



FAMILY DEVOTIONS

REASONS FOR THE SEASON

24 Devotions to put the focus
back on Christ at Christmas



ADVENT ACTIVITIES

Kathy Hutto



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Scripture used for the Memory Verses comes from the KJV Bible.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. New York: American Bible Society: 1999; Bartleby.com, 2000.

Please visit Kathy's blog for more family devotions:

www.kathyhutto.wordpress.com

Disclaimer: Please be aware that websites can change. The sites included in this resource may or may not contain the content that they did when I posted them here. As always, use care when using the internet.

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Advent Ideas

The Reason Behind Writing This Book...

Last year, at Christmas, our family decided we wanted the focus to be 100% on Christ. I know how busy the season can be, so I wanted to have a plan upfront. I wanted to focus on one aspect of Christmas for each of the 24 days leading up to it. This resource includes 24 meaningful Family Devotions developed to fit into any busy schedule. With just 15 minutes a day, you can help your family discover Reasons to celebrate Christmas without forgetting Christ.

Listen to the Avalon song on Youtube, *The Reason We Sing*, and remember what the **Reason** for all that we do should be:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeFMZ0L4POc>

Note: Be sure to read over all the Family Devotions in advance. You will want to save some of your holiday decorating to go along with the Family Devotions. For example, there are certain days for decorating the tree, adding the tree topper, placing a poinsettia in your home, etc. Doing these activities in conjunction with the Family Devotions will make them so much more meaningful.

24 Reasons to Countdown Christmas

Reasons 1-8 are all about decorating and getting your home ready for the season

Reasons 9-14 sights around town that you will see at Christmastime

Reasons 15-18 are all about celebrating with family and friends

Reasons 19-24 center around *The Christmas Story*

There are Family Memory Verses for included for each week.

December 1

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Trees

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7 -9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

Pass around a Christmas ornament and have each family member tell about his/her favorite Christmas memory when the ornament is passed to him/her.

Discussion:

The Christmas tree is said to have originated in Germany. In fact, the word tannenbaum is a German word meaning Christmas tree. In 1570 a small tree was decorated with apples, nuts, dates, pretzels, and paper flowers and erected in a guild-house (like a club). The children were allowed to collect the treats from the tree on Christmas. Wax candles were added in the 18th century. Eventually, the tradition spread to different countries.

Toward the end of the 1800's, artificial Christmas trees were introduced. They, too, originated in Germany. Metal wire trees were covered with goose, turkey, ostrich, or swan feathers and often died green to look like needles. The Addis Brush Company created the first artificial-brush trees. They were a company that made toilet brushes and used that same machinery to make their Christmas trees! They patented their "Addis Silver Pine" in 1950.

Activity:

As a family, decorate the Christmas tree. Talk about where the ornaments came from. Discuss any handmade ornaments from the tree; who made them and when.

Prayer:

Pray for each person who has given or made an ornament that is hanging on your tree. Remember to continue to pray for them each time you see the tree.

Extra Activity:

Have each family member make an ornament to hang on the tree. This can be as simple as popsicle sticks painted green and glued at the corners to form a triangle (Christmas tree). Glue colorful sequins to the "tree" and attached a star at the top.

December 2

Theme: The Reason Behind the Treetop Star or Angel

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7-9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

Go outside and spread out a large quilt on the ground (or on your trampoline). Have everyone lie down and look at the stars. Say, "Tonight we will learn about a very special star."

Discussion:

Today many Christmas treetops are adorned with a large bow, Santa, an angel, or a star. The two most traditional tree toppers are the angel and star. The angel represents the angel that appeared to the shepherds, telling them of Jesus' birth. [There will be more about the shepherds on December 21.]

Read Luke 2:8-15. (Be sure to have every family member gets their own Bibles and finds the reference. This teaches familiarity with your Bible.)

The star represents the star that the wise men followed to find Jesus. [There will be more about the wise men on December 23.]

Read Matthew 2:1-12. (Have every family member find the reference in their own Bibles)

Activity:

Add the treetop angel or star to your Christmas tree on this night.

Prayer:

Have each person say a prayer thanking God for the star or angel at the top of your tree and for what it represents.

Extra Activity:

If you are like most families, the tree topper you use pre-dates your children's birth. Wouldn't it be nice to have a new topper this year? As a family, go shopping and pick out a new tree topper this year. Have everyone help with the selection of either an angel or star. Come home and proudly add the topper to your Christmas tree.

December 3

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Carols

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7-9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

Make a list of all the Christmas Carols that you know.

Discussion:

The word carol means a verse song with a refrain. A Christmas carol simply means a song with a Christmas theme. In France, these songs are called Noels. We have come to use this word in our country as well, to refer to Christmas songs.

