

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

the Twelve Days of Christmas

axis



Christmas isn't just
a baby in a barn; it's a
rescue operation.



FIIIIVE GOOOOLDEN RIIIIINGS!

Oh wait, just kidding. Thankfully, that's not the Twelve Days of Christmas we're talking about. (But you're welcome for getting the song stuck in your head!)

So what are you talking about?

Did you know that Christmas hasn't always been celebrated as a one-day affair? Throughout its history, Christmas has been a whole season according to the Christian calendar. A twelve-day season, to be precise—a season that is best experienced after entering fully into the season of Advent.

Side note

This guide is a follow up to our “Parent’s Guide to Advent” and thus a lot of this will make the most sense after reading and celebrating Advent. However, a great deal can still be gleaned from this guide regardless of if and how you celebrated Advent. But if you do want a deeper look at Advent and how it precedes a profound understanding of celebrating Christmas, check out [A Parent’s Guide to Advent](#) before or after you read this one! For those of you who *did* read and embrace the ideas in the Advent guide, and if you’ve managed to hold off on celebrating Christmas in its fullness for the majority of December, congratulations! It’s not easy. And now you’re probably asking what’s next? Read on, friends!

What exactly is Christmas?

It felt a little ridiculous to write that question! Who doesn't know what Christmas is? It's December 25, the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus by giving each other gifts and eating a lot of food. But it's not really so simple, is it? There are a lot of other traditions and ideologies mixed in, and Christmas looks very different for different people: Finding the perfect gifts for all the people you love. Candlelight Christmas Eve services. Baking cookies and putting out milk for Santa Claus and his reindeer. Tense family dinners wrought with unrealistic expectations or political debates. Some sort of generic, Madison-Avenue-driven “holiday.” Missing loved ones who are no longer with us. Finding the perfect Christmas tree. Credit card debt. Stress. Time off work. Beautiful Christmas carols. Annoying Christmas music, like “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas.” (Another one stuck in your head! It's almost as if we're doing this on purpose. . .) Joy. Traditions. Sentiment. Decorations. Food. Movies. And much, much more. And that's only describing the Christmas we know in modern-day America.

How has Christmas changed over the centuries?

Obviously, Christmas “started” with the birth of Jesus, but our modern holiday has its [origins](#) in pagan winter solstice feasts. It wasn't until the fourth century that the Church decided to set apart time to celebrate the birth of Jesus—the Incarnation—at that same time of year. Then in the 17th century, the Puritans actually got rid of Christmas in England because they thought it had become too worldly. (Imagine what they would think now!) The pilgrims

who went to America followed suit, and Christmas was not a widespread celebration in the early years of our country. It regained popularity in the 1800s, around the same time Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*. (Check out this [fascinating blog series](#) on how this one work of literature almost single-handedly revived Christmas.) It was then declared a federal holiday in America in 1870. Over the next 100+ years, many of the traditions and practices we see in our modern-day version of Christmas were slowly adopted. Because of this history, some people believe that the pagan origins of Christmas are reason to abandon it entirely. We'll come back to that later.

How does the Christian calendar fit in here?

The way we as a culture tell time says something about what we love. The purpose of the [Christian or liturgical calendar](#) is to order our physical and spiritual lives around God's big story, helping us to love the right things. As we walk through each season, we reenact another small piece of the story He's written and is still writing. In this traditional calendar that Christians have used for centuries, Christmas starts on December 25 and lasts [for 12 days](#) (!) until January 6, Epiphany. ([This helpful website](#) makes it clear whether it is Christmas or not, in case there's any confusion.)

The beauty of observing these traditions is that we don't hunker down in Advent forever, just waiting and biding time until Jesus comes again. Salvation has already come, the kingdom has been ushered in, it's begun! It's time to celebrate! Yet most Christians don't observe this 12-day ritual: "But often the focus falls on giving Advent its due, with the 12 days of Christmas relegated to the words of a cryptic traditional carol. Most people are [simply too tired](#) after Christmas Day to do much celebrating." Celebrating for 12 days sounds great in theory, but thinking through all the logistics, preparing, planning, cleaning, hosting, etc. that would entail is enough to wear us out.

