

# Prepare the way for the Lord

*Pastor Tim Melton*

The Advent season is the four weeks before Christmas. The origin of Advent is not in the Bible, but comes from church history, as early as the fourth century. Throughout the centuries the focus has changed. For some it was a time of preparing for baptism. At other times in history it focused on preparing for the second coming of Christ. In recent years it has evolved into a time of preparing our hearts for the celebration of Jesus' coming at Christmas. That is where the word Advent came from. In Latin it means "coming or arrival".

It is a time to draw back from the rush, the noise, the stress of our lives, and once again allow God to turn our hearts back towards Himself. A time to refocus our lives on the Christ child in the manger. A time to evaluate our priorities and the direction of our lives, and make the needed changes so that we can once again draw near to God.

The Jews were very familiar with this idea of preparing for the Messiah's coming. We read in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 9:6-7, almost 800 years before Christ was born, that God had spoken through the prophets promising a day when a Messiah, a Savior, would come to deliver His people.

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."*

So, they took these words and they waited. Century after century, generation after generation, but yet there was no sign of their Messiah. Have you ever been in a situation where you have been forced to trust and wait on God's timing? It is a difficult process of trust, obedience and patience. The Israelites' continued to wait for 400 years, between the Old Testament and the New Testament. They heard nothing from God. Some chose to forget the prophecies, but some held on to the ancient scriptures and continued to pray for the day that the Messiah would come. Finally, the silence was broken.

In Mark 1, a man named John, the son of Zachariah, is spoken of: *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

This "John" would come to be known as John the Baptist, and he was to prepare the way for Jesus' coming.

John had been prophesied about centuries earlier, in Isaiah 40:3-5: *"A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.'"*

In Isaiah's time in history the roads were much worse than they are today. When a king wanted to travel from one city to another, he would send out hundreds or even thousands of workers. They would clear the road of stones and fallen trees. They would level out the tough terrain. They would do whatever was necessary to "prepare the way for their king".

Spiritually speaking John would play a similar role in preparing the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. John was to be the forerunner or the herald of Jesus Christ. He was to come and call people to repentance. He would call people away from empty religious rituals and back to an intimate relationship with God. He was to prepare the way for Christ's coming.

We, also, are to prepare our hearts for the coming of the King during this season of Advent. It is a time to put aside whatever is hindering our walk with Christ. Slow down, make time for God's Word, pray, and plan some time with other believers, who strengthen our faith. During this time of advent, we should evaluate our priorities and direction of our lives. Ask God to help us make the needed adjustments and ask God to turn our hearts back towards Him. Ask God to reveal if there is any impure way in us and trust Him to remove it. **James 4:8 instructs us to draw near to God and He will draw near to us.** Christ came 2,000 years ago. And He still comes for us today.

Advent celebrates, revels in, and looks forward to the coming of Christ. This is a coming that manifests itself in 3 ways. The coming of the Christ child, the coming of Christ into our lives at conversion, and the coming of Christ at the end of the age. The first, we look back to celebrate at Christmas. The second, we experience in the present on an ongoing basis. The third is still in the future as we await his return.

All 3 call for preparation. The birth was preceded by the prophecies and their fulfillment in God's bringing together everything in the fullness of time. It was also preceded by John the Baptist, who prepared the way of the Lord. Our conversion was prepared for by God himself as He drew us to himself, gifted us with faith and granted us the revelation of who Christ was and is. The third is being prepared for as the church is made holy, as the nations hear the gospel and as God's "second coming" prophecies are fulfilled. It is the faithfulness in the present that prepares us for his final coming. Like Joseph in the book of Genesis, as he was faithful in the present, God was preparing him for the future.

In Genesis 37, 39-47, we find his story. As a young man, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. He was taken to Egypt and sold to a man named Potiphar. Even in slavery Joseph honored God and was promoted to manager over all that Potiphar owned. Joseph was then falsely accused and

thrown into prison. Yet he continued to honor God. Even as a prisoner Joseph was put in charge of most of the prisoners in the prison. He continued to honor God. God had given Joseph the ability to interpret dreams. One night the Pharaoh of Egypt had a dream. None of his wise men could interpret his dream. Joseph was called from prison to stand before Pharaoh and interpret the dream. Joseph interpreted the dream and in response Pharaoh made him the second most powerful man in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh.

