

Introduction to *Anticipate Christmas* Daily Readings

One of the highlights for our church each year is the annual celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas. For many Christians around the world it's called Advent. It is a season of patient waiting, hopeful expectation, soul-searching, and calendar watching marked by many churches, Christian families, and individual followers of Jesus. There's no biblical mandate to observe Advent. It is an optional tradition that developed over the course of church history as a time of preparation for Christmas Day, the anticipation of Jesus' coming. That is why our theme at Mountain View each year is *Anticipate Christmas*.

At Mountain View, we'll observe this season starting the fourth Sunday before Christmas and it will climax with our Christmas Eve candlelight service. Each Sunday we will look at the celebration of Jesus' first and second coming through these four words and themes: *Light*, *Grace*, *Truth* and *Glory*. Each week we will light a theme candle to remember and anticipate His coming.

The daily readings were written by the pastoral staff at Mountain View to complement and correspond with the four weekly topics. We encourage you to use this time of reading, individually or as a family devotional time, to help prepare your hearts and minds to come and adore Him this season. Together, we will "Anticipate Christmas" and also look toward Jesus' second coming.

Our prayer is that our daily reading times together might help us, as a forever family, keep Jesus as our focus during this season, that we'll make Him preeminent even in all the rush and busyness that surrounds the season. Let's together anticipate the birth and coming of Jesus -- "O Come, Let Us Adore Him."

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 28 November

Anticipating the Light

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.
You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.*

*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.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.
[Isaiah 9:2, 3; 6, 7]*

Adam and Eve's failure in the Garden of Eden resulted in sin's darkness shrouding the human family. Since the fall, mankind has walked in darkness, alienated from God who is light and in whom is no darkness at all. Israel's anticipation of Messiah was the anticipation of light to dispel sin's darkness. His coming would bring the light of life not only to Israel but to the Gentiles as well. Though mankind loves darkness rather than light because of hatred for God and evil deeds, the light has come.

The Messiah of Israel is the Light of the World. Those who hear and believe the gospel are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. The light that dispels the darkness of sin also delivers the soul from death. In his name and by his grace believers are exhorted to walk as children of light, holding forth the Word of life. The light of the believer's life shines that those in darkness may find their way to Jesus.

Is your light shining in the darkness?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 29 November

Jesus, the Light of Life

In Him (the Word) was life, and the life was the light of men.

[John 1:4]

Jesus, the Word, was in the beginning with God, a member of the godhead, equal with the Father, eternal and co-existent with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He enjoyed fellowship with the Father, the adoration of angels and all the glories of heaven. But he stepped out of heaven's brilliance to penetrate earth's spiritual darkness. At the beginning of creation physical darkness shrouded the planet. At the time of the incarnation, spiritual darkness shrouded the race. Without God man is described as having a darkened heart, a darkened mind, walking in darkness, even *loving* the darkness because his deeds are evil.

Our finite minds cannot fully comprehend the significance of Jesus' entrance into the world. The words he prayed in the Garden, "Not my will but yours," echo words he had uttered to the Father just as he stepped away from heaven's glory in anticipation of his redemptive assignment: "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God." Spiritually, the Father, in sending his son, was saying once again, "Let there be light." And Jesus, the Creator of light, was willing to breach the spiritual darkness to be the light of life.

Light is necessary for physical life and health. Sunlight is the major source of Vitamin D, essential for healthy bones. It is effective in destroying germs and treating skin diseases. Light is also necessary for good mental and emotional health, enhancing positive moods through the release of endorphins. Jesus, the light, similarly is indispensable to spiritual life and health. Those who come to the light are exhorted to "walk in the light" thus insuring spiritual health, the integrity of a godly life and enjoy intimacy with the Father and with his Son.

Are you walking in the light?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 30 November

Witnesses of the Light

[John] was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

[John 1:8]

As a kid I was fond of the chorus, “This Little Light of Mine.” We loved to sing it with great enthusiasm and do the motions with great energy. The message is simple, yet profound. It reminds us of the importance of allowing our lives to bear witness that we are children of light.

As history approached the fullness of time for Jesus’ birth, John the Baptist bore witness about the light. He preached in anticipation of the One who was to come. It had been nearly 400 years since the voice of a prophet had broken the silence of heaven. But now the voice of the prophet cut through the silence to announce One who came as the light of life. He would be seen and heard as one who comes from the presence of the Father as a light shining in the darkness.

