

# Prepare the Way

An Advent Devotional Guide



## **Week One (December 3 - 9)**

### **Waiting - Moving from Deprivation to Expectancy**

Waiting is a part of life. Every road seems to be under construction these days and that means long lines of traffic. And if the traffic doesn't stop you, the train will. The grocery store has got five million people waiting to be checked out and two registers open. You're on hold with the insurance company and the automated person tells you there are 63 people ahead of you. At the doctor's office you check in at the large waiting room and then they call you back to wait in the smaller waiting room. You're waiting on your favorite sports team to finally win a championship.

Have you ever waited on a table at a restaurant and it's just taking forever? And you think to yourself, "Should I just give up and go somewhere else since this is taking so long?" But then the other part of you says, "Or should I just keep waiting since I've already put all this time in?" It's always the moment you decide to leave when your name is called the second you're out the door. Some people hate waiting so much that they will actually pay others to wait in line for them. Robert Samuel, the founder of "Same Old Line Dudes" based in New York City, has created an entire business where he and others are paid to wait in line for people. Robert once made \$14,000 in ONE DAY waiting in line for iPhones.

The examples I've mentioned on waiting are relatively trivial: waiting on a table at a restaurant, waiting in traffic, waiting on hold with customer service. But we all know there are other kinds of waiting that affect us in immense ways: we're waiting on our prodigal son or daughter to come home. We're waiting on the chemo to work and for the cancer to go away. We're waiting on the college acceptance letter, the second job interview, the test results from our doctor's visit. We're waiting on the depression to lift, the person we hurt to forgive us, or us to find the strength to forgive someone else. We're waiting on the deployment to end, waiting on the promotion to begin, waiting on a spouse to walk into our lives, waiting for our child to be healed.

Waiting is so hard for us because we can't predict the future which means we can't predict how long the waiting period will be. And when there is no way to monitor or assess the progress of our waiting, we become anxious. How long will we have to wait before the relationship is mended, before the couple longing to have a baby conceives, before the chronic pain goes away?

Waiting is a way of life for people in Scripture. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Hannah, the Israelites, Simeon, Jesus. All of them had to wait. Some waited years and decades. In Israel's case, they waited centuries (400 years) for God to break His silence and fulfill the promise of sending a Messiah to save them. Can you imagine today, in our culture of instant gratification, waiting 400 years on a promise from God? What would keep us from just giving up believing that either we had heard wrong or God didn't come through?

For a lot of us, waiting is defined only in terms of deprivation. We look at what we're being deprived of, what needs are going unfulfilled, what we are lacking as a result of our waiting. But what if we approached waiting not from a perspective of deprivation but as a season of expectancy? What if we waited in hope trusting in the reality of what our eyes cannot yet see? The difference between waiting in deprivation versus waiting in expectancy is huge. The former sees the waiting as purposeless, meaningless, void of any sacredness. The latter sees waiting as not a prelude to the calling but the calling itself. For it is in the waiting that we are stripped of our control only to discover the rich freedom of relying on the Spirit. We are forced to actually depend on Jesus for our

sustenance, our daily bread. When we wait in hopeful expectancy, we don't waste the present. We see our present circumstances as ways in which God wants to grow us, teach us, heal us, and transform us.

In no way should we deny the harsh realities that accompany waiting. The truth is sometimes waiting cripples us to where we can't see beyond the despair. My intention is not to sugar-coat the real struggles we encounter as we wait for God to move in our lives or in the life of our church. But at the same time, we must be careful to not dwell in the despair because hope always has the last word. And that hope has a name. It is Jesus.

At its very essence, Advent is about waiting. Waiting in the dark and hoping for the Light, waiting in the drought and hoping for the rain, waiting in the night knowing joy comes in the morning. Waiting for the Savior to come and make all things new.

### **Question for the Week**

What are you waiting on God to do in your life? In the life of our church?

How can you shift your perspective from waiting in deprivation to waiting in expectancy?

### **Scriptures for the Week**

Psalms 27:14 - Wait for the LORD; Be strong and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the LORD.

Isaiah 30:18 - Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you For the LORD is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him.

Galatians 5:5-6 - For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Psalms 33:20-21 - We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.

