

Bible Reading Guide

Week 1 He Will Come Again in Glory

Nov. 29	Revelation 1:4-9; 19:11-16; 21:1-5, 22-27; 22:1-5
Nov. 30	Zechariah 9:9-17; Romans 5:3-5; 8:18-30
Dec. 1	John 1:1-5, 14; Revelation 22:12-13, 20
Dec. 2	Mark 13:24-37; Luke 21:25-28
Dec. 3	2 Peter 3:8-15
Dec. 4	1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
Dec. 5	1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Week 2 God's Presence and His Promises

Dec. 6	Exodus 1:1-3:10
Dec. 7	Psalms 46, 112
Dec. 8	Isaiah 2:1-5
Dec. 9	Isaiah 40:1-11
Dec. 10	Isaiah 64:1-9
Dec. 11	Isaiah 9:2; John 1:4-5, 9
Dec. 12	Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7

Week 3 Immanuel: God with Us

Dec. 13	Matthew 1:1-17
Dec. 14	Luke 1:5-25
Dec. 15	Luke 1:26-38
Dec. 16	Matthew 1:18-24
Dec. 17	Luke 1:39-56
Dec. 18	Isaiah 9:2-7; 40:1-5; Luke 1:57-80; 3:1-6
Dec. 19	Luke 2:1-7

Week 4 A Savior Is Born

Dec. 20	Luke 2:8-20
Dec. 21	Luke 2:22-38
Dec. 22	Matthew 2:1-12
Dec. 23	Matthew 2:1-18; 1 John 3:8
Dec. 24	John 1:1-18
Dec. 25	Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 2:4-7; 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13

WEEK 2 GOD'S PRESENCE AND HIS PROMISES

BIBLE STUDY

1. Where do you see examples of hope in the Old Testament? How do they offer a unique perspective on hope?

2. Carmen Joy Imes highlights the way hope is depicted in Exodus: “Christian hope is rooted in God’s *seeing*. Nothing escapes his notice. The heart of Advent is knowing that God sees a world gone wrong and that he will do something to make it right.” What’s your reaction to her observation about hope? About Advent?

3. Read **Psalm 46** with the experiences of 2020 in mind. What lines or phrases resonate with you?

4. Read **Isaiah 2:1-5; 40:1-11; 64:1-9**. Like many biblical prophecies, these passages point toward multiple layers of fulfillment. How do you see these passages pointing toward Jesus’ birth and his life on earth? How do they point toward the Second Coming and Christ’s reign over all things?

5. Read **Isaiah 9:2-7**. How do the descriptions of the Messiah in this passage speak to our deep human longings and needs?

6. What is one phrase or expression from **Psalm 46** or the **Isaiah** readings that best expresses your response to God this week? How do you desire to strengthen your hope in him?

