

# **The Cozy Seasons: Christmas at Home**

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# **The Cozy Seasons: Christmas at Home**

*Devotions, Stories, Activities, and Recipes for Simple Family Moments*

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# Chapter 1: Preparing Your Heart for the Season

*"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*

— Isaiah 9:6 (NLT)

## Devotional Reflection

The Christmas season has a way of rushing in before we've even caught our breath from autumn. One minute, we're crunching leaves under our feet, and the next, it seems every store aisle is decked with garlands and glittering ornaments. Lights twinkle, music plays, and the world tells us it's time to go faster: shop more, bake more, do more.

And yet, when we return to Scripture, we see a very different invitation. Isaiah's prophecy didn't shout with the noise of busyness. It whispered with hope: *a child is born to us, a son is given to us*. It was a promise spoken into a weary world. Long before the shepherds heard the angel's song, God's people were waiting. And waiting always requires stillness.

But if we're honest, stillness doesn't come naturally at Christmastime. Most of us feel the pull of lists and obligations: teacher gifts, school programs, decorations, grocery runs, and family gatherings that require more emotional energy than we want to admit. If we're not careful, the season that's supposed to center us on Christ can leave us scattered, distracted, and depleted.

What if, this year, we prepared our hearts differently?

## The Quiet Before the Birth

I often imagine what it must have been like in the days leading up to Christ's birth. Mary and Joseph weren't rushing through aisles at Target.

They were weary travelers, carrying a secret the world could barely comprehend. They weren't counting down to wrapping paper and stockings but to the promise of God Himself arriving in flesh.

I imagine Mary, heavy with child, trying to breathe steadily as the donkey carried her down rocky paths. I picture Joseph, determined to find a place for his young bride, shouldering the weight of responsibility. No garland, no glitter. Just obedience. Just trust.

Christmas didn't begin in frenzy. It began in faithful waiting. And I believe that's what God invites us back into, year after year. Not to deny the beauty of family traditions, not to ignore the sparkle of lights or the joy of sharing gifts, but to first posture our hearts in the same quiet expectancy that filled Bethlehem on that holy night.

### **The Danger of a Crowded Season**

Let's be real, mama — the season can get crowded fast. Not just crowded with schedules, but crowded in our souls. If our hearts are full of rushing, where will there be room for the Savior?

Think of the innkeeper who turned Mary and Joseph away. He wasn't cruel; he was simply full. Every space occupied, every corner taken. That's the danger we face too. When our calendars and minds are overstuffed, we risk missing the presence of Christ right in the middle of us.

Preparing your heart for Christmas means leaving margin. It means making room. Maybe that looks like setting aside ten quiet minutes in the morning with coffee and Scripture before the house wakes. Maybe it means saying no to one extra event so your family can say yes to an evening of rest together. Maybe it means lowering expectations — not every decoration has to be perfect, not every recipe has to be made from scratch.

The season doesn't need our performance. It needs our presence.

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## **An Invitation to Wonder**

Do you remember the first time you saw Christmas lights as a child? The way your breath caught at the sparkle, how the world suddenly felt magical? Children don't have to be told to wonder; they lean into it naturally.

As adults, wonder gets buried under responsibilities. But preparing your heart means uncovering it again. Looking at the lights and remembering that the Light of the World stepped into darkness. Hearing the carols and realizing they are not just songs but testimonies of joy. Seeing the Nativity set and remembering that those tiny figurines point to the most extraordinary reality: God with us.

Wonder is not childish. It is holy. And when we slow down enough to wonder, we make space for worship.

## **The Prince of Peace**

Isaiah called Him the *Prince of Peace*. And don't we need peace at Christmastime? Not the kind of peace that comes from finishing every task or finding the perfect gift, but the kind that quiets our restless hearts.

Peace comes when we remember that Jesus came not to add burdens but to carry them. He came to be the Wonderful Counselor for our anxious minds, the Mighty God for our impossible circumstances, the Everlasting Father for our lonely hearts.

That's why preparing your heart isn't about achieving a perfect Christmas; it's about receiving a perfect Savior.

## **What Preparation Looks Like**

So how do we actually prepare our hearts?

- **Choose Stillness:** Light a candle each evening and read a few verses of Scripture. Let that small flame remind you of His light in your home.
- **Simplify:** Pick one or two traditions your family loves most and release the rest. Better to do a few things with joy than everything with exhaustion.

- **Serve:** Find one act of kindness to weave into your week — baking for a neighbor, writing a card, donating a toy. When we give, we reflect the Giver.
- **Savor:** Pay attention to small holy moments: a child's laughter, the smell of cookies baking, the hush of snow falling. Let them turn your heart toward gratitude.

