



the
Right
—OF—
CHRISTMAS

A FAMILY GUIDE FOR CELEBRATING
CHRISTMAS EVE & CHRISTMAS DAY



The Light of Christmas

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CHAPTER 1

AN INVITATION

The Christmas season is here. It's the most wonderful time of the year—or so the old song goes. Yet we all have to admit that it doesn't always feel that way. Each of us can rattle off a list of the reasons we feel a twinge of stress or sadness mixed with happiness or excitement when the carols start playing in every public setting. Hectic schedules, rampant materialism, and reminders of personal wounds are just a few of the reasons.

Whether you are the person who is ready to relax and savor the season because you did all your shopping and preparations months ago (not likely) or the person who dreads the busyness, responsibilities, or loneliness that steals your joy this time of year (much more likely), the Christmas season offers a unique opportunity to experience God's love and grace in the midst of real life. Christmas can still truly give us a taste of the most wonderful time in world history. Jesus—the Messiah, the Savior—came as the light into the darkness, stress, and pain of the world. That world then needed the light to illuminate, clarify, guide, and heal—just like our world now, including our lives, needs the very same thing. Christ's coming brings that ultimate light as well as His peace, joy, and all-consuming love. Those are the true gifts of Christmas. And He is worth celebrating.

Each of our celebrations will look a bit different depending on our places in life. You may be single, married, with or without or wishing for kids. You may be celebrating new life or grieving the loss of a loved one. You may be caring for older parents, young children, or someone who is sick. You may have every moment of your Christmas Eve and Christmas Day already scheduled, or you may be wondering how in the world you are going to fill all the holiday hours.

This invitation is for you, whoever you are and whatever your situation. Think about the people God invited to witness the birth of His Son that first Christmas—they came from all areas and walks of life.

First there were Mary and Joseph. They were young and in love, and God interrupted their lives with an invitation to follow Him. When the angel appeared to each of them, they were afraid. But they surrendered their own plans and followed God.

Luke 1 tells the story of how an angel appeared to Mary and explained that she would give birth to the Son of God. Although Mary was troubled and afraid, she responded in faith: “‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her” (Luke 1:38).

Joseph’s story is recorded in the book of Matthew. It tells us that Joseph found out his wife-to-be was pregnant. In other words, he had to endure the shock of bad news and feel the burden of his life plans unraveling. Then—afterward—Joseph was told by God what he should do. And when an angel explained God’s plan to him, Joseph too responded in faith: “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of

the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24–25).

By trusting God, this young couple didn’t sign up for honor, prestige, or excitement. Theirs was more a journey of rejection, doubt, and uncertainty. But they chose to follow each step of the way to Bethlehem and to be the vessels God used to bring His love and salvation to the world.

Then there were the shepherds. Talk about a motley crew. They were working on Christmas! But they had no choice. Shepherds were pretty low on the social scale in that day. Yet while they were tending to their sheep, their lives were interrupted by an angel announcing the birth of the Son of God. “An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord’” (Luke 2:9–11).

The shepherds could have stayed in the field. They could have said they were busy. They could have assumed such

an important message was meant for someone more worthy. They could have chosen not to go. But they eagerly left what they were doing and went to see what the angels had told them about. “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about’” (Luke 2:15).

And then there were the Magi—you know, “we three kings of Orient are.” The guys with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They didn’t quite make it to the manger scene in Bethlehem (although they usually show up in most Christmas pageants). But they did make the longest journey, following a star they believed signaled the birth of the Messiah. Matthew 2:1–2 tells us, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’”

These wise men could have been skeptical or hoped someone else would go. They could have said the journey was too long or too hard. But they recognized the invitation of God to witness something that would change the world, and they went.

So what does your journey to Bethlehem look like? How has God been calling you to follow Him to Bethlehem and experience in a new way the birth of His Son, Jesus? Will you go? Will you set aside the distractions of life and allow God to lead you? Will you let the light of God's love shine into even the darkest places of your heart this Christmas season? Will you choose to experience Christmas as truly the most wonderful time of the year—not as an empty lyric but as a life-giving encounter? The invitation to you is the same as it was for Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi—to come and see this baby born in a manger, Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, and to be changed by the experience.