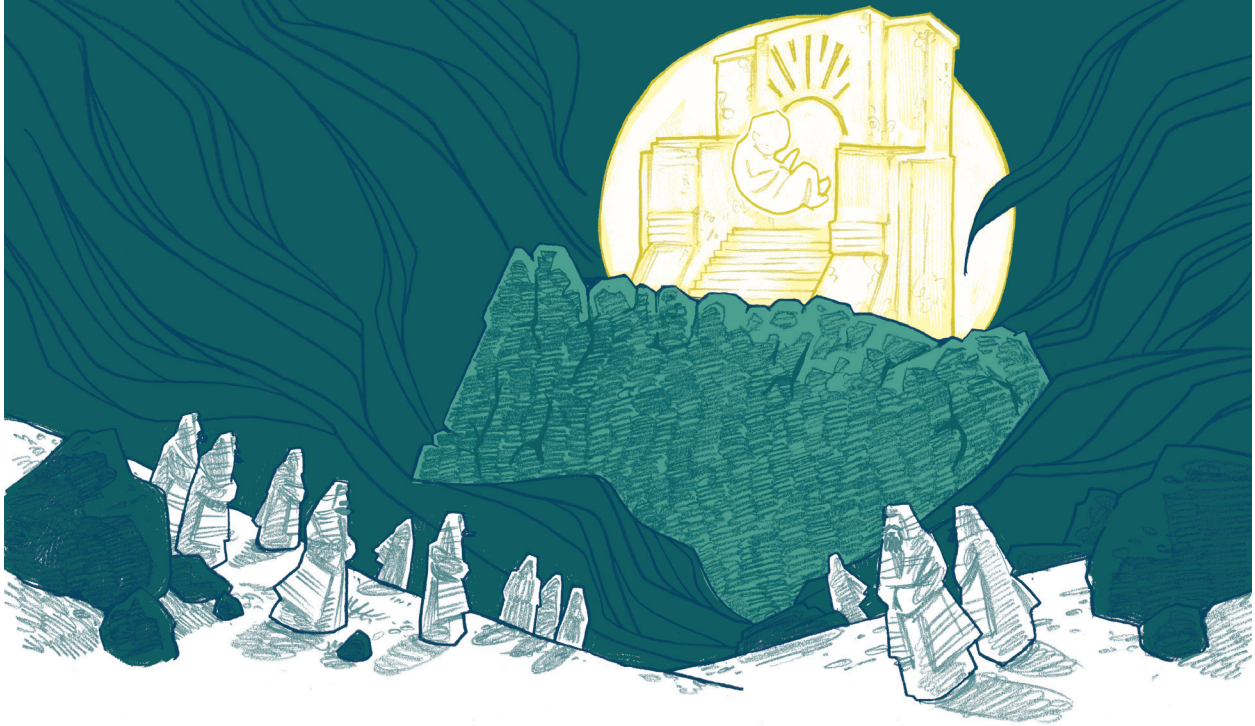
FOR TO US A CHILD IS
BORN, TO US A SON IS
GIVEN. . . . HE WILL
REIGN ON DAVID’S
THRONE AND OVER
HIS KINGDOM.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Week 2

God's Presence and His Promises

This week, we consider the hope of God's people in the Old Testament as they relied fully upon him in difficulty and hardship. And we ponder the prophecies and promises of hope that pointed toward the First Advent: the coming of the Messiah.



FOR TO US A CHILD IS BORN, TO US A SON IS GIVEN. . . .
HE WILL REIGN ON DAVID'S THRONE AND OVER HIS KINGDOM.

Isaiah 9:6-7

12/06
WHAT
GOD SEES

BY CARMEN JOY IMES

Exodus 1:1-3:10

I HAVE INDEED SEEN
THE MISERY OF MY
PEOPLE IN EGYPT.
I HAVE HEARD THEM
CRYING OUT BECAUSE
OF THEIR SLAVE
DRIVERS, AND I AM
CONCERNED ABOUT
THEIR SUFFERING.
SO I HAVE COME
DOWN TO RESCUE
THEM FROM THE HAND
OF THE EGYPTIANS.

Exodus 3:7-8

Israel's exodus from Egypt has fueled the imaginations of countless generations. At its heart, it is a story of hope. The Israelites couldn't see that at first. They were a despised minority enslaved by an ambitious and greedy pharaoh who continually sought to extract more profit at less cost. In spite of his dependence on their labor, Pharaoh saw the Israelites—especially the men—as a potential threat. Not only did he work them to the bone, but he sought to kill their sons.

The writer of Exodus begins by focusing on the women in the story: midwives, a mother, her daughter, a servant, and the daughter of Pharaoh. Each one acts within her sphere of influence to resist Pharaoh's cruel policies. Working together, they save the infant Moses. They act with hope, refusing to let the regime force them into submission. The writer describes their bold actions with the same words he will later use to describe God's saving of the Israelite nation.