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited for the first Christmas carols sung during a worship service. He is also credited with the first nativity display [You will learn more about the nativity on December 4.] He introduced carols during a Christmas Midnight Mass.

The first accounts of caroling door to door occurred in England in the 1840's. After Prince Albert married Victoria of England, it is said that the English peasants were eager to please the newly married couple. After reading in the newspaper that Prince Albert enjoyed Christmas carols, they started serenading him with them. It is said that the Methodists and Lutherans brought a modified version of this tradition to America.

Today, we can look in the newspaper and find many Christmas caroling events, not just for Christmas Eve, but throughout the holiday season.

Activity:

Begin playing Christmas songs in your home and car this week. Use a CD you already have, download songs from iTunes, or purchase a new CD of classic Christmas favorites. Have them playing softly in your home throughout the entire season. You could put a CD player in the kitchen, a room everyone in the family frequents often.

Prayer:

Pray for God to help you organize a caroling event that would help put the focus of the season on Christ this year.

Extra Activity: Organize a time of caroling. You could organize neighborhood families, church groups, or just your own family. Go door to door or visit a local nursing home to carol.

December 4

Theme: The Reason Behind Nativities

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7-9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

Show the box containing your family's nativity set. Have the children talk about what is in the box. What pieces will you pull from the box? See if you can name them all from memory.

Discussion:

A nativity is a depiction of the scene around the birth of Jesus as described in the Bible in Matthew and Luke.

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited for creating the first nativity scene in 1223. St. Francis was an Italian Catholic friar and preacher. He wanted to place the "emphasis of Christmas upon the worship of Christ rather than upon secular materialism and gift giving," so he staged a living nativity scene. Humans and animals were cast in the Biblical roles. This first nativity was staged in a cave near Greccio, Italy. Living nativities became very popular and within a hundred years every church in Italy was expected to have one. Live nativities were replaced by wax, stone, or plastic. Eventually, the nativity scene found its way to Western culture. There are still live nativities on display during the season. Many nativities include the wise men (or Magi), but according to the gospel of Matthew, they probably arrived when Jesus was around two years old and should not be present at the nativity. (Matthew 2:1-23)

Activity:

Have each family member participate in setting up a miniature nativity at a prominent place in your home.

Prayer:

Pray for each person who has given or made an ornament that is hanging on your tree. Remember to continue to pray for them each time you see the tree.

Extra Activity:

Visit a live nativity or create your own outside on your lawn.

December 5

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Stockings

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7-9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

What is a stocking? A stocking is a sock-shaped bag that is hung at Christmas time and filled with toys and treats on Christmas Eve.

Discussion:

There is a popular legend as to how the tradition got started. It goes as follows: Long ago there was a poor man who lived with his three daughters. It was tradition that the father would offer a monetary dowry to a future son-in-law when his daughter married. Since he was poor, he had no money to offer. A man named Saint Nicholas was passing through the village when he heard about this. He wanted to help, but knew the man would never accept charity. He decided to help in secret. He waited until it was night and crept through the chimney. He had three bags of gold coins which he placed in the stockings of the three girls, which had been hung on the mantel to dry. When they woke and found the money, they were so happy. The girls were able to get married. This led to the tradition of hanging stockings on the mantle.

According to the Guinness World Records, the world's biggest Christmas stocking was made in 2007, in London. It was made of over 6,000 squares of red knitting and measured 32.56m long, and 14.97m wide (heel to toe). It was filled with 1000 presents. The stocking was created as part of The Children's Society's knitting fundraising event. The presents were given to children in The Children's Society projects.

Activity:

Hang your stockings on the mantle tonight.

Prayer:

Have each family member say a prayer for the other members of the family whose stockings are on the mantel. Remember to pray for each other throughout the season, each time you pass by the stockings.

Extra Activity:

Purchase miniature stockings and fill with a mini candy canes. Deliver to your local nursing home.

December 6

Theme: The Reason Behind Poinsettia Plants

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7-9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

Have everyone look at a poinsettia and make up a new name for the plant. Tell them that today they will learn some names that this plant is called.

Discussion:

The first poinsettias were brought to our country by a man named Joel Roberts Poinsett. He was the first US minister from 1825 to 1830 to Mexico, where poinsettias were a wildflower. He began growing them in his South Carolina home and shipped them to horticulturalists all over the world. After about twenty years, they began to be resold in America as well. At first they were sold as small plants to be grown outside. In 1920, they began to be sold in pots for decorating inside the home.

How did this plant become known as a Christmas plant? There is a Mexican legend that says about three hundred years ago there lived a little girl named Pepita who came from a very poor family. It was tradition that on Christmas Eve everyone would bring a present and place it beside the nativity at church. Since she was poor, Pepita could not afford to buy anything. Her father told her, "Even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes." She gathered up a bunch of weeds from a field nearby and arranged them into a bouquet. She knelt and laid the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene. To her surprise the weeds bloomed with bright red flowers - poinsettias.