This final outcome was not because of great preparation for the future. It was not because of a great career plan, great networking, or advanced levels of education. Not that there is anything wrong with these, but that is not where we put our trust and our confidence. Joseph honored God each day and God ordered his days so that he would be prepared for the future. This too should be our method of preparing for the future. The future is so unknown, so unpredictable. Preparation for the future, especially for Christ's second coming, is done through honoring God one day at a time. Honor God in the present and God will make sure that we are prepared for the future that awaits us.

➤ **So the question is, “in the midst of our hurried lives, how do we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord?”**

How do we live so that we can still be sensitive to what God is doing in and around us? Our goal is to be sensitive to the Spirit every moment of every day. As we see in Galatians 5, we are to walk in the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, bear fruit of the Spirit, and live in the spirit. This is to be the norm, but to many being sensitive to God seems to be the exception.

How do we live a God-sensitive life? In the midst of our hurried lives and godless world, how do we live so that we can still be sensitive to what God is doing in and around us?

Followers of Christ from the early church until today have sought to follow the teachings of scripture and live a life that is sensitive to God.

You see it in Jesus' life. It was His custom to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). We see that Jesus prayed often. His priorities were correct. He was never hurried. He was sacrificial, lived in community with other followers of God, He fasted, He knew the scriptures, He had a heart of gratitude and He was forgiving. He surrendered His rights for the sake of furthering God's kingdom. He was a servant. He was humble. As a result He was aware of what God the Father gave Him to do and He accomplished it all (John 17:4). We also read that Jesus “only did what He saw the Father doing” (John 5:19). Because of Jesus' “God-sensitive life”, God worked through His life mightily. One can see a similar pattern in the earliest days of the church.

We see early examples in the book of Acts. In Acts 2:42, we see the disciplines of fellowship, communion and prayer. In Acts 3, the discipline of compassion is seen. In Acts 4, we see the disciplines of generosity, sacrifice, corporate worship, and witness. In Acts 7, one finds the discipline of service. In Acts 14, the people experience the discipline of fasting; and in Acts 15, we see the discipline of discernment. In all of these occasions God's people lived in ways that brought them nearer to God and more in line with what God wanted to do in and through their lives.

Some of these “ways of living” are personal. Some are corporate. Some call us to action, while others help us to abstain. Through the centuries they have been shaped by the needs of Christians in

response to the culture and context in which they have lived. While at certain times some spiritual disciplines have been needed more than others, they have always shared the simple focus of making less of the world and making more of God in the lives of those who had chosen to follow Jesus Christ.

As the centuries passed, times changed and so did the needs of the Christians of those days. While the timeless spiritual disciplines of Scripture remained unchanged, new expressions of them formed in response to challenges which the followers of Christ faced.

*“As the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, the church continued to respond to people’s desires to keep company with Jesus. In the fourth and fifth centuries, as the church was relieved of its persecution, the desert fathers found that the politicized and nominal nature of Christianity sabotaged their first love. Longing to recover the passionate love for God that characterized the early church, they moved into the desert where they could more intentionally partner with Jesus for transformation. Their longing to be conformed to the image of Christ gave rise to spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, contemplation, detachment . . . Believers who shared a desire to go deep with God made space in their lives for God. These Monastic communities forged their lives around disciplines of memorization, devotional reading, hospitality, meditation, and service.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the sixteenth century, the Bible began to be translated from Latin into the native languages of the people. Coupled with the invention of the printing press and sailing ships that could travel the world, the Word of God could now be taken to the nations. Because of this, the spiritual disciplines of witness, Bible study, prayer, discernment, and stewardship became the property and the personal calling of the normal people.

