

TAKE HEART

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL SERIES

Christmas In the Storyline of the Bible:
Peace In the Midst of Tribulation

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.
In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart;
I have overcome the world." –John 16:33

TAKE HEART

DEVOTIONAL

By Greg Strand
Executive Director of Theology and Credentialing

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INTRODUCTION

The Meaning and Significance of Advent

What does Advent mean?

Advent (from the Latin *Adventus*, meaning coming or arrival) is part of the larger season in the Christian year, an aspect of the church's gathered worship leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas.

Although not a biblical mandate for the church, Advent has been and remains an important aspect for many churches for most of Christian history. In fact, according to the Christian year, Advent marks the beginning for the people of God in their annual calendar, not January 1. Our lives are not only lived between Christ's first and second comings, they are also marked, formed and shaped by His two comings.

What is the Significance of Advent?

It is a time to remember the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:5-2:20; Gal. 4:4), the time at which the promises for the Messiah in the Old Testament were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14; 9:2-6; Mic. 5:2).

It is a time to ponder the person of Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:1-18; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16).

It is a time to look ahead to the time when Christ will return in great power and glory (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rom. 1:4) to judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Tim. 4:8; cf. 1 Thess. 4:15).

Remembering causes us to thank and praise the Lord for sending His Son to be the Savior of the world. Pondering causes us to worship. Looking ahead to the future return of Christ leads to a time of examination to ensure one is ready, prepared, and properly waiting for Christ's second coming (Matt. 25:1-30; Phil. 3:20-21; 2 Thess. 2:6-13).

I asked my daughter to reflect on Advent and she wrote the following: "Advent literally means 'to come,' signifying Jesus' coming to earth as a baby. There are several fun traditions we have done the past few years (some even before I was born!). Every year, we read from the Scriptures and from an Advent devotional, sing favorite Christmas hymns and light Advent candles. This we do in preparing our hearts for Christ and Christmas."

Application

In each of the devotionals we include materials consisting of questions, a hymn to sing and a prayer enabling you to linger over the lessons.

Questions

1. How will you remember?
2. How will you ponder?
3. How will you look ahead?
4. What difference will remembering, pondering and looking ahead make during this season of Advent?
5. What difference will this make in your life?

Hymn: *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*

Prayer

Father, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world. Thank you for the sure and certain promise He will come again. As we focus on Jesus Christ today and this season, we remember, we ponder and we look ahead; and we ask that the truth of Christ's first and second comings would mark, form and shape our lives, both now and until the end of the age. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL THEME

John 16:33

The Peace Christ Promises

Our devotional theme comes from Jesus' words at the conclusion of His farewell discourse. Jesus says to the disciples, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (Jn. 16:33) If we are to understand these words of Jesus, it is important to understand who He is.

The Prologue

In the Prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18), John states of the Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (1:1-2). A few verses later, John further describes the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). And at the conclusion of these introductory verses, John informs us that it is Jesus, who is God, who has made the Father known, the one who interpreted (exegeted) Him (1:18). We learn a number of important truths about the Word, Jesus.

Farewell Discourse

After celebrating the last Passover meal with His disciples (and the transition to the first Lord's Supper for Christians) (13:1-30), in which Jesus takes the towel and washes their feet, Jesus teaches His disciples for the last time prior to His crucifixion in a section referred to as the farewell discourse (13:31-16:33). Within this section, John records the longest prayer of Jesus, the high priestly prayer (17:1-26).

Cross, Resurrection and Confession

After Jesus prays, He undergoes the trial and the crucifixion (18:1-19:42). After His death and burial, He experiences His glorious resurrection (20:1-31). The culmination of Jesus' revelation of the Father is the cross. The fitting and only appropriate response to Jesus comes on the lips of Thomas who upon seeing, hearing and touching the resurrected Lord exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). Jesus is God! Please note the profound connection between the last words of Jesus on the cross, "It is finished" (19:30), and the first words Jesus uttered after the resurrection, "Peace be with you" (20:19, 21, 26). Peace only comes through the cross and resurrection.

Peace in the Midst of Tribulation

We are going to return to these texts in John's Gospel in the final devotional. For now, with this larger context in mind, let's consider again the theme passage found in John 16:33: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Related to this are Jesus' words earlier in this section where He declares, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (14:27).