But blogger Greg Goebel offers a solution! He thinks we should start a "[Twelve Days Conspiracy](#)" and bring back the 12-day celebration: "I suspect that at some point we scraped the icing off the cake, trying to get to the good part first. And then we felt too sick to our stomachs to eat the actual cake. The remedy is to save that cake until birthday time, and then cut off a little slice each day, enjoying each bite." So bringing the 12-day Christmas tradition back doesn't have to involve a full-blown, all-hands-on-deck kind of celebration each day. Rather, it simply means having small, more manageable celebrations.

Wait! Should Christians even participate in Christmas? Isn't it selfish?

Besides the holiday's roots in pagan practices, we must also consider what it's evolved into, which seems to be the wanton consumption of material goods. Because of that, Christmas just encourages selfishness and materialism, so we should wash our hands of it, right?

Before we go down that path, we must remember that the whole reason we are celebrating is this miracle of the Incarnation—God made *flesh*. We cross a dangerous line into dualism or gnosticism when we treat the physical/material world as bad and think that goodness only resides in the spiritual, non-physical realm. We need to acknowledge that there is not one without the other. When Jesus became man, spirit and flesh became *forever* intertwined.

Instead of pulling away all together, we have the opportunity to redeem something that has arguably become worldly in many ways. (This may very well have been one of the intentions of Christians starting Christmas in the first place.) Yes, we absolutely must be intentional in looking at how our Christmas liturgies are shaping us, but our celebrations should be an enjoyment of this physical world that's been given to us, not a denial of it. The problem isn't the "stuff"; it's the hearts that take it for granted or struggle to be grateful.

Having said that, we shouldn't go too far the other direction and embrace modern Christmas wholeheartedly. We need to remember that there's no salvific effect of gift-giving or fun or food or family time on its own. When our celebrating is misdirected, we end up making idols out of the created, rather than worshipping the Creator. And idols always, always let us down. Christmas then becomes a task-oriented and difficult holiday. But we can't just agonize over the world's false worship in a reactionary way. We are called to worship God, not just do whatever is the opposite of our pagan neighbors. Instead of being overly-reactive, we can be obedient.

Too often we feel this need to somehow fit Jesus into Christmas. If we're honest, that part of Christmas feels boring while things like Santa Claus and opening gifts feel like the exciting part. Perhaps we obligatorily trudge our way to the Christmas Eve service so we can check it off the list and get down to the business of really enjoying Christmas. If you or your family experience this, you're simply feeling the tension of trying to reconcile true Christmas joy with a counterfeit.

Deep down we long for our Christmas celebrations to declare truth about God and what He's done, yet something in us can sense that it's missing. But it doesn't have to be. We can and should still enjoy all of the magic and deliciousness of Christmas, without guilt, when we open our eyes to see the magnitude of what we are celebrating, when we realize there is something much, much greater at stake in our celebrations. Christmas is an opportunity to celebrate the glorious Gospel in all its fullness.

— So how do we better understand what we're celebrating?

The sacred side of Christmas has sometimes been reduced to this quaint, charming, static nativity scene. A chubby baby in a manger, with the adoring eyes of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds looking on and angels singing above. It's a beautiful and meaningful picture, but perhaps it stops short. It's so familiar that we forget its gravity and magnitude. It's not that we don't think it's important that Christ was born to a virgin mother in humble Bethlehem, but we forget *why this matters so much*. **Christmas may have begun in this stable, but it certainly doesn't end there.**

In order to help our families better grasp the gravity of Christmas, we must first begin by reflecting on why we needed Christmas. (As mentioned earlier, observing Advent really helps with that.) Then we must talk about and reflect on everything that was accomplished through Christmas.