Consider these examples: Moses' mother *saw he was good*, reminding us that God values every human made in his image. She placed him in an *ark* in the *reeds*. The ark (or "basket") reminds us of God's rescue of Noah's family from watery death. Moses' rescue anticipates Israel's future escape through the Sea of *Reeds* (or "Red" Sea). Pharaoh's daughter saw the ark, saw the baby crying, and took pity on him. Suddenly there is hope for this condemned child. Then we learn that God saw his people's suffering, heard their cries, and was concerned. God's concern moved him to action when he commissioned Moses to lead the people out of Egypt.

Christian hope is rooted in God's *seeing*. Nothing escapes his notice. The heart of Advent is knowing that God sees a world gone wrong and that he will do something to make it right. He may at times seem distant in our suffering, but he consistently acts to uphold the covenant he made with Abraham (Gen. 17). This same covenant is why God sent Jesus into the world.

The exodus story invites us to participate in God's audacious work of redemption. The women of the story heard no clarion call from the heavens prompting them to act. They simply lived as though God could see and acted accordingly. They knew the right thing to do, and they did it.

READ EXODUS 1:1-3:10. (Optionally, also read 3:11-4:17 and 13:17-14:31.) How do the women in chapters 1 and 2 embody hope? How can the Exodus enrich our understanding of Advent?

12/09
ON BUILDING
A HIGHWAY

BY JOHN GOLDINGAY

Isaiah 40:1-11

Over the past two or three decades, the Israeli National Roads Authority has built an impressive network of highways through the country. One current project is an urban artery with tunnels and bridges that will take people straight into the center of Jerusalem from the point where the Tel Aviv highway reaches the edge of the city. The trouble is that the construction involves disturbing some Roman graves from 1,900 years ago, which has sparked protests. But people want to get to Jerusalem, fast, and they feel the need for a highway that overcomes the obstacles—a bit like the one God commissions in Isaiah 40. “In the wilderness clear Yahweh’s way, make straight in the steppe a causeway for our God” (v. 3, FT).

In the summer of 587 B.C., God essentially walked out on Jerusalem. He’d had it with his people’s unfaithfulness. His glory left, as Ezekiel 10 puts it. And when God walked out, Nebuchadnezzar was free to walk in. Nebuchadnezzar set about devastating the city so thoroughly that he rendered it more or less uninhabitable and had to locate his provincial headquarters elsewhere, in Mizpah.

Nothing happened for half a century. Then, in Isaiah 40, God told one of his aides to commission supernatural contractors to lay out a superhighway with flyovers and underpasses for him to return to the city, bringing his scattered people with him. And God did return. Some of those in exile came too, and they did their best to make the city habitable again. The Book of Ezra relates how they rebuilt the temple and God returned to live there and meet with them there once again.

On the whole, things were better between God and his people for the next 500 years, though for most of that time they remained under the authority of a series of imperial powers. They still longed for their independence.

In A.D. 30, along came John the Baptizer, picking up Isaiah 40 and proclaiming that people needed to turn to God and be washed clean. And again, God was saying, *Build me a highway, I’m coming back, and I’m going to sort out your destiny* (see Matt. 3:3). This time the highway was a moral and religious one, and John was commissioned to build it.

In effect, each Advent God is again saying to us, as he says in Isaiah 40, *Build me a highway*. You want to see Jesus? He’s coming.

IN THE WILDERNESS
PREPARE THE WAY
FOR THE LORD; MAKE
STRAIGHT IN THE
DESERT A HIGHWAY
FOR OUR GOD.

Isaiah 40:3

REFLECT ON ISAIAH 40:1-11, first considering its original context: God’s people in exile, living far from Jerusalem. Then re-read it in light of John the Baptist’s role and Christ’s coming (Matt. 3). What stands out to you when you look at this passage through different lenses?

