

## Advent: A New Hope

November 28, 2021

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away... who can tell me what movie that's from? Star Wars. Now most of you who know me know that I am a huge Star Wars fan, but it might surprise you to know that wasn't always the case. In-fact, when I was a kid and even into my young teens, I thought Star Wars was lame and had less than zero interest in it. So, when they re-released the original trilogy in 1997, I couldn't have cared less. However, I had a friend who was more than excited for the both of us, and insisted that we go see a New Hope. Preparing myself to be bored out of my mind, I reluctantly went along. Two and half hours later, I walked out of that theatre a changed man. My eyes were open, and I was hooked. I immediately immersed myself in the plethora of Star Wars books, movies, action figures, and toys (some of which I still have today). I even had my very own lightsaber. I was one happy nerdy kid. This love for Star Wars has endured over the years, though admittedly it took a bit of a hit after seeing the latest 3 movies – but we won't get into that.

As many of you know, Star Wars is set in a galaxy that is ruled by the tyrannical, oppressive, and evil Galactic Empire. In the movie A New Hope, one of the main characters, Obi Wan, describes this period as "the dark times." People lived in fear, despair, and in desperate need of hope. Now as the movie progresses, it is surprising to discover who serves as the embodiment of this hope. It's not Obi Wan, or a well-trained Jedi knight (who were once the galaxy's guardians of peace and justice), or even a skilled member of the Rebel Alliance (who are the good guys in the film)... Instead, it's a young, unassuming farm boy named Luke Skywalker from a scummy backwater planet. A very unlikely hero. Little does Luke know that he carries with him the hope of the entire galaxy – a hope that Darth Vader (The enforcer of the Empire) could somehow be defeated, that freedom and democracy would return, and for a better way of life. No one, however, would have ever expected this lowly kid bring down the Empire, and yet (spoiler alert) that's just what he ends up doing.

Now you are probably wondering what this has to do with Advent, and specifically this week's theme of hope. Well, like in Star Wars, the Israelites were living in their own dark times in years leading up to the birth of Christ.

Despite being the holy nation of God, the Israelites were not living together as a gathered people of God. At the time of the first century in-fact, there were as many as 3x as many Jews living outside of Palestine as in it, with their primary language being Greek, not the traditional Hebrew.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this dispersion, the Israelites also had to contend with a significant amount of different cultural and religious influences, including the temple to Caesar and other shrines to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bird and N.T Wright, *The New Testament In It's World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), Olive Tree Digital Access.

pagan gods. This posed a powerful threat to the Jews, as they faced the increasing pressure to assimilate, which would result in a loss of their self-understanding and identity.<sup>2</sup>

Then of course there was the arrival of the fierce and powerful Roman Empire. In Judea, Rome appointed their own leaders to strongly enforce Roman rule and protect its interests. Two notable rulers include King Herod, who the Roman senate deemed to be “The King of the Jews,” and Pontius Pilate, who was known for his insolence and brutality. Life under Roman rule for those not part of the elite classes was often quite severe, including lack of employment, food supply issues, disease, and violence to name a few.<sup>3</sup>

Not only did the God’s people face these physical hardships, they faced spiritual ones as well. At that point, God had not spoken to His people in 400 years. The last thing he said to them can be found in Malachi 4, where he promises a coming day of justice, which will be preceded by an Elijah-type figure. After that, there was silence. For nearly 10 generations, there were no revelations, no prophets, no communication. Nothing. Just a promise that God would one day trample evil and bring restoration for the righteous. So the Jews waited for that day to come.

Against this backdrop hope came in an unexpected way, much like it did with Luke in Star Wars.

*Luke 1:26-37; 2:1-7*

*26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”*

*29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

*34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

*35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail.”*

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*2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

Jesus was born into very unusual circumstances. His mother Mary was unwed when she was found to be with child, which was not just scandalous but could have resulted in Mary being divorced, or even put to death. Jesus spent his first night sleeping in a feeding trough as no lodging was available. And as a toddler, Jesus had to flee for his life to Egypt to escape Herod's decree to kill the baby boys. Hardly what you'd expect for birth of the Son of the Most High God.

