

### hol·i·day

Etymology: Middle English, from  
Old English halig, holy + dæg, day;  
holy day, day set aside for special  
religious observance

### crux

Etymology: Latin cruc-, crux, cross  
1. an essential point requiring resolution  
or resolving an outcome  
2. a main or central feature

### cru·cial

Etymology: Latin cruc-, crux, cross  
important or essential as resolving a crisis,  
decisive

N I N E

## ESPECIALLY EASTER





Growing up in the South at a time when there was a lot more etiquette in the air, I learned an important lesson about Easter: That's the day you can begin to wear white shoes again after winter. Fortunately, my family and church taught me more *crucial* lessons about the *holiday* that marks the *crux* of the Christian's life.

*Crucial, crux, holiday*—in these words we see even our language bowing to the essential nature of the event we remember during Lent and Easter. Good Friday is not just a day off work; it is a holy day. Easter's Resurrection could happen only after the Crucifixion, and the cross is like a crossroads in our lives. Every one of us must stand at that crux, that point requiring resolution, and must choose which way to go. The decision we make is crucial—the crisis of our lives is resolved by our turn toward either life or death. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24).

We reveal to ourselves and others what is important to us by the way we celebrate. Is the season before Easter mainly a hassle to get to the mall and a strain on the budget purchasing clothes, candy, cards, and groceries for a big dinner? Or is it several days or weeks of considering God's work in our lives through Jesus, along with special activities to help us think about Jesus' death and resurrection?

Over the course of the Lenten and Easter season, we are remembering the lowest points of sin and the highest peaks of what God has done for us through Jesus. We have a way, the only way, to the Father through Jesus. That's worth celebrating!

*Jesus said . . . , "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

(JOHN 14:6)

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

(JOHN 3:16)

And yet every year somehow it's so easy for Easter to slip up on us, and suddenly we're saying, "Oh, my goodness, it's Palm Sunday already!" Let's think of some ways to be prepared, to be waiting for Easter.

Although Easter is the highest celebration of the Christian year, it doesn't have the fascination and thrill that surrounds Christmas. There's a reason: The death of Jesus was a very somber and tragic event, and we had a part in causing it. But we mustn't avoid preparation for Easter simply because the sober, contemplative season of Lent precedes it. As with all the other special times of our year, we'll be wise and

obedient if we start by preparing our own hearts and lives. Lent offers us seven weeks for this purpose.

## LENT

*Lent* comes from an Old English word that means *lengthen*, signifying that the days are getting longer because spring is here. Among many Christians Lent has come to mean the pre-Easter season that begins on Ash Wednesday.

Traditionally Lent is a season of sober, realistic reflection on our own lives and our need for a Savior. It is a time for turning away from anything that has kept us from God and for turning or returning to him. It is a time to pray that God will renew our love for him and our dependence on him.

## FASTING

In some churches, fasting has been a traditional way of expressing dependence on God during Lent. Of course, like any other religious observance, fasting is only as significant as the intent of the heart. The practice may be nothing more than legalism, or on the other hand, it can be a way of saying, "Oh, God, I want you more than I want any of the good things in my life—food, videos, crossword puzzles, shopping, etc. You are the one who fulfills my desires."

We may find that a fast of some sort helps us recognize our reliance on God. Whether it's a fast from some particular food or meal or from some activity, such as watching TV, reading the newspaper, or surfing the Web, we need to remember that fasting is two-sided. It's not just turning away from something for a while, but it is also turning toward God. In the time that is "added" to our day through fasting from some activity, we might:

- consider the depth of our sin and the height of God's love in Jesus, asking God for forgiveness.
- remember Jesus' forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness, and consider the temptations that hit us the hardest.
- pray for our enemies and the people in our lives who are most difficult to like.
- pray for the salvation of a neighbor, coworker, or family member.

## FASTING

Christian fasting is a test to see what desires control us.

Fasting reveals the measure of food's mastery over us—or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God.

A real lived-out human act of preference for God over his gifts is the actual lived-out glorification of God's excellence for which he created the world. Fasting is not the only way, or the main way, that we glorify God in preferring him above his gifts. But it is one way.

JOHN PIPER  
*A Hunger for God*<sup>12</sup>

#### JOHN 1:4-5

<sup>4</sup>In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

#### ISAIAH 60:20

Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

One thing we have tried to do in our family is “fast” during Holy Week from entertainment and activities that are not in the same spirit as the commemorations of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the “waiting” Saturday that follows those tragic days. If we owned a television, I expect we’d cut way back or simply unplug it. We’re not likely to go to a movie or a party, and we try to save any kid’s overnight visits with friends till later.

Even if we don’t feel led to fast during Lent, let’s ask God to show us what it is that we depend too much on, and ask him to help us cut back that dependence while we lean all the more on him.

#### LENTEN CANDLES

Lent is a season of waiting. In that sense it is like Advent. But while Advent waits eagerly for the appearance of the Savior, Lent waits, with heavy responsibility, for his death. The light of the Advent candles grows brighter as we approach the Savior’s arrival. In Lent all grows darker as we draw nearer to the unthinkable—the death of God.

To symbolize this, we can begin Lent with seven lighted candles. On the first Sunday, one is snuffed out. On the second Sunday, the second candle is extinguished, and so on until Good Friday, when the last one is darkened. It is as if we have seen sin growing in power and finally crucifying the Light of the World, leaving us in darkness.

