

## INTRODUCTION

C hrist came.  
Christ comes.  
Christ will come again.

This summarizes the season of Advent.

For many people, time is oriented around a cultural calendar that we organize life around. Every month, there's a holiday, various school breaks, and rhythms that we keep. But for the person who wants to live into the story of Jesus, a new vision of time is needed.

For the Christ follower, the new year doesn't begin when January 1 arrives; it begins with the news that God came. And that he comes. And that he will come again.

In the church calendar, Advent marks the beginning of the year. It's the start of a new year for the Christian. It reminds us that fresh starts and new beginnings are not prod-

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ucts of our willpower, or realities that surface when a new calendar year begins, but rather expressions of God's grace in Christ.

Advent means "arrival." This season compels us to look for the one who arrived on earth two thousand years ago and still arrives in our world today. Advent is preparation for Christ's arrival. It's what Christmas is all about: God with us.

Yet preparing for Christmas is often not focused on Christ. We tend to get ready for Christmas by setting up the Christmas tree, filling stockings, and waiting for the arrival of our Amazon purchases. (Preaching to myself here.) We are culturally formed to prepare more for the arrival of Santa than the coming of Jesus. We leave out cookies and milk by the fireplace (or maybe on the fire escape!).

But setting out cookies and milk is not what preparing for Christ's arrival looks like; rather, we should be preparing our hearts and our attentiveness. The season of Advent opens us up to the surprising ways of God. In Advent, we are invited to wrestle with our longings, desires, and hopes for a world marked by grace, goodness, and peace. It is a time to recall the biblical truth that the renewal of our lives and our world is found in God's coming among us in Jesus Christ. Advent is a season to reignite a spirit of prayer.

Every season in the church calendar has a particular emphasis.

Lent reminds us to place God's ways—and not our appetites—as the guiding principles for our lives. Eastertide calls us to feast and rejoice in Christ's resurrection. Pentecost in-

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vites us to be filled with God's life because the Spirit has been poured out. Ordinary time forms us to see God in the mundane.

Advent trains us in hopeful waiting.

In this devotional, you will find twenty-five days of reflections and guided structures for prayer. There are four main sections. Traditionally, the four weeks of Advent are built around the words *hope, peace, joy, and love*, but this devotional is based on the words *waiting, peacemaking, rejoicing, and beholding*.

My hope is that you will find truth and encouragement to cultivate a life of communion with God in this Advent season—that you would be moved to prayer. My hope is that, by his grace, this book will ground you in the midst of a distracted world, help you wait on Jesus, and discern the ways he arrives in your life today.

To wait well is part of the Christian life. Yet this is what I know to be true about my life and yours: In this season, we might not wait well. We might become impatient and disgruntled and lose hope. But, dear friend, the good news of Advent is not that we are faithful in our waiting; it's that God is faithful in his coming.

## HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

This book is designed to help you travel through the first twenty-five days of December, culminating in a final reflec-

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tion meant to be read on Christmas Day. I encourage you to set aside a consistent time and place to read, journal, and pray through this book. I've attempted to make each day's reading brief enough to fit into fifteen minutes; however, those who desire to linger longer may do so.

Each day is comprised of two parts: (1) a devotional written by me that unpacks a portion of Scripture related to one of the four themes of this book (waiting, peacemaking, rejoicing, and beholding), and (2) space to reflect on the day's theme. In the second part, you'll find the following elements to help you enjoy God's presence and go deeper:

- **Prepare:** an invitation to spend a few moments in silence before God
- **Prayer for Presence:** a short prayer to dedicate your time to God
- **Scripture:** a passage to look up in your Bible if you desire to
- **Guide:** a thought-provoking quote from a wise voice in recent or ancient church history
- **Question:** a prompt based on the day's theme that you can pray, discuss, or journal about
- **Closing Prayer:** a way to conclude your time and invite God into your day

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Depending on how you like to process with God, you may want to have a pen and a notebook or journal nearby. If you're using this devotional with your spouse, family, or small group, the questions might tee up meaningful conversations.

