

Advent

Advent isn't in the Bible, but is it Scriptural?

In **Galatians 4:10-11**, Paul writes, “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! **I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.**” But many Christians **today** observe special days, months, seasons and years too, so what would Paul say to us?

Take Advent, for example. In many Christian churches, Advent is celebrated for a whole “special” month until Christmas Day. Christmas then continues for 12 more “special” days until Epiphany in January. And if you're Roman Catholic, there are several other special days to be observed in between too. In other words, Christians have come up with an entire season of “special days” at Christmas-time, each with its traditional customs, visual aids, prayers and songs. So, if Paul was living today, would HE go along with all this stuff too?

Well, in context in Galatians 4, what Paul was afraid of was the Galatians reverting back to being “enslaved to so-called gods that had **nothing of the divine about them,**” **verse 9** (The Message). The Galatians had started off so well, breaking free of “**all the traditions, taboos and superstitions**” forced on them by pagan and Jewish cultures alike, **but under pressure** (Galatians 2:12-13) they were being intimidated back into observing them again. Why? Because that's what people do under pressure from pushy people who are very good at scaring you into believing you're wrong.

And in that context, I could see Paul being very concerned about Christians today getting all wrapped up in the secular paraphernalia of Christmas, because they've been made to think they're wrong by relatives and the general culture for not joining in with the Christmas spirit. The problem with that, though, as Paul discovered with the Galatians, is that intimidation from those who have “**nothing of the divine about them**” can easily take a Christian's eyes off Christ.

Which is exactly what Christmas has done today. It has successfully taken people's attention off Christ, and now it pressures Christians to make it a “family time” instead, and to focus on Santa Claus for the sake of the children. Our culture doesn't want Christians talking about Christ at Christmas, because Christmas, to them, isn't about Christ anymore, it's about pretty lights and “the spirit of giving” and getting one's Christmas shopping done, and bloating oneself to a standstill. But Christians have always been under pressure from the culture to go along with its empty, meaningless rituals and to make faith in Christ an embarrassment - so what's been our response?

When Paul, Barnabas and Titus were under pressure to get Gentile Christians to bend to Jewish customs (like circumcision), **Paul's** response was - **"We did not give in to them for one moment."** And why was that? **"So that the TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL might remain in you," Galatians 2:5.** They didn't bow to pressure for one moment, because they didn't want the truth of the gospel compromised or diluted in the minds of new Christians. That's what drove them to not give in: **it was defending and preserving the gospel for the sake of others.**

And that's important because the reality for all Christians in any age is the constant pressure of **"false brothers infiltrating our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves," verse 4.** So it's not just the culture putting pressure on us, it's people who call themselves Christians too - and they're even worse because they **"pervert the gospel of Christ"** with their so-called "Christian" ideas, **Galatians 1:7.** And in the church in Galatia they were very convincing and persuasive, but their intent was to get approval from people (verse 10) so people followed them, not Christ (4:17).

And what did they use to convince people to follow them? Fear. They scared Christians into thinking they were wrong, so they could prescribe their own Christian-sounding ideas for how to worship God better and make themselves more spiritual. But it resulted in the Galatians being **"alienated from Christ,"** and **"falling away from grace," Galatians 5:4.** It got their minds off the central message of the gospel, which was God's grace demonstrated so totally and completely in Christ.

Paul's answer to the intimidators was simple: **"I do not set aside the grace of God," Galatians 2:21.** And he stuck to that. In all his writings there is never a hint that salvation involves anything but God's grace. Never does he mention a law or "special day" that we must keep to make our salvation more secure. To Paul, salvation was entirely a work of God's grace, seen in all its glory in **"Jesus Christ clearly portrayed as crucified," Galatians 3:1.** And he stated that clearly right at the beginning of Galatians, when he greets the church with, **"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father," Galatians 1:3-4.**

And Paul never veered from that, **"for if righteousness"** (or being right with, or pleasing to, God) **"could be gained through the law"** (or through anything **we** do, like keeping special days) then **"Christ died for nothing," Galatians 2:21.** There'd be no point in Christ dying to make us righteous if we could make it happen ourselves.

But under pressure from **"false brothers"** how quickly the Galatians were **"deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel," Galatians 1:6.** It shocked Paul just how easily they set aside the grace of God for **"attaining your goal by human effort," Galatians 3:3.**

The pressure never let up on Christians after that, either. So, over the next 150 years or so the church created annual reminders that kept “the grace of Christ” firmly at the front and centre of people’s minds. Since God had saved them **purely through the work of Christ**, the church took each work of Christ that had saved them and made a celebratory occasion out of it: His **death**, for instance, was celebrated by Communion; his **resurrection** was celebrated by meeting every week on the day of his resurrection, and his **sending of the Spirit** was celebrated on Pentecost, the day the Spirit came.

