

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

The First Week of Advent

Sunday November 29

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

As the season of Advent begins, we are called upon to “cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light,” as we prepare ourselves for Jesus’ return in glory. Our eyes are cast to the future, to the dawn on the horizon, as our hearts are firmly rooted in our Great Christian Hope.

The Christians in Thessalonica did not need to be convinced that Jesus was coming again. In fact, they were so convinced he was coming that some of them stopped working! Paul, then, wrote to remind them to be ready for Jesus’ return. Rather than finding false security in the world, God’s people “are not in darkness...for that day to surprise” us like thieves.

Paul then moves to give the motivation for our preparedness. “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation...” We are to be ever ready for Jesus’ return because God has given us salvation. This is our Great Christian Hope. It is the sure and certain promise that we have eternal life. That hope then reaches into our lives now and enables us to live in a different way, to live for different things, and to endure anything.

From the outset, this season of Advent calls us to our Hope. Jesus has promised to come again. Just as he fulfilled that first promise of a coming Savior given through the prophets of the Old Testament when he was born in Bethlehem, so we are confident that he will keep this promise. And so as we prepare to celebrate that first coming at Christmas, we rekindle the power of our Great Hope in his coming again.

Monday November 30

2 Peter 1:1-11

Peter is calling his readers to fruitful living, living which manifests nothing less than the life of Jesus in us! We are to abound, then, in faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. This list alone challenges how well-balanced we are in our lives as we all tend to excel in some qualities with ease and prefer not to diligently pursue others. But the fruitfulness to which we are called, even when it does not seem to come easily, demands this kind of fullness.

So how can we have this kind of balanced fruitfulness? Peter says something staggering here. First, he reminds us that whoever lacks these things has, “forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.” We have been cleansed: forgiven and made new! The old person has been washed away; we are a new creature in Christ. As a new creature in Christ, we are to know that, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness...”

We have, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, everything we need to live in union with Christ! So often, we live as those who are in spiritual poverty, without the spiritual resources necessary to do and to be all that Christ would have. We have everything we need to be fruitful in Christ! The question is, do we remember that and know how to live in that power?

Tuesday December 1

2 Peter 1:12-21

It is amazing how much we can know and yet fail to actively remember! How often are we simply reminded of what we know in a way that makes it seem as though we are hearing some great truth for the first time? One of the chief goals of teaching, then, is to remind people of what they already know.

Peter begins to remind us of what we should already know. As he does, though, he assures us of the truth and power of what he has taught his flock about Jesus. He hearkens back to his time with James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus shone in his eternal glory. Peter was there; he saw Jesus; he heard the Father’s voice. “And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place...”

One of the most powerful tools we have in consciously remembering what we know in Christ is to feed upon Scripture daily. As we do, we are reminded of God's will, God's faithful provision, and of who God has made us to be. We are reminded, among other things, that we have, by God's grace, been given everything we need to follow Jesus! Reading God's word reminds us of what we know in a way that helps us stay close to Jesus and produce the fruit of his life in ourselves.

Wednesday December 2

2 Peter 3:1-10

Having assured his readers of the truth of his teaching, Peter now reminds his flock that Jesus will come again. Scoffers will come, he says, saying that nothing ever changes, Jesus hasn't come and he won't. They deliberately forget that it was God who created all things, and it is the Father who holds back judgment because he is patient, "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

Hold fast and remember, then, "the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through you apostles." Throughout this season of Advent, our Old Testament readings from both the Sunday Readings and the Daily Office proclaim the promise God made to send a Savior, a Messiah, who would usher in the Kingdom of God. In that Kingdom, there would be justice and righteousness, there would be freedom from sin and death, the Curse would be undone and all of Creation would be restored to what God created it to be. Remember the predictions.

Those predictions and promises began their fulfillment in the First Coming of Jesus in his birth in Bethlehem. With the birth of Jesus, the Kingdom of God began breaking into this dark and fallen world. When he comes again in power and glory to judge the world, he will consummate his work and the fullness of the Kingdom will be revealed. It is the knowledge of this sure and certain promise that continues to fill our lives with the power of hope.

Thursday December 3

2 Peter 3:11-18

Knowing that when Jesus returns he will usher in the fullness of the Kingdom of God, Peter then asks, "what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness..." He encourages us to do several things which in turn challenge our lives of faith.

First, he encourages us to be, "zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace." To be zealous is to be enthusiastic, intentional, and committed. We are to show zeal in being holy and at peace. That leads to a searching question: how much do you yearn for holiness? Many of us are content to be kind and happy. But the call is to the same holiness we see in God. That holiness is not some kind of self-righteous separation from others and a detachment from the world. Rather, true holiness is a yearning to be like God, to love what he loves, to pursue what he is doing. Holiness certainly makes us stand out as we live by a different standard than the world, but it also gives us even greater delight in the "stuff" of this world as it becomes a sheer gift given to be used to delight the Father.

We are also to be at peace. What a wonderful reminder that true holiness does not isolate us from others, but enables us to better live with them! We are to be at peace with those around us, staying faithful to Jesus in a way that produces harmony and unity around us. Does your relationship with Jesus foster peace around you?

Finally, Peter warns us to, "beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and so lose your own stability." We are back, again, to the need to be sound in knowledge. We are to so know what we believe, and don't believe, that we cannot be led astray. This firm foundation allows us to stand our ground and not be led away from the Lord. Do you know the truth of Jesus?

Friday December 4

Jude 1-16

“Contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For admission has been secretly gained by some who...prevent the grace of our God into licentiousness...” Our readings continue, this week, to reinforce the theme of right knowledge. Jude gives a clear insight into why this is so important. Belief produces fruit. Right belief produces good fruit. False belief produces bad fruit.

It is important to say, right at the outset, that we are not ever saved by what we know. Salvation, eternal life, is a gift from God given to us through the Cross of Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...” We are saved as we put our trust and faith in the person of Jesus Christ and accept him as our Lord and Savior.

While we are not saved by what we know, what we believe determines how we live. Belief produces fruit. On the positive side, that means that the more we know God’s truth, the more it will produce True Fruit in our lives. But Jude picks up on the negative side here.

“These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loudmouthed boasters, glittering people to gain advantage.” The challenge of this insight is that where we find this kind of fruit in our own lives, it can be traced to false knowledge and false love. What belief does the fruit of your life manifest?

Saturday December 5

Jude 17-25

As Jude brings his letter to a close, he offers a doxology that is not only beautiful, but of great practical help. “Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory...” This is a powerful reminder that it is God who has saved, is saving, and will save us! It is God who is able to make us ready for his presence!

On Monday, we asked if we knew how to live in the power of the Holy Spirit, knowing that we have been given everything we need to be and to do all that Christ would have. We come now to the heart of living in the power of the Holy Spirit: surrendering to grace. It is as we surrender ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit and cooperate with what he is doing in us that we are changed and molded into the image of Christ.

So often, we try to manufacture the fruit of Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, in our own lives. We try to be holy, patient, right in our speech, forgiving, and self-controlled in our own strength. And we fail. The key to living the Christian life is to know that God’s Holy Spirit already indwells us, that we truly do have everything we need to live the life God has called us to. Our part is simply to stay close to Jesus with an open, humble, willing heart. When we surrender ourselves to him, truly trusting him, we give him the room that he needs in our hearts to touch and mold and change us.

So how do we surrender? There is no formula for that. Like that first dive into a pool into a father’s arms, we just do it. We let go and believe that God will do what he said he would do. And when we do, we find the fruit of the Spirit growing in our lives, and we find that the light of Christ in our lives does, indeed, draw people to want to know him. You just have to do it.