Today, as the modern world has become more industrialized, urban, and individualistic, it once again has called for certain ways of living. Many have begun to re-sensitize their lives to Jesus Christ through simplicity, accountability, small groups, giving to the poor, and mentoring. The hurried pace and technology, that now even reaches into our private moments, has drawn many towards planning alone time, “unplugging”, and intentional times for Sabbath or rest.

This disconnecting from the world or slowing down can be found in various places in scripture: **“Be still and know that I am God”** (Psalm 46:10). Psalm 62:5-7 even says this:

*“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. <sup>6</sup> He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. <sup>7</sup> On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.”*

As we talk about re-ordering our lives to be more sensitive to God, we need to be careful with how we understand this idea. It is not saying that if we re-order our lives, then we can fix ourselves, or that God has to come near to us. No one can change and transform their own heart, and no one can earn God’s blessing.

That is the work of God. This re-ordering of our lives can be described as Spiritual Farming. A farmer understands the Laws of Nature that God put into place. With those laws in mind the farmer works to create the best environment for the seeds to grow and bear fruit. He breaks the soil. He pulls the

---

<sup>1</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 17-18.

weeds. He fertilizes the soil. He irrigates. He might even spray insecticides, but once this is done he must sit and wait. The farmer plays an important role, but the farmer gets no credit for actually growing the plant which bears fruit. He is only creating a fertile environment.

Living our lives in a manner that is sensitive of God is similar. We rely on God's help as we seek to organize our lives in a way that will be sensitive to Him, but it is Christ who comes in and changes our hearts. We must first look to scripture to see what a "God-Sensitive Life" looks like. Then we must trust His ways and obey in faith to re-order our lives. As we are submitted to His ways and His will, only then are we ready to be changed by His grace.

Living a God-sensitive Lifestyle comes in many different forms. It depends on your season of life, your work situation, your family responsibilities, your time in history and much more.

As we prepare our hearts for the celebration of the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, here are some things we should consider . . . Are there any unconfessed sins that are keeping you from walking near to Christ? Are there any areas of rebellion or disobedience that are keeping you from feeling at peace in Christ's presence? Is there anyone who you need to apologize to or forgive? Is there any attitude of yours that is not becoming of a child of God? Is there anyone to whom you need to express thanks? Is there anything that you need to make right financially? Is there anything in your life that is drawing you away from God from which you need to distance ourselves? How can you make unhurried time with God's Word and prayer this Christmas season? What people do we need to make time for this Christmas season? How can we be generous with our finances or material possessions this Christmas season? How can you use any vacation days to put you in a better place to be sensitive to what God is doing in and around you? How can you draw near to God during these days? How can you turn your family's attention more toward Christ this Christmas season (*Belén* tour, etc.)? How can you spend quality time with your family this Christmas season? Is there anyone with whom you need to sit down and strengthen your relationship or share Christ? Is there anyone that you can invite to the church's Christmas events this month? Should you host a Christmas gathering at your home or in your zone to build relationship with neighbors, coworkers or friends? Can you use Christmas to bring up spiritual conversations that you need to have with others?

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the babe in the manger, the coming of Christ into our lives, and the second coming of Christ. May we use these days to draw back from the rush, the noise, the stress of our lives, and once again allow God to turn our hearts back towards Himself. A time to evaluate our priorities and the direction of our lives, and make the needed changes so that we can once again draw near to God.

## Discussion questions

1. Century after century, generation after generation, the nation of Israel waited, but there was no sign of their promised Messiah. Have you ever been in a situation where you have been forced to trust and wait on God's timing? How was your experience with waiting?

2. God the Father brought 300 prophecies to pass in the life of Jesus Christ. God prepared every detail in preparation for Christ's coming. This all-knowing and all-powerful Father is our Father as well. How should that affect our faith, actions and emotions?
3. Advent is a time to turn our hearts once again towards Christ. What characteristics of your life right now are making it hard for you to be as sensitive to God as you could be?
4. What changes do you need to make so that your life will be more sensitive to God?
5. What from this lesson do you think you need to remember?
6. What do you think God wants you to do about that?
7. How can we pray for you?