By the 200s, Origen of Alexandria wrote: “We ourselves are accustomed to observe certain days. For example, there is the Lord’s Day, the Preparation, Easter, and Pentecost.... The majority of those who are accounted believers....require some sensible memorials **to prevent spiritual things from passing completely away from their minds**. For they are either unable or unwilling to keep every day in this manner.”

That last statement is not an insult; it’s simply a reality. The world and its pressures crowd our minds with all kinds of wrong and empty thoughts because “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour,” **1 Peter 5:8**. And the most likely candidates for being devoured by lions, or the devil, are the weak. So, what weakens Christians? It’s the exhausting effort and anxiety of trying to save ourselves by **our** efforts. It makes us easy prey for the devil. So, “Resist him,” Peter cries out in **verse 9**. How? By “standing firm in the faith.” It’s by keeping in mind who and what we trust in for our salvation. It’s not our efforts. It’s not the Law. It’s not special days, months, seasons and years. It’s the grace of God, and never, ever forgetting that.

That’s why Peter wrote in **2 Peter 1:12-13**, “I will **always remind you** of these things, **EVEN THOUGH you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have**. I think it is right **to refresh your memory**,” and in **verse 15**, “I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will **always be able to remember** these things.”

It was at this point of writing, with Peter’s words ringing in my ears, that I stopped to listen to a Christian show on TV, in which a prominent Christian speaker spoke of the humbling realization he’d come to, that two hours after hearing one of his sermons most of his Christian audience wouldn’t remember even the subject of the sermon, let alone all the points he made. But that’s the way we are, and Peter obviously knew that too, because “even though” his audience knew the gospel backwards, he also knew that the pressures of life, false teaching and intimidating people could easily elbow out the simplicity and beauty of God’s grace. So it was good to keep their memories fresh on the basics - so that “you will **ALWAYS be able to remember these things**.”

Peter made “every effort,” therefore, to keep that gospel of grace firmly fixed in people’s heads, and so did the church in the following centuries, resulting in a whole set of reminders by the 4th century to help keep “**God’s grace in ALL its truth**” (Colossians 1:6) at the front and centre of their minds and message.

And among those reminders of God's immense grace, demonstrated in all its truth in Jesus, was **Advent**. The name came from the Latin "adventus" meaning "arrival" or "coming," as a reminder to Christians of the great promise in the Old Testament of the coming of the Messiah to rule all nations, establish justice, prevail over every evil, and bring an end forever to everything that resists God and works against him.

And who was this Messiah whom God would send in glory and power to destroy the work of the devil and bring peace between God and humans, and peace between all peoples? It was Immanuel, "God with us," God in a human body called "Jesus," who died on a cross but was lifted up from death to ascend back to his Father in triumph and victory over all powers and authorities (Colossians 2:15), so that he could draw all men to himself and into the Father's love with him (John 17:26).

And just as Israel held up the Messiah as their great hope, so now does the church, because what hope is there otherwise? If Jesus isn't coming in power, then our planet is stuck in its powerlessness to correct its ills. Millions of people will continue to die prematurely and horribly for the same, needless reasons. But Advent reminds us that because of God's immense love for us, he already created the solution to all our ills in Jesus Christ - **before** he even created us too (Ephesians 1:4-9)

That's the truth of the gospel, that because of God's grace in the work of Jesus Christ, all our problems are going to be solved and everything is going to be fine. It's hard to believe that and promote it, though, when it looks like most people are going to hell, that God is only involved in natural disasters, or "Acts of God," and he cares little about human suffering. In such a negative world pushed by the media it's hard not being anxious, morose, and reverting back to old ways of coping, just as the Galatians went back to their old familiar customs when they were under negative pressure in their day.

We can feel overwhelmed, even as Christians, by a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. So, like Peter, the church came up with ways to "always remind us" and "to refresh our memory" so that we'll "always be able to remember" the truth of the gospel. It will then "remain in us" as a **constant source of hope**, enabling us, like Paul, to "not give in to them for one moment" - "them" being whatever or whoever is pressuring us to compromise or dilute the gospel. And that's probably why Advent evolved so soon, because up to half way through the 4th century there **wasn't** any constant reminder of the hope the gospel gave of Jesus Christ coming back one day to end whatever nonsense and suffering they were going through.

The church already had a reminder of Christ's **first** coming as God in the flesh - in the celebration of Communion. It also had a reminder of Christ's **second** coming in the Spirit - in the celebration of Pentecost. But there was no reminder or celebration of Christ's **third** coming and what ALL Christ's work is for, the ULTIMATE hope of the reconciliation of all humanity with God, and the whole creation healed.