Christmas isn't just a baby in a barn; it's a *rescue operation*, an *invasion*. It's God coming to

reclaim His precious treasure that was lost. Heaven invading earth. [Divinity claiming humanity and never giving it back](#). It's hope for a situation that was completely hopeless. There was nothing we could do to rescue ourselves. We couldn't ascend to God, so He descended to us. The highest we can climb on our own comes nowhere close to the heights of the glory and riches God has for us. Christmas is the birth of not just *a* king, but *the* King.

Yes, we've heard it all before, but it can become so rote that it bears repeating: The heart of Christmas is the Gospel—that God has accomplished fully and completely that which we could never do on our own. Without Christmas, there is no Easter. His birth, death, and resurrection open the door to new life for us. He became like us so we could become like Him.

Christmas doesn't start with us. It's only a response to what's been freely given. We can only love because He first loved. We can only give because He first gave. It humbles us and reminds us that it has nothing to do with us, while simultaneously whisking us up into a story which has *everything* to do with us. Christmas is mystery and abundance. The Gospel is too lofty for us to fully comprehend, too great a gift to fully behold. But yet it's been revealed, made incarnate, given, for us to behold and receive. The goodness that we taste and see in Christmas is only a taste of what's to come. Even when we don't fully understand, we can say as Mary did, "[Let it be to me](#) according to Your word."

Advent points us to the hopeless state we were in before God reached in and came down. And Christmas invites us to behold the greatest gift ever given.

— **What's the tone and feel of the twelve days of Christmas?**

They should hopefully look like one big, long, joyful feast. Exciting, right? But sometimes, fasting (i.e. Advent) is more comfortable than feasting (i.e. Christmas) because we're well aware of the brokenness in the world. And in some sense we are living now in Advent, waiting for Jesus to return and restore all things. But as we wait, it's easy to forget God's promises. We forget that they *will* be fulfilled. We forget the magnitude of what He's done and is doing and all He has in store. We've waited so long and our lives look so bleak that it's hard to celebrate. Sometimes, our feasting reflects our forgetfulness.

On the other hand, we also live in such comfortable circumstances that we become complacent, and we forget how to taste and smell and see the wondrous things before us. [John Piper says](#) that "We've grown dull to the wonder of ample food and drink through constant use, and overuse. When every day is a virtual feast, we lose the blessing of a real one. When every meal is a pathway to indulgence, not only is fasting lost, but true feasting is as well." Our feasts look more like consuming than receiving. More like indulging, bingeing, and gluttony than true festivity, merrymaking, and revelry. Sometimes, our feasting reflects our apathy.

Our feasting falls flat or turns into overindulgence when it's aimed in the wrong direction. But it's not that we go *too far* into feasting. It's that we *don't go far enough* into *true* feasting.

[Feasting](#) for twelve days might very well be next to impossible. Our bodies aren't ready for the feasting to go on forever—not yet. But someday they will be. And we get a foretaste of that now. Just because we don't do it perfectly doesn't mean we shouldn't do it at all (though we

are absolutely free to feast or not feast, to celebrate Christmas or not celebrate it). As we feast, we declare the truth and we say without words what we believe, even if we can't always feel it, or see it clearly. What we really believe is exposed, and simultaneously our belief can be shaped into what it ought to be. Our feasting forms and shapes us into worshipers.

When we feast, we revel in God's glory, creation, and powerful works. Interestingly, the word revel comes from [rebel](#). So we're asking you to rebel this Christmas—why? What are we rebelling against? We're feasting as part of a revolution. We're feasting because the revolution has started. Darkness no longer reigns. Sin and death have been conquered. Evil will not triumph. **Our feasting isn't dependent on our current circumstances, on what we have or what we lack.** Here are a few excerpts of a beautiful "Liturgy for Feasting with Friends" from a wonderful book called [Every Moment Holy](#):

*"To gather joyfully
is indeed a serious affair,
for feasting and all enjoyments
gratefully taken are,
at their heart, acts of war.*

*In celebrating this feast
we declare that
evil and death,
suffering and loss,
sorrow and tears,
will not have the final word..."*

*"May this shared meal, and our pleasure in it,
bear witness against the artifice and deceptions
of the prince of the darkness that would blind
this world to hope.*

*May it strike at the root of the life that
would drain life of meaning, and
the world of joy, and suffering of redemption.*

*May this our feast fall like a great hammer blow
against that brittle night,
shattering the gloom, reawakening our hearts,
stirring our imaginations, focusing our vision
on the kingdom of heaven that is to come,
on the kingdom that is promised,
on the kingdom that is already,
indeed, among us..."*

"Take joy! ..."