Considering these two passages together, we learn the following truths: (1) in the world we will have tribulation; (2) Jesus has overcome the world; (3) we have peace in Jesus; (4) the peace Jesus gives is not like the world gives; (5) our hearts are not to be troubled or afraid, but we are to take heart, to be strengthened and encouraged.

The pax Romana, the peace of Rome, was achieved and maintained by the sword. This explains why many thought the kingdom Jesus would usher in would be accomplished in similar manner, with the sword. To the contrary of what the world expects, Jesus would be a Messiah-king through suffering and dying.

Peace is a term much broader than the English connotation of peace. It does not merely refer to an absence of conflict and turmoil, but to blessing, specifically in terms of a being right with God. This God-given and God-produced peace is experienced in the midst of and through conflict and turmoil while we await the time at which there will no longer be any conflict, turmoil, trials, and persecution.

In the midst of suffering and hardship, disciples (not just those in immediate proximity to Jesus, but all disciples) can have and experience peace in union and communion with Christ. In the midst of sure and certain tribulation, Jesus promises peace and the peace comes from Him. In this world we will have tribulation. That is certain. But for believers, it is also certain that we can take heart and be encouraged and hopeful, because we are in Christ in whom is peace, and He has overcome the world.

Our Study

This is the truth of Christmas. In the four studies, we go back to the beginning and follow the storyline of the Bible: creation, fall, redemption and consummation. What we celebrate at Christmas in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the culmination of this story. For example, even here in John we hear Jesus refer to tribulation. We read of Jesus overcoming the world. We learn that Jesus brings peace. All of these truths have a background, which must be known in order for Jesus' person and work to make sense. This story is vital to know if we are to understand the Christ of Christmas.

Jesus' Prayer

Jesus concludes His prayer highlighting His desire for followers to see His glory and to do with a deep sense of love and delight, similar to the same love the Father has for the Son. Jesus prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. . . . I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:24, 26).

My prayer this Advent season leading to Christmas is that you might see and savor the Savior.

Questions

1. Christ describes that in this world there will be tribulation. What sorts of trials and tribulations are you experiencing today?
2. Jesus promises that in Him we will have peace. If you believe in Christ, we have peace. However, there are peace-robbers that keep us from experiencing that peace. What are some of them?
3. Often the Christmas season is anything but peaceful. Why? What will you do this year to ensure you both affirm and live the peace we have in Christ?
4. Jesus' prayer is for His followers to see and savor the Savior. This is the heart of Christmas. How will that prayer be answered in your life and the life of your family this year?

Hymn: *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

Prayer

Father, thank you that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We give you thanks that Jesus has come to bring peace and that he is our peace. Forgive us when our lives do not reflect that peace. We ask that the truth we have experienced in Christ would be reflected in our lives as we engage in the celebration of Christ this Christmas season. May we truly remember and joyfully live out the true meaning of Christmas – to see and savor the Savior. We ask this because we know when we worship the Son we glorify you, the Father. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

WEEK ONE

From Very Good to Enmity, Pain, Curse and Banishment: Creation and the Fall (Genesis 1-3)

In the last devotional focused on our theme verse for Advent, we learned three important truths. First, there is tribulation in this world. Second, Jesus is our peace, and the peace He provides is not like the peace the world gives. Third, the response to Jesus is captured in Thomas' confession of faith that Jesus is the Lord and God, and since our prayer is to see and savor the Savior, we join the confession in declaring, my Lord and my God.

But if we are to understand the person and work of Christ, the culmination of the story, we need to understand the whole story. We need to go back to the beginning of God's creation and the subsequent fall of Adam and Eve. This is vital to understand if we are to grasp the story of Christ and Christmas.

Creation

In words related to those we read at the beginning of John's Gospel ("In the beginning was the Word"), God's story revealed and recorded in the Bible begins in this way: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). This begins the creative work of God, which culminates in the creation of man and woman, Adam and Eve, who alone are created in the *imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28). When God had completed His gracious and wondrous act of creation, He pronounced that it was all "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Adam and Eve are in a unique relationship with God their Creator, and they were given a mandate, not only in the original act of creation, but also as He placed them in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15-17). Their calling was to God and to work and keep the garden (one could say their true calling is to worship and obey). In this pristine environment they thrived, both as husband and wife, and as worshipers of God (cf. Gen. 2:25).