Preparation is less about doing more and more about noticing more.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. When you picture Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem, what part of their story resonates with your own journey right now?
  2. Where in your life do you feel "too full" this season, like the inn with no room?
  3. What tradition or practice might you set aside so you can focus more fully on Christ?
  4. How can you invite wonder back into your family's Christmas this year?
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## ***The Candle in the Window***

The first snow came early that year, soft and steady, the kind that covered the porch railings like frosting and hushed the neighborhood into quiet. Emily stood at the kitchen window, her hands in warm, soapy water, and watched the flakes tumble under the streetlamp. On the counter beside her sat a little brass candlestick—her grandmother’s—its base scratched from decades of polishing.

“Tonight,” she whispered to herself, “we start slow.” Her daughter Anna bounded in, cheeks pink from the open back door. “Mama, it’s snowing! Can we put up the manger?” “After dinner,” Emily smiled, drying her hands. “But this year we’ll do it piece by piece.”

“Like an Advent,” Anna said carefully, as if the word might break.

“Exactly,” Emily nodded. “We’ll start with the star.”

That evening, the house felt wrapped in lamplight and cinnamon. Daniel came in from the garage, boots dusted white. Jacob, lanky and half-grown, lugged in a bin of decorations. Claire, the youngest, clutched her stuffed lamb in one hand and a silver cardboard star in the other. Dinner was simple stew and bread torn into steam, but no one seemed to mind. After dishes were rinsed, they gathered around the coffee table where a wooden stable stood, its roof a little crooked from years of storage.

Emily lit the brass candle, its glow trembling on the wall. “The prophets promised Him long ago,” she began, her voice steady. “They said a light would come to people walking in darkness.”

Jacob leaned forward and fixed the star above the roof with a bent paperclip. Claire whispered solemnly, “Welcome, light.” Daniel reached for Emily’s hand. For a moment, the room felt like a chapel—just a small flame and a family waiting. Anna’s eyes shone. “Can we sing?”

So they did, softly: *O come, O come, Emmanuel*. The candle wavered, like it was listening.

It would have been perfect to end the night there, but on the way to put the decorations away, someone bumped the bin. A sharp sound split the room. Claire's face crumpled. "I didn't mean to!"

On the carpet lay Grandma Ruth's glass angel, its wing snapped clean off.

Emily's chest tightened. It was just a figurine—but it had stood watch through every Christmas she could remember. She knelt beside Claire and brushed her hair back. "We'll fix it. Maybe a mended angel is even better for our story."

Together they gathered the tiny shard. Daniel fetched glue from the junk drawer, and under the lamplight they repaired it. The wing bore a faint seam when it dried, but Emily thought of how every one of them carried seams of their own. Mended. Kept. Still beloved.

Later, she placed the brass candle in the front window. Grandma had always said it meant welcome—for neighbors, for family, and most of all, for Christ. Emily whispered a prayer: *Lord, let our home make room for You. Don't let me crowd You out with the noise*. The candle burned steady, as if answering.

The week slipped into a rhythm. Each evening they added one piece to the Nativity and read a few verses. "It's Joseph day," Jacob would say with mock seriousness, or "Today's the donkey." Even he lingered a little longer by the stable than he admitted.

On Thursday, a note came home from choir: thirty-six cookies needed for the bake sale. Emily sighed. Thirty-six of anything felt impossible. But on the counter lay their list of "This Year's Yeses":

- Candle each night
  - One story, one song
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- Nativity piece by piece
- Sunday caroling at Maplewood

The rest, they had decided, would wait. "We'll bake a dozen," Emily told the kids. "Snow cookies with sprinkles. That's our yes."

And so they baked after supper, flour on little noses, music playing low. The kitchen felt less like a chore and more like joy. Emily thought of the angel with its faint scar and felt lighter. She didn't need to do it all. Just love well and keep the window candle burning.

Sunday dawned clear and cold. After church and grilled cheese at home, they bundled up for caroling at Maplewood Nursing Home. The lobby was trimmed with paper snowflakes and a tree glittering with homemade ornaments. Pastor Jim strummed his guitar, and families huddled with song sheets.

Emily held Claire's mittened hand. Jacob stood a little apart, voice low but steady when "Silent Night" began. Anna made instant friends with a woman named Louise, who taught her a harmony line she'd sung as a girl.

