

# ADVENT

FOR  
EVERYONE

A  
JOURNEY  
WITH THE  
APOSTLES

TOM  
WRIGHT





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SPCK

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## INTRODUCTION



As Christmas has become more exhausting and commercialized, many people find that keeping the preparatory season of Advent helps them to stay focused and recover something of the mystery and excitement that Christmas itself ought to have. Many churches now hold special Advent services. As we approach the darkest time of the year (in the northern hemisphere at least), Advent offers a gleam of light. And hope.

But Advent itself can be puzzling. ‘Advent’ means ‘coming’ or ‘arrival’. The hymns and readings often used during this season seem to be about two quite different things: about waiting for the ‘first coming’, the birth of Jesus, and about waiting for his ‘second coming’ to put everything right in the end. How did these things get muddled up? How can we make wise, prayerful sense out of it all?

The early Christians developed the ‘church’s year’ as a way of telling, learning and reliving the story of Jesus, which stands at the heart of our faith. As they did so, they came to understand that it wasn’t simply a matter of going round and round the same sequence and never getting anywhere. Think of a bicycle wheel; it goes round and round, but it is moving forwards, not standing still. The same circuit around the hub of the wheel becomes part of the forward movement of the bicycle as a whole. So it

## INTRODUCTION

is with the church's year. We go round the circuit: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost. The traditional Western churches sum all this up on Trinity Sunday, as we learn more deeply who our glorious God really is. But the point of it all is that, in doing this, we are not simply going round and round the same topics and never getting anywhere. We are signing on as part of God's larger project, God's forward purposes, his plans for the whole creation to be renewed, so that (as the prophets said) the earth will be full of the knowledge and glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. In Jesus, God brought heaven and earth together; in his second coming, that joining together will be complete. That is the Advent hope.

So the church's year overlaps with itself. In Advent, we think our way back to the ancient people of God, to the call of Abraham and his family as the start of God's rescue operation for a world in ruins and a human race in chaos. We follow the story of Israel's hope, a hope that refused to die no matter what terrible things happened; a hope that the first Christians believed had become human in the baby Jesus. With that 'first Advent', it was clear that God's rescue operation for humans and the world had been decisively begun but not yet completed. Jesus really did launch God's kingdom 'on earth as in heaven' in his public career, his death and his resurrection. But it was clear, because of the sort of thing this kingdom was, that it would then need to make its way through the humble, self-giving service of Jesus' followers, until the time when Jesus returned to finish the work, to put all things right, to banish evil and death for ever, and to bring heaven and earth completely together.

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The 'second Advent', then, overlaps with the first. We celebrate Jesus' first coming, and use that sense of fulfilment to fuel our hope for his second coming and to strengthen us to work for signs of that kingdom in our own day. We live between the first Advent and the second. That is one way of saying what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

The readings in the present book have been chosen to help you ponder and pray through what all this means: what it meant at the time (we always have to go back to that to check our bearings) and what it means today and tomorrow (we always have to come forward to that to stay on track). My hope and prayer is that this book will help individuals, groups and churches to be 'Advent people': people of light in a dark world, people of hope in times and places of despair. People who follow Jesus.



## WEEK 1: A TIME FOR THANKSGIVING

### FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

#### Thankful for God's Grace: 1 Corinthians 1.3–9

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our father and King Jesus the Lord.

<sup>4</sup>I always thank my God for you, for the grace of God that was given to you in King Jesus. <sup>5</sup>You were enriched in him in everything, in every kind of speech and knowledge, <sup>6</sup>just as the messianic message was established among you, <sup>7</sup>so that you aren't missing out on any spiritual gift as you wait eagerly for our Lord, King Jesus, to be revealed. <sup>8</sup>He will establish you right through to the end, so that you are blameless on the day of our Lord, King Jesus. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful! And it is through God that you have been called into the fellowship of his son, King Jesus, our Lord.

We weren't long into the phone call before I noticed something was different. It was the first time I'd spoken to this friend for some weeks and, whichever way the conversation turned, one name kept coming up. She and James had been talking over dinner last night . . . James was hoping to get promotion soon and would be working much closer to where she lived . . . perhaps I knew so-and-so who'd been at school with James? . . . and so on, and so on. There was a warmth, an excitement, and the conclusion was obvious; any minute now, she hoped, James would ask the key question, to which her answer was ready and waiting.

Well, it happened, of course, and they are now married, but my point is to notice how people give themselves away by what they go on talking about, almost (it sometimes

appears) to the point of obsession. It doesn't take long in someone's company, or even during a phone call, before you discover what's really exciting them: what is at the centre of their waking thoughts.

If we had any doubts what Paul was excited about, what was at the centre of his thoughts and intentions, this first paragraph of one of his most varied and lengthy letters would soon put us straight. One name keeps coming up, over and over again: Jesus. The name occurs eight times in these nine verses. Paul couldn't stop talking about Jesus, because without Jesus nothing else he said or did made any sense. And what he wanted the Corinthians to get hold of most of all is what it means to have Jesus at the middle of your story, your life, your thoughts, your imagination. If they could do that, all the other issues that rush to and fro through the letter would sort themselves out.

In particular, he wanted them to have Jesus at the centre of their understanding of the world and of history. Most of the Christians in Corinth had not been Jews but ordinary 'pagans'. They had been Gentiles, believing in various gods and goddesses, but without any idea that history, the story of the world, was *going* anywhere or that their own lives might be part of that forward movement. Again and again Paul wants them to learn this lesson: that they have been caught up into a great movement of the love and power of the one true God, the God of Israel, whose work for the whole world has now been unveiled through the events concerning his son. That's why Jesus is at the centre of the picture.

