

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT ADVENT SPEAKS OF LOVE

TIM J. R. TRUMPER

Whereas the first candle of Advent speaks of our hope in the Messiah, the second symbolizes love. The two themes are connected, for our hope in the Messiah is explained by his embodiment of God's love for sinners.

God is love.



God tells us explicitly through his apostle John that he is love (1 Jn. 4:8). John had been a down-to-earth fisherman and yet he makes the remarkable claim under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that God is in essence love. This means that there has never been a moment in which the everlasting God has not been loving. But how could he love anyone prior to creating them? To answer this question, we must remember that God is triune, meaning that he is one God in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Matt. 28:19). It follows, then, that from eternity, the persons of the Godhead—each equally and entirely possessing and enjoying the divine essence—loved each other eternally, perfectly, fully, and incessantly.

This love reveals God to be incomparably beautiful—who else combines spotless and endless love?—and incomparably gracious. Without any pressure from without, and without any dissatisfaction or unmet need within, God willed to introduce us into the trifacta of his love. In other words, his love, so pulsating within, broke forth onto humanity.

We can claim no merit for God's love of us. The explanation of it is found in himself. He willed to love us, but since love needs an object for its affection, how can we explain God's love for the human race without implying that fallen man is lovable or not so fallen after all? The best we can say is that God loves in us what he put there, namely his handiwork and his image, neither of which we have merited. Yet, because he has made us, he bestows his goodness on our race. He does so not because we need no saving, but in order that we may be led to repentance (Rom. 2:4). God, then, with a logic out of the reach of our own, hates the wicked and their assembly (Ps. 11:5), and yet has no desire for their death (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11). Thus, he gave the world his Son.

God reveals love.

It is above all through Christ that God makes known his love for the world. Hymnist Charles Wesley expresses this beautifully:

*Love divine, all loves excelling
Joy of heaven to earth come down . . .*

But what may be said of such a love, which, with one hand, brings us out from under condemnation those who believe in Christ (Jn. 3:16), and, with the other, embraces and accepts them?

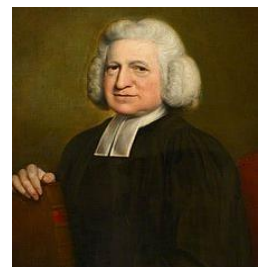
First, we may say that *God's love in Christ is humble*. Whereas God the Father sent forth his Son from or, literally, out of heaven to save us from our sins (Gal. 4:4), God the Son was the one to voluntarily “[**make**] **himself nothing, taking the form of a servant**” (Phil. 2:7). Willingly stooping to take on our flesh and our nature (Heb. 2:14), he brought God's love within the reach of our hearing, sight, smell, and feeling! To quote Wesley again:

*Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.*

Second, we may say that *God's love in Christ is holy or upright*. Christ, Paul writes, was “**born of woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law**” (Gal. 4:4). It was by keeping the divine law in our humanity that he procured for us a perfect righteousness before God that we could never procure for ourselves. This righteousness is reckoned to us when, through faith in Christ, we are united to him. We call this reckoning the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This long held interpretation of Scripture is debated

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven , to earth come down,
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,
All Thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded all Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.*

Charles Wesley (1707–1788).



these days, and yet all Protestants agree that it is at least found in 1 Corinthians 1:30: **“because of him [God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, RIGHTEOUSNESS and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”**

Third, *God’s love in Christ is healing*. Christ did not embody God’s love by merely appearing as a statue among us. He came to actively suffer in our place. As theologians have stated since the third-century *Epistles of Cyprian*, “The Son of God suffered that He might make us sons of God.” Again, in *On the Vanity of Idols*, Cyprian writes, “What man is, Christ was willing to be, that man also may be what Christ is.” Christ thus set his face to go to Jerusalem (Is. 50:7; Lk. 9:51), and in our humanity went all the way to the cross. At Calvary he entered the abyss of his sufferings, enduring for us the righteous judgment of God. Isaiah, describing Christ 800 years beforehand as the suffering servant, remarked, **“with his stripes we are healed”** (Is. 53:5). His prophesy teaches us that in the cross there is not only our acquittal from personal guilt but the definitive medicinal solution for the wounds and infestations of our sin. (Photo: The Great Isaiah Scroll Facsimile: <https://twitter.com/museumofbible/status/732367707853721601>, accessed November 23, 2020.)



Much more could be said of God’s love. Suffice it to say, that Advent is a celebration of the “enfleshing” of Christ. Without it, neither the weight nor the stench of our sins could be borne away. Once we get this, we begin to enter into the sentiment of John Newton (1725–1807):

*How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer’s ear!
It soothes his sorrow, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.*

God entices love.

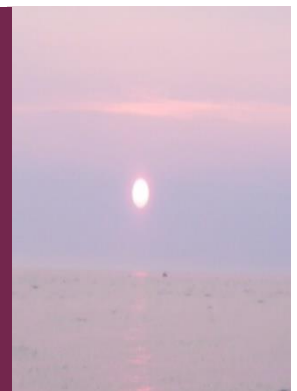
While we are commanded to turn from our sins unto God, God through Christ woos us to do so. To quote the apostle Paul, **“while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Rom. 5:6-8). Likewise, the apostle John has written, **“We love because he first loved us”** (1 Jn. 4:19).

This love is so amazing not simply because of the size differential between God and ourselves, or on account of how far we have fallen into sin, but because God, in his omniscience (his knowledge of all things), foresaw the very worst about us, yet still sent his Son to save us. We thus celebrate this Advent the glorious truth that there is nothing in us that surprises God or leads him to reverse his love for us (Rom. 8:31-39).

The reversal needed is ours. Those yet rejecting Christ are called to receive him, and we who have received him are to offer him our all. Let us pray for each other, then, that, this Advent,

“Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith—that you being rooted and grounded in love, may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19).

*Here is love, vast as the ocean,
Lovingkindness as the flood,
When the Prince of life, our
ransom,
Shed for us his precious blood.
Who his love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten
Throughout heaven’s eternal days.*
William Rees (1802–1883).



Filled afresh with a sense of God’s love, what we could accomplish for him in 2021! Let us pray to this end.



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