

Preparing yourself for the coming of the Lord

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The Advent season is 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 prophesized 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. 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.

So, the question is, “How do we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord?”

Advent is the simple focus of making less of the world and making more of God in our lives. It is intentionally fixing our eyes on Jesus. If we do not intentionally fix our eyes on Jesus, we will automatically focus on lesser things. We will covet the superficial things of the world. We will fight over the petty. We will miss the coming of the King, just like some many people did that first Christmas in Bethlehem.

In scripture we see that this “making much of God” is accomplished in our lives in two ways. From one side, it is a work of God; from the other, it is an act of faith on our part. We see this combination in Philippians 2:12-13. Verse 12 instructs us to *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”* This makes it sound very clearly that it is up to us to figure out and accomplish the work of salvation in our lives. But then we read verse 13 that says, *“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* This sounds very clearly that the ongoing work of salvation in our lives is the work of God. So, which is it? It is both. It is the same with “making much of God” in our lives. As followers of Christ, if God is to become much in our lives, it will be accomplished jointly by God, through us, as God works in our lives.

Let’s first consider God’s work in this process of “making much of Himself” in our lives. We see throughout scripture that God initiates or at least allows people to pass through situations that reveal to them the character of God. God brings about situations that allow people to not just know about Him,

but to know who God is by firsthand experience. That is our confidence. In John 5:17, we read that God the Father is always working. In Romans 8:28-29, we see that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes.

God loves us. He is most glorious. He is worth more than anything else in this world. The greatest gift He can give us is Himself. Any other gift would not be an expression of ultimate love, because any other gift would be less than ultimate. Because of this, God “makes much of Himself” in our lives by ushering us through life situations that stretch our faith and directly confront the idols in our hearts. It was similar to the rich young ruler that Jesus encountered in Mark 10:17-22. The rich young ruler thought that he was righteous and a good religious person, but Jesus knew that money was an idol in the young man’s heart. So, what did Jesus do? Verse 21 says this, *“Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, ‘One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’”* God, at times, does something similar to us. For the sake of salvation and for being made like Christ, He sets in place life situations that directly confront and challenge the veracity of our idols in which we have placed our trust. Our sin is revealed. We then turn to Christ for deliverance and realize the greatness of our God.

We see the same truth in Moses’ story as he was used to bring the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 7-12). God sent 10 plagues in Egypt that directly came against the supposed gods of Egypt. God turned the water to blood to show Himself to be mightier than **Hapi**, the Egyptian god of the Nile. Next, God brought a plague of frogs to show Himself to be mightier than **Heket**, the Egyptian goddess of fertility, water, and renewal. Heket, the Egyptian goddess, even had the head of a frog. Next, God brought lice from the dust of the earth, thus showing Himself to be more powerful than the supposed Egyptian god **Geb**, who was believed to be over the dust of the earth. Next, God brought a plague of flies, showing Himself mightier than **Khepri**, the Egyptian god of creation and movement of the Sun, who had the head of a fly. Next, God brought the death of cattle and livestock across the kingdom of Egypt, to show Himself to be mightier than **Hathor**, the Egyptian goddess of love and protection. Usually, this Egyptian goddess was depicted with the head of a cow. God continued His assault on the gods of Egypt by causing ashes to turn to boils and sores. This was to show Himself mightier than **Isis**, the Egyptian goddess of medicine and peace. God then turned His focus against **Nut**, the Egyptian goddess of the sky. God brought hail that rained down in the form of fire. To show Himself mightier than **Seth**, the Egyptian god of storms and disorder, God brought locusts from the sky. In direct confrontation to the claims of **Ra**, the sun god, God brought three days of complete darkness. Finally, God came against **Pharaoh** himself, who was believed to be the greatest Egyptian god of all. God brought death to all firstborns in Egypt, including Pharaoh’s son, and there was nothing that Pharaoh or any other Egyptian gods could do to stop Him.¹

In Exodus 6:7, we see God’s goal. God tells Moses to tell the people of Israel, *“I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”*

¹ http://www.stat.rice.edu/~dobelman/Dinotech/10_Egyptian_gods_10_Plagues.pdf

In Exodus 7:5, we find a secondary goal: *“That the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.”*

God was coming against false gods and idols in whom the people trusted, for the purpose that they would know that Yahweh God was truly the Lord, God of all.

Today God does the same with us. He comes against any false hope or idol in which we trust or by which we are enslaved. He works in our lives to make much of Himself and less of the things of the world. God is of most worth, so the greatest gift He can give to us this Christmas, or any day, is Himself. He will use poverty, to show us that He is our Provider. He will use an uncertain future, so that we may know Him as our sovereign God, everlasting to everlasting. He will allow times of stress and chaos, so that we might experience Him as the Prince of Peace. He will allow conviction of sin, so that we may be humbled and driven to Him as Savior and our Sacrificial Lamb who has paid for our sin. He will bring about times when we don't have any idea what to do next, so we might finally know Him as the All-Sufficient One.

There is none great than our God, our Heavenly Father. God works to “make much of Himself” in our lives, but He calls us to work with Him in “making much of God” in our lives. Yes, God sets the stage as He works in and through our lives, but He then gives clear instructions on how we can work with Him in this process.

As we read in Hebrews 12:1-3, *“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”*

We are to throw aside anything in our lives that hinders our Christian walk. We are to put away any sin that so easily entangles. Then we are to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, but here is the key, *“fixing our eyes on Jesus”*. It is an intentional “fixing our eyes on Jesus”. It will not come accidentally. We must, by the grace and power of God, make less of the world and make more of Christ in our lives.