"All will be well!"

(We encourage you to print out the entire [liturgy](#) and read it together before your next party or shared meal or before Christmas dinner!)

We have a hard time feasting because we're always questioning: Did we really win the revolution? **It doesn't always look or feel like the revolution has been won.** We have doubts. That's why it's hard for us to feast, and it's exactly why we *should* feast. It's important because it helps us see that the ordinary, plain lives we live are not just ordinary. We're embodied soul creatures, not [mere mortals](#). Maybe this Christmas thing matters more than we think it does.

— Can we properly feast while we're all on our phones?

No. No, we can't.

— What should we do with our current Christmas traditions and liturgies?

Remember that Christmas is as much for a single mother living in poverty in Haiti as it is for a wealthy middle-class American living in abundance. Examine your Christmas habits with this as your litmus test. Think of that young mother. If what you're doing isn't relevant and applicable to her life, then it isn't essential. You can let it go. **Feel freedom to celebrate as you choose, but don't burden yourself with unnecessary things that add financial stress and emotional chaos to your life.**

— What should we keep in mind as we celebrate Christmas, particularly with our teens?

Don't make it burdensome. What do you want your children to "catch" through their time in your home? What is the "background hum" or "wallpaper" of your home? In his book *You Are What You Love*, James K.A. Smith cautions:

You could have Bible 'inputs' every day and yet still have a household whose frantic rhythms are humming along with the consumerist myth of production and consumption. You might have Bible verses on the wall in every room of the house and yet the unspoken rituals reinforce self-centeredness rather than sacrifice.

Your children are guests in your home today, but someday they'll be forming their own homes. Do you want them to remember lots of legalistic rules and things you didn't allow them to do? Only buying them one gift because any more than that would be indulgent and excessive? Or so much excess that there was no space for appreciation and gratefulness?

Christmas. Should. Be. Fun. We should love Christmas in every way possible. Don't over-spiritualize Christmas. Just enjoy it. It is not unholy to have fun. Hopefully you don't think that way. If you do, [stop it](#).

Before our children can even understand and articulate fully what Christmas is about, we want them to feel and experience Christmas, to be enchanted by it. By helping them experience it, we essentially say, "This is what God's love feels like and tastes like, and sounds like." Christmas isn't the opportunity for a lecture, but a chance to show them the hope and joy that we have. And when they ask, why do we do this, we should have an answer for them.

— Ok, but what about St. Nicholas and Santa Claus?

The *real* St. Nicholas, the man behind the fictitious Santa Claus, was a bishop in the 3rd century. He was orphaned at a young age and received a large inheritance. He is known for his generosity and his anonymous gift-giving. A children's book, *The Legend of St. Nicholas*, says that "he made it his purpose in life to use all of his wealth and strength to help people in need and to glorify the Lord." The story goes that St. Nick knew of a man who couldn't afford a dowry for his daughters, so he threw bags of gold through his window at night, possibly saving the girls from being sold into prostitution.

This is a different message than we get from some of our culture's versions of Santa Claus, which basically paint him as a granter of wishes, with a works-righteousness sort of theology for earning good things. In that version, the emphasis is mostly on what the recipient wants. But the real St. Nicholas teaches us more about giving than getting. In his giving, he cared deeply about justice for the "least of these." And he used his wealth to glorify God. We can also be intentional in our generosity and gift-giving, and not feel guilty when God has given us much in the way of material things. Instead, we can be purposeful about what we buy and where it comes from, and care about the people who made it.

— So should we stop giving gifts altogether?