As you embark on this journey through Advent, may the Lord bless you and keep you.



PART ONE

**WAITING**



DAY 1



## THE FOUNDATION OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE



“**W**aiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.”<sup>1</sup> These are words from the French writer Simone Weil. I must confess, I don’t like these words one bit.

Waiting, for me, is not enjoyable. I’m a native New Yorker, so to hear that waiting is the foundation of the spiritual life unnerves me—and maybe you, too.

But there’s no getting around it. Our waiting patiently is God’s laboratory for our transformation, and I’ve had to learn that the hard way.

There have been too many Christmas seasons when I’m frantically running up and down the mall on December 23 trying to pick up an item I should have purchased a few weeks before. Turns out I’m not the only one. During a recent holiday season, I took a trip to a New York mall, only to

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find out that all of Queens had the same idea. I had to wait to get into the parking lot. Wait to find a spot. Wait to get into the store. After amazingly finding my item, I stood in line to make the purchase. Then I repeated the process because I had three more stores to ransack.

At no point in my Christmas-shopping experience did I see people singing Christmas songs while waiting in line. People were angry, frustrated, and irritable. It was a mess. Some people (like myself) did all we could to avoid waiting, but I learned a spiritual lesson while at the mall: Everyone has to wait.

We do all we can to avoid waiting, but no matter what we do to circumvent or avoid it, at some point in our lives, we will have to wait. And God wants to use waiting to transform us.

There's a story in the Gospels about a married couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had to wait to have a baby (see Luke 1). When Luke, the gospel writer, described them, he went all out to highlight their obedience:

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. (verses 5–6)

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It's noteworthy that Luke mentioned their religious power and lineage. A first-century Jew would probably think that because of how righteous they were, Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a great number of kids. In their culture, it was assumed that the size of your family reflected God's favor. If you didn't have kids, it was interpreted as a sign of his disapproval.

That's why the next sentence in Luke's account would have stunned his readers:

They were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.  
(verse 7)

DAY

1

How could this righteous couple be childless? Zechariah's name means "whom the Lord remembers," but, sadly, it feels more like God has forgotten them entirely.

At some point, Zechariah is chosen to perform temple duties on one of the most holy days, in the most holy part of the temple. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. When the day comes, as he's praying, an angel named Gabriel appears and tells him God has heard his prayer. He will have a son (John the Baptist), who will prepare the way for the Messiah. This news is incredible. At their age, it's truly a miracle.

But what I find particularly astonishing is their attitude toward God even in the painful waiting. They could have turned bitter and resentful. Instead, they held on to him in

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prayer. They did not get what they desperately desired and *still* remained faithful.

I'm sure their waiting was not perfect. And, dear friend, your waiting will not be perfect either. Even in the valley, it's possible to stay connected to God while allowing yourself to feel all the feels. (Just read the book of Psalms.)

That is the essence of prayer.

Prayer is not about staying connected to God because of what he will give us; it is about remaining connected to him even when we don't get what we want. Like he did for Zechariah and Elizabeth, God *may* bless you with what you've been longing for. But even if he doesn't, his affection is set upon you, and none of your waiting is wasted.

DAY

1

## REFLECT

**PREPARE:** Spend two minutes in silence and stillness before God.

**PRAYER FOR PRESENCE:** Lord Jesus, in this moment, I believe you want to speak to me in a deep and personal way. May I be attentive to your loving and merciful voice.

— SCRIPTURE | LUKE 1:5-25 —

**GUIDE:** A waiting person is a patient person. The word “patience” means the willingness to

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stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her womb.<sup>2</sup>

—HENRI NOUWEN

**QUESTION:** Which part of Zechariah and Elizabeth's story do you identify with in this season? Have you been waiting on the Lord for something but it feels like he isn't listening? Or, on the flip side, have you seen God provide in a miraculous way? Spend a few minutes reflecting, praying, or writing what you sense God is speaking to your heart.

