

The Victory and Joy of Advent - Romans 8:1–4

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Introduction

Today marks the first Sunday of the Advent season. But, I wonder what comes to mind when you think of Advent. The word literally means arrival. So we refer to this time of year as the season of Advent because it's just before Christmas, which marks the first arrival of Christ. So in one sense Advent refers to the first coming, or first arrival of Jesus. But, we sing Advent hymns like O Come, O Come Emmanuel, because we, like Israel before Christ came, are longing for Christ to come again... Which He has promised to do. So, in that sense Advent refers to the second arrival of Christ still to come. Advent number one was Christmas Day, and Advent number two is the final Day when Jesus will return and fully and finally make all things new.

Now, with that said, I love Advent hymns like the one we just sang. However, I think some of them can give off the wrong vibe. Or maybe their mood isn't quite right. What I mean is, before the incarnation—before God the Son took on flesh and entered into this world as the perfect God-man come to live, die, and rise again to save sinners—things were getting pretty dark and desperate for God's people. The ongoing theme for Israel was exile. And by the time Jesus came on the scene Israel was under Roman rule, and they were not happy about it. Along with that the majority of Israel was utterly deceived, falling into self-righteous hypocrisy, as well as any number of other sins. On the one hand, they were longing for a military Messiah to come and deliver them from their enemies. On the other hand, they felt they had no personal need of a Messiah, showing that they and their sin were their worst enemy.

These ideas of persecution, exile, hardship, and desperation are what we typically hear in Advent hymns and the like. No doubt, the authors of such hymns were trying to convey the

painful longing that Israel felt as they waited for the arrival of their Messiah. But I take issue with that because we, as the New Israel, as God's Church, are not in the same position as they were. Though we are longing for the second coming of Christ, it is not a painful longing, but a joyful one. For Christ has already come and done a great work. And while there is still work to be done, in the light of what has already been done, the time between the first and second coming of Christ is to be marked by joy.

No doubt, there is much suffering and hardship in this world, and surely there will continue to be in one way or another until Christ returns. And because of these sufferings we groan, as Romans 8:23 says. But that verse also says that though we groan inwardly we wait eagerly for the final Day. Or as Galatians 5:5 puts it, "we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness." God's Word says again and again that the posture of His people is one of eagerly waiting for Christ and the consummation of all things. But it's an eagerness tied to hope. As Paul says in Philippians 1:21, it's an eager expectation and hope. And that's what biblical hope is: a sure and eager expectation.

Jesus' second Advent is our eager expectation and hope, but it's a sure and confident eager expectation and hope. Because of the perfect first Advent we have perfect confidence in the second Advent. Jesus' perfection in His first Advent changes everything as we long for His second Advent. Yes, we grieve, but more than that we rejoice. We are sorrowful yet always rejoicing because Christ has come, and we know He will come again. And even now, day by day, little by little, He is coming into our lives again and again, transforming us, and enabling us all the more to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. And that's what we're going to see in our passage today: that Advent is a time of joy and celebration because Christ has come and secured

victory, and He will come again in full and final victory. So with that in mind, look with me at Romans 8:1-4.

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In verse 1 Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” And the therefore is pointing us back to Romans 1-7, but especially chapter 7. Paul was just groaning over his flesh and his tendency to sin, noting that whenever he wants to do the right thing it always seems as though evil lies close at hand. And often that evil comes from within, from the passions of his own flesh. Which leads him to cry out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

I wonder, can you relate to that? Is there some sin that just keeps flaring up in your life? Perhaps for you it’s not so much temptation from within, but temptation from without. Perhaps the evil that lies close at hand for you when you’re seeking to do good is the evil of others. But whether the temptation comes from within or without, make no mistake we will all be tempted and tried. And we will all stumble and fall in one way or another from time to time. And for the Christian who loves Jesus and hates sin, there will be an instinct to cry out with Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