Definitely not. Being generous to others and blessing them is a huge part of modeling Christ's love to them. But as we do that, we must start being aware of how what we buy affects other people's lives, especially those across the world we don't see or hear about. There are wonderful businesses that connect consumers with skilled artisans and craftsmen who make beautiful things and are paid fairly for their work. There are companies that have good labor practices and working environments. And unfortunately there are also many who don't. Check out [this](#) and [this](#) for ideas on how to shop ethically.

Spending money this way is mutually beneficial to everyone, allowing us to give quality gifts while helping someone earn a living wage. It's also worth watching the documentary [The True Cost](#) (available on Netflix) together as a family. But don't come away from it with guilt; instead, see it as an invitation into a more beautiful and rich way of living in this world and loving others with the most basic decisions we make. Consider bringing in Christmas traditions from [around the world](#) to remind us that we're part of a global people and that our lives are connected.

It's one thing to strive with reckless abandon to accumulate more and more, never satisfied, and conveniently disregard how our consumption affects anyone else in the world. But it's another thing to reject the gifts God has put right in front of us. To ascetically deny ourselves pleasure and good things isn't what we're called to. He is a good Father who wants us to enjoy the good things He has made.

— How can I use Christmas to model giving to my kids?

Give generously with your money. But also, give yourself. Christmas isn't the gift of *something*, it's the gift of *someone*. Give gifts, but also give yourself to your family. Put aside

your to-do list and frenzied rushing about to get things done and just be together. Give your time. Give full attention to your teen as they tell you about something you're not the least interested in hearing about. And don't resent them when they're not grateful for all you're giving. Right now, your children are in a place of experiencing Christmas through receiving, and we have the privilege of giving it to them. This is a great reflection of God's unmerited gift of grace of which none of us is worthy and for which none of us is nearly grateful enough.

Give not from a place of guilt but from a place of abundance and generosity. Look at how much you've been given by looking beyond how the world defines abundance. We have an inheritance that is more than we could imagine or ask for!

— What do we actually do during the twelve days of Christmas?

There are a few specified days to commemorate during Christmastide. It might help to let them guide the rhythm of your days:

- **The Feast of St. Stephen**, December 26. Stephen is remembered for his giving, both in his care for the poor and in giving his life as the first martyr. What better way to follow the abundance of gifts received on Christmas Day than to spend the next day giving back to those less fortunate? There are a number of ways you could do this, even with something as simple as shopping the alternative Christmas giving options like [World Vision](#) and deciding as a family how to give. And listen to the song "[Good King Wenceslas](#)," which tells the story of this feast day.
- **Honoring the Apostle John**, December 27. In contrast to dying a martyr's death, John lived a full, long life. This is a day for thanking God for the life and health He's blessed us with, for however long that may be, and it's a day to celebrate the love He's given and that we extend to others. It's traditional to drink [wassail](#) or mulled wine on this day. Invite friends to gather with you for dessert and a toast!
- **Remembering the Holy Innocents**, December 28. This day commemorates the infants who died at the hands of King Herod (see Matthew 2:16-18.) We remember that in our present time, joy and grief are often intermingled. So we mourn those and other innocent lives that have been lost, but we also celebrate that the most humble and lowly and unseen lives matter. Jesus welcomed the littlest children into His kingdom. You could make this a day for celebrating your children (although arguably this might already happen way too much. . .) by letting them decide the activities and meals for the day. But definitely skip the English medieval practice of [beating your children](#) on this day.
- **Feast of the Holy Name/New Year's Day**, Jan 1. This day falls 8 days after Christmas, which is important because Hebrew babies were circumcised and given a name 8 days after they were born (see Luke 2:21.) It was already known that "Jesus" (a form of Joshua, meaning "God saves") would be His name. Jesus is referred to by many other names in the Bible, too. See how many you and your teens can come up with and then compare them to [this list](#). (You could make a competition out of it, if that's the way your family rolls.) It's interesting to discuss why Jesus was given each of these names. There are plenty of traditions already in place to celebrate the New Year, but as you reflect on the last year and look forward to the next, do so through the lens of these names that describe Jesus' character, who He is, what He's done, and what He's promised to do.