**CLOSING PRAYER:** May the Lord bless us and keep us and cause his face to shine upon us from this day forth and forevermore. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

DAY  
1



DAY 2



## GOD WORKS IN THE DARK



When I think of the difficulty of waiting, the great poet Langston Hughes comes to mind. In his famous poem “Tired,” he wrote,

I am so tired of waiting,  
Aren't you,  
For the world to become good  
And beautiful and kind?  
Let us take a knife  
And cut the world in two—  
And see what worms are eating  
At the rind.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, Langston, I'm tired too.

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I'm tired of the wars.  
I'm tired of the division.  
I'm tired of the injustices.  
I'm tired of the violence.

Advent shouts out, "God is coming!" but sometimes it's hard to see that when we're surrounded by darkness. We are all waiting for something. And sometimes it feels like we're waiting in the dark.

That is where Advent begins. Every year, we come to this season and are reminded that darkness is a reality and that we need God to break through with his light. Darkness, for most of us, is not a good thing, but we have hope, because God works in the dark. In fact, some of the greatest moments in the Bible happened in dark places:

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DAY  
2

- When God called Jonah, the man ran the other way. His disobedience pulled him into the darkness of a fish's belly. And in that darkness, God revealed himself to Jonah. God works in the dark.
- The prophet Jeremiah was depressed, contemplated suicide, and experienced great darkness. He wrote the book of Lamentations, and in his writing, God revealed his mercy and faithfulness to him. God works in the dark.

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- Elijah the prophet was afraid for his life, and while it was night, God visited him in a still small voice. God works in the dark.
- Job lost everything, and through that experience, God met him in great power. God works in the dark.
- When the Israelites were in bondage, God led them out of Egypt by night. God works in the dark.
- The resurrection of Jesus happened “while it was still dark” (John 20:1). God most certainly does his best work in the dark. The Advent season doesn’t promise that if you come to Christ, all your problems will go away. Not at all. Instead, the promise is that, even when life seemingly spirals out of control, there is hope.

DAY

2

To wait in the dark can be disorienting and vulnerable. Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote, “Human beings do not lose control of their lives. What we lose is the illusion that we were ever in control of our lives in the first place.”<sup>2</sup>

Waiting certainly reminds us that we are not in control.

Maybe that has become painfully true for you. You might be waiting through a period of illness. Or a season of unemployment. Or deep loneliness.

In all that, take heart, dear friend. The darkness need not

be a sign that the end is near. In fact, Advent tells us that a new beginning is right around the corner.

## REFLECT

**PREPARE:** Spend two minutes in silence and stillness before God.

**PRAYER FOR PRESENCE:** Lord Jesus, in this moment, I believe you want to speak to me in a deep and personal way. May I be attentive to your loving and merciful voice.

—— SCRIPTURE | PSALM 27:7-14 ——

DAY  
2

**GUIDE:** Our lives are formed in the hands of a great mystery that does not ask us for our advice.

So if waiting is an aggravation, it is at least partly because we do not like being reminded of our limits. We like *doing*—earning, buying, selling, building, planting, driving, baking—making things *happen*, whereas waiting is essentially a matter of *being*—stopping, sitting, listening, looking, breathing, wondering, praying. It can feel pretty helpless to wait for someone or something that is not here yet and that will or will not arrive in its own good time, which is not the same thing as *our* own good time.

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And yet waiting is an essential part of the Christian life. Listen to what we say every time we break bread together: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” This is the mystery of our faith, that we are always waiting for Christ to come to us even though we believe that he has already come and that he is coming to us right now in word and sacrament.<sup>3</sup>

—BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

**QUESTION:** What is one area of your life that you struggle to release to God? What would it look like to surrender it to him? Spend a few minutes reflecting, praying, or writing what you sense God is speaking to your heart.