Poinsettias have been called fire flowers, Christmas flowers, and flowers of the Holy Night.

Activity:

Purchase a poinsettia plant in advance and have the family help you decide where to put it (perhaps on the fireplace hearth, on the kitchen counter, or atop a bookshelf)

Prayer:

Ask God to help you remember that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable to You.

Extra Activity: Read [The Legend of the Poinsettia](#) retold and illustrated by Tomie dePaola. Check it out from the library or purchase it in advance.

December 7

Theme: The Reason Behind Garland

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:7-9

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Discussion Starter:

Name places where you've seen garland used as decorations for the holiday season. (mall, dentist's office, church, etc.)

Discussion:

The custom of Christmas garland was brought to this country by American settlers. The garlands were used to decorate Christmas trees, mantels, doorposts, etc. They were also used to decorate churches, shops and hospitals. They were originally made from pine, spruce and cedar trees. Garlands were decorated with dried fruits, mosses, cornhusks, etc.

Activity:

Add garland you already have to your banister, mantel, doorposts, or other place in your home. Or...make a cranberry and popcorn garland for the tree. Have everyone help. This will make a lovely display and a great childhood memory for the kids.

Prayer:

Bring your garland making night to a close with a prayer, thanking God for this family time together.

Extra Activity:

You may choose to make additional garland to hang around your home. One idea is to make a paper chain garland to countdown Christmas. Make one link for each of the 17 remaining days until Christmas. Pull one chain off each day.

December 8

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Wreaths

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

Form a circle and play “ring around the rosey.” Give older kids permission to be “silly.” ☺

Discussion:

Wreaths were originally used in ancient Rome as a sign of victory. Many people believe that this is where the tradition of hanging wreaths on the door comes from.

The origins of Christmas wreaths are found in folk practices when Germanic peoples would gather wreaths of evergreen in the cold December darkness and light fires as a sign of hope for the coming spring.

By the 16th century, Catholics and Protestants throughout Germany used these symbols to celebrate advent (the four Sundays before Christmas, which lead up to the celebration of Christ’s birth). They would place the wreath flat on a table or hanging parallel with the floor. They contained four candles. They would light one each week, representing the four weeks of advent.

Wreaths are circular, representing eternity. They are made from evergreen which represents life, even in the middle of winter.

If wreaths are a sign of victory, how are we victorious because of what happened at Christmas? (Jesus was born to be the sacrifice for our sins so that we can have victory over sin and death when we accept His wonderful gift of salvation.)

This would be a great time to talk about salvation with any unsaved family members. Often young children have questions about baptism and how it relates. Some children even put off becoming saved because they are afraid to be baptized. Reassure your children and use this as a time for answering any questions.

Activity:

Hang your wreath on the door. You can use the one you already have, purchase a fresh, new one this year, or make one.

Prayer:

Pray that God would be at the center of all your holiday celebrations this season.

December 9

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Lights

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

Make a list of some clever inventions. For example, roller skates, electric can openers, computers, and Christmas lights.

Discussion:

The tradition of using candles to decorate a Christmas tree dates back to the middle of the 17th century. However, it was much later before the tradition, which first began in Germany, spread to Eastern Europe. Candles were added to tree branches with melted wax. Around 1890, candleholders were first used to hold the candles in the tree. Between 1902 and 1914, small lanterns and glass balls were used to hold the handles. In 1882, the first Christmas tree was lit using electricity. Edward Johnson lit a Christmas tree using eighty small electric bulbs in New York City. Johnson was an inventor who worked under the direction of Thomas Edison.

While Edison and Johnson were the first to create electric strands of light, Albert Sadacca was the first to see the potential in selling them. His family owned a novelty lighting company. Albert was a teenager when he suggested to his family that they sell brightly colored strands of lights to the public. This proved a good idea and a good seller. By 1920, Albert and his brothers had organized NOMA (National Outfit Manufacturers Association), a trade association linking several companies that sold Christmas lights, therefore cornering the market until the 1960's. Christmas lights became a million dollar market.

Activity:

Take a ride in the car and look at Christmas lights.

Prayer:

Thank God for wonderful inventions like Christmas lights. Thank Him for being the "light of the world."

December 10

Theme: The Reason Behind Candy Canes

Family Memory Verse: Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

Give everyone a candy cane and let them enjoy eating it tonight during your Family Devotional time together. Ask, what does it look like to you? (shepherd's staff...letter J for Jesus)

Discussion:

The origin of the candy cane dates back over 350 years ago. The original candy was straight and all white in color. The hook shape was added by a choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral in Germany in 1670. He is credited for bending the candy sticks into canes to look like a shepherds staffs and giving them to children to eat during the long Christmas services.