We, too, are to bear witness to the light who has already come and has brought to us the light of life. Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men,” that is by doing good works we would draw attention to our Heavenly Father. Paul exhorted his Ephesian readers to “walk as children of light;” that is with testimonies of goodness, righteousness and truth believers draw attention to the Saviour. Simply put, our lives are to bear witness to the light by allowing the presence of Christ to be seen in us. It is important to note such a witness is not a *reflection* of a light that is outside us but rather a *radiation* of the light that is within, a light that is to shine out from us with an ever-increasing brilliance. (2 Cor. 3:18) By our lives as well as by our words we illuminate the darkness around us and provide a beacon of light and life for the lost.

Are you sharing the Light of life?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 1 December

Lovers of Darkness vs Lovers of Light

[T]he light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. [John 3:19]

Today's media read like a contemporary commentary on Jesus' words in John 3. Incidents of serious crime seem to be increasing in number and severity. Lack of respect for persons and property is pervasive. While some crimes do occur in broad daylight, the majority are committed under the protective cover of darkness.

It is intriguing the word for "love" Jesus uses is *agapé*, a term meaning unconditional and sacrificial love. The love for the darkness is deep-seated prompting those who love it to take the risks and make the sacrifices necessary to succeed in their works of evil.

The prophet Isaiah pronounced woe on those who loved the darkness centuries before the Light would come into the world. "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" [Is. 5:20] He indicated this distorted behaviour is the result of rejecting "the law of the LORD of hosts" and the despising of "the word of the Holy One of Israel."

Isaiah's prophecy was uttered in anticipation of the Light to come to dispel the darkness and cure the evil. Jesus is the Light of whom Isaiah speaks. But even his coming was met with an evil response: Herod sought to kill him; his own family ridiculed him; the religious leaders mocked him; the crowds condemned him; the soldiers arrested him; Pilate surrendered him and the Romans crucified him. Many of the above were carried out at night. But they couldn't put out the Light.

Do you love the Light?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 2 December

Jesus is the Light of the World

I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. [John 8:12]

Before the days of multi-screen theatres, television, DVD's, live streaming etc. the "movie house" was the venue for motion picture entertainment. The "venue menu" provided more than just a few trailers and the featured movie. Cartoons, news reels, previews (trailers), etc. were part of the entertainment package. Sometimes the presentation included two movies (a "double feature"). Patrons would often spend several hours being entertained by those on the silver screen. In order to accommodate latecomers, theatres employed ushers to help people find their seats in the darkened facility. They would lead the way with a torch to help people keep from tripping or stumbling. It was a matter of wisdom and safety to "follow the light."

When Jesus stood in front of the crowd, he announced he was the light of the world. He made it clear that following him was a matter of spiritual wisdom and guaranteed spiritual safety. Such is in keeping with the confidence and anticipation of Old Testament psalmists and prophets. David testified, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" [Ps. 27:1) Isaiah prophesied, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." (Is. 9:2)

But following the light demands intentional living, a life-long commitment to obedience.. Sadly, some believers may choose to walk in darkness. But those who wisely choose to walk in the light enjoy intimacy and spiritual safety.

Are you following the Light?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 3 December

Jesus, the Light of Revelation

[M]y eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. [Luke 2:29-32]

Simeon is one of the major characters in the nativity narrative yet is obscured by the presence of shepherds, angels, wise men and the holy family. His reputation is that of a godly man, and his senior years are filled with a sense of anticipation since it had been revealed to him he would not see death until he had seen “the Lord’s Christ.”

One can only imagine the sparkle in his eyes, his smile and the glow on his cheeks as he held the infant Jesus in his arms. One might say he beamed with joy as the Light in his arms reflected on his countenance.

The Gaither hymn, “Because He Lives,” includes the words, “How sweet to hold a new-born baby and feel the pride and joy he gives.” Our hearts resonate with the truth of those words, however, it is doubtful our joy can even compare with Simeon’s as he held the incarnate God, “the light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to [God’s] people Israel.” His benediction: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.” His anticipation was realised; his hope became sight; his joy was full.

But Simeon was aware that his anticipation was not simply the birth of the child but the arrival of the Saviour, predicting the pain and sorrow that awaited the parents and their son in his adulthood. The light of revelation would become the light of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike, a light shining to dispel the darkness of sin and illuminate the heart.

The psalmist, speaking of the Torah, wrote: “The entrance of Your words gives light.” [Psalm 119:130/NKJV]. The entrance of The Word in the incarnation has given light which is “the life of men.”