This book is an invitation to do just that. It is not meant to provide you with more stuff to do. It's an invitation to fun, reflection, and community. It's an invitation for you to step into the glow of the light of the world, our Savior born as a baby in Bethlehem.

In the pages of this book, you will find a wide variety of ideas. You may already have holiday plans and traditions, or you may be looking for ideas to start some. Please know that this book is intended to be an inspiration, not a burden. Use it to supplement and add creativity. Take the ideas, activities, and devotions, and adapt them as you see fit to help you

celebrate the miracle that is the birth of Jesus Christ.

If you've received this book early in the Christmas season, you'll find many ideas in the final chapter to use throughout the season. If you're just picking it up on Christmas Eve, you'll find a schedule to guide you and your family through a celebration of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. In addition, there is a whole chapter on carrying the light of Christmas into the new year. So find your place, answer God's invitation, and let His love light your way as you journey to Bethlehem this Christmas.



CHAPTER 2

CELEBRATION SCHEDULE

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are both times for celebration. In this chapter, you'll find a quick-reference outline of activities for these two special days. All the detailed instructions and resources are spelled out in chapters 3 and 4. So read through the descriptions in those chapters and then flip back to this schedule and make it your own. Get out your red—and green—pens. Add the things you already have planned. Star the parts you like. Cross out the ones you don't. If you need more or different ideas, check out chapter 7 of this book. Turn this schedule into one that works for you as you prepare to celebrate.

Christmas Eve

Afternoon

- ◆ *Read:* “Messenger of Light” in chapter 5 is an original Christmas fiction story to read and talk about together.
- ◆ *Serve:* Use the ideas provided to share the light of Christmas with others.
- ◆ *Connect:* Compose an e-mail newsletter to send to friends and family.
- ◆ *Create:* Make Mason jar star lanterns.
- ◆ *Recreate:* Stay healthy and burn some excess kid energy with a family hike, bike, or swim.

Evening

- ◆ *Worship:* Attend a Christmas Eve service.
- ◆ *Eat:* Do dinner differently by incorporating a new fun idea.

- ◆ *Read:* Prepare for Jesus’s coming with the “Christmas Candles” devotion.
- ◆ *Celebrate:* Take a night walk and enjoy all the lights.
- ◆ *Play:* Open a Night Before Christmas box.
- ◆ *Relax:* Enjoy a quiet time of candlelight, music, and more.

Christmas Day

◆ *Give:* If giving and receiving presents is part of your tradition, fit them into your day of celebration when it works best for you.

Morning

◆ *Read:* Take time to read the Christmas story.

◆ *Eat:* Enjoy Christmas pancakes, cinnamon rolls, or your favorite holiday food.

◆ *Thank:* Form a “snowball circle” to share the things you’re thankful for.

◆ *Play:* Organize a Christmas scavenger hunt.

Afternoon

◆ *Create:* Bake a birthday cake for Jesus, or make Christmas light paintings.

- ◆ *Serve*: Take a basket of dinner or holiday snacks to someone in need.
- ◆ *Play*: Enjoy a snow activity (or find a snow substitute if it's warm weather).
- ◆ *Connect*: Call, FaceTime, or send fun photos to family who can't be with you.

Evening

- ◆ *Read*: Read the “Darkness and Light” devotion.
- ◆ *Remember*: Start a holiday tradition by creating a Christmas Memory box.



CHAPTER 3

CHRISTMAS EVE

It's the night before Christmas! Follow this schedule for a fun and meaningful celebration. Whether you are reading, serving, connecting, playing, or relaxing, allow the suggestions here to help you open your heart to the light of Christmas as you anticipate the arrival of the Christ child.

Christmas Eve

Afternoon

♦ *Read:* “Messenger of Light,” an original Christmas fiction story found in chapter 5, is great for kids and will touch the hearts of all ages. Find an uninterrupted time when everyone can sit together and listen to this story. Put the electronics away, light a candle or a fire, curl up with a blanket (or hang out in the hammock if your weather is warm), and read this Christmas story aloud. Then talk about it together. Questions provided at the end of the story can help prompt you and your family to think about how the message can change your hearts and lives this Christmas.