August Imgard, a German immigrant living in Wooster, Ohio, is credited with the practice of decorating a tree with candy canes. In 1847, he decorated a tree he had cut down by his house with paper ornaments and candy canes.

The peppermint flavored stripes were added around 1859. Red and white stripes were twisted around the white sticks of sugar.

In the 1920's Bob McCormack from Albany, Georgia started making and selling candy canes as a Christmas treat. His company, Bob's Candies, Inc., made them all by hand. They had to be pulled, folded, twisted and cut. His brother, Gregory Keller, who was a Catholic priest, invented a machine in the 1950's which could mass produce candy canes. This machine made Bob's Candies the biggest candy company in the world during that time.

Today the candy cane has much Christian symbolism. The *Legend of the Candy Cane* states that a candy maker from Indiana wanted to create a candy that would remind people about the real reason for Christmas. He said the white color stood for the pure, sinless life Jesus lived. The red color stood for Jesus' blood when He died on the cross for our sins. The shape looked like a J which stood for Jesus. If you turn it over, it looks like a staff which stood for Jesus, our shepherd.

Activity:

Add candy canes to your Christmas tree. Pass out small candy canes to neighbors & friends.

Prayer:

Ask God to help you remember the *reason* we celebrate Christmas each time you see a candy cane.

December 11

Theme: The Reason Behind Reindeer

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

See if you can name all the reindeer from the traditional *Twas the Night Before Christmas* story? Let each person have a turn.

Discussion:

The reindeer, also known as caribou, is a deer from Arctic and Subarctic regions. Today, they are mostly associated with animals that pull Santa Claus' sleigh. This idea came about after in 1823, when Clement C. Moore wrote a poem entitled, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. Today this poem is known as *Twas the Night Before Christmas*. The poem includes eight flying reindeer and their names.

In 1939, the most famous reindeer named Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer was introduced. Robert L. May wrote a story about this misfit reindeer in a booklet for the Montgomery Ward Department Stores. Later, his brother-in-law developed lyrics and a melody for the story, making it a song. The song was recorded by Gene Autry in 1949. It sold millions of copies in the first year.

Activity:

Read the poem on the next page which puts a Christian twist on the popular Christmas Reindeer.

Prayer:

Ask God to help you remember that Christ is the Reason for Christmas. Ask Him to help you show others the true meaning this year.



The First Christmas Reindeer

I am a Christmas Reindeer.
I was grazing on a hill
When an angel appeared overhead.
It seemed the world stood still.

Shepherds who had seen the sight
Passed by me as they sang,
We're going to see the Son of God,
Who will forever reign.

At long last, we had arrived.
Our journey led us to a trough.
There we beheld a wondrous sight,
Baby Jesus-wrapped in swaddling cloth.

I was so moved by what I saw.
I wanted all to know.
So I began to run and run,
But, my legs just seemed too slow.

Then suddenly my legs felt light.
I was floating through the air.
It seemed I was now flying.
All below just looked and stared.

I sang out as I flew around,
God's only Son's been born.
He came to save the world from sin,
To rescue sin-sick and forlorn.

This is the story of how I became
A deer with wings it seems.
I still fly around all over
And of His praise I sing.

Merry Christmas!

December 12

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Parades

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

Have younger children in the family parade around the house with noise makers, streamers, etc.

Discussion:

Perhaps the most famous Christmas parade actually happens on Thanksgiving Day. It's the Macy's Christmas Parade. The first parade was in 1924 and featured floats, clowns, live animals, and bands. In 1927, the first large balloons were added. The first balloon was Felix the Cat. The parade has been held every year since it began except from 1942-44, due to WWII. The parade was first televised in 1948, by NBC. Today, the parade features more than 10,000 participants and will be viewed by approximately 3.5 million live spectators, with another 50 million watching on television from home.

Activity:

Check your local newspaper and plan to attend the Christmas Parade as a family. Take along a thermos of hot cocoa and Styrofoam cups. Be sure to take a quilt to sit on and one for covering up.

Look for opportunities to share your quilt or cocoa and most especially the true message of Christmas with other spectators.

Prayer:

Ask God to give you an opportunity to share the true meaning of Christmas to spectators that cross your path during the Christmas parade. Ask Him to give you boldness to reach out to others for him.

December 13

Theme: The Reason Behind Gingerbread

Family Memory Verse: Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

Ask, what kind of house would you love to live in? (a mansion, a cabin, a beach house, etc.)