**CLOSING PRAYER:** May the Lord bless us and keep us and cause his face to shine upon us from this day forth and forevermore. Amen.

✧  
DAY 3  
✧

## REFUSING TO ACT BEFORE GOD ACTS

✧

Moses was nowhere to be found. Forty days earlier, he'd climbed a mountain to be with God, but after waiting for so long, the people of God were restless. *What's taking so long?* Perhaps Moses lost cellphone reception. Or maybe he fell. After all, he wasn't a young man anymore.

As tension mounted, the anxious crowd cornered Moses's brother, Aaron, who had been left in charge. "We're tired of waiting. *Do something,*" they said. "It seems like Yahweh has abandoned us. We need someone to guide us."

You probably know what happened next. Aaron gave in, instructing the people to hand over their gold rings—the same rings meant for furnishing the tabernacle, where God wanted to dwell with his people. Aaron melted the rings down, then fashioned them into a golden calf. Despite God's

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direct warnings *not* to do so, they worshipped the idol they had made (see Exodus 32).

If we rewind this scene, just a few days earlier, God gave them a command, saying, “You shall not make any graven image” (see 20:4). But anxiety will cause you to do some irrational things.

What’s the lesson? It’s hard to wait upon God when he seems absent or delayed. One of the primary expressions of anxiety is reactivity. It’s tempting to take matters into our own hands. Impatience wins over trust, and the results can be disastrous.

This Advent season, let’s remember the importance of waiting. Though we can’t always see him, God is indeed at work in our lives. In the waiting, he does some of his deepest work inside us.

To wait on God is not a passive act; it’s actually a means of positioning ourselves to receive from him in a moment of difficulty. Eugene Peterson wrote, “Waiting in prayer is a disciplined refusal to act before God acts.”<sup>1</sup> And God acts within us as we wait on him.

In the book of Isaiah, we find words that don’t seem to make sense:

He gives power to the faint,  
and to him who has no might he increases  
strength.

Even youths shall faint and be weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;

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but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their  
strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not be weary;  
they shall walk and not faint.  
(40:29–31, ESV)

I don't know about you, but when I wait, I don't feel renewed. My strength actually dissipates. However, Isaiah reminds us that waiting for the Lord situates us to receive something we can't give ourselves. Jesus tells his disciples the same thing in the book of Acts:

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. (1:4–5)

DAY  
3

What does all this mean? Simply that what God does in you as you wait is just as important as—sometimes *more* important than—what you're waiting for.

We're *all* waiting for something in our lives, and it's common for us to live impulsively and reactively to make it appear. In this season, what would happen if you waited on God, even when it's uncomfortable? If you sat in his presence, your heart open to his will, ready to receive grace and strength?

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When it feels as though he's abandoned you, may the peace of God sustain you in the waiting. I pray that even as you look ahead, longing for what's to come, you're able to rest in the goodness of God, knowing he's right beside you.

### REFLECT

**PREPARE:** Spend two minutes in silence and stillness before God.

**PRAYER FOR PRESENCE:** Lord Jesus, in this moment of prayer, free me from the distractions of the day so that I may be deeply present to you and myself for the sake of the world around me.

DAY  
3

— SCRIPTURE | PSALM 39:4-7 —

**GUIDE:** Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. It wants to break open the ripe fruit when it has hardly finished planting the shoot. But all too often the greedy eyes are only deceived; the fruit that seemed so precious is still green on the inside, and disrespectful hands ungratefully toss aside what has so disappointed them.<sup>2</sup>

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

**QUESTION:** During this season, in what ways is anxiety causing you to react instead of patiently

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wait on the Lord? Spend a few minutes reflecting, praying, or writing what you sense God is speaking to your heart. If it's helpful, write out a simple prayer expressing your trust in his character, timing, and plans.

**CLOSING PRAYER:** Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.<sup>3</sup>