♦ *Serve:* There could be no greater blessing this Christmas Eve than sharing the light of Christmas with others. While many people are busy with family and last-minute Christmas preparations, others are alone and in need of God’s love. If you are able to plan ahead, look for a local charity where you can help serve a meal. If Christmas Eve is upon you without a plan, take a plate of cookies and visit an elderly neighbor or a local retirement home. Many of the older people there will be far away from family and would love

to have someone to simply sit and talk with on this holiday. Ask them to share their most memorable Christmas with you. Take an hour to set aside your own schedule, and open your heart and ears to listen to an older person. As you bless them, you are sure to be blessed.

◆ *Connect:* Sure, the Christmas cards are all stamped and sent (or are they?). But your close family and friends would love a more detailed, real-life update of what you are up to this Christmas Eve. So recruit the youngest to the oldest and have them each write one short paragraph for a Christmas Eve e-mail. If they need inspiration, offer them sentence prompts to complete such as “My favorite thing about today has been . . .” or “If you were here, I’d love to . . .” Include some recent pictures, or have a fun photo session (ugly holiday sweaters, shaving cream elf beards, Santa hats and sunglasses, or your own creative idea) and send a shot or two with your e-mail. Whether your family and friends read it today or in the days following Christmas, it will help them feel more connected to those they love this season.

◆ *Create:* Make these simple Mason jar star lanterns. Collect one small glass jar per person. Small jelly or canning jars work well—no lids needed. On the outside of the jars,

have each person attach medium-sized star stickers or glue on paper star cutouts. Put a votive or tea light in the bottom of each jar. Use the jars as a centerpiece on the table or line them up on a bookshelf or mantle. Light the candles, and watch for the star shadows they cast on a nearby wall.

For a more involved project, place the star stickers on the jars, then spray-paint the outside of the jars red, green, gold, and silver. While the paint is still drying, remove the stickers. When you light a candle inside the jar, it will create a glowing star on a nearby wall instead of a star-shaped shadow.

◆ *Recreate:* By Christmas Eve, your family or group may already be feeling you've had too much time together under one roof—and maybe one too many cookies. Give your physical and mental health a boost by doing something active. Go for a family hike. Take a bike ride. Find an indoor pool and go for a swim. Take the family to a climbing gym or indoor trampoline park. Even when you love being with those you love, it's easy to let relational and logistical stress steal your ability to experience the wonder of Christmas. Make room for the wonder by releasing a little steam. The added benefit? Nothing like some good exercise to tire out the kids and help them sleep tonight when they are antici-

pating hearing reindeer hooves on the roof.

Evening

◆ *Worship*: Whether you are close to your home church or not, find a church and attend a Christmas Eve service. There is something wonderful about the body of Christ coming together to celebrate this night that changed the course of history. If you have kids, look for a service at an earlier time that caters to young hearts. If you are with an older crowd, consider a midnight service where you can worship together right at the start of Christmas Day.

◆ *Eat*: Do dinner differently! Use one of these fun ideas to create a Christmas Eve memory for all.

- ◆ Have a dress-up dinner complete with your best dishes, music, and candlelight. Make it a banquet fit for a king as you welcome the King of Kings to earth tonight.

- ◆ Pack the picnic basket and spread out a blanket right next to your Christmas tree for a picnic under the lights. This is a fun and easy dinner for young kids who will love the extra time looking at the tree

and studying the presents they see.

♦ Have a make-your-own-pizza party. Give each person a ball of dough and encourage creativity to shape pizzas into holiday fun. Christmas trees, wreaths, stars, and candy canes all make tasty pizza shapes.

♦ *Read:* Prepare for Jesus's coming by using this "Christmas Candles" devotion.

Devotion: Christmas Candles

"I can't wait for Christmas!" Those words are being said a million times around the world tonight. Waiting can be exciting, but it can also be hard. Patience is tough. But learning about the coming of Jesus and celebrating together can make the waiting easier. In some Christian traditions, the weeks leading up to Christmas are called Advent. They are a time of waiting and expectation. Tonight we are going to light five Christmas candles that represent different themes of the Christmas story as we wait for Christmas. Sometimes we view waiting as boring, but tonight's waiting is going to be fun as we light the candles in anticipation of Jesus's birth.