They sang in common rooms where wrinkled hands tapped the beat, in hallways where patients leaned forward to listen, and in one quiet doorway where a nurse held a cup for a sleeping woman. *Joy to the World* rang out less like cheer, more like invitation: *let every heart prepare Him room.*

On the way out, Louise pressed a peppermint into Anna's palm. "I used to hang these on my tree when my boys were small," she said. "Before they moved far away." "We'll hang it on ours," Anna promised.

Back home, mugs of cocoa in hand, they gathered by the stable. It was angel day. Claire carried the mended one like treasure and placed it above the roof beside the paper star. Emily thought of the quiet rooms they'd visited, of the lines in her own heart, and whispered, *Emmanuel. God with us.*

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"Can I pray?" Jacob asked suddenly. Heads bowed. His voice cracked but held. "God, make room in us. And use our house to make room for someone who needs it. Amen."

Emily squeezed Daniel's hand, her eyes stinging. Something inside her opened wide, like a field waiting under starlight.

A week later, an ice storm canceled school and froze the world into stillness. "Pajama day," Emily announced. "Shopping can wait."

Instead, Jacob built a fire. Anna cut red and brown paper chains "like cinnamon and cranberries." Claire invented "Shepherds and Stars," leaping from behind the couch to shout "Glory!"

By afternoon the power flickered and went out. "I'll get flashlights," Jacob said, already running. Emily lit the brass candle in the window, then another on the mantle. The house filled with a pale, holy glow.

"Story?" Claire asked, curling against her.

"Story," Emily agreed, and began: "In those days, a decree went out..." She told it slowly, painting pictures with words—the scrape of wood, the breath of animals, the bruise-colored sky. When the angels appeared, the wind rattled the eaves and the flame leapt tall.

"You know what I think?" Emily said softly. "The angels didn't just sing *to* the shepherds. They sang *over* them. Like Grandma used to hum in the kitchen. Like light sings over dark without even trying."

The girls leaned close. Jacob, half-smiling, poked the fire. Daniel cooked grilled cheese on the gas stove, and when power finally hummed back, they kept the lights off and ate by candlelight anyway.

The candle in the window burned on. *I saw it*, it seemed to say. *It mattered.*

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On Christmas Eve morning, Emily unwrapped the mended angel once more and placed it in the stable. The manger remained empty until night. Waiting had become part of worship.

The roads were still slick, so church met at home. Bowls of soup sat on the coffee table. Jacob read from Isaiah, Anna from Luke. Claire, solemn, placed the tiny baby in the manger when the words said, *wrapped in cloths and lying there.*

Emily's tears slid freely. Daniel's hand was warm in hers. They sang *Silent Night* in whispers, as if over a sleeping child. When the song faded, the silence held. "Welcome, Jesus," Claire said at last. "We saved You the best spot."

"Always," Emily whispered.

The gifts that night were small and simple: Jacob's pencil sketch of the stable, Anna's handmade bookmark, Claire's chain of paper hearts. Daniel gave Emily a box of matches with a note: *For the candles you will light and the ones you already are.* She laughed and cried at once.

Later, with the fire dying low and cocoa cooling in mugs, Emily stood by the window. The candle burned, casting a soft circle on the glass. She thought of Louise with her peppermint, the quiet hospital rooms, the angel's scar, the prayers whispered in dim light.

"Room for Christ," she whispered. Not because every corner gleamed or every list was finished, but because they had chosen slow.

Behind her, the stable rested complete, the star above, the mended angel watching. The flame wavered, steady and small, like a promise.

Emily blew out the candle and watched the ribbon of smoke rise like a prayer.

"Welcome home," she whispered into the dark.

## Activities & Traditions

Just as Emily's family found peace in slowing down, we too can build traditions that keep Christ at the center.

### For Younger Kids

#### 1. **Peace Stones**

- Have each child pick a small stone from outside. Write or paint the word "peace" on it (younger kids can use stickers or draw a symbol).
- Place the stones in a basket by the Nativity as a reminder that God gives peace that lasts.

#### 2. **Nativity Coloring Pages**

- Print or draw Mary and Joseph coloring sheets.
- While coloring, talk about how they trusted God and made a home for Jesus.

#### 3. **Bedtime Candle Prayer**

- Each night, light a small tealight before bedtime and let your child say one simple prayer asking God for peace in their heart or family.

### For Teens

#### 1. **Peace Journal**

- Encourage teens to keep a short Advent journal where they write one thing that stressed them each day and one way they saw God's peace.
- At the end of the week, talk together about what God is teaching.

#### 2. **Serve in Secret**

- Challenge them to do one quiet, kind act for someone in the family without saying anything (fold laundry, shovel a sidewalk, write a note).
  - At the end of Advent, share what you did and how it made you feel.
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### 3. **Scripture Challenge**

- Have them look up verses on peace (e.g., John 14:27, Philippians 4:7, Colossians 3:15).
- Let them share one verse during family time that meant the most to them.

