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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

All of history is the outworking of God's plan for the redemption of the world. At the creation He established His order in the universe and said that it was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The order and government of God in creation remains, even though it is now subjected to futility because of mankind's rebellion in the fall. Whereas the first Adam failed in his calling to take dominion over the earth for God's glory, Jesus, the second Adam, will be victorious (Rom. 5:14-21; I Cor. 15:20-22, 45-49). The great hope of all creation is the restoration and glorification of all things through the work of Christ on behalf of His children (Rom. 8:18-23). Thus, the Incarnation, life and ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus are the most significant events of all of human history. At His second coming, Christ will bring to completion the work the Father gave Him to do.

In Christ's coming, we see the fulfillment of the expectations of all of the saints through all of history. Throughout the Old Testament, God progressively established His covenant people (Gen. 8:20-9:17; 12:1-3; 17:1-21; II Sam. 7; I Chron. 17), promising to bless the nations through the coming of the Messiah. By looking forward to the coming of Christ, Old Testament believers put their faith in God to save not only them, but also the whole world. We now look back at the finished work of our

Savior at His first coming with gladness. We look forward with joyful anticipation to the consummation of that work at His second coming.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Church has celebrated Advent (which means “coming”) and Christmas with great joy and encouragement. By remembering the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, God’s people are annually confronted with the fact that He alone is Savior and Lord. It establishes in our minds and hearts that only God is able to save men from sin and its consequences. It exalts Jesus above all men as the Sovereign Ruler of the world and that through Him the nations are being blessed. It encourages us with the fact that all of the enemies of God will be defeated by the life and work of Christ. We have set before us the promise of the removal of sin, the destruction of Satan, and the conquering of death. “Glory to God in the highest!”

Traditionally, the *Advent* season is a time of anticipation, looking forward, from the perspective of the Old Covenant, to the coming of Christ. It calls to mind the fact that for centuries God’s people had anxiously awaited His coming. We are reminded of how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and the work that He would accomplish. It is a time of remem-

¹ In the traditional Church calendar, in addition to the four weeks of Advent, Christmas is celebrated on Christmas day, as well as the following two Sundays, remembering the birth and circumcision of the Lord. Following Christmas is the celebration of Epiphany (which means manifestation) for six weeks, commemorating the manifestation of the Lord to the Gentiles. In order to maintain a simplicity to our celebration of the Incarnation, we will limit our Family Worship guide to Advent and Christmas day.

bering the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, and the significance of those events for the rest of history. Finally, on *Christmas*, we celebrate the fact that He has come.¹

During Advent we focus our attention on the darkness of the world before the coming of Christ. Traditionally Advent begins on the Sunday nearest to November 30th. It may occur between November 27th and December 3rd. The days are getting shorter and the skies grayer throughout December. Close to Christmas Day is the winter solstice, after which the days begin to get longer and brighter again. Thus, the very time of year that we celebrate Advent and Christmas helps us to see that Christ, “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4:2) has come into the darkness of the world to bring salvation, life and truth. This analogy between the creation and the Advent and Christmas seasons has often been accentuated by the use of candles during these celebrations of worship. With each successive week, additional candles are lit to symbolize the progressive revelation of the coming of the Messiah, until finally, on Christmas day, all the candles are lit to depict the fullness and clarity of the revelation of God in the person of Jesus.²

² Traditionally, in the first four Sundays of Advent purple or violet candles are used to symbolize the darkness which is progressively made brighter as Christmas draws nearer, as well as the royal nature of the Messiah. On the first Sunday the first candle is lit during the celebration. On the second Sunday, both the first and the second candles are lit, and so on through the four weeks of Advent. Finally, on Christmas day, a fifth candle, usually white or gold, symbolizing glory, is lit with the other four.

Very often, people will use an Advent Wreath to hold the candles, which has for many families become an important part of their Advent and Christmas celebration. The origins of the Advent wreath are somewhat obscure, but it is thought that the first Advent Wreaths were used in northern Europe within the Lutheran Church. The original wreaths were a wire circle with evergreen branches tied to it and places for four candles to be attached.³ Today, Advent wreaths can be purchased or made of wire, straw, styrofoam or wood, with four candles affixed at equal distances around the wreath. This may be decorated with evergreen branches, holly, pine cones or ribbons. Use your imagination and set the family artists to work! A fifth candle is placed in the center of the wreath to be lit on Christmas Day.