At times our minds are fixated on money, image, pleasure, success or even lust. We are focused on the wrong things. We are making much of the world and little of God. We are believing too many advertisements. Listening to too many worldly opinions. Following what is trending as if it is the true measure of what is important in our world.

We so easily get distracted and begin to focus our minds on the temptations and struggles of this world. You could even say that we are meditating on the wrong things. Have you ever been in a situation where you are having difficulties with a person or a situation and you cannot get it out of your mind? You think about it at work. You think about it at lunch. You think about it when you lie in bed in the middle of the night. It drains us. We begin to worry. We become bitter. We become depressed, and in our mind the situation grows bigger and bigger and bigger. We lose perspective and the struggle becomes this giant of a problem that leaves us hopeless and in despair.

What has happened? We have taken our eyes off Christ and turned our attention to the things of the world. We have made much of the world and little of God . . . and it leaves us feeling abandoned and afraid, but we are not abandoned.

God has not changed. He is as near and able as He has ever been. We are still His children and He is still our Father. He is still the most valuable and worthy One in the whole universe, but we must intentionally fix our eyes on Him, or we will continue to live like the helpless orphan street child, instead of the safe child of the King which we are.

You see the power of fixing one's eyes on God throughout scripture. In 1 Samuel 17, the Israelite army sees the giant Goliath and is dominated by fear. David, the shepherd boy, sees the same giant, but in comparison to God. David runs to the battle and victory, knowing that His God is so much bigger than the giant who stands before him.

In Luke 8:43-48, we see the story of the woman who had had an issue of blood for twelve years. She had spent all of her money on physicians who could not heal her. Because of her issue with blood, she was seen as "unclean" and would cause anyone else to become "unclean" if she touched them. In spite of this, she pushed her way through a large crowd just to get to Jesus. She risked abuse from the crowd if they found out what she was doing, but in that moment her mind was fixed on Jesus and it drove her to action. Her fear of the world was dwarfed by her faith in Christ, and once she touched the hem of Jesus' garment she was healed.

Do we not see that when we make much of God, everything else falls into its proper perspective? I am not saying that our problems are not big, I am just saying that our God is bigger. When we make much of God, it rearranges our priorities. When we make much of God, it moves us to obedience. When we make much of God, it brings us peace. When we make much of God, we find contentment, courage and we pray as our first option, not our last.

So how do we make much of God? How do we intentionally fix our eyes on Him? How do we relate with God in such a way that it changes our perspective on everything else? We find some helpful words in Philippians 4:4-9:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

How can we rejoice? How can we be gentle instead of harsh or critical? How can we not worry? How can we know peace? By focusing on the fact that the Lord is near. Then, as a result, we pray to Him, we entrust to Him, we rest in Him, we thank Him, we make much of Him because He is faithful and able to deliver us. This fixing our eyes on Christ will bring any situation into its right perspective, and as we trust in Him God will grant a peace that is beyond our understanding. It is not saying that we will not suffer or struggle. It is only saying that we will not suffer or struggle alone. We now have One to call out to when

all seems lost. God is near and we are His. As we fix our eyes on Him our perspective of life situations changes, because He is by our side.

In the following verse, Paul goes on to instruct us on how to meditate rightly:

“⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

This is intentionally “setting our mind on the things above” (Colossians 3:1-3). Our thoughts are often drawn to the negative, selfish or worrisome thoughts, but Paul is instructing the believers to intentionally step away from the thought patterns of the flesh and think on that which is excellent and praiseworthy. 2 Corinthians 10:5 refers to this as “taking every thought captive”. This could be immersing yourself in God’s Word and biblical teaching. It could be setting aside some time to rest with meaningful worship music. It could be spending time with godly brothers and sisters for godly counsel. It could mean going on a walk in the mountains, focusing your heart on a meaningful passage of scripture or the greatness of our Creator. It could be journaling about all that you are thankful for. You might ask God to search your heart to see if there is anything impure in your heart or if there is a sin that is keeping you from God’s best.

It could be as simple as a special Bible verse on your bathroom mirror or a bracelet that draws your mind back to Christ every time you see it. It could be adding a brief devotional time during your lunchtime to help you get through the second half of the day, focused on Christ.

Today, in our modern world we live such hurried lives where technology even reaches into our private moments. It could be during this Christmas season that we block off some time to be alone, or at least some unplugged and unhurried time with God and family as a form of Sabbath or rest. Even in the midst of our Christmas celebration, can we turn our children’s attention more towards Christ by visiting *Belenes* here in Madrid, or something like the life size *Belén* in El Escorial that is several blocks long, or reading the Christmas story together as a family and then discussing it?

Advent is a time to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. 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. Today, purpose in your mind to throw off everything that hinders you from drawing near to Christ and to fix your eyes on Jesus, not as an optional pursuit but as a necessity. Take whatever steps are necessary to set your mind on that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. Take every thought captive and set your mind on things above. As we make much of God and fix our eyes on Jesus, the way will be prepared to receive the coming King.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Have you ever been in a situation where you have been forced to trust and wait on God's timing? How did you respond?
- 2) God "makes much of Himself" in our lives by ushering us through life situations that stretch our faith and directly confront the idols in our hearts. What might this look like in a person's life?
- 3) We also have a role to play in "making much of God" in our lives. What ways does scripture give us to draw near to God?
- 4) Can you remember a time when you focused on a negative situation too much and neglected to fix your eyes on Jesus? What do you think you could have done differently? How might that have changed your perspective of the situation?
- 5) During this Christmas season, what do you think you can do to fix your eyes on Jesus and prepare yourself to draw nearer to God?
- 6) What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson?
- 7) How can we pray for you about this?