Other practical ways to celebrate Christmas:

- **Don't stop:** Leave up your decorations, tree, and nativity through the end of

Christmastide. (Makes putting up all those decorations worth it!)

- **Have fun:** If you've held off on the celebration during Advent, now is the time to go hog wild with all your favorite Christmas traditions and fun! Watch all the movies. Drink all the hot chocolate. Listen to all the music. Eat all the food.
- **Gifts:** Don't rush through the celebration. Instead of opening gifts all at once on Christmas Day, spread it out over multiple days! It's more fun that way.
- **Christmas Box:** One of our families at Axis has started a tradition of the Christmas Box. This is just a big cardboard box wrapped with wrapping paper, with something different in it each day of Christmas. This could be the method of spreading out your gift giving. Or what goes in the box could be a favorite food, fancy hot chocolate, tickets to a special event, a craft or activity to do as a family, a favorite Christmas movie, Christmas books to read out loud, etc. It doesn't have to be big and elaborate and planned (you can decide the night before what you want to put in it), but it helps extend the festivities throughout the whole Christmas season. If your kids are young, you can be the one coming up with the surprises. If you have older kids, assign different days to different members of the family.
- **Rest:** If your job and schedule allow it, make these days the ones you take off from work and other activities so you can truly rest.
- **Fellowship:** Gather with others. Host a party or just a casual dinner. People's schedules are often a lot more open after Christmas Day.
- **Light:** Light all five candles of your Advent wreath (or other candles) each day. Let light be a symbol in these twelve days of the true Light who has come into our world, illuminating our darkness. Let it remind you that we are called to be His light in this world.
- **Music:** Now is the time to bring out the joyful Christmas music! Sing the beautiful Christmas carols listed below. (We know you've already gotten a hefty dose of "Jingle Bells" and "Frosty the Snowman.") If you're not a musical family, gather around the computer and pull the songs up on YouTube and sing along! It might be goofy, but it might also become a good memory.
 - "What Child Is This?," "Hark The Herald Angels Sing," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks," "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," "O Come, All Ye Faithful."
 - If you liked Simple Advent, try this "[Simple Christmas](#)" Spotify playlist also curated by Tsh Oxenreider. "[Irish Country Christmas](#)" is also a solid choice, and "[Carols From King's](#)" will take you back to more traditional, choral roots.
- **Family Time:** At the very least take some time for your family to sit down and enjoy life together. Talk. Play games. If you haven't already heard of it, here's [a fun set of games](#) that can be a redeemed way of using our devices in a group setting. [Note: a few of these games have mildly inappropriate content, but there is a children's mode you can turn on.] If you want to start with just one game, [Drawful](#) is a good place to start.
- **Be a good sport:** Don't always force your teens to do things they hate. Ask them what they want to do all together. And then don't complain about what they choose.
- **Epiphany:** Have an Epiphany celebration! The season that follows Christmas is Epiphany, which begins on January 6. The message of Epiphany is Christ's revelation to the Gentiles, which began with His revelation to the magi when they came bearing gifts. Most of us are Gentiles, so this should definitely be cause for celebrating for us. It's fun to save one last gift for this day, because this is truly the day for gift-giving! Talk about what it means that we, by grace, are included in God's family.
 - One idea for younger children is to keep the magi out of your nativity. Each day of the twelve days of Christmas, hide them somewhere else in the house, until they finally arrive to visit and give gifts to Jesus on January 6.

- A meaningful Epiphany tradition is called “[chalking the door](#).” On your doorpost, write “20+C+M+B+18” (or whichever year it is) with chalk. “The crosses symbolize Christ. The three letters have a double meaning. They’re the initials for the traditional names of the Magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. And they’re an acronym for a Latin blessing, *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, ‘May Christ bless this house.’”
- Choose your favorite ethnic food to eat on Epiphany to help remember our unity in Christ with all believers across the globe.
- Epiphanytide lasts through the beginning of Lent (which starts on Feb. 14 in 2018.) Epiphany helps us remember that Christ was made known to us and is made known to others in and through us. As we live out this season of the Christian calendar and finish out the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany act of the drama, we can live into the ministry and work God has for us in whichever sphere of work and life we are part of. There is no secular/sacred divide. We are co-creators with Him in this world and all can be done to His glory.