Have you seen the Light?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 4 December

The Light of the Cross

While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light. [John 12:36]

The cross is the traditional symbol of Christianity. It is often displayed from the spires of churches, above the altar in cathedrals, hanging on the walls in people's homes even worn as an adornment around the neck or on a lapel. In some cities in South Africa a cross stands on a hillside, a symbol of sacrifice made once for all. In many cases, spotlights illuminate the symbol; so it is readily seen even on the darkest night or in a dimly lit room.

Jesus referred to himself as the Light saying he would be among them "for a little while longer." His immediate reference is to the light of *revelation* that had been shining among them. But they rejected him and the explanation of God he brought to them (John 1:18). Thus the darkness of unbelief threatened and would overtake them. In fact their rejection of the light fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that his own people would turn away from him resulting in blinded eyes and hardened hearts.

Jesus death, however, is not representative of a light shining *on* a cross. Indeed the cross was shrouded in darkness as he hung suspended between heaven and earth, paying God's price for man's sin. However, there is a light shining *from* the cross, the light of *redemption* anticipated by the prophets of old. The message of the cross is "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." [2 Cor. 4:4] Those who have responded to the Light are commanded to "shine as lights in the world, holding fast to word of life." [Phil. 2:15, 16] Jesus commanded his disciples, "Let your light shine...."

Are you shining your light?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 5 December

The Miracle of Grace

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

[Romans 5:12-17]

The Apostle John twice affirms that the Incarnate Christ, born in Bethlehem that first Christmas, was “full of grace and truth.” Indeed these were characteristics of the Father, personally and perfectly revealed in Christ during his earthly sojourn. Note the balance. Grace and truth are in a healthy tension as both are essential for a healthy relationship with God and a witness to his character. The Pharisees were long on truth but short on grace. Jesus perfectly personified both.

But Jesus reputation of being “full of grace” was much more than simply healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching the truth and feeding the hungry. Grace was fully expressed when “he who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

Theologically, grace is defined as unmerited favour; practically it is expressed as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense;” personally it is the Father and the Son gifting us with what we don’t deserve.

Are you aware grace is free...but not cheap?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 6 December

The Beginning of Grace

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. [Genesis 3:15]

The first Man and the first Woman were without sin in the beginning. Were they perfect? Obviously not; only God is perfect. They did live in a perfect environment, however. They worked without experiencing the futility that we face in our work or even menial household chores we perform. They were obedient to God, able to have unhindered and unmediated communication and communion with Him, walking in the garden with him in the cool part of the day.

Then something happened. They succumbed to the serpent's temptation as he distorted God's word, deceiving them and driving a wedge between them and God, promising they could/would be like God. Since the fall, we all are born sinners. Even believers may choose to sin. When we do something we know displeases God, we often dismiss it as a mistake or, "that's just the way God made me!" No, that's how I was born—a sinner—but being born again means God has declared me righteous and commands that we should "go and sin no more."

Genesis is the book of beginnings, and it makes sense that we would be introduced to Grace directly after Adam and Eve's sin. Genesis 3:15 does not just speak of a lingering distrust we all of have of snakes. There is a much greater purpose here: God promising his Grace for the very first time. He promises freedom from that liar and tempter, Satan. God promises a hero.

Adam and Eve not only saw a future promise of Grace, they experienced the immediate effects of grace as God clothed them in the skins of the animals offered in sacrifice. We, too, experience an immediate effect of grace. Those who believe the gospel are saved by grace and clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

When did you first experience God's Grace?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 7 December

A Promise of Grace

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

[Genesis 22:6-8]

Abraham walked for three days with his son knowing Isaac was as good as dead. He knew that at the end of their journey the knife would pierce his son's flesh. This was God's demand; Abraham was ready to obey. The three day journey ended. Abraham and Isaac climbed the mountain of God's choice. Isaac carried the wood on his back, Abraham carried the torch and the knife.

Abraham knew that God had provided a son through his wife Sarah. Now, God demanded he sacrifice that son. Abraham obeyed without negotiation. He made no attempt to remind God of his promise. The writer of Hebrews indicates Abraham's faith was resilient, believing God could raise Isaac from the dead. [Heb. 11:19]

God intervened, sending a sheep and Isaac was spared. Abraham was shown Grace. But the incident is itself a prophecy of God's intent. God the Father had another Son in mind that day. His Son. His only Son who would carry wood upon his back. Climb a hill to his death. Remain dead for three days. A Son whose flesh would be pierced. A Son whose blood would wash away every sin. No deity stepped in when Christ was nailed to the cross of wood. Rather his own cry reveals the opposite. His God had forsaken him. He was forsaken that we might be accepted. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That includes you and me!

He sacrificed his life for you. Will you sacrifice your life for him?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 8 December

Taste His Goodness

So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life."

[Genesis 45:4-5]

Amongst other Old Testament saints, Joseph's story is quite remarkable. As his father Jacob's favourite son, he enjoyed many privileges. Nice clothes to mention one. The Bible, however, teaches this dramatically changed for Joseph. We wonder why? Was it his brother's pure wickedness? Was their wickedness furthered by evidence of Joseph's pride? What we do know for certain is that God intended Joseph's being sold into slavery for the greater good. The Lord intended for Joseph to be sold into slavery so that he could go to Egypt ultimately to become second in charge of the land of Egypt. Joseph was promoted to a place second only to Pharaoh, a vice president or prime minister in today's political power structures. This so that he could provide food for his family during a time of intense drought, their saviour if you will.

God's providence over Jacob's family is clearly displayed in Joseph's life, but so also his grace. Joseph was a foreshadowing of Christ. God's grace and compassion for sinners was being hinted at. Like Joseph, Jesus provided food for the sustenance of the physical bodies of people (Matt. 15:36), but more, he provided for man's ultimate need, the need of salvation. As Joseph was moved by compassion for his famished brothers, our Lord Jesus was moved by his grace and compassion for lost sinners. We, the saints, have tasted of this grace! Now we are appointed as ambassadors of grace to a world starving for it.

Are you moved by compassion for the lost?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 9 December

Grace Realised and Applied

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[Hebrews 4:16]

Christ followers are continually mindful of their need for and the availability of God's grace. The writer of Hebrews assures us God's grace is available, abundant and adequate.

Paul reminded the Ephesians they were *saved* by grace. (Eph. 2:8, 9) He assured the Romans believers are *surrounded* by God's grace (Rom. 5:2). He wrote Titus the grace of God is a *teacher* to help us understand the inappropriateness of godlessness and worldliness and the importance of living holy and godly lives. (Titus 2).

Grace, like mercy, is man's perception of God's *agapé* love. His love is extended to us unconditionally; grace is experiencing that love as undeserved favour. A late great Bible teacher often reminded his hearers/readers: "Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve; mercy is God *not* giving us what we do deserve." That's his unconditional love experienced by the partakers of his grace.

There is need for believers to be careful not to abuse, squander or casually regard God's grace. While God grace makes no demand for our works, its availability was made possible at great cost to the Father who gave his Son and his Son who gave his life.

We are saved by grace. We are being sanctified by grace. We are kept safe by grace. We are sustained by grace. And it all began at Bethlehem. Grace personified: born in a manger, raised in poverty, reviled and rejected by most and dying on a criminal's cross. Grace defined: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Grace realised: "For by grace are you saved through faith...it is the gift of God."

How often each day do you appeal for God's mercy, his grace and patience?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 10 December

Perfect and Effective Grace

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. [Galatians 4:4-7 ESV]

"The fulness of time." That term is pregnant with significance. It was the fulness of time *politically*, Rome was the world empire. Tax edicts would require the holy couple to go Bethlehem where Messiah was to be born (Micah 5:2. Crucifixion, not stoning, would be the means of Messiah's death. It was the fullness of time *culturally*. Greek was the common language of the empire much like English is today. It was the fulness of time *religiously*. God's silence and the emptiness of legalism and materialism amplified the Jews' longing for their Messiah.

Thus, "in the fulness of time," Messiah was born. All the promises made by the prophets would be fulfilled. He who came "full of grace and truth" was laid in a manger, the beginning of his sojourn among men—truly human and truly God; grace embodied in the individual, Jesus. He would provide the perfect revelation of God and the only acceptable redemption for mankind.

As we read these words today, we await Christmas Day. While waiting, we need to focus on him, as did Israel, never taking him or his grace for granted. Jesus' sacrifice of love patiently draws us to repentance. Treasure and cherish him. Know that his birth, life, death, resurrection, and perfect holiness absolve us of our sinfulness, enfold us in grace and give us new life.