## **For the Whole Family**

### 1. **Candle in the Window (Peace Candle)**

- Place a single candle in the window each night as a welcome sign to Jesus.
- Gather at the window and pray together: "Lord, we welcome Your peace into our home."

### 2. **Piece-by-Piece Nativity**

- Add Joseph to the Nativity after Mary, since this week focuses on his quiet trust and peace.
- Talk about how Joseph obeyed God even when it was hard to understand.

### 3. **Family Carols at Home**

- End one evening with a carol sung together by the tree or Nativity.
- Choose songs about peace ("Silent Night" or "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear").

## Homemade Gift & Basket Ideas

Alongside these practices, homemade gifts can also remind us that the best offerings are simple and filled with love.

### 1. Hot Cocoa in a Jar

- Layer hot cocoa mix, mini marshmallows, and crushed candy canes in a clear jar.
- Tie with ribbon and add a handwritten tag: *"Warm wishes from our home to yours."*
- Perfect for neighbors, teachers, or church friends.

### 2. Prayer Basket

- Fill a basket with notecards, pens, and a small candle.
- Encourage the recipient to write down prayer requests and keep them in the basket.
- Add a note: *"We've prayed over this basket and will continue to lift you up this season."*

### 3. Cozy Night Basket

- Include popcorn, cocoa packets, a family-friendly DVD (or streaming gift card), and a pair of cozy socks.
- Label it: *"For a quiet night at home — may it bring you peace."*
- Great for blessing a busy family.

### 4. Homemade Spice Blend

- Mix cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves in small jars.
  - Label: *"Christmas Kitchen Blend — perfect for oatmeal, cookies, or cocoa."*
  - Pair with a recipe card for snow cookies or cinnamon bread.
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## **5. Handmade Ornaments**

- Craft salt-dough ornaments as a family (easy recipe: flour, salt, water).
- Paint or stamp each one with Scripture (e.g., *Isaiah 9:6*) or a simple star.
- Give in sets of three tied with twine.

## **6. The “Slow Down” Basket**

- Tuck in herbal tea, a journal, a devotional booklet, and a candle.
- Attach a note: *“Take a moment for stillness this Christmas — His presence is the best gift.”*

## Comfort Foods for the Season

And of course, the kitchen becomes one of the warmest places to live out these truths — food has a way of gathering us together.

### Cranberry-Orange Muffins

There's something about the tart burst of cranberry mixed with sweet orange that feels like Christmas morning. These muffins are bright and cheerful — perfect for a snowy breakfast or tucked into a gift basket for a neighbor.

#### Ingredients

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¾ cup orange juice (fresh if possible)
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon orange zest
- 1 ½ cups fresh or frozen cranberries (halved if large)

#### Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 375°F (190°C). Grease or line a 12-cup muffin tin.
  2. In a large bowl, whisk flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.
  3. In another bowl, whisk orange juice, oil, eggs, and zest until combined.
  4. Stir wet ingredients into dry until just moistened. Fold in cranberries.
  5. Fill muffin cups ¾ full. Bake 18–20 minutes, until golden and a toothpick comes out clean.
  6. Cool 5 minutes in pan, then transfer to a wire rack.
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## **Cinnamon Swirl Quick Bread**

The smell of cinnamon bread baking fills a home with instant warmth. This recipe is simple enough for a weeknight and makes a wonderful “thinking of you” gift wrapped in parchment and tied with twine.

### **Ingredients**

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar, divided
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 egg
- 1 cup milk
- ⅓ cup vegetable oil
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

### **Instructions**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease a 9x5-inch loaf pan.
2. In a bowl, combine flour, ½ cup sugar, baking powder, and salt.
3. In another bowl, whisk egg, milk, and oil. Stir into dry ingredients until moistened.
4. Pour half the batter into loaf pan. Mix remaining sugar with cinnamon; sprinkle half over batter. Top with remaining batter, then remaining cinnamon sugar.
5. Swirl gently with a knife.
6. Bake 45–50 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean. Cool 10 minutes before removing from pan.

## **Spiced Hot Cocoa**

On the coldest nights, nothing brings comfort like gathering with family around mugs of cocoa. This spiced version, with cinnamon and nutmeg, adds a cozy flavor that feels special without extra effort.

