

Traditions and Opportunities

For the first several years of my life, our holiday traditions were rather typical—we put up a Christmas tree each year, sent out Christmas cards, and exchanged presents. Over the years, however, we have abandoned these traditions and began other more unusual traditions in an effort to take advantage of the opportunity the season provides to reflect on Christ's birth.

I still remember the delight I felt as a little five year old when a friend brought over a big paper grocery sack filled with something she called "Advent Bags." Each small paper bag contained a scripture, a paragraph or two about the scripture, a prayer, and a small gift that reinforced the scripture reading.

Every day during the month of December, we opened one of these little bags. My brother and I, then only 5 and 2, could hardly contain our excitement over opening each new bag. What would be inside today? We would wonder. One day the bags contained a pack of Lifesavers to remind us that Jesus was our life saver; another day we received a little lamb sticker to remind us of the shepherds that came and worshiped Jesus.

The "Advent Bags" only took five or ten minutes at the most each day. Yet, without us realizing it, they were helping draw us back to the true meaning of Christmas. As we read a portion of the Christmas story each day, our hearts grew more and more grateful for God's great gift of Jesus.

When we grew older, we began making "Advent Bags" for those family and friends we knew with younger children. This provided a wonderful opportunity to take advantage of the season and share the gospel with others. Since I liked to write, I was usually in charge of writing the short devotionals. My mom would then sit down and figure out what little gift we could stick inside the bags to help reinforce the readings. Then we'd all head out from store to store hunting down the supplies we needed. The bags were a lot of work, yet also a tremendous blessing. The entire month of November became a time of looking at the Christmas story as we prepared these bags.

During the month of December, we began picking a special theme to study in our Bible time. One year our theme was Heaven and Jesus' eternal rule. Another year we looked at Jesus as the Bread of Life. One December we read the *Miracle of Christmas* by John MacArthur.

The "Advent Bags" and December devotionals helped us reflect throughout the month about the glorious gift God had given us in Jesus. By the time Christmas rolled around, we felt like singing with the angels for joy. Jesus—the King of kings—our Deliverer—had been born!

We also discovered that decorations provided a good opportunity to take advantage of the Christmas season. We began by correlating our tree decorations with our devotional readings. Then we decided that, instead of doing a tree, we would try to come up with a decoration that would better help us appreciate the incredible gift God had given us in His Son.

Our decorations from then on often varied from year to year. One time we created a throne by covering a chair in gold cloth and putting crown on the seat. Another year we made a wreath on the names of Jesus. Our living room once contained a gigantic, gold wrapped present out of which emerged Jesus' attributes written on scarlet ribbon, while our wood-burning stove was once covered in gold and decorated with an old scroll to

represent the Old Testament prophecies, a manger scene, a wooden cross, and a crown. The last several years our front yard has hosted a full size wood manger that my brother built as well as a simple wood cross.

Not only did putting together these decorations cause us to think about who Jesus is and what He has done, but all month long they challenged us in our Christian walk. I remember being convicted often the year we did the throne that I needed to stop trying to rule my own life and days and simply surrender to Jesus. Our decorations helped remind us all month that Jesus—the baby in the manger—was our Immanuel, Savior, and Ruler.

Christmas day itself changed perhaps more than anything else over the years. When I was about eleven, we decided to stop the gift opening/giving tradition (we felt like this was distracting our hearts from God's great gift). Since we no longer had the presents to deal with, Christmas became free to really focus on the gift God has given in Jesus. We still wanted to celebrate and rejoice in what God had done, so we began the "tradition" of doing different special activities each Christmas. For example, one year my brother and I dressed up in old sheets and acted out the Christmas story while my dad read it. Another time my mom hid stars around the house with scripture verses and clues for us all to follow. Yet another time we made little gifts for Jesus and wrote Him a card, giving Him our specific fears/desires/plans. It never ceases to amaze me what new activity the Lord gives us to do when we ask Him.

Enough about Christmas at our house. Let me end by simply encouraging you to take a few minutes this year to ask the Lord how you can truly take advantage of the Christmas season. The ideas He will give you and the traditions you will form may be very different than those our family has adopted. But may each one of us seek to make the most of the opportunity Christmas provides to grow closer to our Savior and Lord.

--Katherine Loop

"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."

Ephesians 5:15,16 NIV