Jesus then grew up in Nazareth (which was not a well thought of place) and as an adult, likely worked as a carpenter before his public ministry. To most, Jesus would have been pretty ordinary guy— so much so that his own brothers even seemed to struggle with His divine claims (John 7:5).

In addition to appearing like an average guy, Jesus did not seem to meet people's specific expectations for Messiah. For example, Jesus wasn't a powerful military leader and didn't speak of overthrowing the hated Romans or subverting their rule. Instead, Jesus preached a message of peace, instructing His followers to pray for those who persecuted them. He also went as far as to not only heal a Roman Centurion's servant, but then held the up the Centurion as having a more remarkable faith than Jesus had even found amongst God's own people (Luke 7:1-10).

Jesus also didn't associate with the religious elite and was often accused of breaking their laws. Instead, Jesus spent His time with outcasts, rejects, tax collectors, and other unwanted people of society. He cast out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Jesus didn't judge and condemn the sinners He encountered, but instead spoke and acted with love, compassion, and grace as He invited them to a better way of life.

Despite not meeting these expectations, Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. God's anointed one had arrived to gather the people of God and establish God's reign on earth, as it is in heaven. He gave people a glimpse of what life in the kingdom was like: people were accepted, cared for, loved, shown mercy, healed, and had their sins forgiven. Hope had come in a very unexpected way, and things would never be the same.

Now, let's take a moment to talk about this word "hope." Often when we use hope, we are basically speaking of wishful thinking: I hope it doesn't snow this weekend; I hope Costco isn't busy. I hope the Flames beat the Oilers (and just to be clear, I am using that as an example – as I am most definitely not a flames fan – but I *hope* you don't hold that against me).

At this time of year we also see "hope" on Christmas cards, in tv commercials, and printed on various gifts. But what does the word really mean as it pertains to Jesus and advent?

In the Biblical sense, hope primarily has stronger connotations than merely wishing for a certain outcome, and implies a trust similar to faith.<sup>4</sup> It is a confidence that based on the faithful character and actions of God in the past, we can have an assurance that He will remain true to His word and promises.

Biblical hope also often has an element of waiting.<sup>5</sup> Abraham had the hope that God would give him a son but had to wait 25 years. The Israelites had the hope that God would give them a land of their own, but it was 40 years before they received this Promised Land. They also had the hope that one day Messiah would come, and that took generations. Today we live in the hope that Jesus is coming back, and we continue to wait. Hope, then, is an “expectation” or “anticipation” of something that is certain, but has not yet come to pass<sup>6</sup> (cf. Romans 8:20–25)

This is the type of hope Jesus offered people when he walked the earth. He encountered people who longed for freedom, healing, deliverance, restoration, peace, forgiveness – and Jesus freely provided all of those things. And even though many people remained in their current situations, they were left with the hope and the assurance that something better was coming – something worth waiting for. They had experienced the life-giving presence of the Messiah and had a solid basis for the hope they clung to, a hope that would not disappoint.

Fast-forward to today. Like when Jesus first came, we too are living in dark times. Fear, uncertainty, poverty, disease, racism, war, abuse, and suffering all abound. We need hope. The world needs hope. And Jesus continues to be that hope.

### We Need Hope

In our lives as Christians, we know that through Christ’s atoning work, sin and death have been defeated. We also know that God is at work redeeming and reconciling humanity and creation, and that one day all pain, suffering, and death will be completely abolished. In keeping with the full understanding of Biblical hope, we patiently wait for God’s kingdom to come in its fullness.

However, living in this “in-between” time is not always easy – and in-fact can be downright difficult. We continue to experience pain, suffering, and loss. Strained relationships, financial issues, health concerns, and more. We struggle with the amount of injustice around us. We feel powerless to tackle so much of what’s wrong in this world. We yearn for something better.