### **Ingredients**

- 4 cups whole milk
- ¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- ¼ cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Whipped cream or marshmallows for topping

### **Instructions**

1. In a saucepan, whisk cocoa powder, sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg.
  2. Slowly whisk in milk until smooth.
  3. Heat over medium heat until hot but not boiling, stirring often.
  4. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla.
  5. Pour into mugs and top with whipped cream or marshmallows.
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## **Golden Potato & Ham Soup**

This soup is hearty, filling, and perfect for a cold December evening. It makes enough to feed a family with leftovers to share, reminding us that simple food often carries the most comfort.

### **Ingredients**

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 2 carrots, diced
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 cups peeled, diced potatoes
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 ½ cups cooked ham, diced
- 1 cup milk or cream
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Fresh parsley for garnish

### **Instructions**

1. In a large pot, melt butter over medium heat. Add onion, carrots, and celery; sauté 5–7 minutes until softened. Stir in garlic.
2. Add potatoes and broth; bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until potatoes are tender, about 15–20 minutes.
3. Gently mash some of the potatoes in the pot for a creamier texture.
4. Stir in ham and milk. Heat through but do not boil.
5. Season with salt and pepper. Garnish with parsley before serving.

## **Snowflake Sugar Cookies**

Baking and decorating sugar cookies is a memory-making tradition. These cutouts are simple, buttery, and perfect for snowflakes, stars, or any festive shapes your family loves.

### **Ingredients**

- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt

### **For Icing**

- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 2–3 tablespoons milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Sprinkles (optional)

### **Instructions**

1. In a large bowl, cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Beat in egg and vanilla.
  2. In another bowl, whisk flour, baking powder, and salt. Gradually add to butter mixture until dough forms.
  3. Divide dough in half, flatten into disks, wrap, and refrigerate 1 hour.
  4. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Roll dough to ¼-inch thickness on a floured surface. Cut with snowflake or star cutters.
  5. Place on greased or lined baking sheets. Bake 8–10 minutes until edges are lightly golden. Cool completely.
  6. Mix icing ingredients until smooth. Decorate cooled cookies as desired.
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## **Baked Oatmeal with Apples and Cinnamon**

Warm, hearty, and lightly sweet, this baked oatmeal is a wholesome breakfast for chilly mornings. It can be made ahead and reheated, making it a perfect dish for busy December days.

### **Ingredients**

- 2 cups old-fashioned oats
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups milk
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 ½ cups chopped apples

### **Instructions**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease an 8-inch square baking dish.
2. In a large bowl, mix oats, brown sugar, baking powder, cinnamon, and salt.
3. In another bowl, whisk milk, egg, butter, and vanilla. Stir into dry mixture until combined.
4. Fold in apples.
5. Pour into prepared dish and bake 35–40 minutes until set and golden.
6. Serve warm with milk or yogurt.

# Family Nativity Devotional

## The Prophets

### Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6–7 (NLT)

*"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.  
For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.  
The government will rest on his shoulders.  
And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*

## Family Reading

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, God sent prophets to tell His people that a Savior was coming. Isaiah spoke of a child who would bring light into the world and rescue people from sin and sorrow.

Even though God's people had to wait a long time, they could hold onto hope because God always keeps His promises. The prophets remind us that Christmas is not just about a single night in Bethlehem — it is the story God planned from the very beginning.

## Family Activity

Open your Bible together and mark Isaiah 9 so you can return to it during the season. As a family, talk about promises you've made to one another and why it's important to keep them. Then decorate a candle or lantern (with ribbon, stickers, or paper) and place it by your Nativity set to represent the prophets' promise of light to come.

## Discussion Questions

- How do you think God's people felt while waiting for the Savior?
  - Can you think of a time you had to wait a long time for something good?
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- What does it mean to you that God always keeps His promises?

**Prayer**

“Lord, thank You for sending the prophets to prepare the way for Jesus. Help us to remember that even when we wait, You are working out Your perfect plan. Fill our hearts with hope as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. Amen.”

## **Closing Thoughts**

The beginning of the Christmas season is often full of hurry, lists, and expectations. Yet, just like the candle in the window and the mended angel, we are reminded that slowing down is a choice. When we pause to prepare our hearts, Christ finds room in our homes and our lives. The world may rush past in a blur, but we can step into the gentle pace of Advent — one candle, one prayer, one act of kindness at a time. Let this season begin not with striving, but with stillness. Not with perfection, but with presence. The Savior is coming. Let every heart prepare Him room.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What is one way you can “slow down” this season and make space for Jesus in your daily routine?
  2. How does the image of the candle in the window speak to you personally?
  3. In what ways can your family be a light to others this Christmas?
  4. Have you ever experienced God “mending” something in your life, like the angel in our story?
  5. What would it look like for your home to say “welcome” to Christ this year?
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## Chapter 2: The Gift of Peace

*"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*

— Luke 2:14 (NLT)

### Devotional Reflection

Peace. It's the word written across so many Christmas cards, stitched into banners, and sung in carols. And yet, for many of us, peace is the hardest thing to find during December. The lists get longer, the days get shorter, and the noise of the season can leave our souls restless.

