

The Everlasting Light

DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

R. REED LESSING

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It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas everywhere you go! Is this true for you? If not, let me lend a helping hand!

Wives, don't get your husband a Christmas sweater—he already has seventeen of them. And those socks that can be heated with AA batteries? Not good. Husbands, you may be planning to give your wife an ironing board. Really not good! And for some reason, books on etiquette for your in-laws don't go over so well. Go figure!

One of God's gifts to us this Advent and Christmas is found in this series of daily devotions focusing on the last third of the book of Isaiah, chapters 56–66. These chapters point to the greatest gift—God's coming salvation through our Lord Christ Jesus.

Salvation abounds in Isaiah 56–66. Need some examples? God fights for us, wearing a helmet of salvation (59:17). He clothes us in the garments of salvation (61:10). The Lord is mighty to save because His arm brings salvation (63:1, 5). And divine salvation means our final address will be the new heavens and the new earth (65:17).

Why is salvation such a central message in the book of Isaiah? The Messiah who Isaiah foretold is revealed in the Gospel accounts. Christ is born in a manger, He suffers and dies as the atoning sacrifice for sin, and He is resurrected on the third day. And this same Christ most certainly is coming again—for us—soon and very soon!

SOON MY SALVATION
WILL COME.

—ISAIAH 56:1

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. (LSB 361:4) Amen.

THE LORD GOD, WHO
GATHERS THE OUTCASTS
OF ISRAEL, DECLARES,
“I WILL GATHER YET
OTHERS TO HIM BE-
SIDES THOSE ALREADY
GATHERED.”

—ISAIAH 56:8

Isaiah 56:8 is a fitting conclusion to the first seven verses of the chapter. The verse emphasizes God’s inclusion of outsiders—the forlorn, the rejected, the outcast—an idea developed in the previous verses.

This first section of Isaiah 56, then, consists of three promises: God will come to the aid of His people (vv. 1–2), God will come to the aid of all people (vv. 6–7), and God will have compassion for all people who feel outside His love—especially eunuchs and foreigners (vv. 3–5). God’s goal? Gather all people and bring them to the holy mountain, God’s house of prayer for all nations (v. 7).

Once gathered by the Gatherer, we’re empowered to go out and gather others, having been assured of Christ’s promise: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). We all know lost sheep that need to come home.

Through God’s appointed means of grace—the Gospel, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion—we say, “Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Revelation 22:17). Salvation in Jesus is free! Salvation in Jesus is for you! Salvation in Jesus is forever!

Lord Jesus, having been gathered by Your grace, send me this day to gather others into Your eternal embrace. Amen.

God asks, “Have you discovered the power of the future? Soon, my righteousness will be revealed. My gift of righteousness—that is, My declaration that you’re not guilty by grace, through faith—is right around the corner.” Our response? We live justly and do righteousness. Anticipating what God is about to do gives us the desire and the ability to live upright lives.

MY RIGHTEOUSNESS

[WILL BE] REVEALED.

—ISAIAH 56:1

John puts it this way: “Beloved, we are God’s children *now*, and what we will be has *not yet* appeared; but we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2–3; emphasis added).

The *now* of God’s gift of being “not guilty” in Jesus gives us hope for the *not yet* perfection of paradise. This stirs our hearts to live in love toward God and toward our neighbor—an idea at the center of Isaiah 56:1–8. God places the accent upon what He *will* do: “*Soon* My salvation *will* come, and My righteousness be revealed” (v. 1); “I *will* give them” (v. 5); “I *will* bring” (v. 7); “I *will* gather” (v. 8). We’re motivated to act righteously because God first promises His righteousness in Christ. Put another way, “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Lord Jesus, give me Your Holy Spirit so that I cast off the works of darkness (Romans 13:12), for the day of Your arrival is near. Amen.

LET NOT THE EUNUCH
SAY, "BEHOLD, I AM A
DRY TREE."

—ISAIAH 56:3

In verse 3, the eunuch believes he is a "dry tree." When he dies, he'll be forgotten forever. But God promises all eunuchs who believe in Him a memorial placed in a sanctuary.

Who does the eunuch remind you of? I think of the penitent thief on Good Friday (Luke 23:42–43). Both are hopeless. Both are promised a gift that ensures they will be eternally remembered.

What a Gospel! Repentant castaways will share in eternal joys! "The righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever" (Psalm 112:6). God chooses the weak over the strong (1 Corinthians 1:28), the barren woman over the one with children (Galatians 4:22–31), and the sinful and broken over those who think they're well (Matthew 9:9–13).