Fall

In chapter 3, an intruder enters this pristine setting and undermines everything about God and His plan for humanity. The serpent denies God's infinitely perfect nature, His ways and His Word. He is a usurper of God in every way. Sadly, Eve and Adam believe the lies, defy and rebel against God and His authority, and the story becomes profoundly distorted. Sin is now a part of the story. That which had been "very good" and harmonious, now becomes fallen and cacophonous and discordant, with immediate results.

God gave them everything to eat and enjoy as they worked and kept (worshipped and obeyed) the garden. But they were commanded not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Now having eaten, this would be their new existence. The results were immediate: Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed, which they tried to cover (Gen. 3:7), they hid from God (Gen. 3:8), and they blamed and criticized and did not take responsibility (Gen. 3:12-13). They were cursed, punished and banished from the garden and unhindered, intimate communion with the Father (Gen. 3:13-19). And the effects of sin only got worse. Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4:8) and everyone dies, marked by the recurring refrain, "and then he died" (Gen. 5:5, 8, 11, 14, etc.).

The same remains true today. Consider the number of wars occurring around the world at present. Think of the racial tensions in our country. Reflect on the number of divorces happening. Consider the estrangement among family members. This becomes particularly pronounced during family gatherings at holidays. All of these issues reflect the ongoing implications of the Fall.

Promise

God was perfectly just, holy, righteous and loving in punishing sin and sinners. Had He done nothing beyond punishment, it would not have changed any of God's attributes. But God is also gracious and merciful. He, in His sovereign good plan, determines to destroy sin, to reverse the effects of the Fall, and to restore life to humanity. In the midst of God's curses, He states the promise of the gospel. In His punishment against the serpent, God's gospel shines

brightly: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15 NIV; cf. Rom. 16:20).

This is referred to as the protevangelium, the first gospel. We observe that this first gospel consists of Eve’s offspring, that this offspring will crush the head of the serpent, and will be the one through whom life is given, the one in whom all the original intentions – and more – of God’s very good design and purpose for His creation will be realized. Please note, immediately after God announces the curse, with the promise in the midst of it, God graciously provides clothing for Adam and Eve, through the shedding of the blood of an animal (Gen. 3:21), a picture of what will occur in the death of Christ (cf. Heb. 9:22). In the banishment from the garden, God also makes a statement that there would be no way back to the garden apart from His own appointed means (Gen. 3:24). His way is exclusive, and it is the only way of life. Any and all other ways will result in death.

Questions

1. Why is it important to get the story right if we are to understand the story of Jesus and Christmas?
2. What are the implications of the Fall to the story of the Bible? What about creation? What about your personal life?
3. With the promise fulfilled in Jesus’ first coming, what hope does the promise of His second coming give you, and how does that affect your life between the two?
4. God punishes sin with death, offers forgiveness, and grants salvation. Why do people struggle with this truth?
5. God’s salvation in Jesus is unique and exclusive. How do people respond to this? What difference will this truth make in your preparation for Christmas and in what you say about Christmas?

Hymn: *Of the Father’s Love Begotten*

Prayer

Father, our Creator, thank you for creating all things very good. In the midst of the Fall, we know you could have left us in our sin and you would have remained God without compromising your nature. Yet, because of who you are, you made a way for sinners to have sins forgiven and to experience peace with you. In the work of your Son, thank you for making us new and for the promise you will make all things new. Forgive us when we take your grace and mercy for granted, when we think there may be other ways to attain peace with you, when our lives do not reflect the true purpose of life with you – to worship and obey. May our lives reflect this purpose this Christmas season, and may we boldly proclaim the true meaning of Christ and Christmas embedded in the larger story of your redemptive plan. We pray this in the name of our Creator and Redeemer, for the sake of the Son to the glory of the Father. Amen.

WEEK TWO

From Tribulation to Peace – The Prince of Peace: Redemption Promised (Isaiah 9)

In the early chapters of the Bible, the storyline is established: God created all to be very good, yet Adam and Eve sinned when tempted by Satan, and because of this sin they, and all their progeny, lived with a sentence of death and condemnation. Sin distorted and destroyed God's very good creation. But God would restore and renew through the promise of an offspring as pronounced in the first mention of the gospel, the protevangelium.