This guide to Advent and Christmas family worship is intended to help you create a meaningful season of celebration and worship for your family. The booklet is divided into chapters for each of the four weeks of Advent. Each chapter begins with a brief introductory description of the focus of that week of Advent.

Following this are Bible readings for each day of the week as well as short descriptive explanations of the meanings of the scriptures. Each day's devotion concludes with a selected Christmas hymn to fit the readings. The words to the various suggested hymns can be found at the end of this booklet.

If you do not already have designated family worship times, set aside time every evening to have fam-

³ The circular shape of the wreath symbolized the unending love of God, and the evergreen represented the hope of everlasting life through faith in Jesus, the Savior of the world.

ily worship. Begin by lighting the appropriate candle(s) for the current week of Advent. Read the scripture passages designated for that day and briefly discuss their meaning in relation to the birth of Jesus. Close by singing a Christmas hymn and by having a time of prayer and thanksgiving to God. By taking just a few extra moments each day to gather everyone and join in family worship, you can completely change the focus of the Christmas season in your home.

By actively and creatively including your children in this worship time you will be providing them a way of incorporating the meaning of the birth of Christ into their lives, helping them to grow in maturity, and giving them significant memories and traditions surrounding this season that will endure for the rest of their lives. This can be done by letting them help make the Advent wreath, light and snuff out the candles, read some of the scripture passages, be a part of the discussions, having them memorize Bible verses about the birth of Jesus from the Gospel narratives, teaching them to sing the songs, and doing various Advent centered art projects (see suggestions at end of book) that build into their lives the significance of the coming of Jesus.



God bless you and your household as you worship together during Advent and Christmas this year.

“Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

First Week

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

During the first week of Advent we focus our attention on the fact that God is the Sovereign Ruler of all of history. From the creation of the world, until the end of history, God is working out His plan to glorify Himself by redeeming mankind from bondage to sin and death through the Eternal Son. From the fall of man in Eden, throughout the Old Covenant age, God provided His people with prophecies concerning the coming of the Christ which were at last fulfilled at His birth. This progressive revelation of the coming of Christ not only demonstrates the power of God to order all of history according to His sovereign will, but also that we are the joyful beneficiaries of centuries of preparation. During this week we look at some of these prophecies to gain a fuller understanding of the person and work of Jesus, preparing ourselves for His coming to us through faith. Throughout this week, the first candle is lit.

SUNDAY

ISAIAH 9:1-7; LUKE 1:26-35

In these texts we see that the Christ child is God Himself with us. By the prophecy of Isaiah we learn who He is, and what He will do.

SUGGESTED HYMN

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

MONDAY

GENESIS 2:8-23; 3:15; JOHN 1:1-18

From Genesis 2 we learn of the creation of mankind, and his calling to have dominion over the earth. Genesis 3 teaches us that man rebelled against God by submitting to the words of the serpent. For this sin man has been under the judgment and curse of God. But, we also see the promise of the coming of the One, the “seed” of the woman, who would crush the head of the Devil. This is the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible. John 1 reveals to us that God became flesh (the “seed” of the woman) in the person of Jesus to give life to a new humanity. Those who believe in His Word are given the right to be called children of God once again.

SUGGESTED HYMN

Of the Father’s Love Begotten**TUESDAY**

GENESIS 12:2-3; GALATIANS 3:26-29; 4:4-7

Genesis 12 promises that through the seed of Abraham all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Galatians 3 and 4 tell us that this promise of salvation and blessing is bestowed upon all who have faith in Christ Jesus, because He is the promised “seed.”

SUGGESTED HYMN

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus**WEDNESDAY**

ISAIAH 2:2-5; ISAIAH 60:1-5; MATTHEW 4:13-16

The prophecies of Isaiah look forward to the light and salvation that Messiah will bring to men – even to the Gentiles. The later days are spoken of as the time when Messiah would cause all nations to come into the Kingdom of God, which Matthew 4 tells us was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus.

SUGGESTED HYMN

Thou Dost Reign on High**THURSDAY**

ISAIAH 53; MATTHEW 27:11-14; 27-38; 45-50; 57-60

These texts remind us that salvation from sin comes through the suffering, shame and death of Christ. Jesus was born King of the Jews, but His Kingdom came through His death. The love of God has been demonstrated through the sacrifice of the Son, so that we might have forgiveness of sins.

SUGGESTED HYMN

What Child is This?