But John 1:5 assures us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” On Easter morning, all the candles shine triumphantly. The darkness *cannot* put out the Light.<sup>13</sup>

#### RESURRECTION TREE

At our house during Advent, before Christmas we decorate a Jesus Tree with everything we can think of that reminds us of who Jesus is, of his earthly life and ancestors, and of prophecies concerning him. In January we store away all those symbols in the attic, except the ones related to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. When Lent arrives, we use these familiar items on our Resurrection Tree. They become a tangible representation of the connection between Christmas and Easter, the two anchors of a Christian’s year.

The Resurrection Tree is a bare branch, broken from a bush in the back yard, just as the Jesus Tree was. On its twigs we hang symbols that remind us of the Crucifixion and Resurrection and things that point us toward the names and facets of Jesus that are related especially to his sacrifice for our redemption.

As at Advent, the symbols we place before us will have deeper meaning if we have “found” them ourselves. Perhaps those discoveries will occur as we consider the state of our relationship with Jesus and our understanding of the salvation he offers us. Reading the gospel accounts of his last days (Matthew 21–28; Mark 11–16; Luke 19–24; John 11–21) will be essential for this consideration. Like the symbols on Advent’s Jesus Tree, most of these objects won’t be ornaments but small toys and household items that we “re-create.”

#### HOLY WEEK

If the children in your life are young, Lent may be too long a waiting time. In that case, the week that begins with Palm Sunday may be just long enough for anticipating Easter. At our house, we use a play dough mountain and chenille stick (pipe cleaner) people to depict what happened during the week.

As you’re reading in the Gospels, make a list of the days beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with Easter. Try to assign parts of the Holy Week story to each day. I realize that it’s not clear on which day some things happened, but spread out the events in order as evenly as you can.

Each day we play out part of the story with the chenille stick people. Finally on Good Friday the Jesus figure is placed on the cross and then laid in the grave under the mountain with a rock “sealing” the entrance. After activity all week, there is nothing to do on Saturday except wait. Perhaps that gives the children a tiny bit of empathy for the disciples who were hidden away, thinking all was lost.

#### POSSIBLE SYMBOLS FOR A RESURRECTION TREE

- Donkey (humble entry of King Jesus into Jerusalem)
- Palm branches or ferns as miniature palms (triumphal entry)
- Grapes and wheat or loaf and cup (Last Supper)
- Towel and bowl of water (washing the disciples’ feet)
- Coins or money bag (betrayal by Judas)
- Torches or lanterns (nighttime setting of much of the story)
- Chalice (Jesus’ prayer: “Let this cup pass from me.”)
- Rooster (Peter’s denial)
- Pitcher and bowl (Pilate washing hands of responsibility)
- Crown of thorns
- Hammer and nails
- Cross
- Spear
- Colors, perhaps using cloth swatches or beads
  - Purple (passion and mourning, as well as the robe placed on Jesus in mockery)
  - Red (suffering, Christ’s blood)
  - White (Christ’s purity and innocence)
  - Black (the heaviness of sin and grief)
  - Gold (paradise, promised to the thief next to Jesus and to everyone who trusts him)

## Now We're Cookin'

### Making an Easter Mountain Play Dough

4 c. flour	1 1/2 c. water
1 1/2 c. salt	1 Tbs. oil

Mix ingredients and knead. Add small amounts of water as needed until the texture is right.

### Mountain

1. Use two backyard sticks bound together with twine to make a cross about five or six inches tall.

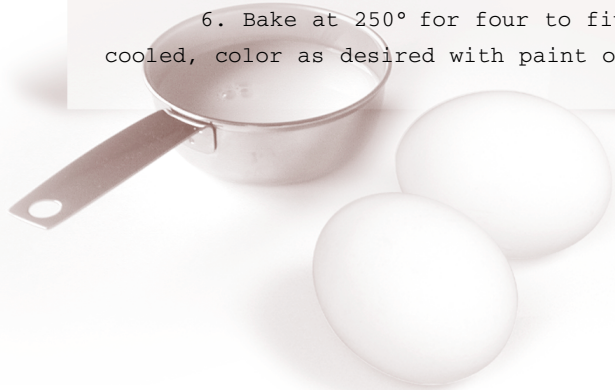
2. Shape the whole lump of play dough into a mountain. The size will be determined by the volume of your play dough. Leave an opening on one side into the "cave" that will represent the tomb, using your fist or a soup can to hold the space open.

3. Press the cross into the top of the mountain to form a hole deep enough to stand the cross in. Make the hole a bit larger than the actual stick circumference because the hole will get smaller as the mountain bakes. Set the cross aside.

4. Twist toothpicks into the dough or press fork tines randomly around on the hill to make "footholds" for chenille stick people.

5. Press the rock that will cover the tomb against the opening, to shape a better fit. Set the stone aside.

6. Bake at 250° for four to five hours. When cooled, color as desired with paint or markers.



The first year we made an Easter mountain, three-year-old Karsten woke on Easter morning and pattered out to the dining room to check the mountain. He saw "Jesus" astride the top of the hill, arms raised in triumph. After a few motionless moments of silence, Karsten shouted, "He's alive! Jesus is alive!"

This activity is excellent for as many years as children can enjoy it and take it somewhat seriously. As soon as it starts to be treated as silly, it's time to set it aside. The reality of the Crucifixion is too deep and horrendous to be treated lightly.

I felt the weight of it most heavily, I think, as I watched a video brought home by a missionary from a nation where it is very difficult to be a Christian—where many people have suffered for their faith. We watched as the brothers and sisters in a house church broke bread together in remembrance of Jesus' death. Their tears and cries and spasms of grief were so overwhelming they could hardly eat and drink. It was as if Jesus were being crucified before them at that very moment.

It is no small thing to "proclaim the Lord's death" (1 Corinthians 11:26), which is what we are doing not just on Good Friday, but every time we eat and drink together the Lord's Supper. Jesus' suffering is very real to his people who suffer because of their faith. May we not take our Lord's death for granted. Our lives depend on it.

I don't want to aim so purposefully toward Easter that I speed unthinkingly past the cross. But at the same time, the Crucifixion—Jesus' death—is not the end.

## EASTER

After the somber days of Lent, we wake to Easter morning. At our house that means I slip downstairs ahead of the children to set out the breakfast cake and turn on some "hallelujah music" to meet the family as they appear. A lamb cake, representing the Lamb of God, decorates the table and will be dessert later in the day. All the Lenten candles burn brightly because the Light of the World has overcome the darkness. At the table together we read the story of the Resurrection.

Then—the high point of the day—we gather with other glad believers to worship our *living* God and cry together, "The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!" This is the cry that resonates through *all* our celebrations and traditions through all the year. If it were not so, it wouldn't matter what our traditions were or even if we had any. If it were not so, we would have no eternal inheritance, no Heirloom that is God himself.



*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us 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 you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

(1 PETER 1:3-5)

## OTHER LENTEN AND EASTER IDEAS

- Pull out all your CDs or tapes of Easter music. Have them handy to pop into your player.
- Read books that will deepen your spiritual life and your understanding of what God has done. Ideas might include missionary biographies or *The Pleasures of God* (John Piper), in particular the chapter entitled "God's Pleasure in Bruising His Son." You could use *The Man Born to Be King* (Dorothy L. Sayers), a radio play, for an evening of reading aloud with friends.
- Put all of your children's Easter-related books, tapes, DVDs, and videos in a basket so that they're handy for you and the children to pick up on the spur of the moment. This would include stories and information about Passover as well.
- Make use of the *Jesus* video (<http://www.jesusvideo.org/>) with your family and with friends who don't yet know Jesus personally.
- Set aside a special place for your family's devotional times, perhaps at the dining room table if that's where your Lenten candles are or beside your Resurrection Tree.
- Attend your church's services that are held during this season. Prepare yourself and your children for the focus and mood of each service.

Palm Sunday—The people were praising with hosannas but were ready to turn against Jesus.

Maundy Thursday—The Last Supper was a time of good-byes and preparation for separation. It would be the end of life together as the disciples had known it. Afterward in the Garden, Jesus' prayer was heart-wrenching, and his disciples deserted him, first in sleep and then by running away. Judas betrayed him, and Peter denied him during the trial and following persecution.

Good Friday—We see Jesus carrying his cross, and we imagine his pain. We hear his words from the cross. We shudder at his death and feel the weight of our own responsibility.

Easter—Hallelujah! Jesus has triumphed over death!

*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

(GALATIANS 2:20)

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

(ROMANS 1:16-17)



The Lord is risen!  
The Lord is risen indeed!



DEUTERONOMY 4:9

*Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children.*

T E N

WHAT NOW?





## THE GENERATIONS

The spaghetti was gone and nothing was left of the mini-éclairs but crumbs. When I stood up, the rehearsal dinner guests—all of them family and special friends—leaned back in their metal folding chairs to hear what I'd say to our son Karsten and his bride, Shelly.

"Until now your parents have been the keepers of traditions for you. Now you are beginning your own home, and the time has come for us to be heritage-passers and for you to become the shapers of tradition in your own family. I have some gifts for you tonight to represent that transfer of responsibility and joy."

First I handed them a baby pandanus plant, the descendant of a parlor-sized tree that had been given to Karsten's grandmother seventy years and who-knows-how-many plant generations earlier. Next was a Noël Calendar, like the Advent calendar Karsten had grown up with. And there was the box of ornaments I had given to Karsten Christmas by Christmas all his life.

Then, moving around behind Shelly, I unfastened the silver chain from my neck and placed it around hers. Inside the Delft-painted locket were two treasures—a photo of toddler Karsten and a blond curl saved from his first haircut. The necklace was a favorite of mine, and I had always promised Karsten it would be his wife's someday. This was the day.

The last gift was a new book of old recipes. For months I had been transferring to my computer all my ragtag collection from stained index cards, crisp yellow newspaper clippings, and random cookbook pages. In the introduction, I wrote:

*It's a risky thing to give these recipes to you. For one thing, I don't want you to think there's anything "sanctified" about these recipes more than others you may try or prefer. For another, no two cooks ever prepare the same dish—even from the same recipe!*

*I heard a story one time about a young woman who tried and tried to make the best mashed potatoes possible, but her husband always said they were not as good as his mother's. The wife went through every step imaginable to make them smooth and light and fluffy, but they were never the same as Mother's. Finally, they visited Mother, and she served the legendary mashed potatoes. "See!" sighed the contented son. "See how wonderful these lumps are in the potatoes."*

*So, both of you, think of these recipes as family heirlooms. Some are used and enjoyed. Others are stored safely on a shelf somewhere, available if wanted, but otherwise pretty much forgotten.*

Whether it's recipes or traditions or raising their own children, I don't expect my adult children to do things exactly as I do. I certainly don't do everything the way my parents did. But they laid a foundation for me.

I can remember my mother when she was younger than I am now. Has she really changed very much? And how have I come to be in the position she held then? All of my grandparents are dead. So is my father. My mother is now the oldest generation, and I've moved up to her former place.

Someday another generational shift will happen for all of us, and our children will be contemplating the same questions. So we need to ask ourselves:

- Am I preparing my children to be the "older generation"?
- How well am I doing at teaching them to value the most priceless and endless treasure of glorifying God and enjoying him forever?
- Am I myself glorifying God and enjoying him?

Answers to these questions must come from every area of our lives together. Through their years with us, our interaction with our children will show them who God is and how he acts. Let's shower them with love and discipline in the broadest sense and convey as much of God as they can understand at whatever age they are.

In this book we have paid special attention to the role of traditions, because they reach into so many corners of a family's life, shaping and reflecting our understanding of love, discipline, and God.

## OLD TRADITIONS AND NEW

My goal is that we *evaluate* our traditions. It's not enough to do things just because that's the way we've always done them. We must think about our traditions. If an activity or custom says what we mean about God and our relationship with him, we keep it. Some we'll want to change, and some we'll want to set aside to make place for something new.

But *tradition* implies a long-established practice, doesn't it? So isn't *new tradition* an oxymoron? Maybe so, but every tradition got its start sometime. Why not with you? I'm praying that what you've read in this book will be a springboard to your own traditions—some old, some reworked, and some new. Dive from the ideas here into the traditions *you* choose and form to fit your home and your family in this chapter of life. Your celebrations shouldn't try to include every detail you've read here. They *should* have God at the center.

Let's just remind ourselves of what we're after:

- Remembering what God did for his people, for us, and
- giving glory to God for what he's done,
- so our children and their children will know him.



If we want our children to know him, it's not enough just to be "doing" the right activities or using the symbolism of God's Word and work. We must remember to be "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" (Deuteronomy 11:19). Without the verbal part, our traditions will become unfocused—beautiful, maybe—but without much point.

#### VALUE EVEN IN RITUALS WITHOUT A FOCUS

It is worth mentioning, though, that even in traditions that seem shallow, God releases glimmers of his presence. A friend of mine wrote:

*I grew up in a troubled, angry, and unpredictable family. One thing proved a small but weighty anchor for me: family holiday traditions. We didn't have Norman Rockwell holidays; ours were a much less funny version of The Honeymooners. But a base of security was laid down for me in the predictable cycle of heart-shaped Jello for Valentine's Day and French toast with thread sewn through the bread slices (April Fool!) and Easter baskets and Thanksgiving salad in that special bowl and Christmas decorations long, long past their prime but welcomed every December. No matter what else was going on, these traditions went on, and they strengthened me. I counted on them, and they were there, year in and year out. It wasn't enough, of course, but it was something, and God used it for my good in the midst of the pain.*

*Red heart-shaped Jello, for crying out loud. Such a little thing. But red heart-shaped Jello year after year after year after year after year was something else entirely.*

"It wasn't enough" she writes, "but it was something, and God used it for my good." Year after year after year the traditions were there, a shadow of our God who is rock-steady and dependable year after year after year. When God created seasons and memories and celebrations—traditions—he knew our need for security. And he knew that even paltry red Jello year after year can provide enough steadiness to keep us going until we find our only real security in him.

#### VALUE OF GOD-CENTERED RITUAL

But how much more of God there is to find when we are on the lookout, when we shape our "everyday" and "especially" around him. God will show himself in special and new ways when we celebrate him. He will use our celebrations, our traditions, to stoke our heart's fire for him.

I used to run among the lightning bugs with my cousins while the adults talked in the dark on the front porch. That's history. Now my cousins and I are far older

than our parents were then. Our parents are dying—the ones from whom we received our earthly heritage.

As they leave us, I feel myself more and more tuned in to the essential in my life. *The essential* is that the eyes of my heart be focused on the Author of the universe so that I celebrate the world and history as he's written it.

Then I turn from the generation who came before me and look toward the children who come after me. I want the story they live to resonate with the history written by that great Author of the universe. It is my heart's desire that they love God and enjoy him forever so that they will love the future he's already written.

It is not from us that our children will receive their Heirloom. Only God can give himself to those who receive the inheritance. But we can praise the Lord that he allows us be part of his plan for bringing his children to himself, that he uses us to reveal to our children the beauty of our Heirloom—God.

(FROM MY FATHER'S LAST LETTER  
TO HIS CHILDREN, WRITTEN THREE  
WEEKS BEFORE HIS DEATH.)

Dear Noël, Walter, Travie, Juliette, Gwynn, Christa, Pamela, Rolfe, and Garnett,

I pray that I will be lucid and able to care for myself until the Lord calls me home. Pray with me that this will be so. Isn't our God good, and his continued blessings follow me regularly.

I love you all with a love that I have no vocabulary for. Only one person on this earth stands above you, and that person is your mother.

Each of you as a child has climbed into my lap, laid your head on my shoulder, and said, "Daddy, wipe the tears away." And when I wiped them away, you would relax and rest in peace. I wish I could wipe those tears away now and continuously, but there comes a time when your earthly father cannot fulfill this office, and you have to put your total dependence upon our heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank God for choosing you and yours for our family.

Our love and prayers for you all continue.

*Dad*



May the ceremonies of our  
homes be true ceremony—  
from him,  
because of him,  
pointing toward him,  
honoring him,  
thanking him.

Amen.



A P P E N D I X

THE FAMILY:  
TOGETHER  
IN GOD'S  
PRESENCE



*By John and Noël Piper*

## SOME THOUGHTS ON WORSHIP

from John

God-centered worship is supremely important in the life of our church. We approach the Sunday morning worship hour with great seriousness and earnestness and expectancy. We try to banish all that is flippant or trivial or chatty.

Not all services are this way. Sunday morning is the Mount of Transfiguration—the awesome place of glory and speechlessness. Sunday or Wednesday evening is the Mount of Olives—the familiar spot for conversation with the Lord and each other.

In this article, we hope to do two things: 1) demonstrate that parents (or some responsible adult) should bring little children to the Sunday morning worship service rather than send them to a “children’s church”; 2) give some practical advice about how to do it.

We don’t claim that our way of worshiping is the only valid way. Not all our ideas may fit with the way another church does it. For example, we don’t have a children’s sermon as part of our Sunday morning service. It would be fun for the children, but in the long run would weaken the spiritual intensity of our worship. To everything there is a season. And we believe that, for at least one hour a week, we should sustain a maximum intensity of moving reverence.

## THE BIGGEST STUMBLING BLOCK

There are several reasons why we urge parents to bring their children to worship. But these arguments will not carry much weight with parents who do not love to worship God.

The greatest stumbling block for children in worship is that their parents do not cherish the hour. Children can feel the difference between duty and delight. Therefore, the first and most important job of a parent is to fall in love with the worship of God. You can’t impart what you don’t possess.

## TOGETHERNESS

Worshiping together counters the contemporary fragmentation of families. Hectic American life leaves little time for significant togetherness. It is hard to overestimate the good influence of families doing valuable things together week in and week out, year in and year out.

Worship is the most valuable thing a human can do. The cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad between the ages of four and seventeen is incalculable.

## CATCH THE SPIRIT

Parents have the responsibility to teach their children by their own example the meaning and value of worship. Therefore, parents should want their children with them in worship so that the children can catch the spirit and form of their parents’ worship.

Children should see how Mom and Dad bow their heads in earnest prayer during the prelude and other nondirected times. They should see how Mom and Dad sing praise to God with joy in their faces and how they listen hungrily to his Word. They should catch the spirit of their parents meeting the living God.

Something seems wrong when parents want to take their children in the formative years and put them with other children and other adults to form their attitude and behavior in worship. Parents should be jealous to model for their children the tremendous value they put on reverence in the presence of Almighty God.

## NOT AN EXCESSIVE EXPECTATION

To sit still and be quiet for an hour or two on Sunday is not an excessive expectation for a healthy, normal six-year-old who has been taught to obey his parents. It requires a measure of discipline, but that is precisely what we want to encourage parents to impart to their children in the first five years.

Thus the desire to have children in the worship service is part of a broader concern that children be reared so that they are “submissive and respectful in every way” (1 Timothy 3:4 RSV).

Children can be taught in the first five years of life to obey their father and mother when they say, “Sit still and be quiet.” In general, parents’ helplessness to control their children should not be solved by alternative services but by a renewal of discipline in the home.

## NOT EVERYTHING GOES OVER THEIR HEADS

Children absorb a tremendous amount that is of value. And this is true even if they say they are bored.

Music and words become familiar. The message of the music starts to sink in. The form of the service comes to feel natural. The choir makes a special impression with a kind of music the children may hear at no other time. Even if most of the sermon goes over their heads, experience shows that children hear and remember remarkable things.

The content of the prayers and songs and sermon gives parents unparalleled opportunities to teach their children the great truths of our faith. If parents would



only learn to query their children after the service and then explain things, the children's capacity to participate would soar.

Not everything children experience has to be put on their level in order to do them good. Some things must be. But not everything.

For example, to learn a new language you can go step by step from alphabet to vocabulary to grammar to syntax. Or you can take a course where you dive in over your head, and all you hear is the language you don't know. Most language teachers would agree that the latter is by far the most effective.

Sunday worship service is not useless to children just because much of it goes over their heads. They can and will grow into this new language faster than we think—if positive and happy attitudes are fostered by the parents.

#### A SENSE OF AWE

There is a sense of solemnity and awe that children should experience in the presence of God. This is not likely to happen in children's church. Is there such a thing as children's thunder or children's lightning or the crashing of the sea "for children"?

A deep sense of the unknown and the mysterious can rise in the soul of a sensitive child in solemn worship—if his parents are going hard after God themselves. A deep moving of the magnificence of God can come to the young, tender heart through certain moments of great hymns or "loud silence" or authoritative preaching. These are of immeasurable value in the cultivation of a heart that fears and loves God.

We do not believe that children who have been in children's church for several years between the ages of six and twelve will be more inclined or better trained to enjoy worship than if they had spent those years at the side of their parents. In fact, the opposite is probably the case.

It will probably be harder to acclimate a ten- or twelve-year-old to a new worship service than a five- or six-year-old. The cement is much less wet, and vast possibilities of shaping the impulses of the heart are gone.

#### SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

*from Noël*

When our four sons grew to be young men, we assumed that the worship-training chapter of our life had ended. But God has wonderful surprises. Our youngest son was twelve when we adopted our daughter, who was just a couple of months old. So our experience with young children in the pew started about thirty years ago and will continue awhile longer.

#### GETTING STARTED STEP BY STEP

We discovered that the very earliest "school" for worship is in the home—when we help a baby be quiet for just a moment while we ask God's blessing on our meal; when a toddler is sitting still to listen to a Bible storybook; when a child is learning to pay attention to God's Word and to pray during family devotional times.

At church, even while our children were still nursery-aged, I began to help them take steps toward eventual regular attendance in Sunday morning worship service. I used other gatherings as a training ground—baptisms, choir concerts, missionary videos, or other special events that would grab the attention of a three-year-old. I'd "promote" these to the child as something exciting and grown up. The occasional special attendance gradually developed into regular evening attendance, while at the same time we were beginning to attempt Sunday mornings more and more regularly.

I've chosen not to use the church's child care as an escape route when the service becomes long or the child gets restless. I don't want to communicate that you go to a service as long as it seems interesting, and then you can go play. And I wanted to avoid a pattern that might reinforce the idea that all of the service is good up until the preaching of God's Word—then you can leave.

Of course, there are times when a child gets restless or noisy, despite a parent's best efforts. I pray for the understanding of the people around me and try to deal with the problem unobtrusively. But if the child won't be quiet or still, I take him or her out—for the sake of quick discipline and for the sake of the other worshipers. Then I have to decide whether we'll slip back into service or stay in the area reserved for parents with young children. It depends on how responsive the child seems and whether there's an appropriate moment in the flow of the service. If we stay in the "family area" outside the sanctuary, I help my child sit quietly as if we were still in the sanctuary.

By the time they are four years old, our children assume that they'll be at all the regular weekly services with us.

#### PREPARATION ALL WEEK LONG

Your anticipation and conversation before and after service and during the week will be important in helping your child learn to love worship and to behave well in service.

Help your children become acquainted with your pastor. Let them shake hands with him at the door and be greeted by him. Talk about who the worship leaders are; call them by name. Suggest that your child's Sunday school teacher invite the

pastor to spend a few minutes with the children if your church's Sunday morning schedule allows for that.

If you know what the Scripture passage will be for the coming Sunday, read it together several times during the week. A little one's face really lights up when he hears familiar words from the pulpit.

Talk about what is "special" this week: a trumpet solo, a friend singing, a missionary speaker from a country you have been praying for.

Sometimes you can take the regular elements of the service and make them part of the anticipation. "We've been reading about Joseph. What do you think the pastor will say about him?" "What might the choir be singing this morning?" "Maybe we can sit next to our handicapped friend and help him with his hymnbook so he can worship better too."

There are two additional and important pre-service preparations for us: a pen and notepad for "Sunday notes" and a trip to the restroom (leaving the service is highly discouraged).

#### WHAT HAPPENS DURING SERVICE?

First, I let a child who wants a worship folder have one. It helps a child feel like a participant in the service. And quietly, before service begins, I may point to the different parts of the service listed in the folder.

During the service, we all sit or stand along with rest of the congregation. I share my Bible or hymnal or worship folder with my little one, because use of these is an important part of the service.

The beginning of the sermon is the signal for "note-taking" to begin. (I want a child's activities to be related to the service. So we don't bring library books to read. I do let a very young child look at pictures in his Bible if he can do it quietly.) Note-taking doesn't mean just scribbling, but "taking notes" on a special pad used just for the service.

"Taking notes" grows up as the child does. At first he draws pictures of what he hears in the sermon. Individual words or names trigger individual pictures. You might pick out a word that will be used frequently in the sermon; have the child listen carefully and make a check mark in his "notes" each time he hears the word.

Later he may want to copy letters or words from the Scripture passage for the morning. When spelling comes easier, he will write words and then phrases he hears in the sermon. Before you might expect it, he may be outlining the sermon and noting whole concepts.

#### GOALS AND REQUIREMENTS

My training for worship has three main goals:

1. That children learn early and as well as they can to worship God heartily.
2. That parents be able to worship.
3. That families cause no distraction to the people around them.

So there are certain expectations that I teach the young ones and expect of the older ones:

- Sit or stand or close their eyes when the service calls for it.
- Sit up straight and still—not lounging or fidgeting or crawling around, but respectful toward God and the other worshipers nearby.
- Keep bulletin papers and Bible and hymnal pages as quiet as possible.
- Stay awake. Taking notes helps. (I did allow the smallest ones to sleep, but they usually didn't need to!)
- Look toward the worship leaders in the front. No people-gazing or clock-watching.
- If you can read fast enough, sing along with the printed words. At least keep your eyes on the words and try to think them. If you can't read yet, listen very hard.

#### CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT IN THE PEW

For my part, I try to create an environment in our pew that makes worship easier. In past years, I would sit between whichever two were having the most trouble with each other that day. We choose seats where we can see the front better while seated, not kneeling on the pew; kneeling leads to squirming and blocks the view of others).

Each child has a Bible, offering money, and worship folder at hand; so he doesn't have to scramble and dig during the worship time. During the prelude, if I notice in the bulletin something unusual for which we need to be prepared (a responsive reading or congregational prayers, for example), I quietly point it out to a child who is old enough to participate.

#### AFTERWARD

When the service has ended, my first words are praise to the child who has behaved well. In addition to the praise, I might also mention one or two things that we both hope will be better next time.

But what if there has been disregard of our established expectations and little attempt to behave? The first thing that happens following the service is a silent and



immediate trip to the most private place we can find. Then the deserved words are spoken and consequences administered or promised.

#### CLOSENESS AND WARMTH

On the rare occasions when my pastor-husband can sit with the rest of us, the youngest one climbs right into his lap—and is more attentive and still than usual. What a wonderful thing for a young mind to closely associate the closeness and warmth of a parent's lap with special God-times.

A child beyond the lap stage can get the same feeling from being next to his parent or from an arm around the shoulder or an affectionate hand on the knee.

The setting of the tight family circle focusing toward God will be a nonverbal picture growing richer and richer in the child's mind and heart as he matures in appreciation for his family and in awe at the greatness of God.

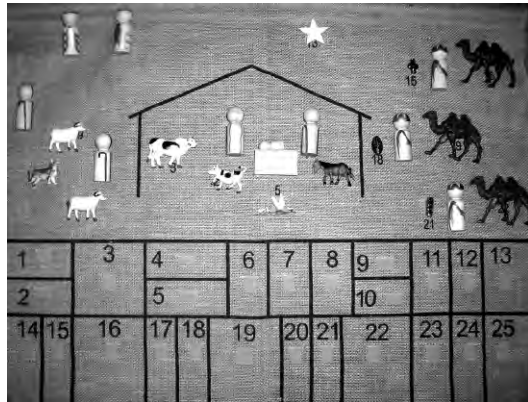
PUBLISHED ORIGINALLY IN *THE STANDARD*, MARCH 1986. REVISED, NOVEMBER 1999.

## NOTES

1. From a sermon given on May 11, 1993, © Desiring God Ministries. Website: [www.desiringGOD.org](http://www.desiringGOD.org)
2. Carine MacKenzie, *My First Book of Questions and Answers* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001). In a foreword Douglas Kelly writes that this book "is organized so that the theological concepts follow each other in proper order, much like its model, the Westminster Shorter Catechism."
3. Noël Piper, "Betsey Stockton, 1789-1865: From Slavery to the World," audiotape available through Desiring God Ministries, [www.desiringGOD.org](http://www.desiringGOD.org) or 888-346-4700 (toll-free).
4. For more ideas, see Noël Piper, "Home-Grown World Christians." It is available through Desiring God Ministries, [www.desiringGOD.org](http://www.desiringGOD.org) or 888-346-4700 (toll-free).
5. U.S. Center for World Mission, 1605 E. Elizabeth St., Pasadena CA 91104-2721, or <http://www.uscwm.org>.
6. Milo Shannon-Thornberry, *The Alternate Celebrations Catalogue* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), 14.
7. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 54.
8. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1996), 143.
9. Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1972), 73-74.
10. For more information or to order a Noël Calendar, visit [www.desiringGOD.org](http://www.desiringGOD.org) or call 888-346-4700 (toll-free).
11. "Never in January" can be read in full at [www.desiringGOD.org](http://www.desiringGOD.org). Follow the "Noël Piper" links.
12. John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1997), 18, 19, 20.
13. Noël Piper, *Lenten Lights*, a booklet of devotions for use alone or with Lenten candles. For more information or to order, visit [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org) or call 888-346-4700 (toll-free).

## Noël Calendar

### Advent Calendar—A Family Tradition for the Generations



This Advent calendar, designed by Noël Piper, has become a treasured tradition of the Pipers and many others. Each day in December, the story begins:

*Jesus is the greatest Treasure of all.  
This is the story of how he came to us.*

*Long ago God made a promise about a little town named Bethlehem. He said, "O Bethlehem . . . From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." Jesus is the King that God promised to send.*

*One time, a long time ago, in Bethlehem there was a place called a stable. In the stable there was a manger, filled with hay . . .*

After hearing these words, a child removes the manger from its calendar square and places it in position on the top half of the banner. That ends the first day's story. On each subsequent day until Christmas, the story starts again at the beginning and stretches a little further. And each day one more figure is added to the illustration of the Nativity.

As they have heard the story day after day, young children have learned the true CHRISTmas story. Then, as they've grown older, they can't imagine Christmas without the Noël Calendar. One newlywed wrote: "My sister and I looked forward to the Advent calendar every December. I just ordered one for Steve and me and any possible future additions to our family."

So, as well as being a Christ-centered Christmas gift, the Noël Calendar is an excellent wedding or baby gift year-round, helping families focus on their true Treasure.

*Set includes a 21" x 27" burlap banner, 25 figures, a segmented dowel, and a laminated brochure with instructions and the Advent story.*

*For more information or to order, contact Desiring God Ministries (see page 120).*

## R E S O U R C E S

### FROM NOËL PIPER

Resources in this section, except for *Most of All, Jesus Loves You*, may be ordered from DesiringGod.org; follow the "Noël Piper" links or call toll-free 888-346-4700.

"The Family: Together in God's Presence." Available to read online or may be ordered in brochure format.

"Home-Grown World Christians." Available to read online or may be ordered in brochure format.

*Lenten Lights.* Booklet of devotions for the season before Easter.

*Most of All, Jesus Loves You* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004). The story of a loving bedtime tradition for toddlers and preschoolers.

"Never in January." Thoughts about personal Bible reading in the midst of a busy life. Available to read online.

### READING AND DEVOTIONAL HELPS

*Fighter Verses Memorization System*, Children Desiring God. Order from DesiringGod.org; follow the "Children Desiring God" and "Bible Memorization" links.

Green, Steve. *Hide 'Em in Your Heart*, vols. 1 and 2. Cassettes or CDs of songs for Bible memory. Sparrow Records.

Hughes, Barbara, ed. *Devotions for Ministry Wives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Ninety devotions, including several by Noël Piper, for any woman trying to live a life of ministry.

Hunt, Gladys. *Honey for a Child's Heart* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Ideas for reading with children and encouraging them to love reading.

Schoolland, *Leading Little Ones to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). Devotional book for preschool and young school-aged children.

MacKenzie, Carine, *My 1st Book of Questions and Answers* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001). Catechism for children.



### BECOMING WORLD CHRISTIANS (A SMALL SAMPLE)

*Mission Frontiers*, U.S. Center for World Mission, 1605 Elizabeth St., Pasadena CA 91104-2721. Subscribe or read online this bimonthly publication: [www.missionfrontiers.org](http://www.missionfrontiers.org).

*Global Prayer Digest*, U.S. Center for World Mission, Frontier Fellowship, 1605 Elizabeth St., Pasadena, CA 91104-2721. Subscribe or read online this daily guide for praying daily for the unreached peoples: [www.global-prayer-digest.org](http://www.global-prayer-digest.org).

Joni and Friends, P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, CA 91376. An international ministry whose mission is “to evangelize and disciple people affected by disabilities.” Find help and opportunities: [joniandfriends.org](http://joniandfriends.org).

### BIBLE STORY CASSETTES

*Dear Noël,*

*You write that your children listened to stories on tape while they were too young to read. Could you recommend some good, sound children's Bible story recordings?*

*Thank you.*

Dear friend,

That's a good question and difficult to answer. The sets we used are out of print, and it's hard now to find good options. Perhaps publishers think kids are too visually oriented to be interested in audio.

These are ones that we've used and liked:

- *Stories That Live*, a large series of books and tapes produced by Peter Enns.
- *A Few Who Dared to Trust God*, a set of five cassettes produced by the American Bible Society.
- *The Word and Song Bible*, books and tapes, ed. Steve Elkins (Broadman & Holman, 2000).

I'd suggest typing those titles into your Internet search engine. You might find one used or back in print. Or your search may uncover some other treasure. (When you find something good, I'd like to hear about it!)

When buying something unfamiliar from a Christian business that presumably cares about the biblical faithfulness of its merchandise, I'd ask up front if there's a way to preview audio before buying or if it's possible to return opened tapes or CDs if they are not as clearly biblical as the packaging indicates.

Here are some of the basics I'm looking for in audio for pre-readers.

- A Bible story told without added details or characters;
- Presentation of God as the central character;
- Appropriate respect given to the Word of God;
- Less important but helpful to a younger child is that stories be narrated rather than dramatized.

If you can't find what you want or simply want the Bible time experience to be more intimate, why not make a recording yourself from your child's favorite Bible storybooks?

Blessings on you and your family as you grow together in God's Word.

Noël Piper

## OUR TRADITIONS



If you would like to ponder further the vision of God and life presented in this book, we at Desiring God would love to serve you. We have produced hundreds of resources to help you grow in your passion for God and help you spread that passion to others.

At our website, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org), you'll find almost all of the resources John Piper has written and preached, including more than 30 books. We've made over 25 years of his sermons available free for you to read, listen to, download, and in some cases watch online. In addition, you can access hundreds of articles, listen to our daily internet radio program, find out where John Piper is speaking, learn about our conferences, discover our God-centered children's curricula, and browse our online store.

John Piper receives no royalties from the books he writes and no remuneration from Desiring God. These funds are all reinvested into our gospel-spreading efforts. DG also has a whatever-you-can-afford policy for the materials we sell, designed for individuals with limited discretionary funds. If you'd like more information about this policy, please contact us at the address or phone number below.

We exist to help you treasure Jesus Christ above all things because he is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. Let us know how we can serve you!

---

### **Desiring God**

2601 East Franklin Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55406-1103

888.346.4700 (phone)  
612.338.4372 (fax)  
Email: [mail@desiringGod.org](mailto:mail@desiringGod.org)  
Web: [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org)

## OUR TRADITIONS

## OUR TRADITIONS



## OUR TRADITIONS

## OUR TRADITIONS

## OUR TRADITIONS

## OUR TRADITIONS

## OUR TRADITIONS