Biblical Framework: Conflict Experienced and Peace Promised

This sentence of death and condemnation and this promise of blessing explain the biblical framework of the conflict between sin, strife and tribulation and the peace promised by God and experienced by humanity through His ordained means. For the people of God, the time between the Fall and God's curse, and the promise made by God of life and the destruction of Satan and sin being fulfilled, seemed interminably long. Time and again, offspring would serve as a king, and one would wonder if this would indeed be the king through whom the enemy would be crushed and peace and blessing would once again be attained. But the number of those who served as king matched the number of failures ultimately to fulfill God's promise. The enemy had not been crushed, and peace and blessing had not been attained.

There is only one way back to the Edenic experience with God, and it would only be through God's ordained means. Any and all other means would result in death. God's people wondered, had God reneged? Had He forgotten His promises? Was there any hope?

Promised Prince of Peace

Isaiah senses the burden of these questions. Added to this wait is the weight of Israel's (the northern kingdom) sin, rebellion, defiance and idolatry. This would not and could not go unpunished. But even though Isaiah gives a message from God that purification was necessary, and this punishment and judgment would come through exile, God's grace would triumph. Isaiah's personal life and response (Isa. 6) become an exemplar for the nation of Israel. God, through Isaiah, not only reminds and carries out the punishment for sin (Israel was carried into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC), but also renews the vision of hope and peace for sinners that would come through the Messiah (who would be born of a virgin, cf. Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23; Lk. 1:31-34). This was a time when joy, gladness and singing would be experienced, and sin and sorrow would be no more (Isa. 35:10; 51:11).

Isaiah captures this contrast. At the conclusion of chapter 8, he describes their plight: "they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness" (8:22). Juxtaposed with this despairing existence is the promise of a new day. "The people who walked in darkness," writes Isaiah, "have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Isa. 9:2). Darkness, spiritual and otherwise, will be dispelled forever by the light of the Messiah. (Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." [Jn. 8:12]) Isaiah 9:6-7, a key text known by many, states this promise clearly:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Five key truths demand our attention at this point in redemptive history, the storyline of the Bible. First, a child will be born, a son will be given to us. This is the offspring promised years ago, immediately after the Fall, when God issued the promise in the midst of the curses. And this is no normal, average son, as Isaiah makes clear. Second, this son will be a king of a kingdom, as the government will be on his shoulder. Furthermore, this son is connected to David, his

throne and his kingdom (2 Sam. 7:1-17; 1 Chron. 17:1-15). This reminds us there are a number of fulfillments of God's promise through redemptive history on the way to the ultimate fulfillment of His promise, which is made clear in the next point. Third, there will be no end to the increase of his government and of peace. This kingdom will not be contained, but the kingdom will expand and grow, a kingdom marked by peace, justice and righteousness. For most, kings and kingdoms come and go. What is needed is one perfect king who will reign forever, where "there will be no end." That is the kind of king this son will be and the kind of kingdom over which he will reign. This also means all other kingdoms will be conquered and there will be no rival. Fourth, this son shall be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." These titles are descriptive of his person. This king will be divine. All of this finally and ultimately converges in Jesus Christ, the true Immanuel (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). Finally, through this child, the offspring, the promise given of the gospel (Gen. 3:15) to Abram to be a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:1-3) is realized in and through this Son (Matt. 28:18-20).

It is no surprise this was one of the truths which gripped Handel as he wrote his Messiah masterpiece. The greater surprise and sadness would be if this truth no longer grips us. May it be rekindled this Christmas.

Questions

1. Do you ever sense the conflict between the promises God has made and your own personal experience, between the conflict experienced and the peace promised? How do you process this?
2. Jesus is our king in the kingdom. This kingdom is marked by growth, peace, justice and righteousness. This is not a geographical location but the rule and reign of the king in a person and people wherever they are. It is not advanced by the sword. How does this compare or contrast with much of what we see and experience in the world today? How do you live in and work toward peace, justice and righteousness, specifically how do you respond in this peace-less culture? Are you tempted to use the means of the world to achieve it?
3. What is the significance of the names of the Son? Names are not just titles, but they also reflect the nature of the person. What does the truth of each of them entail in your life?
4. This king and kingdom will be marked by increase and peace and will have no end. This is God's promise made before the first coming of Christ. What hope does this give as you await the second coming of Christ?