But the angels didn't proclaim busyness the night Jesus was born. They proclaimed *peace*. Not peace that comes from everything going smoothly or from our plans working out exactly right. Not peace that depends on having enough time, money, or energy. Instead, the angels announced a peace that comes only through God's presence.

### Peace in the Ordinary

The shepherds weren't expecting angels. They were doing what they always did — watching sheep in the dark fields outside Bethlehem. It was ordinary work. Lonely work. Yet, into their ordinary came heaven's extraordinary message: *Glory to God...peace on earth*.

That is still how God works. Peace rarely shows up in the absence of noise; more often, it shows up right in the middle of it. Peace is not the calm after the storm, but the calm within it.

Maybe your December feels like those fields — cold, long, and ordinary. The kids bicker, the bills pile up, the house won't stay clean, and Christmas looks more like chaos than wonder. The angels' message is for you, too: peace isn't about your circumstances. It's about His presence with you in them.

## **The Counterfeit Peace of “Perfect Christmas”**

The world offers a counterfeit peace: If you can just buy enough, decorate enough, bake enough, do enough, then you’ll finally feel peace. But that isn’t peace — that’s pressure disguised in tinsel.

Real peace doesn’t demand more of you. It invites you to rest in what Christ has already done. The shepherds didn’t have to perform or prove themselves to receive the angels’ song. They simply listened, and then they went to see Jesus for themselves.

Peace comes when we stop striving and start seeking Him.

## **The Gift of Presence**

One of the greatest gifts we can give our families this Christmas isn’t more presents under the tree — it’s our presence with them. Unrushed, unhurried, paying attention. Children don’t remember every detail of the gifts they open, but they remember how they felt in the moments we gave them our time, our laughter, our listening.

The Prince of Peace gave Himself to us fully. When we slow down to be fully present with others, we reflect Him.

## **Choosing Peace**

So how do we choose peace this season?

- **Pause before saying yes.** Every invitation and event is not required. Choose what brings life to your family and release the rest.
  - **Make room for quiet.** Even five minutes by the tree with your Bible can recenter your heart.
  - **Practice gratitude.** Write down three small blessings each day. Gratitude softens the heart and opens the door to peace.
  - **Remember the manger.** The King of Kings came in the humblest way. If He wasn’t too important for simplicity, neither are we.
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## **Peace Passed On**

Peace isn't just for us to keep; it's for us to share. Imagine the impact if every home in your neighborhood lit not only candles in windows, but also carried peace into conversations, family gatherings, and even grocery store lines. What if you chose gentleness where irritation would come easier, patience where hurry would feel natural, or kindness where frustration might rise? That is how peace spreads.

The angels' announcement wasn't a private concert. It was an invitation to the whole world. And we, too, can echo their chorus — in how we live, in how we love, and in how we slow down long enough to notice the Prince of Peace standing with us.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What circumstances in your life right now feel noisy or restless?
2. When you hear the word "peace," what picture comes to mind?
3. In what ways are you tempted to chase "perfect Christmas" instead of resting in Christ?
4. How could you be more present with your family this season?
5. Who in your life needs you to extend peace to them right now?

## **The Gift of Peace**

Snow drifted in quiet swirls across the homestead yard, softening the edges of the woodpile and turning the split-rail fence into a frosted line. Inside, the old farmhouse glowed with lamplight and the steady warmth of the woodstove. The table in the kitchen was spread with more than supper. Scissors, scraps of fabric, pinecones, and a spool of twine lay scattered between flour-sprinkled bowls and a half-finished plate of gingerbread men.

“Hold still, Caleb,” Mama said with a smile, trying to tie a piece of twine around the top of a cinnamon-scented ornament he had rolled himself. The little boy, just seven, wiggled as though every nerve in his body had been built for motion. “If you can’t be still for ten seconds, this ornament will be lopsided forever.”

Caleb giggled. “Forever’s a long time, Mama.” Across the table, Annie, twelve and serious, was carefully cutting stars from old hymn pages they’d saved all year. She looked up and raised her brows at her brother. “I think Mama’s trying to say you need to be patient. Forever starts with today.”

“That’s right,” Mama said, pressing the knot tight. She placed the little ornament on the counter to dry, then brushed flour from her apron. “Patience makes peace. And peace is the best gift in a house.”

