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# ADVENT IS NOT AN ISLAND

amenable



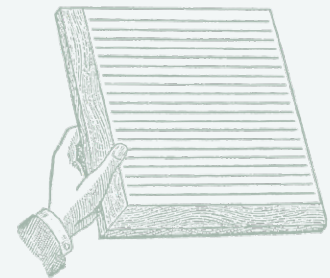
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**Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “coming” or “arrival,” is the four-week period before Christmas Day observed by many Christian churches.**

As the name implies, this four-week season functions traditionally as the time in which Christians reflect on both the first coming (birth) of Jesus and his second coming (future return).<sup>1</sup>

This Advent season, it is likely that a large majority of those sitting in Sunday services will either be so familiar with the common themes and practices of Advent that it will have little to no effect on their hearts and lives, or they will be so vastly *unfamiliar* that the season confuses more than anything.

So, how do we understand and practice Advent in a way that inspires, grabbing simultaneously the hearts of both those who have grown complacent in the season and those who are new to the concept entirely? Together, let us remember why we do and say certain things during the Advent season, consider ways our Advent-talk may fall short, and discover how to bridge the gap between the two.



## DEFINING OUR TERMS

First, we should thoroughly and clearly define our terms, or, better yet, let Scripture define its own terms. Words like “hope,” “peace,” or “Messiah,” are common but largely misunderstood words. For the long-time Christian or the baby believer, these weighty words often go unconsidered; like reading a fantasy novel and skimming completely over the made-up name of a person or place, we ingest the words and practices of Advent, not knowing truly what they mean, but giving them a head-nod anyway. These phrases can all too easily become blindspot. We know something is in them, but who’s to say what? This Advent season, before we hear the common phrases and move on swiftly, take a moment to ponder if we actually grasp what these things mean and why we say them at all around this time. Such an endeavor will undoubtedly humble and enliven the heart behind the season.

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## The Four Themes: “Hope, Joy, Peace, Love”

Many churches study four specific themes of “hope,” “joy,” “peace,” and “love” during the Advent season. The common use of these words and varying experiences of them in our own lives lends itself to a space where we can unintentionally misconstrue both the cultural understanding of these words and our own interpretations of these words into Scripture. Romans 15:13 says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” Clearly, hope, joy, and peace are interconnected in this passage. Start here and consider how these three phrases relate to one another. Or do a word study! How do the Old and New Testaments use these words? What did these words mean to their original audiences?

Perhaps you will find that hope is something more than blind optimism, peace something more than acceptance, joy something more than happiness despite circumstances, and love something greater than we could have ever imagined. Check out the free resources below from The Bible Project and Amenable team!<sup>2&3</sup>