Look how, with a few deft strokes of the pen, he sketches a picture of the Christians in Corinth so that, at every point, their story is intertwined with Jesus' story. To begin

with, God has set them aside for his own special purposes in King Jesus; that's what 'called to be holy' in verse 2 means. I don't possess very many suits, but there is one I keep for best, which only comes out on the most special of occasions. That's what being 'holy' means, from God's point of view; it means that he has set people aside for special purposes; and the people in question are expected to cooperate with this.

But once they've been set aside as special, they discover that they are part of a large and growing worldwide family, brothers and sisters of everyone who 'calls on the name of our Lord King Jesus'. In fact, 'calling on' his name is the one and only sign of membership in this family, though people in Paul's day and ever since have tried to introduce other signs of membership as well. And the idea of 'calling on his name' links this worldwide family back to the earlier story of Israel, the people who 'called on the name of the Lord' in the sense of the Lord  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ , Israel's God. Right from the start, Paul shows what's going on: in Jesus, Israel's true king, the world's true Lord, Israel's one God has become personally present in the world, summoning all people into his family.

As in most of his letters, Paul follows the opening greeting by telling the Corinthians what he thanks God for when he thinks of them. Notice how he moves from what has happened to them in the past, through the sort of people they are in the present and on to the hope they have for the future, with Jesus at the centre at every stage. God has given them his 'grace' in King Jesus (verse 4). 'Grace' is one of those little words that contains a whole universe of meaning, summing up the fact that God loved them and acted decisively on their behalf even though

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they had done nothing whatever to deserve it, but rather the opposite.

The result of this ‘grace’ is that God’s riches have enriched them (verses 5, 6). They have become a community of learners, growing eagerly in knowledge about God and his new life, able to teach one another, and so strengthening and confirming the original royal proclamation, ‘the messianic message’, that has been made to them.

God has called them in the past, God equips them in the present and God will complete the process in the future. World history, and the story of the Christian life, has a shape, and Jesus is its shaper at every point. There is coming a day – like ‘the day of the Lord’ in the Old Testament, only more so – when the hidden truth about the world will be unveiled; this truth will turn out to be a person, and the person will turn out to be Jesus. That’s why it’s the central Christian badge or sign to ‘call on him’, to pray to the father through him, to know his friendship and love, and to thank him for the wonderful grace he has given us – yesterday, today and for ever.

### For Reflection or Discussion

In what ways do you see your church as part of a world-wide family? How does this enable you to ‘call on’ Jesus?

## WEEK 1: MONDAY

### Thanksgiving in Suffering: 2 Corinthians 1.8–11

8You see, my dear family, we don’t want to keep you in the dark about the suffering we went through in Asia. The load

we had to carry was far too heavy for us; it got to the point where we gave up on life itself. <sup>9</sup>Yes: deep inside ourselves we received the death sentence. This was to stop us relying on ourselves, and to make us rely on the God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup>He rescued us from such a great and deadly peril, and he'll do it again; we have placed our hope in him, that he'll do it again! <sup>11</sup>But you must co-operate with us through prayer for us, so that when God gives us this gift, answering the prayers of so many, all the more will give thanks because of what's happened to us.

You watch from a distance as a friend walks down the street. You see him turn and go into a house. He strides in cheerfully and purposefully. You wait for a few minutes. Then you see him come out again – only now you see, to your horror, that he is limping, staggering along, with bruises on his face and blood trickling from one arm. You are filled with pity and sympathy, but also with puzzlement: *What on earth happened in that house?*

The historian, particularly the ancient historian, is often in the position of the puzzled spectator. We may have evidence about an early phase of someone's career and then again a later phase, but what happened in between is often hidden from us. So it is with Paul. He has gone into the house, striding cheerfully along; that is how he appears to us in 1 Corinthians. Now, in 2 Corinthians, we see him emerge again, battered and bruised. Even his style of writing seems to have changed. But we don't know what happened inside.

Nor does he tell us. Like many people in the ancient world, he was more interested in what illness or suffering *meant* than in giving us a detailed account of his symptoms. Most of what we know is in these verses; we can

glean a little from things he says later in the letter, but it doesn't amount to much. He simply refers to 'the suffering we went through in Asia' (the Roman province of 'Asia' was roughly the western half of modern Turkey, with Ephesus in the middle of its west coast; Ephesus was where Paul was staying when he wrote 1 Corinthians). What had happened?

Acts doesn't help at this point, either. Perhaps, if Paul was imprisoned and ill-treated in Ephesus – as seems likely – the author of Acts was anxious not to draw too much attention to it. He has Paul getting into enough trouble as it is. But the riot in the theatre in Ephesus, which Acts describes in chapter 19, may have been part of it. In that passage, things are quietened down by the city officials. But people had woken up to the fact that if the message Paul was announcing was to catch on, their businesses would suffer; so would their civic pride in the great temple of Diana. And the opposition may well have continued in new and nastier ways, leaving Paul feeling, as he says here, that he's received the sentence of death.

In fact, his description sounds much like what we would call a nervous breakdown. The load had become too heavy; all his natural human resources of energy and strength were worn down to nothing. It's bad enough to hear a magistrate declare that you are sentenced to death; it's far worse when a voice deep inside yourself tells you that you might as well give up and die. That is the point Paul had reached, the point where the night had become totally dark and all hope of dawn had disappeared.

Does that mean he'd been relying on his own resources up to that point? That seems strange for someone who

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