From the corner, six-year-old Lydia looked up from where she was stringing popcorn. Her small fingers worked slowly, carefully. “Is peace better than cookies, Mama?”

The room burst into laughter—Daddy’s deep chuckle joined from where he was bringing in another armful of wood for the stove. He stomped the snow from his boots and leaned the logs neatly by the hearth. “Peace,” he said, “is what makes cookies taste better.”

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The December days had been busy, too full sometimes for Mama's liking. Lessons still needed to be done, bread still baked, floors swept, and laundry folded. But in Advent, there were always extra things too: stockings to mend, little gifts to make, letters to write, neighbors to visit.

Sometimes the house grew noisy. Sometimes tempers flared like sparks off the stove. On Tuesday, Caleb had spilled a jar of molasses. On Wednesday, Annie's stitching had knotted into a hopeless mess, and she'd thrown it into her work basket with tears. Thursday morning, Lydia had knocked over the stack of cards Mama had just tied in ribbon.

By Friday, Mama had felt the hurry in her bones. The house smelled sweet, yes—gingerbread and cinnamon and fresh bread—but it hadn't felt like peace.

That evening, when the children began to fuss over who would sweep the kitchen floor, Mama had stopped, looked at them all, and simply said, "Enough."

The room quieted.

"Let's try something different," she said, lowering her voice. She walked to the mantle and took down a small candle. Placing it in the center of the kitchen table, she struck a match and lit it. "We are going to stop everything, just for a few minutes, and remember why we're doing all this at all."

The children sat, wide-eyed. Daddy slid into his chair, resting his elbows on the table. The candle flame flickered, warm and steady.

Mama opened the old family Bible, worn at the edges, and read slowly:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."

She closed it and folded her hands. "Peace," she said softly, "starts here, in this home, at this table. Not in how much we bake or make, not in how perfect everything looks, but in the way we stop and remember Jesus."

Annie sighed, her face softening. Lydia reached across and slipped her hand into Caleb's. Even Caleb, wiggly as he was, sat still for a whole thirty seconds, eyes fixed on the dancing flame.

And in that hush, Mama felt the gift of peace wrap itself around the room like another quilt, warming them from the inside.

The next morning, the lesson books stayed on the shelf. Saturday was for Christmas work. Mama set the girls to making cinnamon-applesauce ornaments and let Caleb pound nails with Daddy in the shed, "helping" with a wooden gift box for Grandpa.

When Annie grew frustrated again over her stitches, Mama put an arm around her. "Daughter, peace doesn't mean everything comes easy. It means we remember who's with us, even when it's hard. You don't have to be perfect to give love."

Annie sniffed and smiled. Together they finished the little potholder, uneven stitches and all.

At noon, the kitchen filled with the sound of Lydia's giggles as she and Mama pulled bread from the oven. Caleb came in with sawdust in his hair, proudly carrying the lopsided little box Daddy had let him hammer together. Supper that night was simple—stew, bread, and apple pie—but it felt like a feast.

Afterward, they gathered around the stove with mugs of warm milk. Daddy pulled out his fiddle, and the old carols rose soft and strong.

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Between the verses, there was a stillness in the room—a kind of holy hush. Mama thought of the shepherds in the field, startled by angels, and wondered if their silence after the song had felt like this.

On Sunday, they packed a basket of bread and a jar of jam and carried it to Widow Henderson down the road. She clasped Mama's hand and whispered, "This is just what I needed."

Walking home, Lydia skipped between her parents.

"Giving feels like peace too," she said.

"It does," Mama agreed. "Because when we give, we remember we're not the only ones God is caring for. Peace grows when we share it."

That night, as the wind rattled against the windowpanes and the lamp burned low, Mama watched her children sleep under their quilts. Caleb's hand stuck out, still sticky from popcorn strings. Annie's braid fell across her cheek, her face peaceful now. Lydia's little arm curled around her rag doll.

She whispered the angel's words into the quiet room. "Peace on earth."

And she thanked God for the gift of peace that had settled, not because life was perfect, but because His presence filled their imperfect home.

## **Activities for the Family**

### **For Younger Children**

- Peace Candle Tradition: After supper, light a candle, read Luke 2:14, and let each child share one thing that made them feel peaceful that day.
- Nativity Building: Let the children set up one piece of the nativity each evening while hearing its part of the Christmas story.
- Peaceful Playtime: Encourage quiet play by building a blanket fort or reading aloud by lamplight with no screens or music in the background.
- "Pass the Peace": Create simple cards with scriptures or encouraging words, and let children slip them under a sibling's pillow or into Daddy's lunchbox as a secret gift.

