).
- Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:29-34).
- Jesus' first miracle, at Cana in Galilee (Jn. 2:1-12).

By the sixth century, Roman Christians were utilizing Advent to prepare for Christ's return as Judge of the world. Yet, later, in the Medieval period, the focus of Advent swung back to his initial coming.

The décor of Advent is more recent. Only in 1839 were candles introduced into the celebration. In Germany a Lutheran minister began using them to teach children about Christmas. Then came the Advent wreath. The evergreens symbolize everlasting life, and the four candles, lit sequentially during Advent, emphasize the hope, love, joy, and peace of the good news of Jesus Christ. Traditionally, the first, second, and fourth candles are purple and the third rose-colored. Sometimes a white candle is added and lit on Christmas Day to represent Christ's birth. Some Advent wreaths include holly and berries. These connect Christ's coming to the blood he shed on the Cross. Pinecones depict his resurrected life in which believers share.

Clearly, the Advent season is man-made. The Bible speaks of both the first and second advents of Christ, the first in dishonor the second in glory (Tit. 2:11-14). Yet, God has given us neither dates nor directives for celebrating them. The Advent season—festive and aesthetically pleasing for sure—is thus negotiable. What is nonnegotiable is the essence of Christianity—the hope, love, joy, and peace made known to us in Jesus Christ. We thus focus in these devotionals on the treasure of Christ rather on than the trappings of Advent.

The hope of Advent.

How we need hope! A yearning for it is inscribed on our constitutions. Man's hope found satisfaction in God, at least until in Eden he revolted against God. In that moment, darkness and despair entered our experience of life. Thus, today, even the sunniest places on earth know gloom of one form or another, whether it take the form of poverty, corruption, suicides, terrorism, and so forth. Man explains this gloom variously, but when he omits from his reckoning our first's parents breach with God, resulting in the rebellion of heart, spiritual blindness, and willful sin of their posterity, his explanation falls short. Simply put, we are estranged from God.

We have neither a cure for this nor a desire for one. We struggle to own our sin let alone to find a way of overcoming our enmity against God. But God, who would have been justified in leaving us in our sins and their misery, has given us hope. It is found in neither the denial nor the downplaying of sin. We find it, rather, in the Christ sent to us to deal with our sin and to dispel our gloom. We celebrate during Advent, then, the unparalleled bursting forth into public view of God's plan to restore our hope.

How our hope developed.

God's plan, eternal in its origin, took effect immediately following the Fall of man. From Genesis 3:15 we trace

its unfolding through the history of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Yet, with the formation of Israel, God exponentially increased his revelation of his plan to grant our race renewed hope. The plan has always focused on God's saving grace. To make sense of it, God began educating Israel as a parent teaches a young son (cf., Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1; Gal. 3:23-4:7). The education covered four themes:

- *The nature of God:* It was one thing for the Hebrews to be redeemed from Egyptian enslavement—which is the great Old Testament picture of salvation—but it was another for them to learn of who it was that had freed them. God, thus, began countering their exposure to polytheism in Egypt, teaching his people that he alone is God (Deut. 6:5). The plagues of Egypt taught them of his justice, the cloud that settled among them of his presence and glory, and the fire of his holiness.
- *The gravity of sin:* The reverential awe which God instilled in the Hebrews was fed not only by revelation of his character, but by a contrasting conviction of their sin. This developed through the gift of the law received at Mount Sinai. The judicial law was given to direct the life of the nation, the ceremonial law to picture for young Israel the good news of the coming Messiah, and the moral law (the ten commandments) to instruct him in how he was to structure his freedom.
- *The need of a Mediator:* Since Israel could keep the law perfectly in neither, thought, word, nor deed, the Hebrews became acutely aware of their need of someone to represent them before God. God, though, was ahead of them, raising up Moses for this very purpose (Deut. 5:5; Heb. 12:18-29). So long as the greatness and glory of God was before their eyes, they knew how much they needed him for their access to God (Deut. 5:22-27).
- *The call to holiness:* Moses stood between God and his people not only because the people were afraid of the fire around Mount Sinai but to give them the word of the Lord. In all the directives he brought down from the mount there was one that stood out: ***“Be holy, for I am holy”*** (Lev. 11:45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; cf., 1 Pet. 1:15-16).

We learn from this education that the more Israel revered God, trusted in the coming Messiah, and obeyed in thankfulness for the gift of the Messiah, the more hope would be known among God's people.

The purpose of gospel hope.

Gospel hope does more to lighten life than anything else. Through it, Israel received light. Note how Psalm 27 begins: ***“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”*** Yet, Israel was to use the light received to be a light to the nations. (Isaiah 49:6). The greater Israel's faith, the purer Israel's worship, and the more complete Israel's obedience, the more the nations would get a visual of the light of God's grace. Tragically, Israel rebelled. By Messiah's arrival, the nation had been split into two kingdoms, exiled for mocking God's servants, and had not heard from God for 400 years.



Was all hope lost? No, for the light lay not in Israel but in God and his Messiah. Despite the oppression of Persian, Greek, then Roman overlords, God kept his promise to send the Messiah and to maintain a faithful remnant. They eagerly awaited ***“the consolation of Israel.”*** On taking the infant Jesus in his arms, righteous Simeon declared, ***“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”*** (Lk. 2:25, 30-32). Clearly, Jesus satisfied his hope.

He satisfies ours, too, for the luster of the incarnation, which shone back on God's people, also shines on us today. Messiah, we can see more clearly, defeated Satan, the arch-agent of gloom (1 Jn. 3:8), and brings us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). ***“May the God of hope,”*** then, ***“fill you [this Advent] with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope”*** (Rom. 15:13).



Dr. Tim J. R. Trumper is President of From His Fullness Ministries (www.fromhisfullness.com).