Discussion:

Gingerbread originated in Germany and was called Ledkuchen. It was made with honey and were more like a cake than a cookie. The introduction of the first gingerbread men is credited to Queen Elizabeth I, who would have gingerbread likenesses made of her important visitors. The origin of gingerbread houses is believed to have come from the Grimm Brother's tale of Hansel and Gretel. Their story described a house "made of bread with a roof of cake and windows of barley." Bakeries began making images of this house using gingerbread and icing. Tinsmiths began making cookie cutters in the shapes of animals or the traditional gingerbread men.

Activity:

Make gingerbread houses this week. A simple way to do this is cover a small milk carton with icing and graham crackers. Decorate with more icing and candy. Many grocery stores sell Gingerbread House Kits. You could purchase one of these and have the whole family help decorate it.

Prayer:

Thank God for the house that you live in. Ask Him to help those that are homeless in your country and for those living in horrible living conditions around the world.

Extra Activity:

Make an easy, traditional German Honey Cake. Use the internet to find a simple recipe for this.

December 14

Theme: The Reason Behind Nutcrackers

Family Memory Verse: Luke 2: 10-12

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Discussion Starter:

March around like soldiers. Bundle up and march around the perimeter of the house or just march around indoors.

Discussion:

Nutcrackers have been around at least since the time of the ancient Greeks. It is rumored that the Greek philosopher Aristotle invented the first lever-operated nutcracker around 330 B.C. But, the colorful nutcrackers we now associate with Christmas didn't exist until the 18th century, and were the product of German craftsmen.

In the 19th century, nutcrackers began being sold as children's toys in Christmas markets. The most popular designs during this time were harlequins and soldiers. One of these soldier nutcrackers became the protagonist of German writer, E.T.A. Hoffman's novel *The Nutcracker and the King of Mice*, which subsequently inspired Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and *The Nutcracker* ballet.

In America, the nutcracker as a collector's item first gained popularity in the 1950s, when American GIs returning from Germany brought the colorful nutcrackers home with them. During the same period, *The Nutcracker* ballet's popular success also sparked interest in the colorful wooden toy.

Today, two German manufacturers are the best-known nutcracker producers: Steinbach and Christian Ulbricht.

Activity:

Display your collection of Nutcrackers around your home or purchase one if you do not have any.

Rent and watch a version of *The Nutcracker Ballet* together as a family.

Prayer:

Thank God for the food he has provided for you most especially for the food provided by the trees and plants He created. Pray for soldiers who are serving our country.

Extra Activity:

Make Christmas cards to send to soldiers. Many churches will have a list of those serving.

December 15

Theme: The Reason Behind Traditions Around the World

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Ask, If you could visit any country, where would you go? Locate that place on a globe or world map.

Discussion:

Read the following ways that Christmas is celebrated around the world.

Venezuela-It is the custom in Caracas to roller skate to church. Many neighborhoods are close to busy streets, so skating is an easy way to get around. After attending church, Venezuelans dine on coffee and tostados. Venezuelans believe Jesus leaves gifts for them under the tree verses Santa Clause. They also receive gifts on Jan. 5th which is when they believe the Wise Men came to visit Jesus. They believe the Wise Men are still looking for baby Jesus, so if you leave out straw to look like a stable, the Wise Men will leave gifts.

China-In China, December 25, is not a legal holiday. The one percent of Chinese citizens who consider themselves Christians, usually privately observe Christmas. However, a cultural interest in this Western phenomenon has prompted more commercial Christmas decorations, signs and other symbolic items during December.

Germany-Christmas trees originated in German, so most houses have a decorated tree. Germans host a feast on Christmas Eve which continues on Christmas day. German children countdown the days until Christmas with Advent Calendars. Most consist of little wooden boxes with 24 tiny doors. One door is open each day leading up to Christmas. Inside the door is a small treat. Germans enjoy music during Christmas. In fact, *Silent Night, Holy Night* (Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!) was first heard in Germany in 1818.

England-Homes and businesses are decorated beautifully. Churches and Cathedrals hold masses, with many people attending a Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, or a service on Christmas morning. In London and the provinces, a number of theatres have special Christmas pantomimes for kids, not based on Biblical tales, but on stories such as Little Red Riding Hood and Aladdin. The day after Christmas is called Boxing Day, named so because boys used to go around collecting money in clay boxes. When full, the boxes were smashed open. Boxing Day remains a bank holiday in England.

Mexico-Nativity scenes are popular in Mexican homes. They usually add the figure of baby Jesus to the scene on Christmas. At midnight on Christmas Eve, fireworks, ringing bells, and whistles announce the birth of Christ. Families attend a Midnight Mass. They call this Mass of the Rooster, because it is said that the only time a rooster crowed at midnight was when Jesus was born. After Mass, families return to their homes for a feast of tamales, rice, etc.

Ask, How do you think other countries would describe the way Americans celebrates Christmas?

Activity: Learn about other ways people around the world celebrate.