### **Prayer for the Week**

Lord, because of your great love we will not be shaken. Your compassions never fail, they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. You are good to those who hope in You, who wait on You. You will not put us to shame for we trust in Your goodness. When we are prone to view our waiting as deprivation, would you come and fill us with your holy expectancy! When we are tempted to despair, would you fill us with your hope! When we begin to grow weary in our waiting, restore to us the joy of Your salvation! Amen

## **Week Two (December 10-16)**

### **Confessing - Moving from Death to Life**

Sometimes God will put random words or phrases in front of you so many times that you can't help but think there is a reason. Strangely, the phrase that keeps popping up in Scripture and lots of unexpected places is THRESHING FLOOR. I know, it's weird. Usually when someone mentions God keeps putting something in front of them it's "love" or "peace" or "grace". But no, for me this time it's "threshing floor". Who knows? Maybe "thresh" will become the most used word of 2018?! Hang with me, I promise we're going somewhere.

If you're talking about threshing wheat, it means you're removing the kernel of grain from its stalk. Different methods were used to accomplish this. The most basic method, beating the grain, was used by farmers with a small amount of grain to thresh. The threshing floor was a flat surface prepared for the threshing of grain. The threshing floor was usually located at the edge of a village, often on a large flat rock. If you had a bigger farm, the ground itself would become the threshing floor and you'd use animal-drawn machines. The most common of these machines was called a threshing sledges referenced in Isaiah 41:15. Made of planks with rocks or metal attached to the underside, the sledges was pulled back and forth over the grain. It seems like the general idea of threshing is to remove the stuff you don't want in order to keep and preserve the stuff you do want. It's a refining process.

Threshing was an important part of the everyday life of the ancient Israelites, and it formed a metaphorical background for the Old Testament. Threshing is used often in the Old Testament as a symbol for destruction or a consequence of sin. In Isaiah 21:10, the prophet speaks to the Israelites and says, "O my threshed people, and my afflicted of the threshing floor! What I have heard from the LORD of hosts, The God of Israel, I make known to you." In Matthew 3, we hear John the Baptist reference this phrase when he talks about the coming of Jesus: "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John differentiates himself from Jesus. Whereas John is just baptizing with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And as part of that process, John picks up on this Old Testament language and says Jesus will clear His threshing floor, separating the kernels of grain from their stalks. This is powerful language describing the Messiah that is to come. And this doesn't translate to a warm-fuzzy Jesus that just tells us how good or holy we are. This doesn't sound like Jesus has come to teach us to be nice or polite or religious. He's come to lay us down on the threshing floor not to destroy us but to save our lives. To separate from us those things that lead to death and destruction so we can come to life. If we want to live, we have to die first. The threshing floor isn't about punishment. The natural consequences of our sin are punishment enough. It's about defeating death by death and then rising. It's about the movement from Cross to Resurrection.

C.S. Lewis talks about this in Mere Christianity:

*Did you ever think, when you were a child, what fun it would be if your toys could come to life? Well suppose you could really have brought them to life. Imagine turning a tin soldier into a real little man. It would involve turning the tin into flesh. And suppose the tin soldier did not like it. He is not interested in flesh: all he sees is that the tin is being spoilt. He thinks you are killing him. He will do everything he can to stop prevent you. He will not be made into a man if he can help it.*

Confession and repentance are the tools used by Jesus as we lay on the threshing floor. Too often we run from these disciplines because they are painful, invasive, humbling, and disruptive to our way of life. We know our sin leads to death and is not from God, but we wonder who we will be without it. Just as CS Lewis shares about the toy soldier, we don't want to be changed into something else because it's uncertain. In a twisted way, our sin becomes our comfort. But we can and we must lay our very souls on the threshing floor so that Jesus can do His work in us.

As we "prepare the way" for the Lord to come this Advent season, we see clearly from John the Baptist that confession and repentance are the means by which we prepare. There's no easy shortcuts; just the daily decision to lay down whatever is not from Jesus so that we may grab ahold of His presence. To confess and repent is to begin the movement from death to life.

### **Question for the Week**

What do you need to lay down on the threshing floor? Spend some time writing down sins you need to confess and repent of. As you write down those things, what are some practical steps you can take to begin the process of repentance?

### **Scriptures for the Week**

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

2 Corinthians 9:12-14 - This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

James 5:16 - Therefore **confess** your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

### **Prayer for the Week**

Jesus, let these words be upon our lips daily as we attempt to love You and others: I was wrong, I'm sorry, and I love you.

## Week Three (December 17-23)

### **Worshipping - Moving from Complacency to Captivation**

Matt Bow was his name. He was a sixth grader and I was a seventh grader so obviously I was way too mature and old to interact with someone so much younger than me. But I overcame the age difference and decided we should be friends. Matt was very different from the other kids in our youth group. For one, he only had a Mom. His dad had left their family right after Matt was born. Second, I could tell right off the bat that Matt was poor. His body odor was strong, but for all I know I had body odor, too. I mean we were middle school boys. I didn't realize till later that Matt wasn't being lazy with his hygiene; he just didn't have money for shampoo and soap. As if the body weren't enough to make things hard for Matt to make friends, he lacked basic social skills. He craved attention from anyone and everyone because he wasn't really loved or valued by his mom, so he'd try too hard in conversation and make people annoyed. I wasn't Matt's friend because I pitied him although I did feel sorry for him; life is hard enough when you've got a relatively normal upbringing much less never knowing your dad, having a mom that doesn't really care about you, and being poor.

