

DECEMBER 20—Twenty-Second Day of Advent

LUKE 2:33-35

33And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. 34Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against 35(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Simeon was a devout man who had waited a long time for the Christ. Even though we expect this to be a moment of great joy and celebration, Simeon delivers a message of danger. He tells Jesus’ mother, Mary, that Jesus will be a tremendous troublemaker. Simeon knows his Old Testament. He knows that the prophets don’t promise a Christ as someone who gets along with everyone and never upsets the powerful. Simeon speaks of the “consolation” or comfort of Israel, and when Isaiah uses that language we see that the Christ is coming to “contend with him who contends with you” (Is. 49:25) and to “feed those who oppress you with their own flesh” (Is. 49:26). In a similar message, the Lord told the prophet Jeremiah that “I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:9,10). We might think that this would be a shocking and troubling revelation for Jesus’ mother. It means certain doom for her Son. One doesn’t take on King Herod and the Roman Empire without provoking a deathly reaction. Simeon even promises Mary that “a sword will pierce through your own soul.” Disturbing claims, but this isn’t really news to Mary. She, herself, had sung similar words about her Son’s dangerous work. She knew that in Jesus, the Father, “has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty” (Lk. 1:51-52). She knew Simeon’s words were true. Jesus would be a premier troublemaker for the enemies of God. He came to pull them down, to overthrow them by the Spirit, and to lift up the people of God. The birth of Jesus is just the beginning of this path of the “fall and rising of many.” The world would never be the same. The enemies of God had little clue about the dramatic consequences of Christmas.

—Pastor Douglas Jones, Christ Church, Moscow, ID

PRAYER

O Father, thank you for the fall and raising of many that Jesus still brings to us. Thank you for the privilege of serving in Christ’s kingdom. We praise You for allowing us to be part of this adventure. Give us eyes to recognize His enemies and friends. Give us the courage to pull down and to build up. Give Your church the strength to withstand those who seek to frighten us. Let us rejoice in the work of Christ. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what sort of enemies Christ would seek to pull down today. What enemies today resemble King Herod and ancient Rome? What sorts of Christians provoke the sort of anger and deathly retaliation that Jesus provoked? Why does our celebration of Christmas often try to hide the more dangerous side of Jesus’ mission?

DECEMBER 21—Twenty-Third Day of Advent

LUKE 2:36-38

36 Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; 37and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. 38And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

The Bible does not provide a moment by moment picture of the people of God. From the last prophecy of Malachi to the announcement of John's birth to Zacharias, God had not spoken for four hundred years. But just as in the days of Elijah, God has, as He always does, preserved for Himself a remnant, a chosen few who remained faithful, and who longed for the coming of the kingdom.

Anna, like Simeon, was one such faithful servant, as were those to whom Anna spoke, those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. Her service came in the form of prayer and fasting. We, when faced with trouble, typically seek a strategy to solve the problem, and turn to prayer as a somehow weaker response. We ought instead to begin with prayer, and rejoice that our prayers, like Anna's, not only served the saints, but as our text reminds us, serve God as well. The prayers of this righteous woman availed much, as our Father sent His only Son for the redemption of not just Jerusalem, but Judea, Samaria, and the outermost parts of the world.

—Pastor R.C. Sproul Jr., *Saint Peter Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our loving and faithful Father, we ask that You would make us a people faithful in prayer, and in hope. In Your grace remind us O Lord, to look, and to pray for the coming again of Your Son, and to speak boldly of the Christ, as Anna did, to all those who hope in Him. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Consider how you might add occasional fasts to your prayer life. Miss a meal, or a day's worth of meals, and when hunger comes, use it as a goad to prayer, for a pressing issue in the life of your family or church, or to pray that Jesus' name would be known throughout the land.

DECEMBER 22—Twenty-Fourth Day of Advent

ISAIAH 53:1-3

1 Who has believed our report?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,
And as a root out of dry ground.
He has no form or comeliness;
And when we see Him,
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.
3 He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

As we approach Christmas and the time of rejoicing at God's presence with us in Jesus, it is important that we think about the plan of God revealed in Jesus. Our readings up to now have focused on the promise of the Messiah coming to save His people from their enemies. So, the anticipation of what God will do through the birth of Mary's son has been growing. We may naturally think that the world will rejoice in this birth and that all that has been amiss in the world will be put right by this little baby boy.

But we see something very different revealed to us in the pages of Scripture and in the life and death of Jesus the Christ. He is set before us, even in the days prior to His birth, as someone who must suffer, be despised and die. This rubs us the wrong way at Christmas time. We want joy and laughter and feasting. And we must remember that Jesus does lead us to joy and laughter and feasting but the way there is through sorrow and tears and fasting. There is resurrection life in Jesus Christ but only after sacrificial death. We must look at the glorious birth of Jesus with the wretched cross in mind. And then, beyond that, to his even more glorious resurrection, in which all things *will* be put right.

He did, indeed, come to save the world but not on the world's terms. He changed everything and since He did so, we too, must see life, this good and joyous life, in terms of the cross. In the Advent season, we see a dying world in need of a Savior and Jesus is that promised Messiah. Then Jesus is born to suffer and die Himself, revealing also the need for all men to die to sin and to live to righteousness.

When Isaiah asks, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" it is clear that he is thinking that few, if any, believed the report. But by God's grace many did believe and from the despised man of sorrows, the victorious arm of the Lord is revealed.

At Christmas, we celebrate all God's work in Jesus Christ, from His glorious Advent to His victory on the cross, His Resurrection from the dead, His Ascension to the place of power and rule, and His coming to establish His Church in power at Pentecost.

—*Pastor Virgil Hurt, Providence Church, Lynchburg, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our Father in Heaven, we give You praise for sending Jesus to us to redeem the world and save His people from their sins. We could not have foreseen the way that You would do this. Your thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways Your ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are Your ways higher than our ways, and your thoughts than our thoughts. We thank You that Jesus suffered and died on our behalf and that at Christmas time we are reminded that we are to be like Jesus, giving ourselves away to others. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will toward men. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Talk about a time when your good intentions were misunderstood and rejected by the very ones you were trying to help. What was your response to this? What does this have to do with entering into the sufferings of Jesus? How do our sufferings turn into victory?

DECEMBER 23—Twenty-Fifth Day of Advent

HEBREWS 2:14-18

14Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. 17Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Our reading speaks of those who were subject to a lifetime of bondage. Who were these in bondage as slaves? All mankind—ever since the Fall of Adam—from the very beginning. And the Word of God, in every place, shows that this bondage is to sin—sin that leads to eternal death. The very thought of death causes fear, for death has great power over us; death is inevitable, it stalks every son of Adam, and every daughter of Eve. But what if there were a remedy for this deathly bondage? What if there was Someone Who could rescue us, Who could redeem us? The Hebrews writer declares that there is such a One! The Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is that One. He Whom the prophets foretold took on flesh and blood; He was made like us, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He came to this world of death to defeat death, by suffering death in our place. By His death, He destroyed Satan's hold over us (our former slave-master), and now we are released into a glorious liberty. Christ has set us free, we are free indeed! Is it any wonder that the Advent/Christmas Season is a time of joy, of singing, and feasting? So let us do what this old Christmas carol says:

Rejoice and be merry in songs and in mirth;

Oh praise our Redeemer, all mortals on earth;
For this is the birthday of Jesus our King,
Who brought us salvation His praises we'll sing.

—Pastor Brian Penney, Christ Covenant Church, Copiague, New York

PRAYER

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, in Your great wisdom You sent Your Only-begotten Son to be our Savior. We thank and praise You that He has accomplished for us what we could not do ourselves. We thank You that He made propitiation for our sins, appeasing Your righteous wrath, and delivering us from sin and death. Help us, by the Holy Spirit, to be filled with gratitude and joy for such a great deliverance! Help us to rejoice in the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we look forward to the Day of His appearing, when we shall be made like Him, and inherit eternal life. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Review and discuss with your family the questions found at Lord's Day Five and Six in the Heidelberg Catechism:

The Heidelberg Catechism

Lord's Day Five

12. Since, then, by the righteous judgment of God, we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how may we escape this punishment and be again received into favor?

God wills that His justice be satisfied; therefore, we must make full satisfaction to that justice, either by ourselves or by another.

13. Can we ourselves make this satisfaction?

Certainly not; on the contrary, we daily increase our guilt.

14. Can any mere creature make satisfaction for us?

None; for first, God will not punish any other creature for the sin which man committed; and further, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it.

15. What kind of mediator and redeemer, then, must we seek?

One who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.

Lord's Day Six

16. Why must He be a true and righteous man?

Because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should make satisfaction for sin; but one who is himself a sinner cannot satisfy for others.

17. Why must He also be true God?

That by the power of His Godhead He might bear in His manhood the burden of God's wrath, and so obtain for and restore to us righteousness and life.