Prayer: Pray for people around the world. Pray for missionaries serving in these countries.

December 16

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Cards

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Buy a box of Christmas Cards from your local Dollar Store. Cut them apart to make puzzles. Have everyone try to put these card puzzles together. (Remember to save cards you

Discussion:

Christmas greetings were originally sent via handwritten letters. The first Christmas cards for sale commercially were created by artist John Calcott Horsley. He was a respected illustrator from London. In 1843, he was commissioned by Sir Henry Cole to create the card. Cole was a wealthy British businessman. He wanted to bring awareness to the need to help the poor. The card featured men and women around a table with a poor child drinking in the center. The card read, A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You.



Louis Prang became the first printer to sell cards in America. A few years before, in 1864, he had visited Europe to learn about cutting-edge German lithography. He returned and began creating high quality reproductions of major art. It was in 1873, that he began creating greeting cards and then began selling Christmas cards the following year. He is sometimes known as the “Father of the American Christmas card.”

Activity:

Fill out your Christmas cards, allowing each child to sign his/her own name. Send them out this week.

Prayer:

Pray for each person who will receive a card from your family.

December 17

Theme: The Reason Behind Christmas Cookies

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Ask, What is your favorite kind of cookie? Allow time for each family member to answer.

Discussion:

Cakes of all shapes have been a part of Christmas traditions for a long time. Christmas cookie roots can be traced back to Medieval European recipes for biscuits that were made from ingredients such as cinnamon, ginger, pepper, almonds, and dried fruit. These were more Christmas biscuits than cookies. German gingerbread was probably the first cookie associated with Christmas.

The earliest examples of Christmas cookies in America were introduced by Dutch settlers in the 17th century. In 1871 cookie cutters from Germany became available to American markets. These cookie cutters depicted images suitable for hanging on the Christmas tree with a small string.

Read 1 John 4:11-12.

How could you use Christmas cookies to show love to others?

Activity:

Bake Christmas cookies together to give as gifts for your children's Sunday School teachers, friends, extended family members, neighbors, etc.

Prayer:

Pray that God would impress on your heart someone that He would like for you to give a box of homemade Christmas cookies to.

Extra Activity:

Host a cookie decorating party or a cookie exchange with your child's friends.

December 18

Theme: The Reason Behind Gift Giving at Christmas

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Ask, Name the most favorite gift you've ever received? Allow each family member to respond. Explain that today we will learn about three special gifts and why we give gifts at Christmas today.

Discussion:

One possible origin that created our modern day tradition of gift giving came from stories about a man named Saint Nicholas. He was born to a wealthy family in Patara, Lycia. His parents died and he inherited a great deal of money. He didn't spend it, but instead used it to help others. (See Dec. 5, for more on this.)

Another possible origin came from the Biblical stories about the Wise Men who brought gifts to Jesus. Read Matthew 2:11. The Bible doesn't say how many Wise Men there were, but it does specify that there were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold - show a wedding ring or other piece of gold jewelry to describe this precious metal
Frankincense – when burnt it emitted a fragrant odor (Mal. 1:11; Song of Songs 1:3)
Myrrh – was used in embalming (John 19:39-40) and as a perfume (Esther 2:12; Ps. 45:8; Prov. 7:17)

Giving gifts at Christmas have been a tradition for some time. Family and friends exchange presents. Many people also use this time to show appreciation to teachers, co-workers, etc. by presenting these acquaintances with gifts.

Activity:

Make homemade gifts to give to friends, co-workers, and teachers. A great gift idea is a Question Jar which contains conversation starters for family dinnertime.

Prayer:

Thank God for the greatest gift ever given – JESUS!

Extra Activity:

Read the article, "Did Three Wise Men Give Their Gifts on the First Christmas?" on the Answers in Genesis website.

<http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2010/12/21/wise-men-give-their-gifts>

December 19

Theme: The Reason Behind John the Baptist's Birth

Family Memory Verse:

Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Ask, What items do you need to get ready for swimming? (swimsuit, goggles, sunscreen, etc.)

Repeat with other activities: soccer, church, etc.

Discussion:

It is important to be prepared. That's why God sent John the Baptist to help prepare the way for the coming Savior.

Read Luke 1:5-22, which tells how God sent an angel to tell Zacharias and Elizabeth about John's birth.

Ask, Why do you think Zacharias didn't believe? (He thought Elizabeth was too old to have a baby.)

Ask, What happened to Zacharias because he did not believe? (He could not speak.)

Read Luke 1:56-64, which tells about how John is given his name. (Note: In Luke 1:13, the angel told Zacharias to name the baby John.)

Before Jesus' ministry began, many people had already heard John preach and their hearts were prepared for Him.

