

SUNDAY

DECEMBER
27

AT HOME WORSHIP GUIDE

RECEIVING HIS MERCY

One of the greatest teachers of patience for a child comes on Christmas morning. After weeks of parents scurrying past children with bags of treasures and the cry of, "Don't open that!" when another Amazon package comes to the front door, the anticipation on Christmas morning is almost too much to bear. For my siblings and I, we were allowed to enjoy our small gifts and treats stuffed in our stockings on Christmas morning, but we knew we had to wait for our parents to come out of their room before we could tear the wrapping paper concealing our new trinkets and toys. Many years were spent on little brother's bed loudly sharing what we found in our stockings, hoping our volume would speed up our parent's emergence from their room. Instead of expediting the process, we learned the valuable lesson of waiting while eagerly anticipating the gifts before us.

The word *Advent* comes from the Latin word meaning "coming." It describes the season before Christmas when believers recreate the anticipation the wise men and shepherds felt at Jesus' birth in that little town of Bethlehem. Hymns become carols. Pine scents tickle our noses as evergreens stand flocked with snow. Devotions and sermons feature passages like Luke 1, Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6, Zechariah 9:9, and others that anticipate the coming King. The season whispers and then crescendos to shout the message, "He's coming! He's coming! He's coming!"

Then, on Christmas Day, believers near and far celebrate the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. The Advent is gone, the celebration has come. Anticipation becomes realization, and we rejoice in the birth of our Savior. The Wonderful Counselor brings us guidance, the Mighty God amazes us all, and the Prince of Peace removes the enmity between God and man. By His birth and eventual death and resurrection, Christ has set us free. What a glorious culmination after such a long wait!

Now what? Advent reminds us that Christ is coming, and Christmas is the celebration of His arrival. But what are believers to do **after they** receive what they have sought for so long? Perhaps Luke 17:11-19 can help.

While on His way to Jerusalem, Jesus hears the cries of ten lepers from a distance. Rather than rushing toward the One who could heal them, the lepers remain at a distance because their highly contagious disease makes them social and religious outcasts. With nothing to offer Jesus, they **simply ask for His mercy**. And His mercy they receive. As the ten leave to present themselves to the priests in accordance with Jesus' instructions, their long Advent season of waiting for healing is replaced by their Christmas celebration of cleansing. Who knows how long these lepers suffered from this isolating disease, but you can imagine all of the high fives and hugging they must have enjoyed in celebrating what Christ did for them. The untouchables can now be touched; the outcasts are accepted. What a glorious culmination after such long waiting!

Then what? Only one—a **Samaritan foreigner**—comes back to praise God, fall at Jesus' feet, and give Him thanks for what He had done. Perhaps we can learn from this leper. After receiving the one thing the Samaritan had waited and hoped for—healing—he responds **with gratitude**. After we celebrate the arrival of the one thing the world waited and hoped for—the first coming of Christ—we should likewise respond with gratitude and praise.

The time between Christmas and New Year's Day often rushes past us. As we are hurrying to put away the Christmas decorations and searching every nook and cranny for the gift receipts of toys that won't light up or sweaters that don't fit, we sometimes miss the opportunity to reflect and give thanks that our Advent season always ends in celebration. As a church family, let us encourage each other to come to Jesus, give thanks for all He has

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given us, and praise Him for His gift of eternal life and the blessings and provisions He has showered upon us in 2015. May we further ponder how in 2016 we can “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:10)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Together, read Psalm 100, 1 Thessalonians 5:18, and Colossians 3:15-17. What other verses of gratitude and thanksgiving would you add to this list?
2. Looking back on your year, for what would you like to thank God? Make a list of the top five things you are thankful for and share them with each other.
3. Like the lepers, sometimes our season of desiring and waiting is longer than others. What are some things you are currently longing to see Christ do? How can you remain thankful even in the difficult times?
4. Looking ahead to next year, what are some ways you can incorporate gratitude into your daily time with the Lord? How can your family and community encourage you in this endeavor?
5. As a group, think of a list of people you know who are in a season of hardship. Spend some time together praying for them. What can you do to encourage one person from your list today?



FOR PARENTS

PUT INTO ACTION:

To drive the message of this story home, grab some paper, markers and/or crayons and work with your kids to make thank you cards for family members who gave them gifts this Christmas. Write notes, color pictures, and encourage your kids to bless those who blessed them this year. Then write one “Thank You Note” as a family to Jesus. Talk about this past year and what specifically you all would and should thank Him for. Work together to write that note to the Lord and then let your kids decorate it just as they did their thank you notes. Find a place to display it in your home as a reminder to “give thanks always” (Ephesians 5:20).

FOR THOSE WITH YOUNGER CHILDREN:

Have your child choose 10 stuffed animals, dolls or action figures. Retell the story of the 10 lepers; how Jesus healed them and only one leper came back to say thank you. Take the 10 stuffed animals and using toilet paper, have your child bandage their sores. Talk about how only one leper came back to say thank you. Have your child close his eyes and remove one stuffed animal. Ask your child which one is missing and why he is gone. Explain that he is gone because he went back to say thank you. Continue playing the game again, even having your child choose which stuffed animal came back to say thank you.