



Hope



Introduction to "Advent & Christmas"

"Christmas" may be defined as "a holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ."¹ "Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "arrival" or "coming." In Christian practice, Advent refers to the period before Christmas, usually starting four Sundays before Christmas Day. The practice of Advent is not prescribed in the Bible, but many churches and Christians observe it.²

Need of Hope³

During the first millennium BC, Israel faced trouble and despair. The kingdom of Israel was broken into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom (called Israel or Samaria), and the southern kingdom (called Judah). Most of the kings of Israel and Judah were corrupt and did evil. Most of the people turned away from the one true God and worshiped false gods and idols.

Because of their unfaithfulness to God, Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC (*2 Kings 17:7-23*; *2 Chronicles 36:15-20*). The people of Israel and Judah were expelled from their land. They were exiled outside the Promised Land.⁴

📖 "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off" (*Ezekiel 37:11b, NIV*).⁵

1. Though we may not face destruction and exile like Israel did, do we still have a "need of hope" today? Explain.⁶ What difference does hope make?



Reason for Hope

During Israel's (& Judah's) time of rebellion and exile, God still spoke through his "prophets."⁷ The prophets spoke both bad news and good news. The bad news was God's judgment because of their sin. The good news was God's blessing because of his grace. Both God's judgment and blessing demonstrated his faithfulness to his promises.⁸ What did God say through the prophet Isaiah?

📖 "Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers" (*Isaiah 1:7, NIV*).

¹ The word *Christmas* comes from the early English phrase *Christes Masse*, meaning 'Christ's mass.' *Mass* is the name of the Roman Catholic Church's worship service. The specific celebration of Christ's birth is not prescribed by the Bible, and the earliest Christians did not observe it. Also, the actual date of Christ's birth is unknown. For these and other reasons, some Christians do not observe Christmas, but the majority of Christians do celebrate the holiday.

² There are two main 'advents' – Christ's first coming (>2000 years ago) and his second coming (in the future). Advent practices vary but typically involve lighting of candles, Bible reading, reflection & prayer in preparation for Christmas.

³ 'hope' is generally defined as a wish or desire accompanied by the confident expectation that it will happen.

⁴ Israel's possession of the Promised Land was always conditioned on her faithfulness to God (*Joshua 23:6-16*).

⁵ These words are stated in the context of Ezekiel's prophecy on the valley of dry bones (*37:1-14*), which symbolizes the destruction, exile, and 'death' of Israel. Cut off from God's life-giving presence, they are helpless and hopeless. But God is able and willing to rescue his people and restore them to life and blessing (*37:12-14*).

⁶ We all live in a world of trouble. People's deepest needs and desires are unfulfilled. Human 'progress' falls short. The Bible says that everyone who is separate from Christ is 'without hope and without God in the world' (*Ephesians 2:12*). Their 'bones are dried up' (i.e., they are spiritually dead) and they are cut off from the Source of life and well-being. Even those who are united with Christ need hope to persevere through this difficult life on earth (*Romans 8:18-25*).

⁷ The *prophets* were both 'forth-tellers' (proclaiming God's word for the present day) and 'fore-tellers' (proclaiming God's word about the future). For a list of Bible prophets, and their placement within Israel's history, ask Jay.

⁸ For the main promises and covenants, see 'The Road to Christmas' on the ICF website.

📖 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land” (*Isaiah 6:13, NIV*).



Israel’s situation was like a destroyed forest. Only stumps remained. But there was still hope!



2. Read Isaiah 11:1-10. This passage speaks of a future king and his kingdom. How are the king and his kingdom described?⁹

📖 “The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.” (*Jeremiah 23:5-6, NIV*).

3. In our world today, what do people hope for? What is the basis of their hope? How does this hope compare to the hope presented in the Bible?¹⁰

Realization of Hope

Around 5 BC,¹¹ a baby was born in the town of Bethlehem (*Luke 2:4-7; cp. Micah 5:2*). He was given the name “Jesus.” It became obvious that Jesus was the promised Messiah – “the root of Jesse” (*Isaiah 11:10; Romans 15:12; cp. Revelation 5:5; 22:16*). The Savior has come!

Continuation of Hope

When we trust in Jesus Christ, we are saved from spiritual death and given a new life. We enter into a relationship with God and we become heirs in God’s kingdom of light (*Colossians 1:12-14*). Our hope has been realized, but not fully realized. Hope continues until Christ’s second advent.

4. God’s people in the Old Testament spent many years hoping and waiting for the Messiah and his kingdom. How are *our* hopes and waits similar to theirs? How are they dissimilar? *How* can we stay encouraged and faithful as we hope and wait in this troubled world?¹²

Reflection & Application

- Do *you* have hope? What is your ultimate (greatest, final) hope? What is the basis of your hope? The only hope that truly delivers is the hope found in Jesus Christ. Do you need to trust in him?
- Brothers & sisters, are you troubled in this world? Can you say that you are overflowing with hope? Reflect on Romans 5:1-5, 8:18-25 & 15:13 and ask God to increase your trust and hope.

⁹ This passage and many others speak of the ‘Messiah’ – a great king in the line of David (and Jesse, David’s father). The prophecies say that the Messiah will bring salvation, righteousness, justice, peace, and blessing to the earth. ‘Messiah’ means ‘anointed one.’ The Greek word is *Christos*, thus ‘Christ.’ The Messiah will establish his kingdom in which everyone will know God and have his law written on their hearts (*Jeremiah 31:31-34*).

¹⁰ The ‘hopes’ of many people are earthly, and are supposedly achieved by human progress. The ‘hopes’ of religions vary, including Nirvana, Moksha, Paradise, etc. But none compare to the Biblical (Christian) hope, which is the greatest hope – a full knowledge of the loving Creator enjoyed in his perfect kingdom. This hope is based on God’s revelation – in the Bible, in history, and ultimately in Jesus Christ; which have proven God’s faithfulness to his promises.

¹¹ We might expect Jesus’ birth to be in the year 1 AD (anno Domini – ‘in the year of the Lord’). However, the calendar established by Dionysius in AD 525 was in error. Most estimates of Jesus’ birthdate are in the range of 6 to 4 BC.

¹² Our hope is unlike (dissimilar to) theirs because the Messiah *has come* (the first time)! However, it’s similar to theirs because we too are hoping and waiting for God’s kingdom in its fullness, which will happen when the Messiah comes again. As Christians, we can experience much of the blessings of the kingdom now, but the full realization is future.