Matt and I showed up for youth group one Wednesday night and found out the church was beginning a youth choir. We were sitting next to each other as the rehearsal began. Now I was not a seasoned singer by any means but I could match a note and kind of sing by ear. When Matt started singing, it was so bad that I thought he was trying to be funny or something. After a few minutes, I figured out he wasn't trying to be funny or draw attention to himself. In fact, Matt closed his eyes and started singing louder as the song progressed. By this time, I wasn't the only one that had noticed Matt's singing. Kids started pointing and laughing but the crazy part was Matt didn't even notice. If he did notice, he didn't seem to care. He was worshipping Jesus with abandon and it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever witnessed. The purity and sacredness of his worship left an indelible mark on my heart. The fact that he wasn't even close to singing the right notes made it even more meaningful. While excellence in worship is to be treasured and valued, authenticity matters so much more. To worship in spirit and truth is to have Jesus as the foundation for all that is said and done: He is the object of our worship, He is the focal point of our prayers, songs, preaching, and praise. He is the ONLY one worthy of our worship.

I think about Matt every time I read the story in Luke 7 about the woman who anoints Jesus. Can you find a more clear example of someone worshipping Jesus with abandon? There are clear social and religious customs put in place by the ancient Mediterranean world to assure this kind of thing does not happen. The unnamed woman is sinful and should not be there for a whole host of reasons yet there she is. Notice she doesn't say anything. She comes in, stands behind Jesus at his feet weeping. In fact, her tears are so numerous that Jesus' feet are getting wet! This is not one tear rolling down her cheek; this brokenness, sobbing, endless tears. She's become undone in the presence of Jesus. She is not "holding it together", she is not "maintaining her composure", she is not living within the boundaries prescribed to her by the religious and cultural institutions of the day. She wipes the tears off his feet with her hair and then kisses them and pours perfume on them. The woman could not have been more humble, more contrite, more broken, more adoring. There is zero pretense in this woman's heart towards Jesus. Simon the Pharisee is smug, complacent, and self-righteousness not getting down on his knees to kiss Jesus' feet because he doesn't want to get his pants dirty. All his religiosity and obedience to the law is just trappings. His cup is all nice and shiny on the outside but inside it's dead. The opposite is true for the woman. She's dirty, sinful, and at the

bottom of the social strata wearing a scarlet letter around town. Yet in this intimate scene the truth of her heart is revealed. She is captivated by Jesus worshipping Him and Him alone.

Advent is the time for us to worship Jesus in spirit and truth. To make the move from complacency to captivity, from pretense to purity, from facades to falling on our knees in brokenness.

### **Question for the Week**

What does it look like for you to worship Jesus with abandon this Advent season? Is there something getting in the way? Pride? Worried about what others might think?

Maybe you don't feel worthy because of who you are or what you've done. The point is not to clean ourselves up before we come into the presence of God. We come into the presence of God SO THAT we can be healed, forgiven, loved, redeemed, and made whole.

### **Scripture for the Week**

Instead of reading a few different passages, this week I want us to focus on a single passage from Hebrews. Let the Holy Spirit use this passage to wash over you as you internalize its truth.

### **Hebrews 10:19-25**

**19** Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, **20** by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **25** not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

### **Prayer for the Week**

Jesus, every day we struggle to live in harmony with You. Every day we struggle to play the correct notes of the composition You are writing, to learn the right steps of the divine dance you are composing. But would you be so gracious to sing that melody again so we can get it into our heads, to show us those moves you are choreographing so we can be in step with your divine dance! We offer our bodies as living sacrifices of worship to you. Take us, use us, and lead us not for our glory but for Yours alone. Amen.