But, there is an answer to that cry. Paul answers that in Romans 7:25 with, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Who will deliver us from our trials and temptations? Who will deliver us from our wretchedness? Who will deliver us from our bodies of death? Answer: God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Him who is perfect. Through Him who came down from heaven and perfectly lived, died, and rose again to save all who would trust in Him by faith, because by faith we are united to Christ—all that He is and all that He’s done—and therefore we are saved. And this is what our passage says.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*.” If we are in Christ, if we are united to Christ, if we have been baptized into Christ and are looking to Him by faith, there is now... right now... no condemnation for us. Right now... Even though we still have wretched tendencies, and so much of what we think, feel, say, and do is marked by death instead of life... Even though so often evil lies close at hand in all we do, if we are genuinely in Christ, and united to Him by true faith, there is no condemnation for us, because justification has come in its place.

In verse 2 Paul unpacks this further, saying, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” So, there’s no condemnation for those who are united to Christ because the law of the Spirit of life has set us free in Christ. Now, that needs some explanation, but first notice how this helps us understand condemnation. If we are set free in Christ, then we are in bondage outside of Christ. Jesus said, “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). And that’s the same idea Paul lays out in Romans 8 when he talks about people being set on the flesh and hostile to God and slaves to fear, heading towards eternal death. So when he says condemnation in Romans 8:1 he has all of this in mind. Condemnation is slavery to sin, guilt for sin, and all that comes with those. But there’s no condemnation for those in Christ because we have been set free by the law of the Spirit of life.

Now, context is key here to understand what Paul means by law. In Romans 7:23 he speaks of a law warring against him, seeking to hold him captive to sin. And in that sense he’s not just speaking of a rule but of a power or force. It’s like the tuff guy Sheriff that tells the bad guy in the Western, “I am the Law.” Or, “You can’t run from the Law.” By that he means that the Law is a force to be reckoned with. It’s a power that wins. And that’s exactly what Paul is saying.

The law, or the power of the Spirit of life (that is the Holy Spirit) has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law, or the power, of sin and death. The law of the Spirit is a power that triumphs over the law of sin and death. There is victory here, by the Spirit... So, by the Spirit, the condemnation, the slavery to sin, the guilt for sin, and the all that comes with those have been removed from those who are in Christ. To have no condemnation is to no longer be condemned by or enslaved to sin. Sin no longer has ultimate power over you. And it makes sense that Paul would say this given that he has just spoken of his need for deliverance from his wretchedness. He says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" And here we see the answer in fuller form. The Spirit of life in and through Christ will deliver him. But that begs the question, how? How does this happen? And the answer is *Advent*.

In verse 3 Paul says, "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. *By sending his own Son* in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh..." *Now* Paul is using the term *law* in the typical way we would expect, referring to rules and regulations. However, specifically Paul has in mind the rules and regulations tied to God's Covenant with Adam. The Covenant Adam failed to keep.

As we looked at Wednesday night, Adam was created by God in God's image, placed in God's garden sanctuary, and blessed by God, and then in light of that gracious blessing called to be fruitful and multiply, to work and to keep the garden, and to have dominion. Essentially Adam was to be God's priest/king, who guarded what was good and holy, and cultivated and advanced that goodness and holiness out to the ends of the earth. In light of the gracious blessing he received he was called to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love his neighbor as his self... especially his wife. But he failed to do this.

Instead of living a life of obedient faith to God he sought to be God. Instead of guarding what was holy he let Satan creep into the garden and deceive his wife and lead him and this world into sin and death. And ever since Adam's failure, all of mankind has fallen in line with his failure. And ever since man has sought to be God or to somehow get to God by taking His good Law and twisting it as a way to get to heaven. But sinners who deserve eternal condemnation cannot earn or obey their way into heaven. And as we have already seen, by nature outside of Christ we are all slaves to sin, unable, and really unwilling to keep God's Law. At least to keep it rightly. But, the failure is not the Law's. The Law was never meant to be used this way.