Are you patiently waiting God's promises of grace?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 11 December

Grace for all the Right Reasons

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. [Genesis 12:2-3]

*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...
[Ephesians 3:7-8]*

Throughout scripture God blesses but not for the sole benefit of the receiver. People are blessed to be a blessing. Or, in Paul's case, he was shown grace so that he could preach of that grace—"the unspeakable riches of Christ." Believers are to be gracious and speak of the grace they have been given. (See Colossians 4:5, 6)

Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father after his earthly work was done. But he sent a helper, the Holy Spirit. He continues to offer us grace in a thousand different ways. Daily we should seek the Spirit to convict us of our sin and lead us to repentance. Repentance is not just a single act but the means by which one participates in their sanctification, in the perseverance of their faith.

In our service to others we attempt to display the grace that God showed us through Jesus. Gracious acts of neighbourly love give evidence of spiritual fruit.

Grace is complex, and there are dimensions we work diligently to understand. But grace is simple to receive. That is what makes it so "Amazing."

Can you identify three ways Grace plays out in your life today??

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 12 December

What is Truth? He is the Truth.

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

[Jn. 17:6-8;17-19]

The mission of the Incarnate Christ was to reveal the Father whom no one has ever seen. The disciple Jesus loved twice affirms the Saviour was “full of grace and truth.”

Jesus *embodied* the truth. He stood in contrast to the Father of Lies who has closed the minds of unbelievers lest they believe the truth. He exposed the hypocrisy of religious leaders who had abused and abandoned the intent of truth revealed in the Scriptures.

Jesus *affirmed* the truth. He taught the Word of God with authority to the extent people marvelled. He rehearsed the prophecies from the Torah, the Psalms and the Prophets on at least two occasions following his resurrection.

He also *taught* the truth, preparing those who heard and believed to have an impact on an unbelieving world. He promised to dispatch the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, who would guide Jesus' followers into all truth.

He *declared* himself to be the truth. People come to the Father through Christ alone. Any other claim is not to be believed.

Do you KNOW the truth?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 13 December

What is Truth? He is the Truth.

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

[Revelation 19:11-16]

Pilate's posed the question to Jesus, "What is truth?" In reality, that question has haunted the mind of the human family since Satan questioned God's Word in the Garden of Eden. Jesus described the devil as a "liar and the father of lies."

Today's culture is even more thoroughly confused in that many believe truth is elusive, unknowable, defying verification and beyond validation. Throughout history mankind has sought truth through philosophical speculation, scientific investigation, and religious meditation.

The answer to Pilate's question is simple: *Jesus is the truth*. He broke into human history as one full of grace and truth; when he comes again he will be acknowledged as faithful and true. The search for truth ends at the feet of Him who is the way, the truth and the life. By him one can know the truth and by it be set free.

Has the Truth changed your life?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 14 December

The LORD, the Truth

In that day the remnant of Israel will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. [Isaiah 10:20]

Just as darkness is the absence of light so lies are the absence of truth. Satan's deception in the Garden involved twisting the truth and supplanting the truth with the lie hatched in his own heart. Eve, being deceived, believed the lie.

The race has continued to believe the lie rather than respond to the truth. Jeremiah said, "Everyone deceives his neighbour, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies;...they refuse to know me, declares the LORD." [Jer. 9:5, 6] Paul notes, "[T]hey exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." [Rom. 1:25]

Further, Paul speaks of the day when the man of sin, *aka* Antichrist, will rule the world. "The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."

The prophet Isaiah anticipated a time when a remnant of Israel would embrace the LORD in truth. The context speaks of a time when the Assyria threatened the nation. Yahweh would provide physical deliverance to the remnant who leaned on him and believed the truth. But there is a further fulfilment of his prophecy, the anticipation of the spiritual deliverance of the remnant that would respond to Jesus, the incarnate God, full of grace and truth.

As Satan sought to displace the truth with his lies, so the anticipated Christ would destroy the lies with his truth. Those who respond to the truth—so as to be saved—love it, lean on it, learn from it and are led by it.

Do you LOVE the truth?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 15 December

Worshipping in Truth

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. [John 4:23]

It is a biblical fact the Father seeks worshipers. It is also a cultural fact the human person seeks something to worship. But Romans 1 reveals the effects of sin and how far mankind will go to create deities of his own. Sinful man worships the creature rather than the Creator. Someone once said, "In the beginning God created man in his image; since the fall man has been returning the favour!"

Worship the Father seeks and accepts is worship motivated by the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote the Philippians, "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." As Jesus notes, acceptable worship is also in accordance with His revealed truth.