Hymn: *Silent Night! Holy Night!* and sing or listen to Handel's *For Unto Us a Child Is Born*.

Prayer

Father, thank you that you are a promise-making and promise-keeping God. In the midst of distress and darkness, your light shines. Thank you that Jesus is truly the light of the world. We are grateful for the reminder of the names of the Son: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. We confess we quickly forget your blessings and frequently doubt your promises. We think and act as if we are the king seeking to establish our own kingdom using the ways of the world. Forgive us. We pray for your kingdom to come, that your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. For yours alone is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

WEEK THREE

A Birth, Glory and Peace: Redemption Experienced (Luke 2)

The tension between the reality of the fall evidenced in sin and punishment, and the promise of redemption is a consistent theme throughout Scripture. It was evident in God's curse after the Fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:14-19), with the promise of the offspring, the protevangelium, stated in the midst of the curses (Gen. 3:15). Isaiah informed us of this truth, and affirmed the promise of a son, whose name would be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. This son would be the king whose reign would be forever and over all, and his kingdom would be marked by peace, justice and righteousness (Isa. 9:1-6).

Israel and all nations were waiting for this son who would establish a kingdom and rule on the throne of David. King after king failed. At the closing of the Old Testament canon, God again promises He will send Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5-6; this text picked up by Luke [1:17] as a reference to John the Baptist). And then it appeared God became silent. (And even though God was silent, He was not absent or removed. His sovereign and providential plan was moving toward fulfillment.) For 400 years there was no word from the Lord. Finally, when "the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). The Messiah's forerunner was John the Baptist. When he came on the scene, the silence was broken. At this time in redemptive history, not only did God speak again, this time through John the Baptist, but He also spoke finally and definitively in the Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

Let's situate ourselves before proceeding. Jesus states that in this world we will have tribulation, but in Him we have peace because He has overcome the world. In order to understand Jesus' statement, His person and work, we need to understand the story of the Bible. In our study of Jesus' statement in the context of the whole Bible, we have moved from creation and the Fall now to the major section referred to as redemption. Noted previously, this is promised immediately after the Fall, and moves toward fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. All the details in redemption culminate in the greatest turning point in salvation history, consisting of Jesus the Messiah's birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension.

Today we look at the beginning of this culmination, the birth of Jesus. This is the reality of Christmas that we celebrate, and there is, indeed, much to celebrate.

Mary, Angels and Shepherds

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (cf. Lk. 1:5-24, 39-45, 57-80). He informed her she will conceive and bear a son and call his name Jesus (1:31). Joseph, the righteous man to whom she was engaged, was from the house of David (1:27), and the "Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33). This echoes Isaiah's words. The promise is coming closer to being fulfilled. However, Mary was young and unmarried, a virgin. How could she conceive and bear a child (1:34). Gabriel answered her question and concluded, "nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37). (Zechariah also asked a question, but, in contrast, his question arose from doubt and he suffered because of it.) Mary responds, "I am a servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (1:38). She responds in a word of praise, known as the Magnificat (1:46-55).

We also see the angels announcing the birth of Jesus:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:8-14)

This is the fulfillment of the promise of redemption. The offspring that had been promised is now here. This birth is “good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The good news is the term for gospel. This gospel brings great joy and its message is not limited to Jews but for all people. There is a universal scope with exclusive claims. Jesus is the good news for all, and the only good news for all. He is the Savior, Christ the Lord. Through the Son, the Father is glorified and in the Son, those who affirm this gospel will experience peace.

In this context and looking ahead to Jesus’ later ministry, it is helpful and important to remember our text from John 16:33, the fact that we experience tribulation, and the concurrent truth that we experience peace in Christ through it. We often forget that this peaceful, serene birth reflected in our plays and pageants, is more staged than real. When Christ was born, not only did the angels sing, but the demons were also threatened because they knew their time was short (cf. Rev. 12:10-12). Jesus came to destroy them and their works (1 Jn. 3:8; Heb. 2:14-15). Matthew notes this ploy of Satan to kill, steal and destroy (Jn. 10:10) through the schemes of Herod (Matt. 2:3, 16). When Jesus was born Herod was threatened since this would be a rival king. In an attempt to control this, he had all babies two years old or younger killed.