— How do we deal with hard people around the holidays?

Hard people aren’t just in your crazy extended family. Sometimes your teens are those hard people. Sometimes *we* are the hard people. We can give grace because grace has been given to us. We can love others by giving them the freedom that we’ve been given. This is easier said than done, and sometimes it’s really, really complicated, but let’s not forget that the person across the table from us is a beloved image-bearer of God, too.

Also, let’s stop expecting perfection. Real life isn’t perfect. Real life has grumpy great-uncles and particular cooks and food allergies and babies who refuse to sleep, even on Christmas Eve. We want to live life in the big moments, in the holidays and the honeymoons and the excitement. We prefer “life with all the [dull bits](#) cut out.” But some years, even Christmas can be one of those dull bits. Daily, monotonous, familiar life is where we practice true faithfulness.

— How can I celebrate when Christmas just brings pain and sadness?

It is easy to feast when life is going well, when we aren’t facing tragedy or unemployment or illness or poverty. We rightly celebrate and thank God for our homes, for our health, for safety, for our food, for warm coats, for loving families, for meaningful work, for the abundance we’ve been given. All of these things are wonderful and worth thanking God for. Outside of God’s blessing and grace, we would have none of these. All good things come from His hand. But what do we do when all of this is gone? What do we do when Christmas arrives in a torrent of devastation, and it only pours salt on the wound of all that is lacking and all that is wrong in our lives? Or when it brings emotion and the heartache of missing those who are no longer here with us?

To think of ourselves as blessed when things are going well and lacking when they’re not will only lead to despair in the end. Because, inevitably, something will go wrong. We might hold

on as tightly as we can to the good things we have, but we have no power ourselves to keep our lives how we want them to be.

The world's version of celebration might have nothing to offer you this year. But there is a greater truth out there. True blessing isn't about what we possess, but rather about a relational reality. It's the overflow of a relationship of favor, which, by grace, is the relationship we have. We are in relationship with the One who desires our flourishing—flourishing beyond what we can fathom—and who desires truly abundant life for us—life beyond our imaginations. This means that hard, devastating things can be blessings because God can use them to draw us to Himself and to cause life and flourishing to spring up. On the other hand, things we consider good can be curses, when they make us to think we're doing all right on our own, or when they make us think that we've done something to earn what we've been given. **Blessing, in whatever form it comes, is anything God uses to reveal His unfathomable love to us.** In the midst of the darkest, most bleak of circumstances, Jesus was born. Light came into the darkness. There is hope, even when all looks hopeless.

Happiness is fleeting. Christmas doesn't mean you have to fake it and conjure up positive emotions. We can be real about the hurt and pain in our lives. Feasting in the midst of pain says something powerful to the world around us. Without Christ, we have nothing. And by having Christ, we have everything. When we seek God with our hearts, souls, and minds, we find not just things, but a Person; not just momentary pleasures, but eternal joy. Joy given as a gift, joy that no one can take away.

We gaze longingly toward the day when all happiness and joy will be ours to experience in full. But today, whether life feels more like feast or famine, we can rest in the One who not only gives us good things, but gave us Himself.

*“Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.”*

[Habakkuk 3:17-18](#)

*“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.”*

[Isaiah 9:2](#)

“A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices...”

Recommended Reading

[*Ancient-Future Time*](#) by Robert E. Webber

[*You Are What You Love*](#) by James K.A. Smith

[*Liturgy of the Ordinary*](#) by Tish Harrison Warren

keepingadvent.com/christmas-season

[*The Annotated Christmas Carol*](#) by Charles Dickens with notes by Michael Patrick Kearns

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