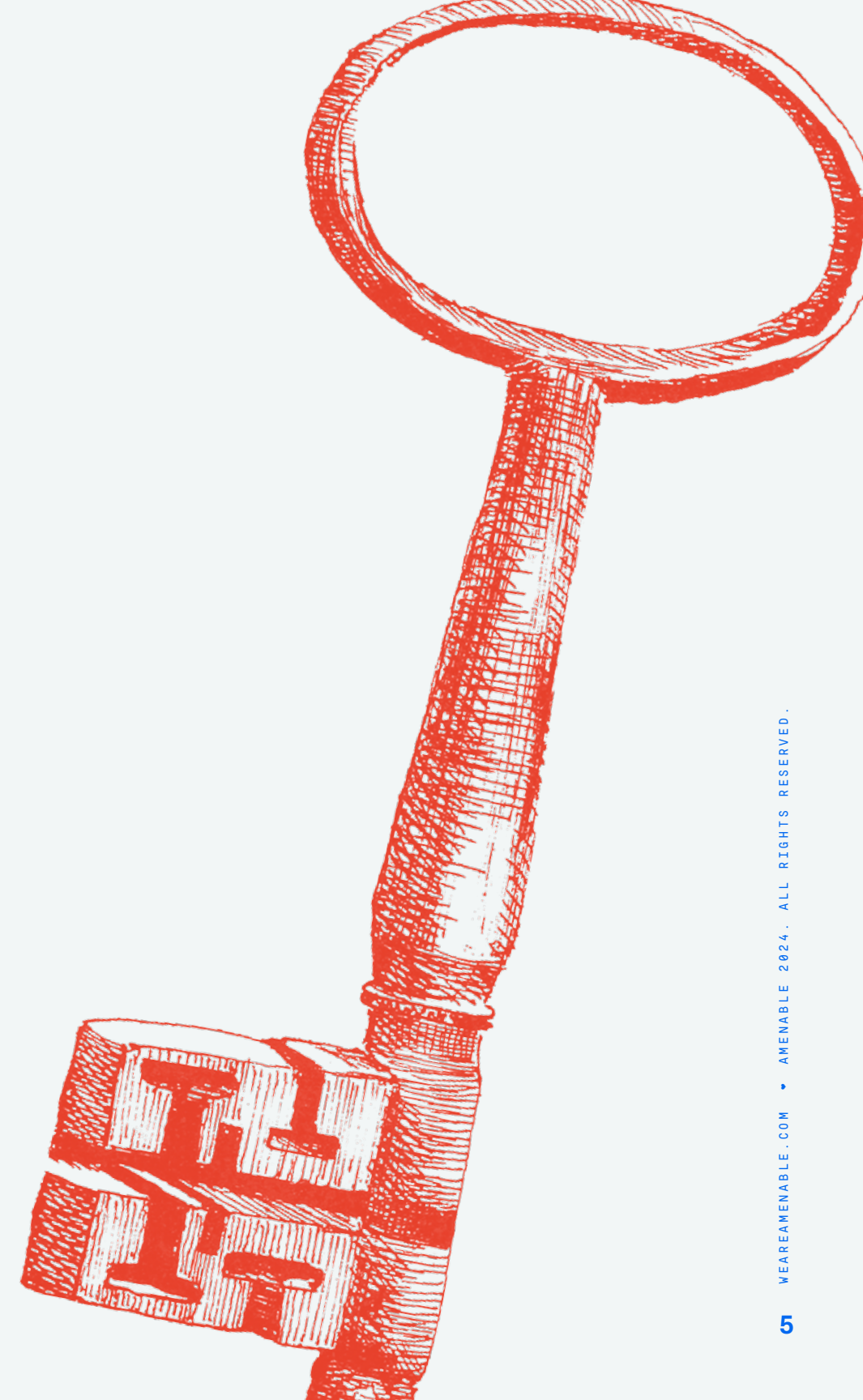
[The Bible Project Advent Guide →](#)

[Amenable Advent Reflections →](#)

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## The “Parousia”: Presence

*Adventus* is the Latin translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which the New Testament uses to discuss the birth and return of Jesus. There are, however, other words in the Bible used to discuss Jesus’ arrival. Author Walter Riggans [surveys these various words and their meanings](#) noting that *parousia*, the most commonly used word in the New Testament used to discuss Jesus’ arrival, implies personal presence. The *parousia*, he writes, “...will be the moment for which we are all waiting in our need and inadequacy. It will be a time of unprecedented meeting with Jesus.” How might a renewed understanding of how Scripture describes Jesus’ “arrival” strike our hearts uniquely this season?<sup>4</sup>



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## Jesus: “Messiah” and “Christ”

Perhaps we didn't have a full picture of what “hope” means in Scripture or the distinct connotation of “*parousia*,” but certainly we know who Jesus is, right? Maybe. Or we should humbly admit that our picture of Jesus might not be full either. The names most frequently applied to Jesus in our Advent conversations tend to be “Messiah,” and “Christ.” Yet, these are not names—they're titles. The English word “Christ,” originates from the Greek “Christos” as a derivative of the Hebrew word transliterated “Messiah,” which comes from the root word meaning “anointed.” When the Bible refers to Jesus as “Jesus Christ,” the authors are really saying “Jesus, the Anointed One.” But, what does it *mean* for Jesus to be the Anointed One? What do the New Testament authors intend to communicate based on how they understood anointing in the Old Testament? Anointing in the Old

Testament had a three-fold purpose: it was understood as a ritual that set someone or something apart, marked someone or thing as a point of connection between heaven and earth, and placed on someone or thing a divine task. The final “Anointed One,” Jesus, is prophesied to be not merely set apart, but truly One of a kind; not merely a connection point between heaven and earth but heaven itself *on* earth; and not merely called to fulfill a task, but called to carry out salvation once and for all. When we refer to Jesus as the “Messiah,” or the “Christ” this season, may we understand what it means to call him such a name. In ascribing to Jesus this title, the New Testament authors are not only identifying him with the priests, prophets, kings, and holy places, but are claiming him as fully divine on the earth—God with us—to bring salvation.

## ADVENT IN CONTEXT

Maybe we understand Advent-talk, but we view Advent as an isolated event. We do not fully know where it came from, or why it stuck around. Why these four weeks? Understanding Advent not as an island, but within its greater context may lend to a deeper, truer understanding of the season.

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## The Whole Church Calendar

Many churches observe Advent, but fewer churches observe its successors. Advent is not a rogue four-week anomaly, but the beginning of what is traditionally called the “Church Calendar,”<sup>5</sup> an annual schema that celebrates certain events or periods in God bringing salvation to the world through Jesus’ life. Advent is the start of this yearly schedule, ushering in a four-week period of anticipation for the arrival of Jesus. Following this time, the church calendar observes a twelve-day period of celebration which lasts from Christmas until January 5th. Epiphany, from the Greek word for *manifestation*, then commemorates the revealing of Jesus to Gentiles by marking the day according to tradition, when the magi came to visit Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12). Lent is the subsequent forty-day period, representing Jesus’ time spent in the wilderness being tempted by Satan to disobey God. This period is characterized by self-reflection, fasting, and repentance in many Christian churches.

Holy Week remembers the last days of Jesus’ life; Easter, perhaps the most important day of the Christian calendar, celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, his coming back to life from the dead. Three final events bring the Christian calendar to a close, only to be repeated again with the return of another Advent season! Ascension day marks the day Jesus ascended to be with his Father, Pentecost denotes the birth of the Christian Church, when the early followers of Jesus were given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Finally, “Ordinary Time,” from Pentecost to Advent, contains no major holidays or feasts in the church, but is a time that represents the growth and maturation of Jesus’ followers. There is no set-in-stone way to observe this calendar, nor a biblical mandate; however, it may be helpful to understand Advent within its greater context in church history. Understanding the rest of the church calendar can help us understand why we choose to celebrate Advent—why it is a special and meaningful part of Christian life.



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## The Whole Gospel

As the last point details, Jesus did not arrive on the scene of human history and proceed to do a grand total of nothing. He was born and then lived a perfect life, performed miraculous acts, died, rose from the dead, left earth to be with his father, and is coming back again one day. Celebrating Advent falls short if we fail to remember what Jesus was born to do and would complete during his life on earth. The whole story of salvation (the “gospel,” the “good news”) ties together with Advent. The in-between of the birth and return of Jesus is where the life-saving work of Jesus occurred. It should, therefore, be considered in order to experience a more robust Advent season. And Jesus’ life informs everything to follow in history. Jesus had to be born for a reason, yes?

Call to mind, then, God’s act of creating the world and man’s act of defiling it. The need for Jesus to come was predicated on a broken world that needs to be saved and redeemed. Likewise, Jesus will come again to restore the broken world to its original state of life with God. The “advent” of Jesus has vast implications for the whole of human history from inception into eternity. And vice versa, the *whole* story of human history informs why and how God became a man.



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## The Whole Bible

Just like Advent isn't an island in time or history, neither are the common Advent passages we hear year after year. The essence of Advent is not merely found in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and the prophecies of Isaiah. While these beautiful passages are pointed places to anchor our Bible reading during this time, we must remember that *all* of Scripture is centered on Jesus Christ. From Genesis to Revelation, the whole Bible reveals who Jesus is. Not only does each verse "point to Jesus," but they existentially have substance *in* him, *through* him, and *for* him (Romans 11:36). Jesus did not only come into the picture once born in a manger, but he was in the beginning and he was with God, and he was God (John 1:1).

A common phrase during Advent is "God with us," from the name ascribed to Jesus in Isaiah: "Immanuel." What if, though, the idea of God with us is not confined to his physical presence with us during his life? What if the whole Bible is about God being with us? Immanuel God with us—is actually the whole story of the Bible.

In Eden, God was with us. In the wilderness wanderings, God was with us, in the tabernacle, God was with us. In the person of Jesus, God was with us. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, God is with us. God will return to be with us. What if, as another example, the common Advent phrase, “prepare him room,” can be found in the preparations for the tabernacle, the temple, and Revelation? Prophetic books of the Bible other than Isaiah discuss the birth of Jesus; God’s many promises throughout the Old Testament surround Jesus; poems and songs in the Psalms tell of Jesus; Jesus himself repeatedly tells his followers about his return in the four gospels; Paul and Peter do not shy away from the second coming of Jesus in their letters—the list goes on.

All of the Bible is decorated with the themes of Advent, we simply must look. This Advent, perhaps the go-to Christmas verses have become our blind spots. Perhaps looking to passages in scarcely-traversed books may be where we find meaning anew about Jesus’ presence.



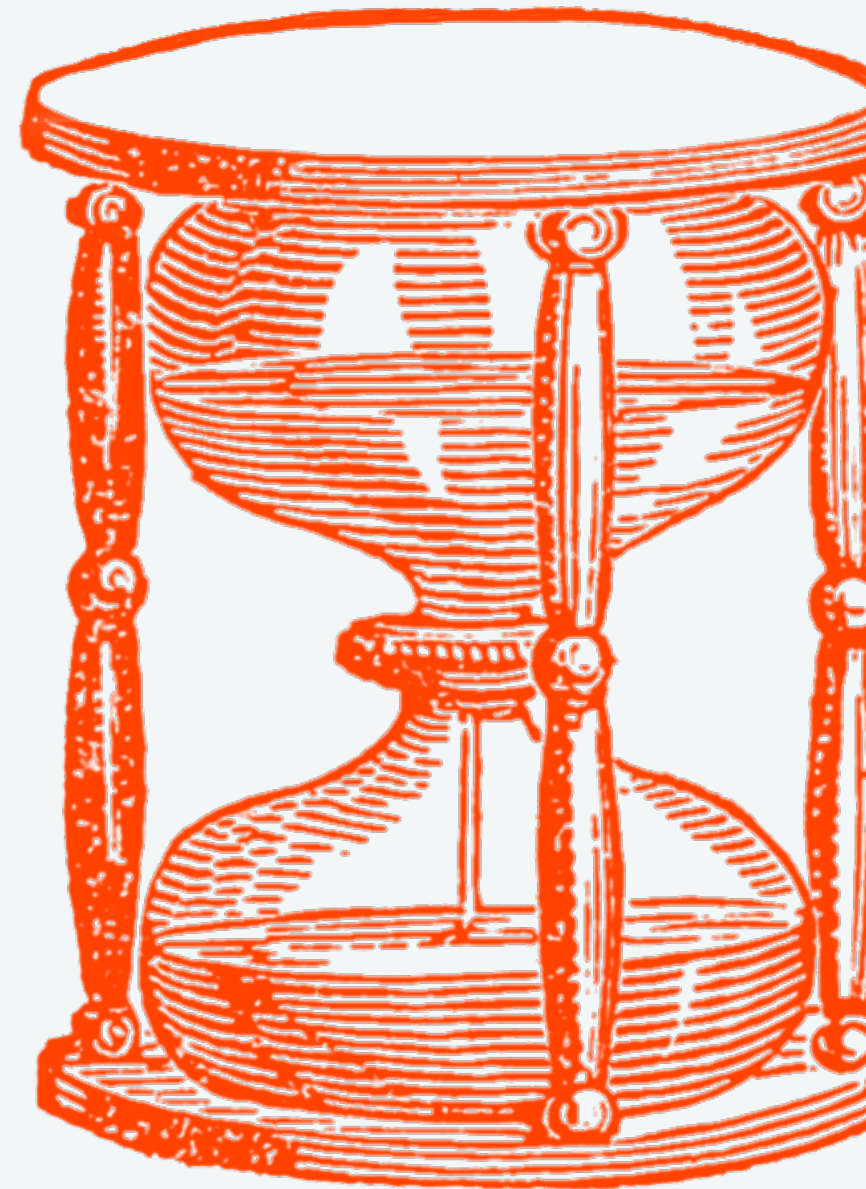
## SOUL-DEEP IMPLICATIONS

Another emphasis of the Advent season hits close to home—waiting. We’ve all had to wait, and most of us frequently fail to wait well. Advent, then, is not a dissociated set of sermons we hear, a list of songs we sing, or a collection of lofty stories. This waiting spirit of the Advent season is tangible, real-life stuff that affects us daily. Maybe, for those who have never experienced Advent as exceptionally impactful, it is because the type of waiting we are told about during Advent looks nothing like our experience of waiting. In what ways have our blind spots surrounding Advent created a barrier for its meaning to hit our hearts? The wait for the coming of Jesus, both past and present, must hit at a soul level. One author, Chris Goswami, pricks at this very thing poignantly, writing, “Isn’t it odd that on the only day of the year someone shows up to our church, we don’t address topics that bother them? Instead, we re-tell a story they don’t believe.”<sup>6</sup>

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## Waiting Well

Scripture is constantly calling Christians to look back and remember the Lord's kindness and faithfulness to us in order to ground our current hope that he will continue to be kind and faithful. Like the Israelites waited for the Messiah to come, we now wait for him to come back. Our current wait for Jesus' return should not be starkly misaligned from our understanding of the Jews' wait for Jesus to come. Otherwise, we may become disillusioned or disappointed, wondering if someone has it all wrong.



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## Waiting with Creation

People aren't the only things that have to wait. Romans 8:19–23 says, *“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”*

Without breaching the deep theological waters of this passage, it is clear on the surface to see that all of creation is waiting for Jesus to come again. Consider, this season, the soul-groanings of humans, animals, and all of creation. Groanings, which, Romans chapter 8 continues on to say—have no competent words—which only the Holy Spirit can communicate to God the Father. Lean into the groaning of the Advent waiting.

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## Why We Wait

So, we know what we are waiting for—for Jesus to return. But why must we wait? Why, from the human perspective, does there seem to be a delay—one that we have been tasked with enduring well? Outside of the sheer fact that God has a perfect plan and divine timetable, Scripture points to two primary reasons for the timing between the first and second coming of Jesus. 2 Peter communicates that this period allows more time for more people to place their faith in Jesus (2 Peter 3:9) and that it affords the church the time it needs to grow before Jesus returns (2 Peter 3:10–12). Understanding this twofold purpose of we must wait is a project in submitting to the plans of God, in leaning on his knowledge, and in trusting him more wholly.



## CONCLUSION

None of this is to say that we as Christians have got this whole Advent thing terribly wrong. This is not an indictment of our churches. Instead, this resource hopes to serve as a reflection piece, causing us to question if we have lost sight of some things, and presenting a few thoughts on how to reignite the flame (pun intended if your church uses an Advent Wreath). So, as we enter this season, consider implementing a few new practices. Take a fresh look at the language we use. Endeavor to present Advent in its context. Lean into the real-life application of how Advent impacts the other 337 days of the year in our lives.



## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> [christianity.com/wiki/holidays/what-is-advent.html](http://christianity.com/wiki/holidays/what-is-advent.html)

<sup>2</sup> [bibleproject.com/guides/advent/](http://bibleproject.com/guides/advent/)

<sup>3</sup> [weareamenable.com/collected-reflections-from-the-advent-gift-bag/](http://weareamenable.com/collected-reflections-from-the-advent-gift-bag/)

<sup>4</sup> [thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-parousia-getting-our-terms-right/](http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-parousia-getting-our-terms-right/)

<sup>5</sup> [thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-know-christian-calendar/](http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-know-christian-calendar/)

<sup>6</sup> [premierchristianity.com/opinion/3-things-churches-get-wrong-at-christmas-and-how-to-fix-them/14461.article](http://premierchristianity.com/opinion/3-things-churches-get-wrong-at-christmas-and-how-to-fix-them/14461.article)

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