The failure is on Adam and on us. It's our weak and wretched flesh that's the problem, not the Law. Therefore, "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh..." The solution for Adam's failure, the solution for our failure is *Advent*. God sends His own Son. Jesus comes in the flesh... that is, in the likeness of sinful flesh, but without sin. As Hebrews 4:15 says, Jesus is as we are, tempted and all, yet without sin. And this is crucial to how the Spirit of life sets us free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. He took on flesh, becoming truly man while staying truly God: 100% man and 100% God. And He did this for sin. That is, He did this because of sin. Notice He didn't come because of the flesh, but He came in the flesh because of sin. This tells us that the flesh isn't ultimately the problem. When Paul speaks of the weakness of the flesh he's speaking of the sinfulness of the flesh, meaning the issue is sin. When Paul cries out for deliverance from his wretched body of death, it's not really his body that he wants

deliverance from, but his sinfulness and its effects. Having a body isn't the problem, sin and a sinful nature is. But Jesus came to change this.

Jesus comes in the flesh to be what the flesh is to be. Jesus comes to succeed where Adam failed. As we sing this time of year in Hark the Herald Angels Sing, "Second Adam from above, reinstate us in Thy love." That's Jesus... That's who He is and what He does. He lives the life Adam failed to live, and He lives the life we've failed to live. He perfectly keeps the Covenant Adam broke. And He perfectly keeps the Law we've all failed to keep. He perfectly loved God and perfectly loved His neighbor, especially His wife. Indeed, He loved us and gave Himself for us... Us... His bride the church. And He did this in the flesh.

He condemned sin in the flesh. He lived perfectly in the flesh the way that we are all called to live. A life of obedient faith, a perfect life in line with God's Law and for God's glory. And then He condemned sin in the flesh by taking the punishment that all of His people deserve for their sin. "For our sake He (God) made Him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus condemned sin in the flesh by being condemned Himself. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ because Christ took that condemnation upon Himself.

Jesus was mocked, ridiculed, beaten, spit upon, and condemned to die in our place for our sin. He suffered the wrath of sinful man in horrific ways, and then was nailed to our cross where the true horror happened. It was there on the cross that He not only suffered the wrath of sinful man, but also the wrath of God due sinful man. Isaiah 53 lays it all out far better than I ever could.

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he

has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted . . . [indeed He was] stricken for the transgression of [God's] people . . . Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief" (Isaiah 53:3-10).

On the cross God unleashed His wrath onto Christ. Jesus suffered in our place for our sin. He took our condemnation upon Himself and drank down the cup of God's wrath to the dregs. And then cried out, "It is finished!" And then He gave Himself over completely, dying in our place. But, because He is the perfect God-man, He did not stay dead. On the third day He rose from the grave showing that He did indeed condemn sin in the flesh by having victory over it in every way: resisting it in life, paying for it in His suffering and death, and providing redemption and freedom from it for all who will trust in Him.

Now, remember, this is God who has done this. God, in Christ, has done what we could not do. But, this infinitely glorious, good, and beautiful God did this in the flesh. As C. S. Lewis put it, "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God." But again, this tells us something about the flesh. The flesh itself, this body as Paul called it, is not the issue. Our wretchedness, our sinfulness is the issue. But Jesus took care of that issue by condemning it in His flesh.

I think we tend to think about many earthly and physical things, even our own flesh and blood, as sinful and wrong; but that is not the issue. The *sinful passions* of the flesh are the issue. Jesus could take on flesh without being a condemned sinner Himself because He had no sin.

Sinful passions weren't an issue for Him the way they are for us. And in light of that I want to point out a couple of things.

Though we are indeed longing for the second Advent of Christ, Advent is not merely a time of grief and sorrow. We are not meant to spend time simply wishing we could escape this flesh and this world. That's not what Paul means when he cries out for deliverance from his body of death. He wants deliverance from sin and its effects, from the sinful passions of the flesh, not merely from the flesh itself. Indeed, we will spend eternity in physical glorified bodies on a redeemed earth.