## **Week Four (Dec. 24-31)**

### **Stopping - Moving from Hurriedness to Presence**

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and you can tell they are not fully present? It happens all the time in our culture afflicted with hurry sickness. We're so busy that we don't have enough time to focus on one thing or even one person at a time. Sometimes when I can tell a person is not really listening to me, I'll be a bit ornery and say something random like, "I'm really excited to be going to Mars next week, the weather forecast looks great!" You should try this sometime and let me know how it turns out! More than ever before, we are in need of deep people who can be fully present. Our world has never been more connected and fragmented at the exact same time. The advent of text messaging and social media, while beneficial in some respects, have eroded our ability to fully connect in relationships, to carry on meaningful conversations, and to be fully present with and for one another. Our phones have become safety blankets we carry around to shield us from personal interaction, to avoid eye contact, and to create the appearance of busyness. We are connected with everyone which means we are connected to no one fully. Our FOMO (fear of missing out) ironically causes us to miss out on the things standing right in front of us, the people looking us in the eye.

If ever there was a time for us to stop, be fully present, and give our attention it is the Season of Advent. One of my favorite characters in Scripture is the blind man named Bartimaeus. We meet Bartimaeus in Mark 10 where he is begging for alms by the roadside in Jericho. The Gospel of Mark is like a cliff-notes version of the Gospel story; it seems like Jesus sprints at break-neck speed from the very beginning of the book. There's very little dialogue and Jesus is seen moving rapidly from town to town on his way to Jerusalem. The words, "And then he" are all over the Book of Mark describing Jesus' activity. I get it. His destiny, the very reason for the incarnation, awaits him in Jerusalem. The Cross is beckoning Him. Because we know that Jesus rarely stops in Mark, each time he does stop and strike up a conversation with someone is special. You know something profound is getting ready to happen.

In Mark 10:46, we see Jesus entering Jericho and in the same breath exiting the town with his disciples. It's very clear Jesus does not plan to stay in Jericho; he is just passing through. Again, he's got big things in store and Jerusalem is his destination. Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside begging for alms. He and other beggars were anticipating the generosity of pilgrims headed toward the Holy City (Jerusalem). Bartimaeus' name means "Son of Timaeus" and in the Greek "Timeaus" means "Son of Honor". This "Son of Honor" is anything but. Forced to beg because of his blindness, no one honors Bartimaeus. He is scorned by the world, treated like an outcast, and a sinner. In the ancient mediterranean world (and still sometimes today), people believed a person's disabilities were punishment from God for sin. So not only is Bartimaeus poor and blind, everyone around him believes he has done something to deserve his blindness. As he sits by the roadside, he hears murmuring from the crowd about this man named Jesus. The one he's been told can heal, forgive, and restore. When he hears Jesus is walking by, he shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Bartimaeus is not just throwing around a random phrase to get Jesus' attention. This is a messianic title! The blind beggar is making a public confession of his faith in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the promised Deliverer! Those around Bartimaeus are embarrassed by his antics and tell him to shut up but that just makes the blind beggar shout even louder!

Verse 49 is huge. "Jesus stopped..." A stop in Jericho wasn't in the itinerary, he was on his way to save the world from itself, Jerusalem was in His sights, and nonetheless he stops. He stops not for

a powerful aristocrat, a holy pharisee, or Jewish dignitary. He stops for the blind beggar whose name has become a punchline. But Jesus intends on Bartimaeus becoming who he was destined to be as a “Son of Honor”. He calls him to come over, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak (his sole possession and the garment containing the alms collected), and he’s made new.

Jesus stops. I wonder if his disciples were thinking, “Jesus this is nice and all but don’t you remember we’ve got to get to Jerusalem? We’ve got big plans.” Do you feel the immensity of this moment? Jesus’ act of stopping saves the life of Bartimaeus. His faith in Jesus makes him well and he follows the King “on the way”. This doesn’t just mean he followed Jesus physically although that is true as well. It also means he followed Jesus in the way of discipleship. A blind, hopeless, beggar becomes a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus stops for you and for me. He’s fully present, he’s not going anywhere. You don’t have to impress Him with your words or deeds for His grace is a gift. Look into His eyes for his gaze will pierce your soul and make you whole. Feel your hurry sickness subside in the stillness of his love and bask in the glory of His presence. He is enough. You need not fear of missing out because He is all you will ever need. He stops for you. Will you stop for Him?

### **Question of the Week**

How can you be fully present to Jesus this Advent Season? What are practical steps you can take to be fully present for those around you? Why is it so hard for us to stop moving?

### **Scripture for the Week**

John 1:14 - The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 13:1 - Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, **He loved them to the end.**” (emphasis added)

James 4:14-15 - Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

### **Prayer of the Week**

Jesus, teach us to be fully present to You as You are to us. Teach us to give the gift of presence to those around us, to be Your presence for them. Let us ruthlessly rid hurry from our lives to the point where we walk at Your pace, love at Your pace, and serve at Your pace. Send your spirit to calm our fears of missing out and teach us to trust in Your love. Thank you for stopping for us so we can be made whole. Amen.