We light candles because their light reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world. His light comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life, and hope. It also reminds us that we are called to be a light to the world as people see the love of Jesus in us. Each time we light a candle, we remember part of the story of Jesus coming to earth as a baby, and we wait with excitement to celebrate what happens next.

Light each candle one at a time, and read the Bible passages listed. If your group is up for it, memorize the short focus verses together. Try making up hand motions to help kids and adults alike. Discuss what each candle signifies, and then sing the song together. To enhance the singing fun and keep everyone active, add some tambourines, maracas, or jingle bells to the singing.

Candle 1: Hope

Read: Isaiah 11:1–5 and Luke 1:26–38

Focus: Isaiah 9:6

Discuss: The first candle signifies the hope that people felt in their hearts for a Savior to lead them out of dark and hard

times. What does it mean to hope for something? What had God promised to the people of Israel that they were hoping for? What do you hope for this Christmas?

Sing: “Away in a Manger”

Candle 2: Peace

Read: Luke 2:1–7

Focus: John 14:27a

Discuss: The second candle signifies peace and reminds us that Jesus came to bring peace and goodwill. What does it mean to have peace? Do you think it was peaceful in Bethlehem when Jesus was born? How can we have peace in our hearts when the world around us is not peaceful?

Sing: “Silent Night”

Candle 3: Joy

Read: Luke 2:8–14

Focus: Psalm 100:1

Discuss: The third candle represents joy and reminds us of the good news the angels brought to the shepherds. What

do you think it was like when all those angels appeared in the dark night sky and sang together? How would you have felt if you were there? Why does Jesus's coming bring us joy?

Sing: "Joy to the World"

Candle 4: Love

Read: Luke 2:15–20

Focus: John 3:16

Discuss: The fourth candle represents love and reminds us that Jesus was sent to earth because of God's deep love for us. How did the shepherds spread God's love after they had gone to see Jesus? The wise men came later to see Jesus. How did they show their love for the new King? How can we show our love for Jesus?

Sing: "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

Candle 5: Christ

You may choose to complete the lighting of the candles tonight, or save the final candle for Christmas morning. The Candle 5 information is included here and in the Christmas Day schedule in the next chapter.

Read: Luke 2:1–21

If appropriate, choose one of the children in the family to read the story, or have each family member read a few verses.

Focus: Reread (or recite together if you memorized them) the focus verses from the other four candles: Isaiah 9:6, John 14:27a, Psalm 100:1, and John 3:16.

Discuss: The fifth and final candle represents the gift God gave us in the baby Jesus, the Savior of the world. Why do we give gifts to each other on Christmas? What was the greatest gift of all? How can we share that gift with others today?

Sing: Choose a favorite or sing all the songs from the other four candles: “Away in a Manger,” “Silent Night,” “Joy to the World,” and “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.”

♦ *Celebrate*: When you are finished with the devotion time, take a night walk around the neighborhood to enjoy the festive lights of the season. As you walk, let the reality sink in that Jesus is the true light of the world.

♦ *Play*: Open a Night Before Christmas box. Place supplies for your Christmas Eve fun in a box, wrap it, and place it

under the tree. Kids always want to open “just one present” on Christmas Eve, so after dinner, have them open the box and use the contents for an evening of fun together. You might include new pajamas, popcorn, and a new Christmas book, movie, board game, or puzzle for the family to enjoy together.

◆ *Relax*: Sometimes silence is the very best way to reflect on the season and prepare your heart for the coming of the Christ child. Whether you sit by the fire, light candles, turn on the Christmas lights, or sit in the dark, spend a few minutes in complete silence, letting God speak to your heart tonight. Even with young children, you can encourage a minute of silence—a time when everyone sits in quiet expectation of the coming of Jesus. Close your time of silence with a simple prayer, inviting Jesus into your world tonight, or by singing the well-known Christmas song “Silent Night.”

Silent Night

Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin, mother and child
Holy infant, so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night
Shepherds quake at the sight
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia
Christ the Savior is born
Christ the Savior is born

Silent night, holy night
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth