

A LULLABY FOR TALITHA
Sung to the tune of "If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee"

*Come rest your head and nestle gently,
And do not fear the dark of night;
Almighty God keeps watch intently
And guards your life with all his might.
Doubt not his love nor power to keep;
He never fails nor does he sleep.*

JOHN PIPER

FIVE

“EVERYDAY” AND THE ULTIMATE



GOD'S CLASSROOM

Can Daddy tuck me in? Please? Please? Please? I already brushed my teeth and went to the bathroom." Talitha throws herself onto my lap and smothers me with a hug that's meant to plead her case.

"Sure." I finally get a word in—the word she wants.

The squeeze tightens. I'm struck by a glancing kiss and released. She turns to her dad.

"Daddy! Will you take me up on your back?"

"Stand on the sofa and hold onto my neck."

They disappear up the stairs, but their voices remain audible as she's tossed onto her bed and tucked under her covers.

"Oh no!" Her laughter ends. "Where's Christopher?" In the moment of silence, I know her daddy is reaching over to find this week's favorite baby in the dolly crib and putting him in Talitha's arms.

"Daddy, will you sing me a song?" And the old familiar hymn tune settles around her, but now with new words from Daddy.

On cue, just as the last word is fading, Talitha begs, "Bless me, Daddy. Bless me."

The deeper voice is low now. I can't make out the words, but I've heard them many times before:

*"The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace . . ."
and someday [From downstairs, I hear a giggle] a godly husband!"*

Talitha's laughter erupts. The low voice speaks a quiet word. Then there's silence, after just one more outbreak. "Leave the door cracked, Daddy!"

Talitha may have the impression she's stringing Daddy along, postponing bedtime. But actually she knows exactly what to expect, what to ask for, because Daddy is following the routine he's planned for saying good night to his daughter. The script is the same every night.

We can only guess how much Talitha is soaking up at bedtime as she goes to sleep, tucked in by the love of her parents, the security of her home, and the blessing of God. We pray that the regularity and repetition and consistency of this and other routines are being used by God to shape her foundation, her assumptions, about the steadiness and dependability of God.

LEARNING WHAT THEIR PARENTS THINK IS IMPORTANT

Our homes are the universities where our children learn about the world and how to live. What kind of basic "courses" are we offering them? As Christians, we want God to be the core of our curriculum. We want our children to be learning to know God and relate to him. God has given us his Word to help us and our children know him. And he has taught us to pray so that we can have a constant relationship with him.

LEARNING THAT GOD'S WORD IS IMPORTANT

God's Word is the way God has given us to know him, our only source of life and happiness. You want to know what to do to make sure your children know the importance of God's Word? It's simple, though it seems to be one of the hardest things for families actually to do. The answer is family devotions.

Family devotions is a good example of the need to plan. It won't "just happen," at least not regularly. Someone needs to have decided when, where, what to read, who will read, and how to know what to pray for. Perhaps before Dad calls the family together, he takes five or ten minutes to look at the Bible passage and think of its main points and a couple of questions the family might ponder.

Children need basic Bible knowledge and theological understanding that develops with that knowledge. We've always thought it was important for our children to be familiar with the words and sounds of the Bible itself. So, whatever their ages, we've always had a daily time of reading directly from the Bible. That's often a time for theological conversations as they grow in their understanding. This is prime time for learning to know God's beauty, holiness, purity, sovereignty, goodness, mercy, faithfulness, wisdom, justice, wrath, and love. And it is prime time for teaching how God wants us to live.

The Bible offers everything we want most deeply for our children. Paul tells Timothy (2 Timothy 3:14-17) what he can receive from God's Word:

- wisdom
- salvation through faith in Jesus Christ
- teaching
- reproof
- correction
- training in righteousness
- competence
- equipment for every good work

2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

¹⁴As for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good

In other words, as Paul summarizes it, children need teaching from the Bible so they can grow into men and women of God. That's what we long for on their behalf and what God offers through his Word.

A catechism can be a helpful tool. Its question-and-answer format takes a family systematically from "Who made you?" through "Does Adam's sin affect us?" to "What is heaven?" and all the basics in between. With Talitha we've used *My First Book of Questions and Answers*.²

For the younger children, we like to read through a Bible storybook. This helps them come to recognize the main biblical characters and their stories and to grasp basic chronology.

The evening devotional time is when our family prays together. What an encouragement it is for a child to know that his parents and siblings are praying for him! And how good it is when a child learns how to talk to God while still young. He learns to pray just as he learns most things, first by hearing others do it and then by trying it himself. For a while, learning will probably mean echoing Mom or Dad phrase by phrase in a simple prayer, but soon he'll be asking to "do it by myself."

We don't forget to eat, and we feel icky if we don't remember to brush our teeth. How wonderful it is when family worship is just as normal a part of the day—so that the day is uncomfortable and off-kilter without it.

LEARNING WHO GOD IS

A child is learning about God all week, but there is something focused and intense about being with God's people to worship in a particular place on a particular day. God knew what we needed when he inspired the words of Hebrews 10:24-25, admonishing us to meet together.

Who can measure all that a child learns by gathering regularly with God's people? There is the Word of God itself, the proclamation from the pulpit and the teaching in classes. That's the most important thing, but there's more. One small thing for our family was that we never had to teach Talitha the days of the week. She learned them by their function. First she knew Sunday, the day that

anchors all the rest. Then Wednesday, when we eat supper at church and she has class with her friends. Then Saturday, the day we get ready for Sunday. Then Tuesday and Friday, the mornings Daddy's at church for early prayer when she gets up. Then Thursday, Daddy's day off. And that leaves Monday.

HEBREWS 10:24-25

²⁴Let us consider how to stir up one another to good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Of course, there are more significant, though intangible, effects. We've been thankful for leadership and learning opportunities our children have had with their peers and adults in classes and youth group. During Sunday morning worship, though, they always sit with the family, even the teenagers. We worship together. Perhaps the children haven't always understood why, but my husband and I wanted our unity to say to our children and to others, "We are a family together before God. We depend on him for our lives, and we come before him together as part of the body of Christ."

This brings up the need to train young children to sit through church services. I started easing mine into the habit when they were about three. That meant sitting on the end of an out-of-the-way pew so we could slip out if we needed to. We knew that the best way for a child to learn how to worship is to see Mom and Dad worshipping. We wanted our children to be part of the whole congregation as soon as they and we could manage it. Yes, it's different for different children. And, yes, Mom's and Dad's worship is pretty distracted for a while. But that's what parents do: We live a less-than-ideal (by some standards) life for a few years so we can bring our children up to be adults with us. (For thoughts about this, see Appendix—"The Family: Together in God's Presence," p. 108.)

LEARNING HOW TO RELATE TO GOD

Relating to God Through Personal Devotions

"What do you think I am? A dog? Coming against me with sticks and stones! C'mere, kid! I'm gonna feed you to the birds!" Three-year-old Abraham, in terry cloth robe and dishtowel head covering, plastic sword in hand, growled Goliath's challenge.

Quickly he threw aside the sword and faced the other direction, becoming David, grasping his imaginary sling. "You come to me with a sword and a spear, but I come to you in the name of the Lord!"

This "reality" form of make-believe grew out of Abraham's daily morning Bible time. He couldn't read yet, and so he listened to Bible stories on tape, filling his mind and imagination with the Lord who fights for his people.

We stuck "Talitha's Morning List" to the fridge with a magnet as soon as she could *try* to read it. Each morning after Talitha has taken care of things, including "make up bed, dirty clothes down chute, breakfast, feed Sable, vitamins, brush teeth," she comes to "Bible time." At this point, she picks up her Bible and goes to a cozy corner by herself to read and pray. She knows we won't interrupt her during this quarter hour. This habit with God's Word began for her, as it did for her brothers, before she could read. Like them, she listened to Bible stories from cassettes or CDs.

It takes only a few seconds of thought to realize that it is smarter to get a three-year-old started with good lifetime habits than to spring a new regimen on a teenager. One old saying is, “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.” Wise Solomon said with the authority of Scripture: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). Why would we wait to train up our children in this essential discipline? Do we think younger children don’t yet need time alone with God?

That’s one of the great values of God-centered traditions: A child is learning the habits he will need as an adult. When we train our children in godly patterns, godly traditions, we’re helping them get ready to move with responsibility into adulthood. I can’t guarantee that my children will move seamlessly from the “Bible time” I schedule for them as children into personal devotions on their own initiative as teenagers and adults. But the steadiness of a daily childhood habit is a good basis for future disciplined living.

Relating to God Through Other Prayer

“Please protect us as we travel today,” we prayed before we left the motel.

Hours later a sudden, raucous clanking drove us to the road’s shoulder, miles from the nearest exit. Abraham was only ten, but watching us peer under the hood, he knew what to do. “I think we should pray.” And so our family stood with heads bowed, whipped by the gusts of speeding traffic, and asked God to help us.

When we opened our eyes, a pickup had stopped. The driver was a mechanic who diagnosed the problem in a moment—our water pump was shot. How would we get a new one? Everything was closed by now, and we had no transportation anyway. No problem. He drove to the twenty-four-hour truck stop where he worked, got the part, brought it back, and installed it right there beside the freeway.

On the road again, we thanked Abraham for pointing us toward God, “a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). And we thanked God for answering our roadside prayer for help.

“But what about our prayer at the motel?” Abraham’s daddy asked. “Why didn’t God answer *that* prayer when we asked for protection?” By the time we found that night’s motel, we were still discussing how God works through our prayers. We realized we had even greater things to thank him for, because he had shown himself to us more clearly than if nothing had happened.

He *had* kept us safe—only the car was broken. He had reminded us to pray, giving us the privilege of leaning on him for help. He brought us a mechanic with ability, with access to the part we needed, and with time and willingness to help.

That also gave time for conversation with the man about our amazing God and the way he works.

Before we slept, we knew our prayers would be bigger in the morning, because God always has more to show us than we know to ask for. We knew more about God because we had talked with our children about God when we were driving along the freeway, today’s version of “walking by the way” (Deuteronomy 11:19).

Relating to God Through Mealtime Prayer

Maybe the prayer habits in your family are sketchy. If so, perhaps the first step in getting regular would be to give thanks before all your meals. It’s easy to flop down at the table and dig right in, to take it for granted that we always have food and to forget that it all comes from God. But remember, God doesn’t like to be taken for granted.

As we Pipers gather at the table, we sit (usually not very quietly) until everyone’s there. After so many meals together, no one has to tell anyone what to do next. In one movement each of us stretches both hands out to the ones on each side. We grasp hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes. Then we take our next cue from my husband. He might begin to thank God for the meal. He might ask someone else to give thanks. But most often he begins one of the family mealtime prayers we’ve used for years. By the third word, we’re all with him, praying out loud together.

Without spelling it out, mealtime prayers remind us three times a day that God is there, filling our needs and hearing our prayers. As we give thanks, we are acknowledging that we’d have nothing without him: “Every good gift [including food] and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17).

PIPER FAMILY MEALTIME PRAYERS

Morning

Our Father, every day you give
The food by which our bodies live.
For this we thank you from our heart
And pray that as we this day start,
You might allow our eyes to see
Your endless generosity.
And grant that when we thus are filled,
We may do only what you’ve willed.

Midday

We’re grateful, Father, for this hour
To rest and draw upon your power,
Which you have shown in sun and rain
And measured out to every grain.
Let all this food which you have made
And graciously before us laid
Restore our strength for these next hours
That you may have our fullest powers.

Evening

How faithful, Father, is your care;
Again as always food is there.
Again you have set us before
A meal we pray will mean much more
Than single persons filled with food;
Let there be, Lord, a loving mood.
And as you make our bodies new,
Come now and feed our oneness too.

JOHN PIPER

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTS' PRAYERS

Then there's another kind of prayer that our families depend on. That's the prayer we have together as a couple. We might think that isn't a family tradition that has anything to do with the kids, since it concerns what we say to God when the children aren't around. If we thought that, we'd be wrong. We're talking about super-glue—the bond that makes marriages stronger, families stronger.

When my husband counsels couples in trouble, he asks them, "Do you pray together regularly?" Often they look down, shuffle their feet, and say something like, "Well, not really very regularly." I'll admit, there've been times when we two have been so angry or frustrated or discouraged with each other that when it's time to

pray together, we don't know how we can do it. But you know what seems even more impossible? *Not* praying together. It's such an ingrained habit that it's blessedly inconceivable not to pray together. That's what we need—prayer that we can't *not* do together. We need a *habit* of prayer so that when praying together is hard, it's even harder to say, "Let's not."

The bonding that happens in *our* prayers is a gift from God to our children. And there are other gifts to them in our prayers. If we both pray for each other every day, our prayers are one of God's ways of granting our children better parents. And we must never forget, each of our children needs us to pray for him or her every day. Then as the Lord adds daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, and grandchildren to our families, our prayers expand.

Here's another gift our children may receive through the regularity of our just-the-two-of-us prayer. We don't pray "that [we] may be seen by others," as Jesus put it (Matthew 6:5). But there are times that a child does see us kneeling beside our bed

O LORD, MAKE ABER GREAT!

How many times I've stood beside
Your bed when you're asleep, and tried
To find the words for my desire:
That you might be a living fire
For God. Sometimes I say, "O Lord,
Make Aber great! Open your Word
And let him see enough to break
His heart and then, for Jesus' sake,
To heal with remedies of grace;
And give him strength to run his race."

And when I see you up before
The sun, to read God's Word and store
Up truth inside your heart and mind,
I thank the Lord that he is kind.

Sometimes when you're asleep, I touch
Your face. If you could know how much
The warmth of your life means to me!
For every freckle . . . let me see . . .
Perhaps a million dollars? . . . No.
They're not for sale! And for the glow
In your calm face there is no price.
Which means I have a very nice
And costly treasure lying here.
It's what we mean when we say, "Dear."

Tonight I'll probably just stare
At you and marvel that you're there
Asleep, and that you've just turned eight,
And say, "O Lord, make Aber great!"

BY DADDY (JOHN PIPER), 12-12-87

together—maybe a teenager coming home late in the evening or a younger one up for the bathroom. We don't say, "Look at us. We're praying." But our children know, and we pray it will be an example they carry into their own marriages.

PRAYER IS NOT OPTIONAL

Huge things are at stake in our prayers. The salvation of our children is in God's hands. It is good that we exert ourselves to help them see and understand God. But nothing we do has any ultimate impact, except for God's Spirit working on their behalf. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the soil of their hearts fertile and ready for the seeds we plant. One plants, another waters, but only God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7). So for our children we "pray that the eyes of [their] heart may be enlightened, so that [they] may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1:18 NASB).

Many everyday activities in our lives—even excellent, God-centered activities—are optional. But some are too close to the heart of God to be left to choice. Deuteronomy 11 has shown us that God's command to us is that we love the Lord our God and serve him with all our heart and with all our soul (v. 13). In order for that to happen, he has told us, "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul" (v. 18).

The practical necessity for this "laying up" is even more obvious when we realize the kind of interaction God expects adults to have with children: "You shall teach [God's words] to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (v. 19). Our mouths are able to be filled with God's words only as much as our hearts are.

God is the most precious heirloom our children can ever receive, and receiving him means knowing and loving him. Our personal habits and family traditions of the Word and prayer are the ones that are not optional if we want God as our eternal inheritance.



Our mouths will be filled with God's words
only as much as our hearts are.

S I X

“EVERYDAY”
TRADITIONS,
THE FAMILY,
AND THE WORLD



God's Word and prayer are at the heart of some of our "everyday" traditions, as we saw in the previous chapter. What are some of the other, though less "ultimate," lessons to be learned through the regular patterns in a family? Maybe if we think about some of the things our children are learning through their daily lives, it will give us ideas and impetus to develop new family habits or strengthen old ones. This chapter will not be an exhaustive list of "what a Christian family ought to be doing." Instead, please read these examples as illustrations to help you think about your family through God's eyes and to help open your eyes more clearly to God through your life together.

LEARNING WHO AND WHAT THEIR FAMILY IS

"Tell us a Quintle and Quinjay story, Daddy!" Young Karsten or Benjamin made this request every time they rode with Daddy in the car. So Daddy would create a story of adventure and danger, his brain running only a couple of words ahead of his mouth. Quintle, who was just the age of Karsten, and Quinjay, the same age as Benjamin, always found themselves in a scrape, in catastrophes involving waterfalls, earthquakes, airplanes, and toppling buildings. They would be saved through either Quintle's logical deliberation or Quinjay's impulsive agility, or—in the best stories—by both of them together. As the boys grew, the fictional predicaments became more impossible, and a new character appeared on the scene. The boys needed only to cry desperately, "Balo-o-o-ney!" and Baloney, the phenomenal pony, no matter how far away he was, arrived in a galloping rush to manage their rescue.

There are other evidences, besides stories, that we Pipers are a word-oriented family. When we sit around the table, comments and arguments shoot from one person to another. On his day off, my husband and I play Scrabble. Karsten teaches English. Benjamin is a poised and natural speaker. When Abraham sleeps late, he loses his chance at the daily newspaper crossword because I beat him to it. Books are near the top of Barnabas's Christmas list. One Christmas recently, he asked for *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* and his own set of the Narnia books. If we can't find Talitha, she's probably curled up somewhere reading. I love it when it's some favorite from my own childhood, like *The Five Little Peppers* or *The Secret Garden* or *Heidi*.

I expect our children will remember childhood word games in the car. "What's the opposite of upside down?" "Does anything rhyme with orange?" "How can flammable and inflammable mean the same thing?"

And books. I wish I knew how many I've read to our children. I wonder if they'll always associate the sound of a good book with the smell of fresh laundry. When their drawers had become empty, and all their clothes were washed and in the clean

clothes mountain, we'd sort everything into separate piles, one for each child. Then while they folded, I read.

My up-front motive was a fair trade: "You're doing what I want, and I'm doing what you want." But what else was happening? They were learning to sort, learning to be responsible for their own clothes, learning to work and listen at the same time. Those are helpful skills, but we all know the most valuable lessons are deeper and less tangible.

When we read to our children, at the deeper level they are learning about life. They're soaking up what we think about world events, what it takes to be a real hero, how important it is to act with integrity. Sometimes we have to stop and talk about what we read. Maybe a character we like acts in a way that puzzles us. How could Laura and her family think a black-faced minstrel show was so much fun? Or maybe a character we don't like doesn't seem to get what he deserves. How does Templeton get by with being such a . . . rat? From those stories and conversations, our children are gaining a sense of who their family is, and thus who they are.

Do your children ever ask you to tell them about when you were little? When they listen to your stories, they're learning history, beginning at a very personal level. And they're finding out what shapes a person into an adult who follows Christ. Like when I was a kid, and the school burned down one weekend. Lost in the blaze were the birthstone necklace I wasn't supposed to have worn to school and the spelling book I was supposed to have taken home for homework. My children remember all too well the account of my disobedience and downfall.

The stories we tell and the books we choose are influenced by the gender, ages, and interests of our children, from Andersen and Seuss to Lewis and Lawhead. An additional ingredient was stirred in when our family became interracial through our adoption of Talitha. Since then we've discovered history and heroes we should have known before. (Did you know that Betsey Stockton, America's first single woman missionary, was a freed slave?³)

That's *our* family. The enjoyment of words that God gave us helps us realize how important words are. God used a book full of words to tell us about himself. God the Son is even called "the Word." If we didn't have words, how could we understand God and his world? What a precious gift to be a "word family"!

Who is your family? What habits and traditions do you enjoy together that express your family's character and help you see that facet of God? Maybe you're artistic, and you feel a special connection with the colors and designs God uses to paint and shape our world. Maybe you're a family who builds, and you relate to God especially as creator. Maybe you travel, fix things, or work the farm or the garden.

Think about it, not to become self-conscious, but rather to consider how God is reflected in your family and in the activities you especially enjoy.

LEARNING ORDER IN LIFE

With a mouth full of ramen noodles, Talitha asks, “What are we going to read today?” Most days after lunch, we sit together and I read to her, maybe from a library book and maybe from the next chapter of *Sir Gibbie*. She doesn’t have to ask, “Are we going to read?” She knows what to expect.

When our children were preschoolers, they knew the order of the morning because it was the same almost every day. After some playing came lunch and then naptime. The clock was nothing; sequence was everything. This meant that if I wanted them happy when I had to take them somewhere in the early afternoon, I could feed them at 10:30 or 11:00, and they’d nap before our outing.

Our regular “everyday” traditions give shape and order to our days. Even the most spontaneous person needs some predictability in his life. God is not the author of chaos. Our children are soaking in some of his character when there are at least a few regular patterns and traditions in our homes.

LEARNING TO RELATE TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE HOME

Decision-making

“But, Daddy, what’s wrong with . . . ?” Familiar question. And a parent’s easy retort might be, “What’s right with it?” That’s catchy and has some truth, but maybe we can help our children dig a little deeper into the mind of God when they need to make decisions.

Some traditions are not events and are not on a regular schedule. Sometimes a tradition is words that you know you will hear in a certain situation. If our children ask my husband, “What’s wrong with . . . ?” they know what he’ll answer. He’ll say, “That’s the wrong question. Here’s what you need to be asking: Will it strengthen my faith and help me love Jesus more?” Those are the basic filters. Depending on the circumstances, there may be other ways of asking the same filter-questions: Will it advance me in my warfare against sin? Will it help me be more resolved to pray? Will it embolden my witness?

Our children’s lives will be filled with decisions as they mature. The way we help them assess their earlier, less crucial choices is training for what is to come. And think about those questions—we parents haven’t outgrown them either. Let’s try to ingrain those filter-questions into our children while they’re young so that choosing godly options is a lot easier and more natural for them than maybe it’s been for us.

Hospitality

For some people a meal set for six or seven is a full table that involves lots of planning and preparation. I think of a cozy dining room like that when I remember some Sundays at our house. If our boys came home from church and saw the table ready for six or seven—our family—at least one was sure to exclaim in disbelief, “Nobody’s here? Why isn’t anybody here?” That’s how accustomed they were to Sunday guests at our table and how much they enjoyed it. They viewed home as a place where visitors come and go, where their friends are welcome, where others get swept into our family’s hubbub of conversation over a plate of spaghetti or bowl of soup.

Hospitality’s conversations aren’t all with invited guests either. Some talks occur at the door with pairs of sect members wanting to proselytize. Some conversations are on the phone with a troubled person who needs prayer. Some are on the front porch with a street person who thinks he needs just food and drink.

We may try to teach our children that the “earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). They may memorize the words and meditate on them. But they learn what the words mean when they see in their own home that our family and our home and our food and our stuff and our time are not ours. They are the Lord’s, and that means these things are available for his purposes of love.

Learning How God and Parents See the World

“When I grow up, I’m going to be the kind of missionary who is a juggler and pianist and soccer player and actor . . . in China.” Benjamin’s dreams were as wildly diverse as any ten-year-old’s. And as a young world Christian, he already assumed that his future could be anywhere in the world. What were some of the things that had opened his eyes to see beyond the downtown Minneapolis neighborhood where we’d lived as long as he could remember?⁴

The first thing was one of those you-always-say-that responses—the answer Benjamin knew he’d hear when he asked school geography questions or when a place was discussed on a radio program or when we received mail from friends far away in California or Cameroon: “Let’s find it on the map.” And the map was on the wall, readily accessible. (Our world map eventually “grew” into a wallpaper mural covering one whole wall of our dining room.)

Another “everyday” tradition was part of our family prayer. Benjamin regularly heard us praying for missionaries and for unreached peoples who need the gospel. These prayers worked at least two ways in his mind and heart. The first was a reminder of the *world* part of *world Christian*—that our city and neighborhood

NOW WE'RE COOKIN'

Noël's Spaghetti

This is a family favorite, the choice for most birthday dinners, and a perfect make-ahead. I make a huge batch—for about fifteen adults. The recipe can easily be cut into thirds.

3 lb. ground meat	1 tsp. black pepper
1 Tbs. whole oregano	1 Tbs. basil
1 Tbs. garlic powder	2-3 bay leaves
1 Tbs. salt	
3 Tbs. dried parsley	
2 Tbs. Worcestershire sauce	
1 large onion (or 1/3 cup dry onion flakes)	
Institutional size can tomato sauce (six 15-oz. cans)	
6-10 drops Tabasco sauce (optional)	

Brown meat. Drain. Stir in flavorings and spices. Add tomato sauce. Simmer at least one-half hour.

Noël's secret to non-sticky pasta: (Use about twice as much as the pasta package says. Cook until done but not overdone. Strain. Immediately rinse with cold water until noodles are cold. With hands, mix in oil to coat pasta (about 2 Tbs. per pound). Cover well until ready to use, up to a day ahead. Heat in microwave.



are only one part of God's large world that's filled with many kinds of people. The other was a piece of the *Christian* part of *world Christian*—the truth of Jesus' reminder that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). A helpful daily tool for this kind of prayer is *The Global Prayer Digest*.⁵ In fact, world missions leader Ralph Winter once said that the reason he helped conceive and promote the *Digest* was that the things that have the longest and deepest effect on people's lives are the things they do every day. Praying daily for a different unreached-people group gets missions under the skin.

LEARNING THEIR PLACE IN THE FAMILY

Names

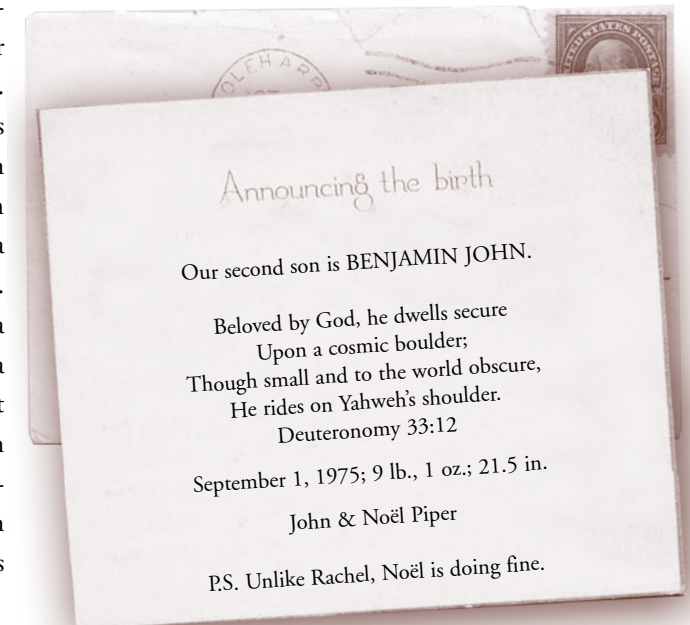
"What shall we name him? Jonathan Daniel. Daniel William. William Jonathan. Barnabas Daniel. Barnabas William. Yes! He's Barnabas William."

I squeezed the hand of my husband and raised my head from the pillow to kiss the damp, dark hair of the wrinkly, red, almost ten-pound ball of baby nestled on my chest.

"That was fast," the nurse commented.

Not really. We'd discussed these possibilities for months, and each was special to us because of the person and qualities it represented. Our difficulty was not finding a name, but narrowing the list to only two.

A child hears his name dozens of times a day, hundreds of times a week, thousands of times a year. In some way, it defines who he is. So it has been the habit—the tradition—of my husband and me to choose our children's names carefully. Karsten Luke's name reflects the stage of our lives when he was born. We were in Germany; so his name is a German variation of *Christian*. Benjamin John's name is a prayer that he will indeed be a "son of his father's right hand." Abraham Christian has big sandals to fill, to follow God with the faith of Abraham. In Barnabas



William, we honor his Opa, William Piper, a man whose life has been shaped by his calling to spread the gospel.

Talitha Ruth's name is a story of adoption. Talitha, "which means 'Little girl'" (Mark 5:41)—this family has been given a little girl. Ruth, Talitha's adoptive grandmother—this little girl has been given a family.

Each of us bears the name *Piper*, which means "you're part of this particular family; you're ours and we're yours." We pray that all our children will also come to bear the name *Christian*, meaning "you're part of the family of Christ; you're his and he's yours."

As we talk with our children about the meaning of their names, we're giving them examples and standards to aspire to, as many parents did in the Bible. We help a child know the importance of his own name when we tell about the Shepherd who knows each name: "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name" (John 10:3). And he never forgets us; when we are his, our names are recorded forever in the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5).

Special Music

"Daddy! Do you have your hymnal?" Talitha squirms and stretches her arm across him to reach his PDA as he pulls it from his pocket. She flips open the cover, clicks out the stylus, and runs the device through its paces until she reaches the menu of songs Daddy has saved. She scrolls down until she reaches the one she wants tonight, and we sing together. This routine is part of our evening devotions, between the Bible storybook and prayers.

Although we would have said for many years that most of us in this household are not very musical, music is an important part of our "everyday" traditions. Right after our evening prayers is bedtime, and another song is part of the tucking-in routine (p. 42).

Each of our children has his or her own special hymn, the one I sang most regularly as a lullaby when the child was a baby. I had just memorized "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"; so that came most easily to my lips when I was desperate to quiet baby Karsten. Psalm 23 was fresh in my mind when Benjamin was born; so for him I learned "The Lord's My Shepherd." For Abraham how could I resist "The God of Abraham Praise"? Soon after Barnabas was born, an ensemble at church sang "O Let Your Soul Now Be Filled with Gladness," the first time I'd ever heard it. The lilting tune and confident message so perfectly enveloped and lifted the sad moment of the second verse; it made me cry and helped to lighten my short-lived "baby blues." When we adopted Talitha, I searched for a hymn that assures her of a permanent, faithful home and found it in "Children of the Heavenly Father."

I often sang their songs to my little ones at bedtime. Nowadays in church, I have to look up to the older ones to share the glance that says, "They're singing your song"—your song of our faithful, glad Shepherd-Father God.

By the way, our formerly mostly non-musical family now includes two guitarists, a budding pianist, some vocalists on stage or in worship teams or choirs . . . and some who still sound best in extremely large groups.

A CHILD'S OWN HISTORY

"Abraham! Look what I just found in your file. Remember that bike-a-thon for school when you didn't ride as far as you said you were going to? Here's the letter Granddaddy wrote you saying he didn't want his extra money back."

Abraham at twenty-something doesn't remember. But because of the "Abraham" file my organized husband keeps, there are words here for all of us in my father's own handwriting:

I encourage you to always set your goals higher than you think you can reach and then work diligently to reach the goal. You will miss it many times, but you will also reach it many times. In the Lord's work, goals are reached by prayer and much work. Our children and grandchildren give us much joy, and we love you all very much.

By now there are several folders for each of our children, filled with certificates, drawings, letters, photographs, poems, creative writing, report cards, newspaper clippings, and whatever we want to keep. To open one of these manila files is better than peeking into a treasure chest.

There's the letter young Benjamin wrote to his grandmother, for example (and that she gave back to us later): "Dear Gma, Thak you for 5 dolars. I like mony and I love you." When we read that, someone is sure to say, "Remember how Mother always made us write at least two sentences in our thank-you notes?"

O LET YOUR SOUL NOW BE
FILLED WITH GLADNESS

O let your soul now be filled with gladness,
Your heart redeemed, rejoice indeed!
O may the thought banish all your sadness
That in his blood you have been freed,
That God's unfailing love is yours,
That you the only Son were given,
That by his death he has opened heaven,
That you are ransomed as you are.

If you seem empty of any feeling,
Rejoice—you are his ransomed bride!
If those you cherish seem not to love you,
And dark assails from every side,
Still yours the promise, come what may,
In loss and triumph, in laughter, crying,
In want and riches, in living, dying,
That you are purchased as you are.

It is a good every good transcending
That Christ has died for you and me!
It is a gladness that has no ending
Therein God's wondrous love to see!
Praise be to him, the spotless Lamb,
Who through the desert my soul is leading
To that fair city of joy exceeding,
For which he bought me as I am.

PETER JONSSON ASCHAN

A lot of love and history lives in those file folders—history that one particular child can “read” to know more about who he is in this particular God-loving family.

LEARNING HOW TO BE ADULTS

“Nobody is stronger than you, Daddy,” Talitha states with confidence. Her daddy knows better; so he’s teaching her to depend on her heavenly Father. It’s absolutely true that there’s nobody stronger than *he* is. But even though the best possible daddy can’t compare with our heavenly Father, still God uses fathers to teach children what he himself is like.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:18

“And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me,” says the Lord Almighty.

HEBREWS 12:9-10

9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?
10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

The Bible is filled with references to God as Father. He promises to be a father to his people, as in 2 Corinthians 6:18. Hebrews 12:9-10 shows how the example of our earthly fathers helps us know the way to relate to God.

What sort of everyday traditions help children understand God more clearly so that they can grow up to be adults who depend on God? For years the evening mealtime conversation at our house has included debate about what to do during “playtime.”

Our children know that right after supper

Daddy does whatever (almost) the children want, from reading to being a bucking bronco. We gave up on having a nice backyard lawn because it was incompatible with frequent kickball and soccer games. And anyway what’s more important? When Daddy’s down on the floor playing with Talitha’s dollhouse, she’s seeing a reflection of the Incarnation—God stooping to our level so that we can relate to him and understand him.

Another example is Saturday lunch dates with Daddy. Each child knows what to expect over the pizza when his or her turn comes. There’ll be fun conversation about the child’s current interests. Daddy will ask how things are going. He’ll probe a bit into something in that son’s or daughter’s life that he is concerned about. He’ll have some loving, good advice. Someday I hope our children will realize that when it was their turn with Daddy, he was showing them a father who likes to be with his children, one on one, who cares about what’s important to his child, and whose words are wise and helpful—like God.

These times with the children are a reminder of the importance of planning. It might seem coldhearted to write “playtime with children” on your calendar, but

really it’s a loving way to make sure that a good thing happens, a time that you and your children enjoy. Scheduling helps you respond to competing requests. You can look at your calendar and say, “Sorry, I have another appointment at that time.” Both you and the children may take it for granted after a while, but the tradition wouldn’t have developed if you hadn’t planned it into your days. When your children know they can depend on Dad and Mom, it will be much easier for them to learn to depend on God.

Being this kind of parent may not come easy for a person whose own father or mother was far from God, disinterested, or abusive. But in their own way, indirectly, poor parents also point us toward God and how to be the kind of parents we ought to be. At the least, their example shows us the kind of parent we *don’t* want to be. But more directly, their failures leave us realizing that God is the one we lean on. “For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in” (Psalm 27:10). As parents, we can be in no better position than leaning on God and showing our children the dependability and love of a heavenly Father who never lets us down.



When your children know they can depend on Dad and Mom, it will be much easier for them to learn to depend on God.

*Celebrations are the ritualized interruptions
in the continuum of daily life
which remind us who we are,
where we came from and where we are going.*

MILO SHANNON-THORNBERRY,
*The Alternate Celebrations Catalogue*⁶

S E V E N

“ESPECIALLY” TRADITIONS



WE NEED “ESPECIALLY”

No!” our college friend squawked. “All days are *not* the same! God knows we need ‘especially.’”

He’d heard it once too often, somebody pontificating, “Every day should be Mother’s Day,” or “Every day should be as significant as Christmas.”

God knows we need “especially”—that was a new thought to me back then. And it’s true. God himself appointed special days, such as Passover, for his people and gave them ceremonies to set those days off from the others (Exodus 12:1-20). December 25, for example, could pass like any other day in our week, except for the thought and preparation we give to it and the customs and traditions that surround it. The ceremony of a special day keeps it from slipping away like an ordinary day. We stop and recognize the specialness of an event in large part because of the traditions in which it’s wrapped.

Our “especially” celebrations anchor us and our children in the harbor of our family, reflecting our true refuge—God. The way we observe these occasions—the focus of our observation—has great potential to show our children what we think is most important and to help them value what we hold most dear. Of course, the benefits are not just for the children. Our celebrations work good in our own lives and in other people whose lives touch ours, by rekindling our love of God, by increasing our knowledge of him, and by helping us remember who God is and how he works.

LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD

Memory is the mother of traditions. Almost all of our special days are celebrated because they remind us of something significant in the past. A birthday looks back to a birth. An anniversary looks back to a wedding. A funeral looks back on a life. Christmas looks back on Jesus’ birth. Easter looks back to his death and resurrection. Our celebrations are occasions to look back and remember what God has done in the world and in our lives.

At the same time, we are also looking forward. The preparations we make and the eagerness we feel as we look ahead toward a special day are a foretaste of the emotions we will experience when we encounter God in a special way as we celebrate. And that encounter with God is, in turn, a foreshadowing of the great day when we will see him face to face.

Memory and anticipation swirl together before a great occasion. When Barnabas was younger, he wondered before his birthday, “Will the poem Daddy writes for me this year be funny or spiritual?” Perhaps he hadn’t caught on yet that even Daddy’s funny poems are also spiritual. But what he had caught onto was this:

Every year Daddy wrote a poem for his birthday. As Barnabas looked forward to the celebration of his day, he knew what to expect because of his memory of “the way it always is.” His memory of earlier birthdays increased his anticipation of the celebration yet to come.

AT THE HEART OF EVERY CELEBRATION

Thinking of birthdays raises an important question. Some of our most significant events—birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, funerals—honor particular people. At those times, how do we demonstrate that *God* is at the heart of every celebration? Can we honor God appropriately while focusing so much attention on people? How do we keep God at the center? We can answer those questions in various ways. Paul said, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:18); “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36).

Through him we have birth and life and every thing and every person in our lives. So God is the reason we have *anything* to celebrate. He is the ultimate source of any of our celebrations. As we read in James 1:17, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

When we realize that the child, the spouse, the life, the friends, and the family are all gifts from our Father, it makes every celebration a “thanksgiving” day, a time to express our heart of thanks to God.

Saint Augustine said something that might help us when we worry that making much of a person might somehow be competition for our love of God.

BARNABAS AT SIX

I know a brand-new six-year-old.
When he was made, they tossed the mold.
That means he’s just one of a kind.
Look high and low; you’ll never find
In all the world another lad
Who makes a more contented dad.
Who might this rare young fellow be?
I’ll give you clues so you can see:

He talks a lot. He even talks
When no one’s there to hear. He walks
With courage through the battlefields
Of bedrooms, halls, and stairs, and wields
His ever-present plastic sword
To slay the beast and evil lord
That lurks behind the rocking chair
And falls dead like a grizzly bear.

Sometimes his brothers think he’s cute,
With brown bowtie and little suit.
And then he tries hard not to smile;
He tries but misses by a mile.

Sometimes you’ll find him with his back
Against a pillow, with a stack
Of Bible books, and on the tape
A story of some great escape
God gave to Joseph or to Paul;
And this young lad has learned them all.

I think, perhaps, that’s all you need
To guess his name, but one more lead:
He has a kind of pleasant roar;
We sometimes call him Number Four.
We’re glad that he is one of us:
His name? You’re right. It’s Barnabas.

JOHN PIPER, MARCH 31, 1989

For he loves Thee too little who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake.⁷

In other words, as my husband explains, “If created things are seen and handled as gifts of God and as mirrors of his glory, they need not be occasions of idolatry—if our delight in them is always also a delight in their Maker.”⁸ Thinking about a few special days might help us see how this truth can play out.

PSALM 139:13-18

¹³For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.
¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there were none of them.
¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you.

thought of by God, it is certain that you will *be*. He creates not just an idea, but a flesh-and-blood person knitted together within the flesh-and-blood body of a mother.

God knows each atom of your body because he designed and created each one and wove it together with all the others. When the weaving was completed, then came the one day, from among all the days that were formed for this creature, that God appointed as the day of birth.

How would a birthday celebration change if we looked at our birthday person and imagined God's hands knitting him or her together, if we thought of his or her unabridged story written in God's book, if we remembered that this day was chosen by God specifically for this person? At the least, we would speak our personal thanks to God and lift our praising hearts to him. Then we might try to plan a time to pray with and for the birthday person, especially thanking God for him or her and asking God's blessing, recognizing that each of the person's days is written in God's book.

This is the one day of the year that belongs especially to the birthday person. We want to shower our love on a child on his or her day. Every bit of love we give

BIRTHDAY

The psalmist pictures God in Psalm 139 as an author. In his mind God creates a person and the details of every day of that person's life. Then God writes the story in his book. “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them” (v. 16). The amazing thing about this Author and his book is that once you've been

NOW WE'RE COOKIN'

Chocolate Éclair Cake

1-lb. box graham crackers
3 small boxes instant vanilla pudding
4 c. milk
8 oz. whipped topping, thawed
Mix pudding with milk. Fold in whipped topping.
Make a single layer of graham crackers to cover the bottom of a 9 x 13 pan. Cover with half of the pudding mixture. Repeat layers. Cover with final layer of grahams. Frost.

Frosting

1/2 c. unsweetened cocoa powder
2 tsp. white corn syrup
2 tsp. vanilla
1 c. powdered sugar
3 Tbs. softened margarine
3 Tbs. milk

Beat until smooth. Frosting will spread better if cake has been refrigerated a couple of hours, but cooling first is not absolutely necessary. Refrigerate cake, covered, twenty-four hours before serving. Makes 12-15 servings.



comes from God. Ours is only a pale reflection of God's love, but it is one of the means God uses to point our child toward himself.

At the Piper house, the birthday child wakes up to balloons and breakfast cake (p. 14) with candles to blow out. He or she gets to choose the menu for birthday dinner. Once we mature past the wieners and beans or macaroni and cheese stage, it's usually spaghetti (p. 56) and chocolate éclair cake. In between the cake and presents, Daddy reads the poem he's written for the occasion. Close to the birthday we try to have a family outing that the birthday child chooses—maybe miniature golf or the zoo or the science museum. Along the way, there are bound to be stories of “the day you were born.” These are ways we try to say, “We are thankful for you. We love you. We are thrilled God gave you to us.”

GOTCHA DAY

In many families the recounting of God's gift isn't entitled “The Day You Were Born.” It might go more like this:

“Talitha, want to hear a story?” She scrambles into my lap. Fingering her beaded braids, I begin.

“A long time ago there was a little boy named Johnny and a little girl named Noël.” Talitha's dark eyes light up, and she nestles into place, knowing what comes next.

“When they grew up, they fell in love and got married. After a while God gave them a fat, blond baby boy named Karsten. Then he gave them a fat, blond baby

boy named Benjamin. Then he gave them a fat, blond baby boy named Abraham. Then he gave them the fattest, blondest baby, named Barnabas. Their daddy called them the cookie-cutter kids.

“Noël and Johnny loved their boys very much. They said, ‘Father in heaven, thank you so much for our sons. You have given us more than we could have dreamed. We are very happy.’ Then they whispered, because they didn't want to be greedy, ‘Do you think

GALATIANS 4:4-7
⁴When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

there might be a little girl for us, too?”

I continue the familiar story of our long-distance telephone introduction to a tiny baby girl, our decision to adopt her, the preparations we made, and the day we waited and waited and *waited* until Miss Phoebe arrived and laid that little girl in our arms. “Here's your little girl.”

“We squeezed her and said, ‘Welcome, Talitha Ruth.’ She smiled at us and . . .

burped!” Talitha chimes in on the “chorus”: “Barnabas la-a-ughed and laughed. And Abraham said, ‘Coo-ul!’”

Some adoptive families celebrate Gotcha Day on the anniversaries of the day they received their child. After cake and other goodies, they pull out photos and the video of “the day we gotcha.” This special day is a reminder of the thanks they feel toward God for the gift of their child. He is the one who gives them the privilege of picturing the relationship he has with his children: “God sent forth his Son . . . so that we might receive adoption” (Galatians 4:4-5).

WEDDING

We shouldn't be surprised to discover that *the* original human kinship—that of Adam with Eve—is also a picture. Marriage was designed by God to be an illustration of the most important relationship we can ever have. The apostle Paul explains, “I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Galatians 5:32). That statement gives marriage a significance far beyond any other human alliance we might ever make. We all realize that marriage is not God's best plan for everyone. But for those whom God leads into this bond, there is the responsibility and privilege of living a parable.

And so a wedding, though it lasts only a few moments, is eternally momentous because of the way the marriage will reflect truth or untruth about our eternal God. People who observe a marriage will have a clearer or foggier understanding of who Christ is, in part because of what they see; and that understanding has eternal implications for their lives. Could it be that one of the reasons there is so little respect for Christ and his church is that there is so little to respect in many marriages? It is certainly true that marriage is held in such light regard because its parable-purpose is almost forgotten.

Etiquette provides rules for how a wedding “should” be done. A desire for a God-centered ceremony goes beyond these rules

EPHESIANS 5:22-33

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

and asks questions to help a couple make choices that reflect the focal point of their lives and the life they will share after the ceremony.

- What is our greatest treasure? What is most precious to us?
- How do we reflect and express that treasure in our lives and in our life together?
- How can we pass that treasure on to others within our circle?

Perhaps the new bride and groom learned to ask such questions from their parents through years of family celebrations.

In what other ways are we parents helping our children prepare for marriage? Here our “everyday” traditions overlap with our “especially” occasions. One important way we help our children get ready for marriage is by teaching God’s words to them every day, speaking these words when our children are sitting in our house, when they are walking by the way, when they lie down, and when they rise (Deuteronomy 11:19). Even when children are young, we can be discussing what words like these mean:

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

(LUKE 14:26)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

(2 CORINTHIANS 6:14)

You shall not commit adultery.

(EXODUS 20:14)

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

(GENESIS 2:23-24)

As with most of life, our sponge-like young children are soaking up their basic understanding of marriage by living in our home. When Paul tells us that our marriages are pictures of the relationship of Christ and the church, let’s remember that our own children absorb almost full strength the truth or untruth reflected in our union. That is an awesome responsi-

bility, reminding us of our “everyday” need for prayer, asking God to keep us pure and strong and true together.

Let me mention one other prayer that is a preparation for our children’s future. From the time we realized we were expecting each of our children, whether by birth or adoption, we began to intercede for the little girl or boy who would grow up to be our daughter- or son-in-law, if God plans marriage for our child. We ask especially that God will bring that future spouse to a strong faith in Christ and keep him or her pure, and that God bring the two together when his time is right for them.

FUNERAL

My cousin Henry looked at the broom in my hand, glanced over at my sister setting out lunch for his family, and then above the roar of the lawn mower my brother was pushing outside, said, “This is way above and beyond . . .”

I looked him in the eye and said, “No, it isn’t. We’re family, and this is what family does. I learned how to do this from your parents, you know.” I told him about the aunts and uncles surrounding us when Daddy died. Now Uncle Sam was gone, and we were there to surround Henry and the rest of Uncle Sam’s family. It seemed like the natural thing to do.

Soon cousins from farther away arrived with ice and food and willing hands. I took a break to sit with Ruth, Henry’s sister, who unwittingly disenchanted me because she knew you can’t take family support for granted. “I just wish my husband could have experienced something like this when his father died,” she mused. “He was about the only one there.”

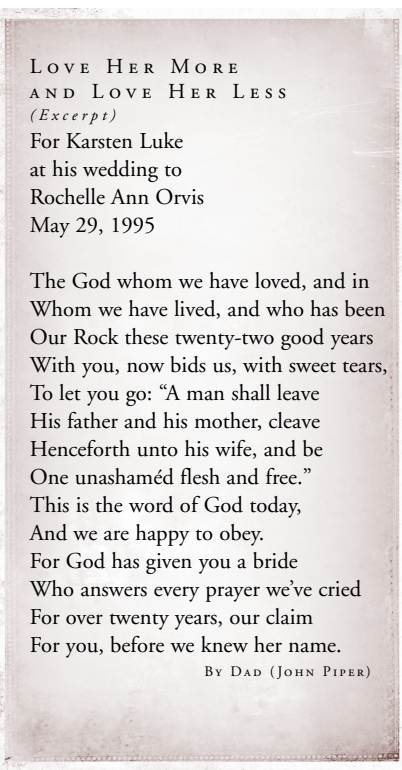
It may seem strange to include a funeral on the list of “especially” occasions. But the days around a funeral may be a time when we see most clearly how God has shaped a family through its traditions. Then we may be able to see more clearly how the character of God is reflected in the life of a family.

We who are grieving, how do we respond to the people who were closest to the one who died?

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

(ROMANS 12:4-6)

We will have different ways of responding. But if we are part of the body of Christ, he will be serving and comforting through our hands and words.



And if it is we who are the closest to the one who is gone, how do we cope with the loss? Aunt Alice was tired, but it was hard for her to sleep because she kept thinking of people she ought to call, and she didn't want to miss any of the friends who came to visit. At the end of a long day, she said quietly, "I have so much to be thankful for. Sam and I were married for sixty years. He was a good man. I prayed that God would take him gently, and he did. I'm going to miss him, but I don't feel bad he's gone." She did "not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

It's never easy to say good-bye to someone we love, and it's especially hard when he or she seems too young. I received the word early one morning in Munich that my sixteen-year-old brother Benjamin had been killed instantly in a car crash in Georgia. Three months earlier, my husband and I had said good-bye to our families before flying to Germany to live for three years. How could we have known that the farewell picnic snapshots were the last we'd take of Ben?

I couldn't be there with my family, but we talked together on the phone. Both Mother and Daddy comforted me, reminding me that Ben's life had been an affirmation of Paul's words: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). From a neighborhood flower shop, I ordered a fiery red azalea plant to be delivered with this card, "He lives and sings praises to our God."

When we are the ones planning a service for a saint who is with God, if we reflect that hope in the memorial service, we are honoring the person by honoring his God. Yes, there will be many words about the one who's gone. But may our songs and eulogies and homilies be filled with God, so that as we remember our loved one, we can paraphrase 1 Peter 1:3-5:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused [] to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [], who by God's power [was] guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

THANKSGIVING DAY

What more could we ask for than that hope and salvation? "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Peter 1:3). Sometimes we can't help pouring out our praise and thanks to God—which brings us to Thanksgiving Day.

What are the requirements for any sort of thanksgiving to happen? Something we're thankful for and somebody to thank. Seems so obvious, but I think I need to say it because it's amazing how many people can say, "I'm thankful for . . ." without

admitting that God is there to hear their thanks. And they're certainly not giving him credit for whatever it is they're enjoying.

So what turns the fourth Thursday of November into Thanksgiving? Turkey? I know one family who doesn't like turkey. Their traditional Thanksgiving meal is Vietnamese carryout. But whatever our food traditions, is that all there is? Not if we plan *real* thanks into the day.

Maybe we can start by giving someone else a reason to give thanks. It might be by food donations we make ahead of time. It might be through invitations to our table—someone with no relatives nearby, a newly-arrived refugee family, a lonely neighbor.

And then how will we express our thanks to God? Perhaps there's a poster on the wall where anyone during the day can write or draw pictures of what he or she is thanking God for. Perhaps one of the children will make place cards with a verse of thanks on each, to be read sometime during the meal. Maybe this is a good day to pull out the year's journals or photo albums or videos to remind each other of all that God has done in our lives this year. And maybe Dad will begin the meal by reading or singing some words from Scripture, such as Psalm 95 below.

*¹Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. . . .
⁶Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

(PSALM 95:1-3, 6-7)

"The people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. . . ." Our Shepherd knows we need "especially" occasions to round up our attention and direct our thoughts toward him.



Oh, save your people and
bless your heritage!
Be their shepherd and carry them forever.
(PSALM 28:9)

Imogene had the baby doll but she wasn't carrying it in the way she was supposed to, cradled in her arms. She had it slung up over her shoulder, and before she put it in the manger she thumped it twice on the back.

I heard Alice gasp and she poked me. "I don't think it's very nice to burp the baby Jesus," she whispered, "as if he had colic." Then she poked me again. "Do you suppose he could have had colic?"

I said, "I don't know why not," and I didn't. He could have had colic, or been fussy, or hungry like any other baby. After all, that was the whole point of Jesus—that he didn't come down on a cloud like something out of "Amazing Comics," but that he was born and lived . . . a real person.

BARBARA ROBINSON
*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*⁹

E I G H T

ESPECIALLY CHRISTMAS



Why in the world would God send his Son among us as a *baby*? Just think of almighty God waving his arms and legs and lying in place until someone decided to pick him up, getting hungrier until somebody decided to feed him, remaining dirty until someone cleaned and changed him. This is not reasonable—not by our standards, that is. But God has his own purposes. Perhaps one reason for God becoming a baby is that so many people desire a baby, love children, and suffer until a child arrives. God uses that yearning to draw us toward his Son, Jesus.

Christmas is only one small part of a whole year of living, working, and ministering in our churches and to our neighbors, of meeting our family's physical needs, of teaching our children. Just one small part of the year—but with our hearts and spirits open in anticipation and excitement, what an ideal opportunity for remembering and teaching.

We've seen in earlier chapters how important it is to *plan* our "everyday" traditions so that we reflect our view of the world and God. How much more important our planning is for celebrations of a world-shaking event like God being born a baby so that we can be reborn as his children.

ADVENT

We are a people of promise. For centuries God prepared people for the coming of his Son, our only hope for life. At Christmas we celebrate the fulfillment of the promises God made—that he would make a way to draw near to him.

Advent is what we call the season leading up to Christmas. It begins four Sundays before December 25, sometimes in the last weekend of November, sometimes on the first Sunday in December.

First Peter 1:10-12 is a clear description of what we look back to during Advent. For four weeks, it's as if we're reenacting, remembering the thousands of years during which God's people were anticipating and longing for the coming of God's salvation, for Jesus. That's what advent means—"coming." Even God's men who foretold the grace that was to come didn't know "what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating" (v. 11). They were waiting, but they didn't know what God's salvation would look like.

I PETER 1:10-12

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

In fact, God revealed to them that they were not the ones who would see the sufferings and glory of God's Christ. "They were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (v. 12). They were serving us. We Christians on this side of Jesus' birth are a God-blessed, happy people because we know God's plan. The centuries of waiting are over. We have the greatest reason to celebrate.

And yet we are still waiting. Our spiritual redemption came to us with the baby of Bethlehem. Nonetheless, as Romans 8 says, "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (v. 23). There is suffering and tragedy still, even for Christians. Someone we love is dying. We may be in pain. Sometimes we have trouble believing God's promises. In other words, our redemption is not complete. We are waiting for the redemption of our bodies—waiting for Jesus' second advent, for him to come again.

So here we stand in the middle. Advent is a season of looking back, thinking how it must have been, waiting for the promised salvation of God, not knowing what to expect. And at the same time, Advent is a season of looking ahead, preparing ourselves to meet Jesus at his Second Coming.

ADVENT—LOOKING BACK

Probably the two most common symbols of Advent are candles or a calendar. That's appropriate, since each is a way of waiting for Christmas.

Advent Candles

Various helpful schemes of symbolism can be attached to the candles, their number, and color. But here are the basics—one candle for each of the Sundays of Advent and, if you wish, a fifth for Christmas Day. On the first Sunday, only one candle will be lit, then two on the second Sunday, and so forth. That's all that's *necessary*. But if we want our Advent candles to be more than a centerpiece, we have to ask ourselves, "What makes these more than wax and wick?"

The flame is a symbol of the one who is called "the light of the world." We who follow him "will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). As we move closer to the day when we'll meet him, there is greater and greater brightness.

ROMANS 8:22-24

²²For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved.

JOHN 8:12

Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

But we need to remember that our very young children will see only candles. No matter how much we explain the symbolism, they need some more years before they can comprehend the meaning of the candles. That's

why I always incorporate a manger scene into our Advent candle arrangement. *Tangible* is my guiding word. What a child can see and touch, he might understand a little more clearly. Tangible things help us adults as well.

Each Advent Sunday, we Pipers gather at the table for a meal and hear a word from the Bible before lighting the next candle. When the children were younger, each week's passage probably would be one part of the Christmas story from Matthew or Luke. As they've grown older, we've expanded the reading to include Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah's coming. Then on other days, whenever we sit at the dining room table where the candles are the centerpiece, we light that week's number of candles.

The light, brighter by the week, points us toward Jesus who has called us to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Advent Calendar

"Mommy, Mommy! May I open the next window on the calendar?" A simple paste-board Advent calendar with one flap to open on each day in December is probably the most familiar way to help a child understand the wait until Christmas. In the stores several themes are likely to be available, including Swiss mountain villages and Santa's workshops. But since the Advent—the coming—we're waiting for is Christ's, let's make sure our daily countdown has a real *Christmas* setting.

For our family a more permanent calendar has become a tradition. When our first child was a toddler, I could find hardly any Christmas things that had to do with Jesus. So I created the Noël Calendar, a burlap banner with plastic and wood figures that by December 25 have been attached with Velcro across the top half of the banner to represent the Christmas story. Throughout the month, that story is told in increments, starting over at the beginning and adding a bit more each day.¹⁰

The first year we used the calendar, I learned an important lesson: Repetition is an excellent way for a child to memorize. In mid-December, when Karsten was barely two, my mother-in-law died in a bus crash in Israel. With little time to plan, we were on our way from Minnesota to South Carolina to take care of my father-in-law, who had been injured. On an impulse I had tossed the calendar into a suit-

case. In the midst of so much confusion, shock, and irregularity, Karsten forgot everything he'd learned about potty training and too much of what he knew about behaving. But even though he could hardly make a whole sentence on his own yet, he could pick up the Christmas story at any point and keep it going, word for word, as he'd heard it day after day when we did the calendar.

In chapter 4 of this book we thought about the importance of repetition and regularity. This period in Karsten's life was the time when I began to realize the place of these things in my life with my children—repeating regularly the story that for centuries God's people had longed to know.

ADVENT—LOOKING FORWARD

The verses we read earlier from 1 Peter 1 (vv. 10-12, p. 76) look backward toward God's people who were awaiting his salvation. The very next verses look forward in Advent, anticipating the return of Jesus. "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 13). There will be another advent of Christ; he will come again.

Advent is a season for introspection. Peter gives us God's high standard as we contemplate our standing with him: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (v. 16). This is a time to ask ourselves questions:

- Am I clear-thinking and sober-minded, or are my concerns mainly trivial? (v. 13)
- Is my hope set fully on the grace I will receive from Jesus at his Second Coming, or do I cringe at the thought of leaving behind the life I love? (v. 13)
- Am I an obedient child of my Father, or am I still shaped by the passions that drove me before I became a Christian? (v. 14)

If regular personal devotions are not part of our lives, Advent would be a time tailor-made to begin. We remember that God charged the adults in Deuteronomy 11 to "lay up these words of mine in *your* heart and in *your* soul" (v. 18, emphasis mine), and that he expects us to "love the LORD [our] God" (v. 1). The living water in our own hearts is the fountain from which we shower Christ on our family. Our time with God

1 PETER 1:13-19

¹³Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." ¹⁷And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

and his preparation of us is a necessary foundation. Without it our Christmas activities will degenerate into hoopla.

But however much we want a significant Christmas celebration for our families, that is not the primary reason for our contemplation and self-examination. Our deeper motivation is the strengthening of our ultimate hope in Jesus, “so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming” (1 John 2:28).

May this time be a reflection of what our lives are—gratitude for the promises that were fulfilled when God gave us the gift of his Son and anticipation of and preparation for Christ’s coming again.

DO OTHERS SEE WHY WE CELEBRATE?

How will our home look if our celebration is a picture of anticipation and waiting for God’s plan to be completed, a picture of our joy in the salvation he has begun for us? What visible things will fill our house as we celebrate what God has done through Jesus?

Thinking About Santa

For several reasons, we have chosen not to include Santa Claus in our Christmas stories and decorations. First, fairy tales are fun, but we don’t ask our children to believe them. Second, celebrating with Santa *and* manger will postpone a child’s clear understanding of what the real truth of God is. It’s very difficult for a young child to pick through a marble cake of part truth and part imagination to find the crumbs of reality. We want our children to understand God as fully as they’re able, at whatever age they are. So we try to avoid anything that would inhibit or distort that understanding.

Third, think how confusing it must be to a literal-thinking, uncritical preschooler. Santa is so much like what we’re trying all year to teach our children about God. Look at the “attributes” of Santa:

- He’s omniscient—he sees everything you do.
- He rewards you if you’re good.
- He’s omnipresent—at least, he can be everywhere in one night.
- He gives you good gifts.
- He’s the most famous “old man in the sky” figure.

But at the deeper level that young children can’t comprehend yet, he is not like God at all. For example, does Santa really care if we’re bad or good? Think of the most awful kid you can remember. Did he or she ever *not* get gifts from Santa? What about Santa’s spying and then rewarding you if you’re good enough? That’s not the way God operates. He gave us his gift—his Son—even though we weren’t good at all. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). He gave his gift to us to make us good, not because we had proved ourselves good enough.

Helping our children understand God as much as they’re able at whatever age they are is our primary goal. But we’ve also seen some other encouraging effects of not including Santa in our celebration.

First, I think children are glad to realize that their parents, who live with them all year and know all the worst things about them, still show their love at Christmas. Isn’t that better than a funny, old make-believe man who drops in just once a year?

Second, our children know our family’s usual giving patterns for birthdays and special events. They seem to have an instinct about our typical spending levels and abilities. Knowing that their Christmas gifts come from the people they love, rather than from a bottomless sack, can help diminish the “I-want-this, give-me-that” syndrome.

And, finally, when children know that God’s generosity is reflected by God’s people, it tends to encourage a sense of responsibility about helping make Christmas good for others.

Karsten, for example, worked hard on one gift one year. On Christmas morning in 1975, my husband stepped around a large, loose-flapped cardboard box to get to his chair at the breakfast table. “Where’s Karsten?” he asked, expecting to see our excited three-year-old raring to leap into the day.

Sitting down, I said, “He’ll be here in a minute.” I nudged the box with my toe.

Karsten threw back the flaps and rose to his full three-foot stature. “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them . . .” He had memorized Luke 2:8-20 as a gift for his dad. Karsten knew Santa wasn’t the one to depend on.

In fact, a few days later Karsten and I were walking down the hall at church. One of the older ladies leaned down to squeeze his pink, round cheek and asked, “What did Santa bring you?”

Karsten’s head jerked quickly toward me, and he whispered loudly, “Doesn’t she know?”

These thoughts raise the question: If not Santa, then what?

Manger Scenes

Our very first Christmas was in the middle of our honeymoon. So our traditions began the second year of marriage. We visited our families before Christmas and returned to our small place late at night on December 21. We didn't have any decorations, and the time was short. So we decided not to buy a tree. I had found a tiny nativity set at an international gift shop. On Christmas morning, the two of us sat on the floor beside a low, small table with that scene between us. Christmas carols played in the background as we opened each other's gifts. It seemed exactly right that Jesus be the visible center.

So every year since then, a special crèche has been the focal point of our celebration. We arrange it on a table and collect our gifts underneath. This is often the gathering place for our family devotions during December. Anyone who visits sees what our center is.

We also use a manger scene as part of our Advent candle arrangement to keep the focus of our waiting visible before us. Other uses for a crèche might be:

- An unbreakable set for the children to play with.
- Manger scene ornaments for the Christmas tree.
- A stained-glass or colored-cellophane window arrangement visible from the street.
- A play corner with toy lamb, baby doll, and appropriate items for costumes.

One friend told me about her crèche collection:

I try to find one in every place I visit. I give traveling friends \$20 to spend on a nativity for me if they happen to see one where they are going. I find them at garage sales and thrift stores and after-Christmas sales, and people give them to me as gifts. I have more than a hundred now from all over the world, and when I get them out for Christmas, it is a wonderful reminder that one day people from all tribes and tongues and people and languages—not just my own country—will worship the King.

Other Symbols

One year I read through the Bible looking for names of God and word pictures that describe him. I filled every flyleaf, listing them for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹¹ Each name or image is a facet of the God who is too complex and deep for us to ever know completely. But as we gaze at him from one angle and then from another, we see more clearly the whole, complete, perfect person he is. And the more we know him, the more we love him.

There is no other time in our year set aside to think so happily and thoroughly about who Jesus is and what he's done. That makes Advent and Christmas a perfect time to put in front of us everything we can think of that reminds us of him.

While the children are very young, one way to create visual reminders is by using a large bare branch as a Bethlehem Tree. It would be hung with ornaments and items that picture or symbolize the Bethlehem event.

When children are older, the branch might become a Jesus Tree, reaching further for its symbolism, to include:

- Ornaments and items that represent the nativity.
- Items that relate to Jesus' life.
- Symbols of who Jesus is, as found in Scripture's names for him, word pictures, and parables.
- Reminders of Old Testament prophecy and history leading up to his birth.

Many of our Jesus Tree items are not "ornaments." They are made of cloth or sticks or clay, or we reinvented something as a symbol. For example, the lion is from an old zoo game; the hammer and saw were part of a toddler's tool set; the globe is a key ring.

The facets of Jesus are even more significant to us if we discover them ourselves. Perhaps our Jesus Tree preparations and our Advent spiritual preparation can mesh as we read the Gospels, say, trying to find out who Jesus is.

AM I REFLECTING GOD'S GENEROSITY?

Just about everything in our culture is commercialized. So why does it bother us so much to see Christmas taken over as a sales opportunity? Isn't it because the eagerness to make money off Jesus' birth is the very opposite of God's action in giving

A FEW REMINDERS OF JESUS' LIFE

Star, stable, holy family, Wise Men,
and other nativity symbols
Shepherd (nativity visitors; he is the
Good Shepherd)
Toy hammer, saw (he was a carpenter)
Nails (carpenter; crucifixion)
Grapes (Last Supper)
Praying hands
Thorns
Cross

A FEW SYMBOLS OF PROPHECY AND HISTORY

Bible, scroll
Wheat (his ancestor Ruth; Bread of Life)
Heart (God so loved the world)
Joseph's coat, Noah's Ark (God saving
his people)
Church

WORD PICTURES AND NAMES OF JESUS

Lion (of Judah)
Rose (of Sharon)
Sun (of righteousness)
Sheep (Lamb of God)
Globe (he takes away the sin of the world)
Crown (eternal King)
Dove (Prince of Peace; he left his Spirit
with us)
Candle (Light of the World)

IMAGINARY LETTER TO BEIJING

(Based on a real visitor's questions about our child's manger scene)

December 26

Dear Mother,

I am working diligently in my university courses, and usually I understand the English fairly easily. But I am glad to write to you in Chinese. Thank you again for allowing me this opportunity to study in the United States.

I hope you are well. I am fine, but there is so much to learn about a new place. October 1, as you have taught me well, is the proper day to begin wearing long underwear again. Imagine my embarrassment at the jocular comments of my dorm companions when they saw my attire. In America they pay no attention to the appropriate dress for the date. Rather, if it grows cool so early in the season, they turn on the central heating, not waiting for the designated fire-up-the-furnace day!

I have heard much about the American holiday, Christmas, and so I was eager to find out more about it now that I am here. One realizes the importance of the festival when one sees its trappings in public more than two months before its actual date of December 25. I will tell you some of what I have seen, although it is difficult to interpret the true function of each element.

One first notices the miles-long strings of tiny lights draped over houses, businesses, and trees. Since this is the darkest time of the year, perhaps they are part of some ancient winter solstice ritual ("ancient" by American standards, that is).

I have seen many forms of greenery—juniper, fir, pine, holly, mistletoe. There may be some fine distinction between one and another. I am not sure. But the lush mistletoe seems to have some connection with an "ancient" courting or fertility ceremony.

By far, the most pervasive symbol of Christmas is a character called "Santa Claus," a rotund, cheerful, red-suited, white-bearded, larger-than-life being. He is often seen surrounded by miniature creatures somewhat like himself, called elves. Sometimes he is portrayed waving from a reindeer-drawn snow vehicle, positioned as if it were flying. Often also there are glittery "icicles," aerosol spray-on "snow," and snowflake ornaments, leading one to suspect that Christmas might be a celebration of winter, with

Santa Claus somehow as its personification. I see him everywhere, and so I had been thinking he must be the key to Christmas if one could only delve deeply enough into the mystery.

Then I received an unexpected invitation to visit an American family on Christmas afternoon. At last! I thought. An opportunity to see firsthand a genuine observance. Imagine my dismay yesterday when all my previous assumptions were shattered. There was not one hint of Santa Claus anywhere in this home even though there were several children. (I had assumed that Santa Claus was considered especially valuable for instructing children in the "ancient" truths.)

What did I see instead? Tiny cowsheds filled with toy-sized animals and people. What relation did these bear to any of the Christmas symbolism I had observed in past weeks? Not wanting to appear foolish, I waited until a moment arrived when all of the adults were out of the room. Then I leaned over to a small son of the home, gestured toward a cowshed, and inquired softly, "What is that?"

For an instant, he looked surprised, and I feared I would be shamed by a mere child's recognition of my ignorance. But almost immediately, his face lit with liveliness as he began to recount a story—a story whose details he seemed to know intimately, young as he was.

He spoke of a stable and a baby, of angels and shepherds, and of a star and wise men. When his parents returned to the room, I wasn't finished listening, and I had forgotten about looking foolish. So I asked them for more. Their story started with a serpent, sin, futility, and despair and ended with God's Son, the Savior who gives hope and a future, and with God and his glory. They say this baby is God. Can this be?

Dear Mother, it is late. Though there is much more to write, I must continue another time. But, Mother, is it possible? Could it be that I have found the most ancient—the truly most ancient—mystery?

Your wondering son

him? God pours out his riches on us. He even gave us the life and death of his beloved Son. How do we show that we are children of that generous Father?

We will find our own ways, not by the size of our gifts, but by our choices of gift recipients, of guests in our home, and of the kinds of presents we give.

Gift to Jesus

It may be easy for us to forget that this is Jesus' *birthday*. That usually means gifts to the birthday person. Children especially will think it normal that Jesus should receive something for his birthday. We'll need to talk with them about what it means to give a gift to Jesus since we can't put it in his hand. One of the unusual things about Jesus is that when we give a gift to him, other people benefit. "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25:40).

If you decide early in the Advent season where your gift is going, you can be praying for the recipient throughout the season. Your prayer becomes an added gift to the family with special needs, the Christian relief agency, the local ministry, the missionary, or whomever you have chosen.

Money isn't the only thing we can give, but for the moment, let's think about financial gifts. How might you decide on the amount? One possibility is to determine what percentage of your total gift expenditures will be set aside for Jesus. Another is to give him your December coffee break money or some other regular expenditure.

What about our children? Some years I have offered "wages" for special jobs or even for regular chores during December, with the understanding that this money is being earned for Jesus' gift.

Shepherd's Pouch

The children at our house have had a simple drawstring bag—a shepherd's pouch, we call it—in which to collect Jesus' gift throughout December. On Christmas Eve, during a special family worship time, the children lay their pouches beside the manger of our special nativity scene. We speak to them then of giving their gifts to Jesus, as the shepherds came, giving Jesus worship and wonder.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it won-

dered at what the shepherds told them. . . . And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

(LUKE 2: 15-20)

On Christmas morning, the coins have been removed and added to our grown-up gifts, ready to be sent to our chosen recipient. And the children find in their pouches several small gifts. We speak of a God who blesses those who love and trust him. Although these particular tokens are tangible and physical, our children know from our lifestyle and teaching throughout the year that God blesses in many ways. In fact, many people who are most blessed have very little visible wealth. The blessing of God is his presence with us, which gives us constant cause for praise.

*Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*

(PSALM 63:3-8)

Perhaps the following questions can help us prepare for Christmas.

- Am I my Father's child? Do I resemble him in my generosity?
- Am I focusing on God's gift so that my appreciation to him grows?
- Can others see why I am celebrating?
- Am I celebrating Christ?

One November a friend of mine almost lost her child. By Christmas the crisis was past, but they still were not sure of the long-term implications. She e-mailed me during the season that had always been her favorite time of the year:

Surprisingly, I'm finding Christmas hard. A little bit I resent all the hoopla; sometimes I want to shout, "Don't you know my baby could have died?" At the same time I'm very grateful she's alive, and very aware that she might not have been. So you'd think I'd be really, really happy! That's a pretty secular statement. In spiritual terms, Christmas is not very meaningful to me this year one way or the other. I feel a bit like God and I are on a journey together, seeing and doing a lot, but certainly not staying anywhere for any length of time.

My answer to her could well be the summary of this chapter:

It's not at all surprising that Christmas is hard for you this year. The reason for Christmas is the same as it ever was, and nothing is more essential to our lives than the Incarnation. What's different for you, I expect, is that the traditions we wrap around December 25 to make it different from other days, those traditions and activities are as nothing to you this year. In fact, the thought of them probably weighs like a lump of lead in your belly. So what! Trees are nothing. Feasts are nothing. Lights are nothing. Music is nothing.

Only Christ matters. He is the only reason that you can be on any sort of journey with God, that you can have anything at all to do with God. Only Jesus matters. Hold on to that. Even if your little girl had not survived. But she did, praise Jesus!

One time I told someone in hard times, "Just hang in there." But she corrected me, "I'm not just hanging in there. I'm trying to hang on to Jesus."

So, please, just keep hanging on to Jesus.

Sometimes, when things are going well, we might too easily forget that we have only one sure, immovable, dependable strength—Jesus, who was a baby once and is always and forever God. That is what holds us and keeps us whether or not we can carry out our traditions. May our decorations, gifts, and festivities—or lack of them—never block our view of him but always point us toward him.



Only Christ matters.