But amidst our trials and hardships, God’s Word provides us with the hope we need. He promises:<sup>7</sup>

- To guide us (Psalm 48:14)
- To love us no matter what (Isaiah 54:10)
- To be faithful to us (2 Timothy 2:13)
- To give us wisdom (James 1:5)
- To give us peace (John 14:27)

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<sup>4</sup> Moises Silva, *The Essential Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Olive Tree Digital Access.

<sup>5</sup> Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Tremper Longman III Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), Olive Tree Digital Access.

<sup>6</sup> Adams, J. E. (2020). Hope. In *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (p. 101). Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies.

<sup>7</sup> “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas – Week 1” Orange Senior High Curriculum, Winter 2021.

- That we belong to Him as our heavenly Father (Romans 8:15)

There are two passages in particular I want to share with you that have been especially meaningful to me as I hope in the Lord:

John 16:33

*“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

Matt 28:20b

*“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

These are two of my favourite Bible verses and they serve as a reminder that no matter what comes our way, no matter what challenges we face, and no matter how difficult things get – we will never face them alone. We also have the assurance that nothing in this world can thwart God’s plans – and that every challenge and every obstacle has already been overcome.

### The World Needs Hope

We are also surrounded by others who are in need of hope – and just like with Jesus’ first advent, hope for the world comes in an unexpected way. Out of all the possible ways God could accomplish His will, touch the lives of others, and proclaim the Gospel message...He chooses to work through us, the church. Though redeemed, we are still finite and broken people who are prone to sin. We don’t always get things right. We sometimes focus on the wrong things. We fail to love others well. We can be arrogant and judgmental. We lack unity at times. Yet, despite all of this, God has chosen and called us to be His Body – His hands and feet – to help advance His kingdom, to restore and reconcile all things to Him, and bring hope to those in need.

So, we are not only recipients of hope, but we are bringers of hope as well. In his book “A Light to the Nations,” Michael Goheen describes the people of God as a “so that” people,<sup>8</sup> which is something that has stuck with me. What Goheen means is that as God’s people, we receive things like salvation and God’s blessing *so that* we may share it with others. I would include the hope we have been discussing in this as well. There is therefore a missional aspect to the hope we experience in Christ, as we participate with Christ in sharing that hope with all people.

As we seek to be bringers of hope, here are a few ideas you could try this week:

- Pray with someone
- Send an encouraging message/card/phone call
- Send a thoughtful gift
- Buy a homeless person a meal
- Perform an act of service
- Donate food and winter clothing items
- Volunteer (Soup Kitchen, Streets Alive)
- Take part in a seasonal ministry such as CBM’s Hopeful Gifts for Change or

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 31.

the Angel Tree program through  
Prison Fellowship Canada

There are so many opportunities around us, and often even small things can make a big impact.

As we wrap up, you may be entering this advent season with a heavy heart. You might be struggling and in desperate need of hope. I encourage you this week to spend some time immersing yourself in the many promises of God, to reflect on the many ways He has been faithful and provided in the past, to be honest with God about your struggles, and to seek out time with other believers who can lift you up and encourage you.

And for all of us as we head towards Christmas, let us remember that we have a precious gift to share with the world, far more valuable than anything that can be found in any store. So let's get out there and share it. Let's pray...

Dear Lord Jesus,

We thank you for this advent season, and for the opportunity to stop and reflect on your miraculous birth. You stepped into a world of darkness to bring light. You came alongside those who were suffering to bring comfort. And for those struggling with despair, you brought hope.

Lord, as we grapple with times of discouragement and despair in our own lives, we ask that you would fill us with hope by your Spirit. Regardless of our situations and circumstances, may we continue to trust in your goodness, faithfulness, and love.

We also ask that as we go forth this week that we would be bringers of hope to those around us. May you give us the wisdom to know which words to speak and actions to take that will lift others up, encourage them, and bless them. In your name and for your glory, amen.

**Benediction Romans 15:13:** May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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