Returning to the birth of Jesus, we note the shepherds determined to assess the truthfulness of the good news announced by the angels. They found it just as the angels had said, which they told Mary and Joseph. After hearing this good news, “the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (2:20).

Simeon and Anna

Finally, we observe the response of Simeon and Anna to Jesus as He was brought to the temple. Simeon was known as “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Lk. 2:25). When he saw Jesus, he took Him and held Him in his arms and exclaimed (Lk. 2:29-32): “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.”

With the coming of Jesus, Simeon was ready to “depart in peace” (the *Nunc Dimittis*). Through Christ, God’s promises had been fulfilled and salvation had come for all. That brings one peace and prepares one to depart, to die, and only those who live in this state are truly able to live.

We hear something similar from Anna. She had given her life to serve in the temple, which is explained as “worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk. 2:27). When she saw the baby Jesus “she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk. 2:38).

O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Questions

1. What do we learn from these events, people and responses around the birth of Jesus? What are some of those implications in your life?
2. Mary is told, “nothing is impossible with God.” Although Mary plays a unique, non-repeatable role, she serves as a model of humble, dependent faith in God. What situations or circumstances in your life do you need to be reminded of this truth about God and His promises?
3. Regarding the angels’ message, do you believe the birth of Jesus, His incarnation, the good news of great joy that will be for all the people? What keeps you from announcing this good news, the gospel, which is for all people, i.e., its universal and exclusive claims? What are your joy robbers?
4. With the shepherds, how will you glorify and praise God this Christmas season and beyond?
5. With Simeon, have you truly experienced peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ so you are not only prepared to depart, but to truly live?

Hymn: *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

Prayer

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for the incarnation of your Son, Jesus our Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Forgive us when this story becomes too familiar and is treated like a play or pageant rather than the life-transforming truth it is. We confess that although we affirm Jesus Christ is Lord, we often live as if we are lord. Forgive us. In this season of Christmas may we be and live the fullness of peace with God, and from this fullness of joy might we glorify and praise you in word and deed. We pray this through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

WEEK FOUR

A Cradle, a Cross, and a Crown: Consummation (John 20; Revelation 21)

Now come to the end of our Advent series, it is fitting that we address the final part of the Bible story, the consummation. As we do so, let's briefly review.

The Story

We began “in the beginning” when God created all things “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Adam and Eve, the culmination of God's creative handiwork, were created in the *imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28). They were created to “work and keep,” to worship and obey God (Gen. 2:15). They were in a unique relationship with God. However, they sinned when tempted by Satan (Gen. 3), which affected them and all their progeny, who are now fallen (Gen. 3:14-19; Rom. 5:12-21), along with all of creation (Rom. 8:19-23). “But God” in His grace and mercy promises an offspring would come from Eve (Gen. 3:15) who would crush the head of Satan (Rom. 16:20), overcome the effects of sin and bring new life (Jn. 17:3). This is redemption, the third major part of the story. The final part of the story consists of the consummation.

Redemption

Before we address the consummation, we return to our Advent theme Scripture passage. With the biblical story now in mind, Jesus and His statement become clear.

In the farewell discourse (Jn. 13:31-16:33) Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn. 14:27). And later in this section, our theme verse, Jesus says something similar: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (Jn. 16:33)

The world is in a fallen state. It is broken. Life in this world consists of tribulation. This hardly needs to be stated because it is everyone's universal experience. The world offers no solution, which explains why the peace offered by the world is transient, and not true, real or lasting peace (cf. Jer. 6:14; 8:11). This peace is what Jesus came to provide. This is redemption. One does not have to remain in the fallen state in the biblical story. One can, in and through Christ, enter into the story of redemption to become part of the story of the redeemed (Col. 1:13-14).

In John's Gospel (Jn. 14:27, 16:33), Jesus is the one who provides peace and is, indeed, the one in whom we have peace. This statement is made by Jesus, fully aware He is on the way to the cross, knowing the peace He provides only comes through the cross (Col. 2:15). The world is blind to this sort of peace (2 Cor. 4:4). The cross is offensive and makes no sense, since, according to the world, peace and redemption come through power and might, not weakness and a cross (1 Cor. 1:18-25). And yet, peace and life through the cross is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are two key statements that frame this: Jesus' final words on the cross and His first words after the resurrection. Immediately prior to His death, Jesus cries, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). Jesus' earthly life was over but it indicated so much more. His work of redemption which culminated in the cross was also accomplished, and it was through the cross that forgiveness, peace and redemption (salvation) were achieved. This was also the unique way in which the Father would be glorified (Jn. 17:4).