Creation reveals him to be the powerful God, majestic and full of glory. We should worship him in *humility*. The Law revealed him to be the perfect God, righteous and full of holiness. We should worship him in *submission*. But such worship was to be done from afar. Both creation and the Law suggested a God who was unapproachable, one who distanced himself from his people because of their sin and rebellion. Only the high priest dared enter the intimacy of his presence and then only once a year with the blood of the sacrifice.

But Jesus revealed him to be the personal God, merciful and full of grace. We should worship him in *gratitude*. Those who worship "in spirit and in truth" have the confidence to enter into his presence knowing the Father seeks their worship and welcomes their presence. Truth makes a difference in how we worship as well as how we walk.

Do you worship him in truth?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 16 December

The Truth Will Set You Free

And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

[John 8:32]

Post-modernism's denial of absolute truth attempts to assault the very foundation of the Christian faith. Denying the absolute truthfulness and authority of Scripture leaves the possibility for everyone to do that which is right in his/her own eyes. The days of the judges are a reminder of the havoc that results from such a mindset. Our contemporary society and culture do not differ a whole lot.

One indisputable absolute is human bondage to sin. Creation groans under the curse inflicted on it by man's sin, anticipating the day when it will finally be free. The human family, while not admitting its spiritual deadness and bondage, nonetheless speaks of Utopias, Nirvanas, Shangri-Las and Edens where the ugliness of sin's effects are eradicated. Even children's fairy tales end with the phrase "happily ever after." All indicate an awareness of man's helplessness and hopelessness because of sin's bondage.

For centuries the Israelites offered their sacrifices in accordance with Moses' instruction and the demands of the Law. The writer of Hebrews, however, says such sacrifices were impotent to remove sin and could only serve as a reminder of the individual and national sinfulness.

Then Jesus came. The incarnate God's arrival allowed for his personal and sensory contact with the depth and breadth of man's depravity. While he himself knew no sin, he spent the days of his earthly life in the company of sinners. He who came "full of grace and truth" brought deliverance not only from the bondage of sin but also the bondage of the Law. Says, John, "The Law came by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." He offers life and liberty to all. Absolute truth can set one absolutely free.

Has His truth set you free?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 17 December

Jesus, Truth Incarnate

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
[John 1:14]

Today's world worships at the feet of celebrity. The lives of movie stars, musicians, famous authors, statesmen, etc. are covered in detail by media gone mad with the spectacular. But the Word becoming flesh didn't make the slightest ripple in the pulse of society. No reporters rushed to the cave; no news reports interrupted "regular programming;" no one interviewed the young mother; no bright lights or headlines reported the arrival of God in flesh.

The cave was a quiet place except for the whimper of the infant and, perhaps, the sigh of Mary and Joseph who had anticipated the delivery. True, there was a heavenly announcement on a hillside some distance away. But the audience was small. A sign was given to a chosen few who lived hundreds of kilometres away. They would spend the better part of two years making their way to the house where Jesus was. There in the quiet of the home they worshiped him and gave him gifts then departed to the country from which they had come.

Even today, Jesus is not the celebrity of Christmas. The Word made flesh is an event as obscure in today's culture as it was two thousand years ago. Santa's arrival is of greater concern than Jesus' birth, a persistent lie that conceals the birth of the Truth. But Jesus is full of grace, refusing to intrude. He waits to be remembered. He waits to be invited. He does not seek the status of celebrity. He waits to be received as Saviour. "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"

Is Santa or the Saviour the reason for the season?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 18 December

Understanding His Glory

*Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel
and the preaching of Jesus Christ,
to the only wise God be glory forevermore
through Jesus Christ! Amen. [Romans 11:16:25, 27]*

God's purpose has always been the manifestation of his glory. At first glance, this might seem to be a very self-centred and unrighteous purpose. However, that betrays a lack of understanding what that actually means. God's manifestation of his glory is simply his endeavour to reveal himself as he really is, to help us know and understand his reputation.

Consider **creation**: The psalmist wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." In Romans 1, Paul echoes David's words: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." John writes in Revelation 4: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." Such a doxology indicates "mission accomplished."

Consider **redemption**: John writes: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." The church in worship as portrayed by John in Revelation 5, says/sings: "'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!' And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!'" Such a doxology indicates "mission accomplished."

His reputation is entrusted to us. That's what it means to glorify God. Are we mindful of the mission? Are we accomplishing it...to his glory???

How is God's glory being revealed in/through your life?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 19 December

Anticipate Christmas...Anticipate Glory!