Old Testament prophets also foretold of Jesus' birth. Read the following accounts:

Isaiah 9:6-7

Micah 5:2

Activity:

Allow each family member to make a popcorn snowman and give him a name.

<http://www.thrivingfamily.com/Features/Magazine/2011/advent/popcorn-snowmen.aspx>

Prayer:

Pray for your aunts and uncles and cousins.

December 20

Theme: The Reason Behind The Journey to Bethlehem

Family Memory Verse: Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Provide two suitcases and have a relay to see who can pack their suitcase with the following items: shirt, pants, socks, underwear, comb, Bible. Repeat, giving each child a chance to play. You could use a stop watch to calculate who “packs” the quickest. Say, Today we will hear about a trip that Mary and Joseph took.

Discussion:

Read Luke 2:1-5.

Why did Mary and Joseph have to take a trip? (Caesar Augustus issued a law that everyone should go to their home towns for a census.) A census means to enter into public records the names of men, their property and income. He wanted to tax people fairly.

Joseph and Mary’s trip involved much more than packing a suitcase and jumping in the car. They needed to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which was around 70 miles. Joseph probably would have traveled on foot and Mary on a donkey, but the Bible doesn’t specify these details. It would take us about an hour and 10 minutes to make this trip in a car. It took nearly a week for Mary and Joseph to make the trip.

Look at the map of Mary and Joseph’s journey:

<http://s196.photobucket.com/albums/aa23/holymusic55/Holidays%20and%20Special%20Occasions/Christmas/Advent/?action=view¤t=MapofjourneyofMaryandJosephfromNaza.jpg&mediafilter=images>

Ask, Where do you think Mary and Joseph slept during their journey? (They would have to camp)

Activity:

Put blankets and pillows on the floor and pretend to camp out in the living room. Watch the video, “Bethlehem: The Real Story” at the following link:

<http://www.thrivingfamily.com/Features/Magazine/2011/advent/bethlehem-real-story.aspx>

Prayer:

Pray for an upcoming trip you may have to visit family over the holidays. Pray for traveling mercies for others you know.

December 21

Theme: The Reason Behind the Shepherds' Visit

Family Memory Verse: Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Provide a flashlight for everyone in the family. Cut out the shape of an angel (5 inches high) from dark construction paper. Cut one for each family member. Turn off the lights and explain that the story we will hear happened at night.

Discussion:

Read Luke 2:8-14, by flashlight.

When you get to verse 9, shine the flashlight beam across your angel to create a large shadow on the wall.

When you read verse 13, have everyone project their angels on the wall.

The "flashlight idea" above came from: Thriving Family 2011 Advent Calendar

<http://www.thrivingfamily.com/Features/Magazine/2011/advent/~link.aspx?id=C702153C5A414EEF91AE51F719D65E6C&z=z>

Read Luke 2:15-20.

Why do you think the shepherds, "came with haste?" (vs. 16)

What did the shepherds do after they had visited with baby Jesus? (Re-read vs. 17, 18, & 20...they told everyone about what they had seen and heard; they praised glorified and praised God)

Ask, Are we excited to share the news about Jesus birth with others? Have we stopped to praise and glorify Him this season?

Activity:

Sing Christmas songs together.

Prayer:

Pray a prayer of praise to God. Ask Him to help you share the news of Jesus' birth and the reason for His coming with others.

December 22

Theme: The Reason Behind the Christmas Star & the Wise Men's Visit & When

Family Memory Verse: (See if you can say all the verses learned this month.)

(7) And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (8-9) And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (10-12) And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. (13-14) And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Cut out star shapes from yellow construction paper and secretly tape one to the wall in each room in your home. (A better idea would be to purchase those glow in the dark, plastic stars and affix with painter's tape) Give each child a flashlight and turn off all the lights. Have them go from room to room in search of the star in each room.

The "star idea" above came from: Thriving Family 2011 Advent Calendar

<http://www.thrivingfamily.com/Features/Magazine/2011/advent/~link.aspx?id=C702153C5A414EEF91AE51F719D65E6C&z=z>

Discussion:

Read Matthew 2:1-12

The Wise Men or Magi were distinguished men from the East who came to honor Jesus with gifts. The Bible says in Matthew 2:9, that the star stood over where the young child was. Scholars believe that Jesus was a child of possibly the age of two when the Wise Men visited.

For a more in-depth look at the Christmas Star, please read the Answers in Genesis article, "What was the Christmas Star," at the link below.

<http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/nab2/what-was-the-christmas-star>

The Wise Men presented Jesus with three gifts. For this reason, some people believe there were only three Wise Men; however, there may have been more than that. The Bible doesn't say how many were there.