The things of earth, including our physical bodies, are good gifts meant to be stewarded for God's glory. Just as Adam was a priest/king, called to be fruitful and multiply, to work and to keep the garden, and to have dominion... To guard what was good and holy, and cultivate and advance that goodness and holiness out to the ends of the earth, so too are we. We can't in our sin... But, that's the point here. The Christian is not in sin, but in Christ. And in Christ we can do these things. Our mission isn't merely spiritual, but it's also physical. Everything we are, everything we have, and everything we do is to be leveraged for God's glory.

We aren't to reject God's good gifts, as though whatever is physical and earthly is bad, but we are to steward them and enjoy them, the way God designed them to be enjoyed according to His Word, for His glory. So, though we are indeed in a posture of longing and waiting for the return of Christ, because Christ has already come we long and we wait with joy, living in this world and enjoying God's good gifts to God's glory. So, don't be one of those Christians that are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. Now, by all means be heavenly minded. Look to the God of heaven who came down and lived in this world rightly, but then follow His example.

And that brings me to my other point. Just as some of you are tempted to think anything fleshly and earthly is bad, and just long for escape and deliverance, some of you don't understand how bad your flesh is, and see no need for deliverance. If we are outside of Christ we are in sin. As Jeremiah says, we are by nature stubborn and rebellious people who follow our own hearts. And, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). And even though in Christ we are given new hearts, in a very real way the passions of the flesh still rage within us. There is still a lingering desire to follow the sinful desires of our hearts instead of Christ; so we must check that, repent, and follow Jesus. Because of the lingering effects of sin we must check our feelings and emotions by God's Word. Our feelings and emotions cannot be trusted. We are not the LORD, Christ is, so we must take every thought captive for Him.

For years now the world has been preaching a false gospel, telling us to be true to ourselves and to follow our hearts. But that leads to condemnation. We are to follow Christ, not ourselves, and not this world, because only in Christ is there no condemnation. The world and our hearts tell us if it feels good do it. But, God alone is truly good, and He alone decides what is truly good for us. The flesh wants what it wants, but there is a way that seems right to man and its end is death.

The other approach the world and we ourselves take is to say that if we feel wronged or hurt then we are justified in whatever actions we take from there. We can justify our actions because of how we feel, or because of how the actions of others made us feel. But, that is not what God's Word says. God's Word tells us what is right. And God's Word tells us what justice is. Justice is defined by God's Law, and God's Law is the standard we are to follow come what may. It doesn't matter how we feel, it matters if it's right. Our feelings don't decide what is true

and right and good, God does. So, if you are not a Christian and this is how you've been living, repent and believe in the gospel. Trust in Jesus and be saved. And if you're a Christian who has been living this way, confess your sin to the Lord, repent, trust in Christ, and submit yourself in every way to King Jesus. Submit to His Law, don't make your own.

Now, if you're following me you may be thinking, but Nick, you said Christ kept God's Law for us. And He was condemned for our failure to keep God's Law, so what's with all of this talk about us keeping God's Law? Does it really matter how I live if Christ has already lived and died for me? If grace abounds can't I sin all the more? May it never be.

Look at the last verse in our passage. After telling us that Christ condemned sin in His flesh, verse 4 says He did this, "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." So He didn't simply fulfill the Law for us, though He did... But He fulfilled the Law for us in life, and condemned sin in His flesh in death by dying on our cross, hanging on our tree, taking the curse of the Law due us upon Himself, and then rising from the grave in power and newness of life, so that all who look to Him would live in newness of life. Through His victory over sin and death He secured victory for us, so that the power of sin would be broken and the righteous requirement of the Law would not only be fulfilled for us, but also in us.

The righteous requirement of the law is God's standard of holiness. He who called us is holy, therefore we are to be holy in all our conduct (1 Peter 1:15). We are to bring every area of our lives into joyful submission to the Lordship of Christ, which means obeying all that He has commanded us... obeying the righteous requirement of the Law. And the righteous requirement is not simply outward obedience, but obedience from the heart. After all, the Law commands us to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor

as ourself. Adam was called to do this, but he failed. And so have we. But where we failed Christ succeeded. But now that Christ has succeeded, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of life, the Holy Spirit Himself has caused us to be born again, and given us new hearts, and enables us to live new lives where we can, by God's grace, live a life of joyful, obedient faith.