God invites us—even when we're given the cold shoulder, ostracized by others, and feeling like a dried-up, withered tree—to look upon the love of our Savior.

The eunuch's gift of a "monument and a name" will be "better than sons and daughters" (Isaiah 56:5). To grasp the power of this promise, we need to recall that for an Israelite, true blessedness was having many children; indeed, "blessed is the man who fills his quiver with [arrows]" (Psalm 127:5).

Connecting this to the New Testament, the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion in Acts corresponds to these promises of a monument and a name (8:26–40). This eunuch evidently had numerous spiritual children, with Ethiopia being a country inhabited by countless Christians for the past two millennia.

Thank You, Jesus, for giving me a place in Your forever paradise. Amen.

My home state of Colorado has some awesome mountains. The Maroon Bells. Pike's Peak. Longs Peak. The Collegiate Peaks—Mounts Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. And my favorite—the Mount of the Holy Cross.

THESE I WILL BRING
TO MY HOLY
MOUNTAIN.

—ISAIAH 56:7

There are also some awesome mountains in the Bible. Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark landed. The mountain where Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount. The Mount of Transfiguration. The Mount of Olives.

In today's reading, we learn that God's plan is to bring us to a holy mountain where He places His altar. Why an altar? God took away Gideon's doubts and despair at an altar. Gideon called it "the LORD Is Peace" (Judges 6:24). God took away Isaiah's uncleanness at an altar. After that, the prophet said, "Here I am! Send me" (Isaiah 6:8). No wonder that when Jerusalem's altar was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC, the first thing the Israelites did when they returned to Jerusalem was build an altar (Ezra 3:2).

These examples show why God's goal is to bring all people to another altar, a mountain called Calvary. But this was not your typical altar; Calvary was the Jerusalem garbage dump. Think about that. Jesus was sacrificed on the altar of the cross to take away sin, atone for transgression, and set us free in a garbage dump. At Calvary, Christ carried the sin of the world. He bore it all for you!

Thank You, Jesus, for Your holy mountain called Calvary—Your altar of sacrifice and great love. Amen.

HE WHO TAKES REF-
UGE IN ME SHALL
POSSESS THE LAND.

—ISAIAH 57:13

God wants us to run. Run from what? From the dark and deadly world of idolatry. The prophet vividly describes it in Isaiah 57:3–13. Where does God want us to run? To a sanctuary, a safe haven, to His ever-present refuge.

We all know how refuges work. Kids, to get away from your big sister, you run to a closet or a fort in your backyard. Men, to get away from, let's just say, a spirited discussion, you run to your garage or your workshop out back. Midwesterners, to get away from something called a polar vortex, you hightail it out of town every winter for a refuge called South Florida!

To keep idols from destroying us, Isaiah invites us to run to a refuge—Jesus Christ. He is God's final expression of refuge—a safe space, asylum, sanctuary, haven, and mighty fortress. Jesus provides more safety and comfort than any idol ever can. How so?

Christ delivers salvation through the baptismal waters, the eucharistic body and blood, and the preaching of the Gospel. We're heaven-bound, deeply loved children of the heavenly Father! And we shall possess the land—not the earthly land of Canaan but the new heavens and new earth so wonderfully described by the prophet in Isaiah 65:17–25. This is our promised land.

God, imprint on my heart Your promise of eternal refuge—my forever home in the new Jerusalem. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Who does this verse remind you of?
That's right—Mr. Advent himself,
John the Baptist!

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a *witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him*” (John 1:6–7; emphasis added).

John the Baptist's mission is “to bear witness about the light.” In fact, fourteen times in the Fourth Gospel the word *witness* is connected with John the Baptist. Fourteen times! Here is the clearest example of this witness: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

John's witness is so that through Christ, “all might believe.” This is the first reference to *believing* in John's Gospel. It will occur ninety-six more times. And this is the great goal of John's Gospel: “That by *believing* you may have life in His name” (John 20:31; emphasis added).

And yet, we turn away from Christ and instead believe in people. And in jobs. And in investments. And in money. And in vacations. And in stuff. Those things may be good; they may be grand. But they don't give life—not eternal, abundant, resurrection life. There is only one who gives that: Jesus.

This is John the Baptist's witness. This is our witness as well—to the world!

BUILD UP, BUILD
UP, PREPARE THE
WAY, REMOVE EVERY
OBSTRUCTION FROM MY
PEOPLE'S WAY.

—ISAIAH 57:14

*Jesus, empower me to be a witness so that more people believe in You.
Amen.*