12/10
**A BOLD,
DANGEROUS
PRAYER**

BY JOHN GOLDINGAY

Isaiah 64:1-9

**OH, THAT YOU WOULD
REND THE HEAVENS
AND COME DOWN, THAT
THE MOUNTAINS WOULD
TREMBLE BEFORE YOU!**

Isaiah 64:1

We wish you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that at your presence mountains would shake! This is the prayer of Isaiah 64. The order of chapters in Isaiah suggests that this prayer belongs in a time after the Persians have terminated Babylonian control of the Middle East. The trouble is that Judah has found that this power transition is not much of an improvement. Prophets have told Judah that God would put all the superpowers down, but that time never seemed to come. Persia taking over from Babylon underlines the point. Everything changes, but everything stays the same. *So tear the sky apart and come and sort things out, Lord!*

But in the next chapter, Isaiah 65, God blows a fuse and essentially says, *You've got some nerve!* God seems to be responding with anger to the effrontery of what the Judahites say in Isaiah 64.

When Jesus came, God *did* tear the sky apart and come to sort things out. The Gospels don't use that language in connection with the Incarnation, though they do use similar language in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:10), with Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:7), and with his prayer when he is about to be executed (John 12:28-29).

Then, a few decades later, some people who believe in Jesus are asking a similar question as the Judahites: *Why does everything still stay the same?* (2 Peter 3:4). In effect, they too are praying, *We wish you would tear the heavens and come down!* Peter responds to them in a confrontational way, too. He reminds his recipients that the world has been shaken before, by water, and it will be again, but by fire (vv. 5-7).

Both the Judahites and the early Christians were essentially little people under the control of a big empire. Most of us are not. In many ways, we *are* the empire. When we pray, "We wish you would tear open the heavens and come down, come and sort out the imperial powers, come deal with injustice," God's response may be frightening. We'll find God doing some sorting out in our own lives. When we pray *Come down, Lord!*, we invite God to confront *us* and convict *us*.

READ ISAIAH 64:1-9. (Optionally, also read 65:1-12.) When have you felt the longing expressed in 64:1? How does the context of God confronting sin add to your understanding of 64:1-9? How do you desire to respond to God?

12/11 LIGHT AND LIFE

BY THABITI ANYABWILE

Isaiah 9:2
John 1:4–5, 9

Some of us have grown up in cities, so we don't *really* know what darkness is. In cities, there's always a light on somewhere, and you can see by that light. But others of us grew up in the country, well beyond city lights—where darkness is darkness indeed. Where it can get so dark that you cannot even see your hand in front of your face.

This is the image in Isaiah 9:2—that the darkness of sin is so deep and complete, it incapacitates and immobilizes. You can't walk in it with any certainty. You don't know where you're going. You're lost. The darkness here symbolizes the blindness and death that come from sin.

But God solves this problem of sin and death with Christmas. The very people who walked in darkness “have seen a great light.” They didn't turn the light on; rather, *on them* light has shone. God breaks into the darkness of sin with new hope, new vision, and with a new life of righteousness.

We shouldn't be surprised that almost every Gospel comes back to this prophecy from Isaiah in describing how Jesus came into the world. For example, when John tells us about Jesus' birth—the Incarnation—he reaches for this symbol of light. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:4–5, 9).

Jesus is that true light. This season is about God sending this light into the world to give salvation to all who would believe in him. Christmas is not about the lights on the tree or the lights decorating the house. At their very best, these are merely weak symbols for a much more powerful light that gives *life* to the world.

Isaiah saw it 700 years before Jesus' birth. Two thousand years ago, the apostles laid eyes on that very light in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. And today, he's given us that light in the message of the gospel. Everyone who is in darkness must repent of sin and believe in this light in order to come into the kingdom of God. This is how the Lord changes us. This is the message of light bringing life.

This article is adapted from a sermon Thabiti Anyabwile preached on December 17, 2017. Used by permission.

THE PEOPLE WALKING
IN DARKNESS HAVE
SEEN A GREAT LIGHT;
ON THOSE LIVING IN
THE LAND OF DEEP
DARKNESS A LIGHT
HAS DAWNED.

Isaiah 9:2

MEDITATE ON ISAIAH 9:2 AND JOHN 1:4–5, 9. Prayerfully reflect on *darkness*, *light*, and *life* in these passages. How does Isaiah's prophecy help you understand the true hope Christ brings?