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

[Romans 5:1, 2]

What do you hope for? At Christmas most of us hope to get that one special gift. Some kids wait for a bicycle or video console. Women often anticipate jewellery. Men hope they DON'T get socks! I remember hoping for a special gift one Christmas and was disappointed when it wasn't under the tree. However, it was there the next Christmas. A year late maybe, but it was worth waiting for!

Christ-followers are filled with hope. Among the many instances we could name, we know many hope for deliverance from difficult circumstances or the realisation of a dream. Believers live in hope, looking beyond this life and anticipating eternity with Christ. Such hope dries the tears of sorrow from hearts devastated by grief and offers something more substantive than status or more material possessions. Paul reminded the Thessalonians though believers may sorrow in times of a loved one's death, such sorrow is not like those who have no hope. In the verse cited above, Paul assures us we have hope of glory! God has declared us righteous and assures us we will one day share his glory. No, we'll not have a brilliant splendour blinding those around us. Rather we will fully exhibit God's attributes, free from sin and experiencing perfection. Colossians 1:27 says this is the result of Christ being in us. He assures our hearts with the hope of glory. We may not have all that we hoped for here, but the hope of his glory is a blessing worth waiting for.

Are you rejoicing in the hope of God's glory? What's the evidence?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 20 December

To God be the Glory

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. [Romans 11:33-36]

When I was a kid, and even when I was first in ministry, one of the traditions in Sunday morning worship was to sing the *doxology*. Many Christians today may not be familiar with the hymn itself, but the term *doxology* is from the New Testament word for *glory*. There are several doxologies in the New Testament but none more beautiful than Paul’s words at the end of Romans 11.

He has just concluded what is considered to be the most intense theological discourse in the entire Bible. In Romans Paul confronts and confirms the sinfulness of the human race, both Jew and Gentile. He has rehearsed God’s graciousness to redeem and reconcile those all come to him in faith. Even God’s discipline of Israel will one day give way to restoration and blessing. As Paul brings the doctrinal lessons to a conclusion, his heart seems to explode with indescribable wonder and joy in the words addressed above.

As Christ followers, our hearts should explode with joy and gladness when we read the content of Romans and consider what great things he has done for us. Doxologies from our hearts and mouths would soon displace the complaints, criticisms, disputes, angry outbursts, lies, gossip, injurious comments and self-pitying complaints. Doxologies are the heart’s expression of the wonder of his glorious grace.

Take time today to reflect on who he is and what he’s done. Then burst into songs of glory!

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 21 December

MISSING THE MARK

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,.... [Romans 3:23]

While the end of Romans 11 celebrates God's glory, the first several chapters describe the great gulf that exists between the race and its creator. Romans 1 addresses the rebellion of Gentiles who reject God's revelation of himself in creation. Paul notes that God has thus revealed his "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature. [These] have been clearly perceived, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

Romans 2 chides the Jews, to whom the Scriptures were given, for using God's written revelation as an instrument of judgment rather than proclaiming the message of reconciliation. Romans 3 simply summarises that *all* miss the mark, *i.e.* all fall short of God's glory. The word picture suggests an archer shooting an arrow at a target, however, the arrow falls short of its extended mark. It doesn't just miss the bullseye. It hits the ground before it even gets to the target! (When I was in varsity, I took an archery class. I can testify to the humiliation of failing to get the arrow to the target!)

Sin has inflicted a fatal wound on the race. Alienation from God, resistance to his revelation, persistence in selfish pursuits and explaining away his existence are evidence. These are the realities, revealing the spiritual deadness that is the condition of every human person. The media gives daily examples of just how far from God the race is.

Against this black backdrop sparkles the jewel of God's grace. Verse 24 simply says that while we fail to "hit the mark," we "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...." (Hint: A doxology is appropriate here!)

Have you been justified? What do you have to say about it?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 22 December

HERE AND NOW, THERE AND THEN

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

[Ephesians 3:20. 21]

Ephesians has been referred to as the “crown jewel” of Paul’s epistles. A study of the epistle reveals truths that are always relevant and practical. especially in helping us understand God’s intent for the church both in time and in eternity. Chapter one reminds us it was conceived for God’s glory. Chapter two minds us it is the handiwork of his grace. Chapters 4-6 spell out the practical implications of being the Body of Christ. The book literally hinges on the verses above. That is to say chapters 4-6 are the means by which God gets glory from the church’s behaviour spelled out in those chapters: living in unity and harmony; edifying and equipping one another; maintaining purity and being lights in the world; living in stable marriages and rearing children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; being witnesses in the work place and being victorious in overcoming Satan and his minions. As the people of God we are to be *insulated* from the world but not *isolated* from it. We are to penetrate the culture so as to perpetuate the faith. We are to exhibit God’s character (his glory) and give evidence of his grace.