But isn't that "the hope that is stored up for you in heaven," **Colossians 1:5**, the hope "you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel," that God's "grace and peace," **verse 2**, will one day be extended to everyone "through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself ALL THINGS," **verse 20**?

That IS our hope, right? Yet there are Christians who don't have that hope. They believe, instead, that most people are going to spend eternity in hell. Why? Because, they say, God isn't going to save anyone who doesn't want to be saved, and since most people don't want to be saved, then most people are going to hell. Only those who choose to accept salvation in Christ, or those who give their hearts to Christ, or those who make a decision for Christ, or those who repent and do the Sinner's Prayer - or those whom God has elected - will be saved. The rest, they say, go to hell.

But how many Christians who believe that also celebrate Advent? If they do it's embarrassing, because Advent was created by the early church as a reminder of what **the end result of all Christ's work is**, as stated clearly in **1 Timothy 2:3-4**, that "God our Saviour wants ALL men to be saved." The word "wants" in the Greek means "Intends," meaning God **intends everyone to be saved**. It also means "to be resolved or determined." So God is "**determined** that all men be saved." He is absolutely "**resolved**" to bringing it about. And when God resolves and determines to do something, it will be done, **Ephesians 1:11**, for God "**works out everything in conformity to his will.**" And what is his will? "**To bring ALL THINGS in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ,**" **verse 10**. To Paul, that was the truth of the gospel.

But what about the people who are determined to resist God? Does their determination overrule and cancel out God's determination to save them? If that was the case, though, would it not also cancel out Paul's statement in **Romans 5:20**, that "**where sin increased, grace increased all the more**"? God's grace is always greater than our sin. It always goes one step further. Take the worst possible, most stupid, irrational sin we could ever commit, like using our free will to keep on resisting God right to the day of our death. What awaits us after we die? Grace, because grace has already outrun our sin and is sitting there at the finishing line waiting for us.

And Advent reminds us of that, that our Saviour really is our Saviour. He's in the business of saving people, not losing them, because his grace overrules our sin. That's why Paul said, "**I do not set aside God's grace,**" because therein lies our hope and the hope of all humanity, that one day, when Christ returns, the reconciliation of "**ALL things, whether things on earth or things in heaven**" will kick in for everyone and everything in God's good creation.

No wonder Christians chose to start their year of annual reminders with the end of the story first, because at the heart and core of the gospel is hope, that IN THE END God's grace will prevail, and "**in Christ ALL shall be made alive,**" **1 Corinthians 15:22**.

We are so fortunate as Christians that we understand life isn't just a haphazard existence. We know it has purpose and direction, and it's all going exactly where God wants it to go. We know what God has in mind for the entire universe. We know our planet isn't going to self-destruct, and nor are we, because we know God purposed in Christ before our world even began to provide us with redemption and forgiveness "in accordance with **the riches of God's grace,**" **Ephesians 1:7.**

That's how Paul understood it, for "just as sin reigned in death, so also **GRACE MIGHT REIGN** through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord," **Romans 5:21.** Paul knew the end of the story too. He knew that sin would have its reign bringing "death to **ALL MEN,**" **verse 12,** but he also knew, **verse 18,** that "just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, **SO ALSO** the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings **LIFE** for **ALL MEN.**"

Just as all died under sin's reign, all come alive in grace's reign: "All" means ALL in both cases. If all died, then all come alive too, "For as in Adam **ALL** die, **SO** in Christ **ALL** will be made alive," **1 Corinthians 15:22.** But, some say, all doesn't necessarily mean everyone. Really? Then does "all" not mean all in the phrase 'in Adam ALL die' too? Did some not die? No, sin killed everyone. "**SO ALSO**" - just as sin killed EVERYONE - does the grace of Christ "bring eternal life" (Romans 5:21) "for **ALL men**" (verse 18), meaning EVERYONE, too.

So WE may "set aside God's grace" as not being sufficient for everyone, but God certainly doesn't, and nor does Paul. But Christians have been intimidated for years into believing that only those who accept Jesus, repent and begin a life of good deeds and obedience will be saved. Well, that's great for those who've done all that, but what about those who've been turned off God because of bad experiences with Christians, or a wrong view of God preached to them by a Christian church, or a tragic event in their family they couldn't make sense of? Does grace not cover them too?

Well, Advent reminds us that yes, grace DOES cover them too, because we're not under the reign of sin anymore, we're under the reign of grace. And under the reign of grace, sin has lost its power. It's a deposed dictator, and grace now rules what happens to every human life.

And Advent exists simply to remind us of that. It was never meant to be a "special season" that must be kept, but in today's confused world, with so many conflicting versions of the gospel and the future of sinners, Advent can be just as much help today as it was in the early church for grasping, preserving and defending the truth of the gospel of God's amazing grace.

Advent may not be in the Bible, then, but in its original meaning and intent it is very much Scriptural.