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ADVENT: LIVING HOPE

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Ideas For Families

SELECT SOME OF THESE IDEAS TO ENRICH YOUR FAMILY'S JOURNEY THROUGH ADVENT.

Throughout Advent

- With teens or preteens, read and discuss the devotions together each evening. With younger kids, focus on just the Scripture passages and reflection prompts.
- Create a hope-focused “stained-glass window” that you’ll add to throughout Advent. Use a dry-erase marker (or a colored self-adhesive note) to write the word *hope* in the center of a window in your home. Use a thesaurus together to find and add related words that can help us understand biblical hope. Then, throughout Advent, use colored markers or notes to record words, ideas, images, symbols, or Bible verses from each day’s discussion and add them to the window.

Week 1

- Invite teens or preteens to read “Hope: An Expectant Leap” by Jay Y. Kim, then go on a challenging hike together. As you walk, discuss Kim’s hiking story and the idea that Christian hope is something that’s gritty and determined.
- With younger children, have fun using a joke book to tell each other silly knock-knock jokes. Afterward, talk about the idea that Jesus will one day *arrive*. He will come again!
- Ask, “What are some things in life that upset you, are unfair, or make you feel angry or hopeless?” (Optional: Use newspapers or online news sites to generate ideas regarding current events.) Record on a posterboard some of the evils, injustices, and painful realities of life, like war, abuse, cancer, poverty, racism, stress, personal conflicts, and so on. Then tear up the poster together as you talk about our ultimate hope in Christ’s future reign described in Revelation 21:1-5.

Week 2

- Find an online recipe for air-dry or no-bake salt dough, then use it to make simple Christmas tree ornaments as a family. The ornaments will need to dry for one or more days. Use the experience of waiting for the dough to harden as an opportunity to talk about Advent as a season of waiting. What were God's people in the Old Testament waiting for? How do we see hope in their waiting?
- Use a telescope or binoculars to look at far-off objects. Discuss how God used prophets like Isaiah to see some of what God would do in the future. Talk about some of the truths Isaiah foretold about Jesus.
- Turn off the lights in your house (other than Christmas tree lights) to play flashlight tag or flashlight hide-and-seek. Have fun together, then read Isaiah 9:2 and John 1:4-5, 9. Discuss Christ's identity as the light promised in Isaiah 9.

Week 3

- Play a quiet game to see who can be silent the longest. (Or challenge everyone to be silent for a set period of time.) Use this experience to discuss what Zechariah might have thought and felt during his long period of muteness as he waited for his son's birth and the coming of the Messiah.
- Have an upside-down dinner as a family. Sit under the table, wear clothing backward, eat food in reverse order, and so on. Use this silly experience to talk about how Mary's song pointed toward the upside-down nature of the kingdom. Discuss some of Jesus' teachings and actions that turned things upside down (the first shall be last, love your enemies, and so on).
- Go on a "choice drive" as a family to look at area Christmas lights. At each intersection, let a different family member choose if you'll turn right, turn left, or go straight. Afterward, use this experience to talk about the choices and decisions that Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph faced. How might they have felt in these situations? What motivated their choices or responses? What can we learn from them?

Week 4

- Reflect on the shepherds' and Anna's immediate response to seeing baby Jesus—telling others about him! Create a Christmas card as a family that tells about Jesus, then mail it to someone to share the Good News.
- Gather a baby picture of each family member. (If possible, even include baby pictures of grandparents and great-grandparents.) Look at the pictures and discuss each person's traits you may recognize even when they were babies. Use this experience to talk about how remarkable it was that Simeon and Anna recognized baby Jesus as the promised Messiah.
- Gather around your hope-focused stained-glass window and reflect together on the entire Advent season. How has everyone's understanding of Christian hope been enriched? What is one idea, verse, or biblical story that stands out most to each family member? How was each person's faith impacted through this experience of observing Advent together?