Ask, What were the gifts that the Wise Men gave Jesus? (gold, frankincense, and myrrh)

Activity:

We know the wise men were wealthy because of the gifts they brought, but the Bible doesn't say they were kings. Perhaps they wore crowns, but we can't be sure. One thing we do know for sure is that they brought gifts fit for a king and that Jesus is the King of Kings. Visit Burger King and ask for crowns. Turn the crowns inside out and provide items to decorate.

Prayer:

Ask God to help you seek Him and point others to His gift of Salvation.

December 23

Theme: The Reason Behind Jesus' Birth

Family Memory Verse:

(See if you can say all the verses learned this month.)

(7) And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (8-9) And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (10-12) And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. (13-14) And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Show pictures taken when your children were just born. If you saved the outfit they wore home from the hospital or the cap the hospital placed on them at birth, be sure to show your kids these items.

Discussion:

Read Luke 2:6-7.

The Bible says in vs. 6, that “while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” It doesn’t specify whether they had just gotten into town or not. However, many modern Christmas programs and church plays portray it that way.

The Bible goes on to say in vs. 7, that she “wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” Perhaps there was no room for them due to the many people who were in town for the census.

You may choose to read the Answers in Genesis article, *Born in a Barn*, for more insight into where Jesus was born. <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2010/11/30/born-in-a-barn>

What exactly are swaddling clothes? According to Strong’s Concordance, the Greek word used for swaddling clothes is *sparganoō*, from the root word *sparganon*, which means to wrap with strips. Mary wrapped Jesus securely in strips of cloth.

The Bible says that Mary laid the baby in a manger. A manger is a trough for feeding animals. Perhaps Mary put straw in the manger to make it softer for Jesus.

Activity:

Show how to swaddle a baby doll. Have a race to see who can do it the fastest. For instructions see the following site:

<http://www.parents.com/baby/care/newborn/swaddling-your-baby-the-quick-wrap/>

Explain that when babies are born, nurses at the hospital wrap them securely in a blanket. This is called swaddling and is believed to help them sleep better.

Prayer:

Parents should lay hands on each of their children, thanking God for each of them, and praying individually for each of them. Children, in turn, can pray for parents.

December 24

Theme: The Reason Behind The Christmas Story

Family Memory Verse: Luke 2:7-14

(See if you can say all the verses learned this month.)

(7)And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (8-9) And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (10-12) And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. (13-14) And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Discussion Starter:

Prepare a cup of hot cocoa for everyone in the family. Put a large quilt beside the tree.

Discussion:

While everyone drinks cocoa and sits on the quilt, read the Christmas Story from the Bible or a favorite illustrated story book.

The Christmas story can be found in the Bible in Luke 2:1-20, and Matthew 1:18-25.

Activity:

Prepare to have a Happy Birthday Jesus party for tomorrow (Christmas). Bake a cake. Prepare punch and refrigerate. Make other finger foods like pigs in blankets, etc.

Prayer:

Thank God for His wonderful gift of Jesus!

Note: Tonight when everyone is in bed, take the baby Jesus figure from your nativity and wrap it up. Place this gift in front of all the other presents under the tree. Have the children open it first to remind them that **Jesus is the Best Gift of All**.

The "gift idea" above came from: Thriving Family 2011 Advent Calendar

http://www.thrivingfamily.com/Features/Magazine/2011/advent/~link.aspx?_id=C702153C5A414EEF91AE51F719D65E6C&_z=z

Advent Ideas

Christmas Coloring Book:

Each page has a different coloring sheet to help children think about the meaning of Christmas. When all put together, kids will have a Gospel-centered art project in to celebrate the season.

<http://ministry-to-children.com/advent-coloring-book/>

Create an Advent Wreath:

Purchase or make a wreath by fastening evergreen branches into a circle. Place 5 candle holders within the greenery – add 3 purple, 1 rose, and 1 white candle to the holders. Light one candle each night for a week during your family devotional in this order: 1st purple (hope), 2nd purple (preparation), 3rd rose (joy), 4th purple (love), 5th white (Christ..spotless lamb of God). Continue to light the previous candle and an additional each week. At the end of the five weeks, all the candles will be lit.

For meanings of the candles, visit:

<http://livinghopeomaha.wordpress.com/about-living-hope/bible-stud/the-meaning-of-the-advent-wreath/>

What God Wants for Christmas book and nativity set:

This has been a family favorite of ours during the years our children were younger. For the seven days leading up to Christmas, my husband would read a short dialogue from the story book provided and then would let each child take turns each night opening up the little gift that came with the set. It also comes with a cardboard nativity background. By the end of the seven days, all the ceramic characters are in place. This set costs \$21.99 at Christianbook.com.

http://www.christianbook.com/what-wants-christmas-interactive-nativity-children/9781602004283/pd/04283X?item_code=WW&netp_id=944673&event=ESRCG&view=details

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