In other words, the truth of the doctrines of glory and grace are expressed in the walk and talk of believers as part of Christ’s church. Note the dimensions: *time* (“throughout all generations”); *eternity* (“forever and ever”). Heaven will provide for our performance (Revelation 5). The here and now is opportunity for practice.

What are you doing to practice up for heaven?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 23 December

PEACE IN THE STORM

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. [Romans 8:18]

No doubt most of us have heard comments suggesting doctrine is somehow not practical. Frankly, I cringe at such comments, believing both by faith and experience that if doctrine isn't practical it's not biblical. Various times of trials and testing in my life and ministry have affirmed the necessity of a strong foundation in the doctrinal truths of Scripture. Such gives stability to one's faith as we live in the midst of the storms of circumstances, reminders we live in a broken world. As a rule, we don't have severe storms or earthquakes in South Africa. But we are familiar with the devastation resulting from weather extremes. In most instances, buildings founded on a firm foundation survive. Even Jesus emphasised the importance of building a house on the rock instead of sand.

Paul, right in the middle of the intense doctrinal teaching of Romans, stops to mention the practical implications of doctrinal stability. He doesn't minimise the reality of suffering, both by the planet and its people as the result of Adam's sin. But, such experiences cannot be compared "with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Suffering is a tool God uses to conform us to the image of Christ. Both the Spirit and the Saviour intercede for us during such times; and no matter how bad it gets, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God "which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." A strong doctrinal foundation guarantees we can be *victors* instead of *victims*. The storm may not cease, but we can know his peace.

Is your faith built on the rock of Scripture or the sand of wishful thinking?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 24 December

PROMOTING HIS GLORY

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

[1 Corinthians 10:31]

A doxology: a hymn of praise proclaiming his glory. Sin: falling short of his glory. Hope of glory: anticipating his presence. What, after all, is meant by “his glory?” What does it mean to “glorify God” as we are commanded.

First, God’s glory may mean the splendour of his presence. Moses saw his glory pass by. Ezekiel witnessed his glory as God’s presence appeared to him. The angels who brought good news about Jesus were surrounded by God’s glory, a suggesting of a light so bright it frightened the shepherds. But in both Old and New Testaments, the prevailing idea is God’s character or reputation. His glory is who he is. To glorify him is to exhibit his attributes. Jesus came from the presence of God, and those who followed him “beheld his glory.” That is they recognised qualities of God in Jesus’ life. Jesus didn’t have a halo around his head or a holy glow radiating from his body. He simply exhibited God’s character.

So we who proclaim his glory in doxologies are to promote his glory by our behaviour, being good stewards of his reputation. This is true even in the simple things of life as noted in the Scripture above. Do people watching our lives know that God is truth because we always tell the truth? Do they know he is merciful and gracious because we behave that way? Do they know he loves unconditionally because we love that way also? Some have said our lives are the Bible some will ever read. It follows we are the only Christ some will ever see.

Are we more concerned about our reputation than his?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 25 December

GRACE FOR THE GRIND

So we do not lose heart.... For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. [2 Corinthians 4:17]

When my sweetie was diagnosed with cancer, now over twenty years ago, we immediately went to spend time with our pastor. He carefully listened then took us to the Scripture noted above. While cancer may not be perceived as a “light momentary affliction,” in comparison with eternity it is but a blip on the radar of life. We immediately experienced God’s assurance and during the next two years, right up to the morning she departed for heaven, we never lost heart.

First, our afflictions are temporary, God’s assurances are eternal. Second, what we experience here is evidence of the residuals of sin; in his presence we will experience the reality of his glory and the perfections of his love. Third, we can be and are intimidated by the things we see or experience. But the earthly is not the ultimate reality. Even death is but the experience of putting off the earthly that we might be outfitted for heaven (see 1 Corinthians 15:42-49). The unseen things promised us by a loving Father are not intimidating. Rather they are exhilarating. Finally, our journey on earth is weighted with the cares of this world. But what God is doing is preparing us for an “eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” While that’s no reason to rush things, it does provide rest for the journey and grace for the grind.

Are you carrying the weight of the world? Anticipate the weight of his glory!