You see, our whole passage is an answer to Paul's cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" And remember, what he's crying out for primarily is deliverance from the sinful passions of his flesh. And what he's telling us here is that there is indeed a way to be delivered from the sinful passions of our flesh, in this life, in this body, on this earth, here and now. Not completely. We will not be totally free from sin until the second Advent of Christ, but in Christ now, because of His first Advent and the victory that flowed from it, we are free from the bondage of sin. By God's grace we are no longer slaves to sin, but slaves to Christ.

Jesus came not only to save us from the penalty of sin, but to save us from the power of sin. And when He comes again He will fully and finally save us from the very presence of sin and all of its effects. And so Paul is here telling us that if we want to walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit... if we want to live in line with God's righteous requirement, then we must look to Christ. We must look to His first Advent, and all that He is, and all that He accomplished. And then we must remember *who we are* in Christ.

We have been baptized into Christ because God has laid claim to our lives. We are not our own, for we have been bought with a price. The greatest price... The Son of God Himself. He loved us and gave Himself for us, so that there would now be no condemnation for us. And in view of that reality we are to *live up to* our baptism. Or, we could say, we are to *live out* who we

are in Christ. We are to remember who Christ is. We are to remember what He did. And we are to remember who we are in Christ, and then live that out.

You see church, Christ came once on Christmas Day, and He will come again on the final Day. In His first Advent He came to save us from the penalty of sin. And in His final Advent He will come to save us from the very presence of sin. But, in between those two Advents He comes into our lives in and through the Spirit to save us again and again from the power of sin, to enable us to walk, to live for His glory and to enjoy Him and His creation rightly. Indeed, as Jesus said in John 10:10, He came that we may have life and have it abundantly, that is true life to the full.

True life is not found by following our hearts, or by letting our feelings or emotions lead us. It's not found by listening to the world. True life is found in Christ and by following Him. And we follow Him by walking according to the Spirit. And even though the Spirit renews our hearts, that still doesn't mean we follow our hearts. We follow the Spirit by following the Spirit written Word of God. And by God's grace, through the power of the Spirit we can do this.

Conclusion

The Advent season is a time of waiting and longing for Christmas, just as the season we are in, the Christian life as it is here and now, is a time of longing and waiting for the return of Christ. But, in the here and now, in Christ, we rejoice and be glad, and joyfully submit ourselves to the Lordship of Christ in every area of life. We, like Adam, are called, in light of God's gracious blessing, to be fruitful and multiply, to have dominion, to guard what is good and holy, and cultivate and advance that goodness and holiness out to the ends of the earth. Christ fulfilled the Law for us, and by the Spirit He fulfills the Law in us, leading us to love God with all our heart,

soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself... To uphold the righteous requirement of the Law.

This reality is directly linked to Advent. Jesus comes to make His blessings flow as far as the curse is found. And though the fullness of that won't come until Jesus returns, He's doing that in and through us even now. He doesn't just save us from the punishment of sin, He saves us from the very power of sin. He enables us to fight sin and pursue holiness, and live in line with His righteousness requirement, leading us to truly love God and love people, and to advance the blessings of His Lordship to the ends of the earth. So, this Advent season, as you long for the second Advent of Christ, and the full removal of sin and its effects, remember the reality of the first Advent of Christ and its effects in your life and this world now... And be moved to joy.

We are sorrowful yet always rejoicing because Christ has come, and we know He will come again. And even now, day by day, little by little, He is coming into our lives again and again, transforming us, giving us victory over sin, and enabling us all the more to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. Therefore, Advent is a time of joy and celebration because Christ has come and secured victory, and He will come again in full and final victory. And until that Day, He gives us the victory, so that we can prove the glories of His righteousness and the wonder of His love. So may we give ourselves to doing just that, with great joy. And may everything we do this Advent season, and thereafter, be done in light of the victory of our Savior and Lord, King Jesus.