These words of Jesus, however, must not be considered the last words. The completion of Jesus' final statement on the cross is made in His first words after His resurrection. Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” to the disciples, and again a week later when Thomas was with them (Jn. 20:19-29). The two expressions must be taken together if we are to capture the essence of Jesus' work on the cross. Peace is accomplished through the cross. Thomas' confession captures the response of all true believers: “My Lord and my God” (Jn. 20:28)!

We see Jesus move from the cradle, to the cross, to the crown. And it is the crown that is achieved through the cross. His kingship comes through the cross. Peace with God is accomplished through the cross. And life in the kingdom under this king is marked by the cross.

Jesus is our peace (Eph. 2:14), and through Him we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). There is no condemnation for those who have faith in Christ (Rom. 8:1). The curse of sin has been removed through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 3:10-14). This is the gospel, which is of first importance (1 Cor. 15:1-3). And not only does this affect our relationship with God vertically, it affects our relationships with others horizontally. On the basis of the peace we have with God through Christ, we also have and strive for this peace with others (Eph. 2:11-22; 4:1-6).

Consummation

Jesus' redemption, His creating a community of the redeemed for His glory, is not the final state. There is also the consummation. This is final state of those who have experienced peace with God through Christ. In this world there will be tribulation, as Jesus notes, but not only does Jesus give peace in the midst of tribulation, when He comes again He will deliver us from all tribulation.

John reminds us of this truth in his final letter. At the consummation of all things, in the new heaven and new earth, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. . . 'Behold, I am making all things new.'" (Rev. 21:4-5)

A word of explanation is necessary regarding the well-know and well-loved hymn "Joy to the World." Isaac Watts wrote the hymn based on Psalm 98 with a focus on Christ's triumphant and glorious return at the end of the age when He judges the world in righteousness. The Psalmist calls for the people of God to sing and shout for joy at His second coming. Although it is appropriate to sing at Christmas when we celebrate Christ's first coming, if we ponder the words carefully we will see they reflect Christ's second coming. So this Christmas, as we celebrate Christ's first coming, we also look and long for His return.

The Church emphasizes this truth during the Advent season. This truth, the promise of Christ in the Old Testament, the first coming as a baby and the final coming as king and judge in the New Testament, marks the beginning and the ending of our redemptive story from Genesis to Revelation. And in between the two Advents of Christ, this truth forms and shapes our lives now, motivating us to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission (Tit. 2:14; Heb. 9:28; 2 Pet. 3:11-14; 1 Jn. 3:2-3). This is the life and ministry ordained by God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15), which was marred by the first Adam and restored and redeemed by the second Adam, Jesus Christ. As those who have been redeemed, we worshipfully and longingly wait for Christ's return when He will make all things new (Rev. 21-22).

As the Bible concludes, so we conclude our series: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 16:22)!

Questions

1. What are the trials and tribulations you are experiencing this season? How do you live the peace you have experienced in Christ?
2. The "peace of Christ" is to rule and reign in our lives. How do you live in this peace of Christ, and what are the peace-robbers of your life?
3. As you live in redemption and await the consummation, living between the two comings of Christ, is your life marked by godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission? What needs to change so your life reflects this?
4. Do you only celebrate Christmas, or do you celebrate CHRISTmas? Christmas is about Christ. If you do not know Him, you have no peace. Receive Him and His peace, and celebrate true CHRISTmas for the first time. For those of you that have received Him and have His peace, live in it.

Hymn: *Joy to the World*

Prayer

Our Father and our God, thank you for the peace we have with you through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there is no longer condemnation against us. Forgive us when we live as if the peace we have truly experienced through Christ is not true or real, when our lives reflect more of the fallen world than the world of the redeemed. We ask, dear Lord, that in your grace and mercy, our lives, speech, gatherings and traditions reflect the true meaning and experience of CHRISTmas. And we also ask this would be the mark of our lives this season and until the consummation, when Christ returns again. We pray this in the name of the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Amen.