18. But who now is that Mediator, who in one person is true God and also a true and righteous man?

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given unto us for complete redemption and righteousness.

19. From where do you know this?

From the Holy Gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise, afterwards proclaimed by the holy Patriarchs and Prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and finally fulfilled by His well-beloved Son.

Discuss how God is both perfectly just and at the same time perfectly merciful.

DECEMBER 24—Twenty-Sixth Day of Advent

1JOHN 3:8

⁸ . . . For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Of all the verses that speak to why the Son of God came into the world, this one is certainly the most succinct. The Son of God came into the world to destroy the works of the *Diabolo*s, the Accuser. Also called the Adversary (*Satanas*), the Dragon, and the Serpent of Old (Rv 12.9; 20.2), the Devil is infamous for three works: lying, murdering, and enslaving (Jn 8.44; 2Co 4.4; 2Tm 2.26). The Devil lied to our First Parents by *accusing God of lying!* (Gn 3.4-5.) Using that lie, Satan murdered our Parents, bringing them under the power of death and sin, and through that power he enslaved them and their progeny (Gn 3.19, 24; Rm 5.14; 2Tm 2.26; Hb 2.14-15). Satan could truthfully plead before God: “Man trusted *my* word, not Yours. He obeyed *me*, not You. Therefore, Man is rightfully *my* servant, and the Earth *my* kingdom.” And in all points, the Devil was exactly right. He had an airtight case. Satan thus won rightful legal claim over Man and the Earth, as well as judicial standing in the Court of God (Lk 4.5-6; Jb 1.6-12; 2.1-6). Unless God was prepared to destroy Man and the Earth, He had to recognize Satan’s claim. To destroy the Devil’s work, someone had to get his case kicked out of Court. To do that, someone had to come into God’s Court and show, first, that they were innocent of Satan’s accusations, and second, that they had a superior claim. But neither Adam nor any of his sons qualified; they failed on both counts. Satan had successfully checkmated Man and stalemated God – or so it seemed.

Enter now Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Being fully man, Jesus was qualified as a potential champion of Mankind; being fully God (and with God, not Adam, as his Father), Jesus was immune from Satan’s power of sin and death (Hb 2.17). Jesus was tempted and tested in every way Adam was (and as we are), and He pleased God in every circumstance, being obedient even to the point of death on a Roman cross (Hb 4.15; Ph 2.8). He died for Adam’s sin and ours, paying our debt and breaking Satan’s claim over us (2Co 5.21; Hb 2.14-15). He entered into death, but death had no claim on him; He burst death’s chains (Act 2.24, 32). He didn’t come back from death like Lazarus (that’s resuscitation) – he busted out the other side (that’s resurrection!). He came forth in a new kind of glorified life which no man had ever experienced (Jn 20.19-20; 1Co 15.45). He ascended to heaven where war broke out between Jesus and Satan (Lk 24.51; Rv 12.5, 7). Satan was thrown down to earth, for no place was found for him in heaven any longer (Rv 12.8-10). In legal terms, Jesus presented a superior claim, and Satan’s case was thrown out of God’s court. Having no more case, Satan was thrown down the courthouse steps. Satan still causes mischief on the earth, but his days are numbered and his power restricted (Rv 12.12-13; 20.1-3). Now Jesus has rightful claim over Man and the Earth (Mt 28.18-20; Hb 10.12-13). “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever” (Rv 11.15).

Many battles remain for Jesus’ disciples on earth, but the war has been won (1Pt 5.8; Eph 6.11-12; Co 2.15; Hb 10.12-13). The Gates of Hell will not prevail against Christ’s Church (Mt 16.18). God’s vision for a Kingdom on Earth – where Man enjoys God’s fellowship and does His will as perfectly as it is done in Heaven – has been restored. *All that* is what our verse means when it says the Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil.

*This little Babe, so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarme’d wise
The gates of hell he will surprise. –Robert Southwell*

—Pastor Alan Burrow, *The King’s Congregation, Meridian, Idaho*

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending forth Your Son when we were helpless in Satan’s grip. Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into the world to destroy the works of the Devil. You have set us free that we may know You and the Father by the Spirit. We no longer live, but it is You who lives in us. We no longer belong to ourselves, for You have bought us with a price. Thank you. Send us forth in life that we might serve you, body and soul, as living sacrifices, to Your glory and to the salvation of the World. AMEN.

ADVENT APPLICATION

Discuss how the truths set forth in the Devotion above impact witnessing to unbelievers. To assist your discussion, read 2Tm 2:24-26.

DECEMBER 25—First Day of Christmas

1 TIMOTHY 1:15-17

15This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

Too often the Christmas season is just all a hustle and a bustle. People are rushing around; shopping, cooking, and traveling. So much so, that the real meaning of Christmas is almost forgotten. Imagine what would happen if all the traffic on the way to the local mall was delayed while a man with his pregnant wife riding on a donkey crossed the road! Everyone would be honking their horns and yelling, “Hurry up! We are trying to get ready for Christmas!” Our text provides us a meditation on what the arrival of Jesus meant to the Apostle Paul. He never forgot the real meaning: Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That meant a lot to Paul because he thought that he was the biggest sinner of all. He had hunted Christians down and put them in prison. He was, in many respects, the original Grinch. He hated the fact that people believed that Jesus had come as the Messiah and so he was doing everything he could to stop the spread of the Christian faith.

But when he was converted on the road to Damascus, he realized the reason that God sent His Son into the world. That is why, right after he writes about the meaning of Christmas (verse 15) he sings! (verse 17).

—*Pastor Laurence Windham, St. Peter Presbyterian Church, Bristol, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this season of celebration. Help us to never forget that the reason this time of the year is so special is because of what Jesus did for us. He came to die for our sins and bring peace between You and us. AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Phillips Brooks wrote the Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” upon returning from a trip to the Holy Land. While there, from the hills of Palestine, he could see the town of Bethlehem and as he reflected on the significance of that small corner of the world at the advent of Jesus, he included these words: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight...” Sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and then talk about the lyrics.

DECEMBER 26—Second Day of Christmas

JOHN 1:9-10

9That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. 10He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

In the verses before this, the Gospel-writing John has been describing that other John. The camel-hair wearing, brood-of-vipers preaching, wilderness baptizing John. But that John wasn't the light; he only pointed us to the true light, who has now come into the world that He made. But, wonder of wonders, the world He made didn't recognize Him when He came to them.

When someone turns on the lights in your bedroom in the morning, does it take a while for your eyes to get used to the light, after being closed and in the dark all night long? So it was for Israel, when Jesus came. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). And sometimes you might roll over and demand the light be put out. Or you might even get out of bed and turn it off yourself, and then go get back in bed! This is what Israel did. They went out of their way to put out the light that came to them, so they could go back to their darkness.

But that is like trying to put out the sun. The sun is our source of heat and light, and the sun was made through the Son of God, Jesus. He is our source of light. December 21 is the shortest day of the year this year, when the sun shines the least. Our church fathers put Christmas at this time of year on purpose, partly to remind us that in our darkest hour, the Light of the world dawned. From Christmas Day on, the sun starts shining longer every day. And the Light that gives light to you shines fuller every day in your heart and life. Is He getting brighter in your life? In the tabernacle, God had a lampstand that was kept constantly burning (Exodus 25:31). In Solomon's temple, this became much bigger lampstands (1 Kings 7:49), as God's light to the world in Israel grew. And the lampstand was fueled with oil from olive trees (Ex 27:20-21). Zechariah has a vision of a lampstand fed by olive tree branches, while God says His Word will rule by His Spirit (4:2-6). The anointed ones (Messiah, in Hebrew) stand by the lampstand, just as Jesus walks among the lampstands of the seven churches in Revelation 1. The Spirit fills Him and He is the light of the world (John 8:12). The Spirit fills us, and Jesus calls us the light of the world (Matt 5:14). Our family is also like an olive tree, Psalm 128 tells us. Mom is a vine laden with fruit. Children are like olive shoots springing up around the table. And the oil of the Spirit from Jesus fills and fuels us to shine the light of the world around us.

In the beginning, God spoke His Word and said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Now again, at the birth of Jesus, God has spoken a new creation into existence. He does this, not so that you can get presents at Christmas time. He does this so that you know His Son, through whom all things are made. He speaks so that we will glorify and enjoy Him forever. Do you know this light? Do you know Jesus?

—Pastor Steve Hemmeke, *Covenant Heritage Reformed Fellowship, Newport News, Virginia*

PRAYER

Our gracious heavenly Father, You have given us the ultimate gift. Forgive us for not honoring You, the Giver, or receiving Your Gift with joy, thanks, and faith. Thank you for giving us light and life. We rejoice before You for every good and perfect gift You give us. We believe that you have given us a Savior. We pray in His name, AMEN.

CHRISTMAS APPLICATION

Discuss with your family what light your neighbors can see of Christ radiating from your family. How can you bring them some light and life in this season?