### **For Teens**

- Journaling Quiet: Set aside 10–15 minutes each night for writing. Prompts: "Where do I see God's peace?" or "What steals my peace, and how can I give it to Him?"
- Silent Walk Challenge: Take a family walk together, but spend five minutes in silence, noticing God's creation. Teens can lead the reflection afterward.
- Acts of Peace: Encourage them to babysit a neighbor's child for free, shovel a driveway, or do a sibling's chore without being asked.
- Carol of Peace: Invite them to learn and play a Christmas carol on an instrument, or lead the family in singing around the fire.

### **Whole Family Activities**

- Ornament of Peace: Make salt-dough or cinnamon-applesauce ornaments stamped with the word "peace" and hang them on the tree.
  - Gift of Quiet: Choose one evening each week to turn off electronics, light candles, read Scripture, and sing hymns or carols.
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- Family Story Night: Take turns sharing favorite Christmas memories or stories of when God brought peace to your life.
- Peace Baskets: Work together to fill a small basket with baked goods, a candle, and a handwritten scripture card, then deliver to a neighbor.

## **Homemade Gift & Basket Ideas**

### **1. Cinnamon-Applesauce Ornaments**

Mix equal parts applesauce and cinnamon into a dough. Roll out, cut into holiday shapes with cookie cutters, and let dry until firm. Poke a small hole at the top before drying so you can thread ribbon or twine. These ornaments give a natural scent and remind the receiver of your family each time they decorate their tree.

### **2. Peace Baskets**

Line a basket with festive fabric or a tea towel. Fill with a loaf of homemade bread, a small jar of jam or honey, and a candle. Attach a card with Luke 2:14 written inside: *"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."* Deliver to a neighbor, teacher, or friend.

### **3. Hand-Stitched Potholders**

Let children and teens help sew or hand-stitch simple fabric squares with batting inside. Even crooked seams are full of love. Pair with a handwritten recipe card for cookies or bread so the gift is both useful and meaningful.

### **4. Scripture Bookmarks**

Cut strips of cardstock and decorate them with verses about peace. Add stickers, pressed flowers, or drawings. Laminate if possible and finish with a ribbon tassel. These are wonderful for friends, grandparents, or even tucked inside Christmas cards.

### **5. Cozy Cocoa Basket**

Fill a basket or tin with homemade cocoa mix in a jar, a bag of marshmallows, and a few candy canes for stirring. Add two mugs (thrifted or dollar store finds work well) and tie with ribbon. Perfect for families or couples who can sit down together and enjoy "peace and cocoa."

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**6. Family Movie Night Basket**

Use a large bowl or basket and fill with a DVD or a gift card for a streaming rental, microwave popcorn, hot chocolate packets, and a cozy blanket. Add a tag that says: "*Peaceful nights are best spent together.*" This makes a wonderful gift for neighbors or church families.

## Comfort Foods for the Season

### Cinnamon Star Bread

Nothing gathers a family around the table quite like fresh bread pulled apart by hand. This star bread looks fancy but is simple to shape, and it becomes a centerpiece on a winter evening. The scent of cinnamon and sugar rising from the oven is a promise of peace on its own.

### Ingredients

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 packet (2 ¼ tsp) active dry yeast
- ¾ cup warm milk
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¼ cup butter, softened
- 2 eggs
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ¼ cup sugar (for filling)
- 2 Tbsp butter, melted (for filling)

### Instructions

1. In a small bowl, dissolve yeast in warm milk with 1 tablespoon sugar. Let stand 5–10 minutes until foamy.
  2. In a large bowl, combine flour, remaining sugar, salt, butter, eggs, and yeast mixture. Knead until smooth, 8–10 minutes. Cover and let rise until doubled, about 1 hour.
  3. Punch dough down and divide into 4 equal pieces. Roll each into a 12-inch circle.
  4. Place one circle on a greased baking sheet. Brush with melted butter and sprinkle with cinnamon sugar. Repeat with two more layers, placing final circle on top.
  5. Cut dough into 16 wedges, leaving the center uncut. Twist two wedges away from each other, then pinch ends together. Repeat with all.
  6. Cover and rise 30 minutes. Bake at 350°F for 20–25 minutes until golden. Dust with powdered sugar before serving.
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## **Creamy Chicken & Rice Soup**

On a frosty evening when boots are wet and cheeks are pink, there's nothing more comforting than a steaming bowl of soup. This simple recipe uses everyday ingredients and fills the whole kitchen with warmth and calm.

### **Ingredients**

- 2 Tbsp butter
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 carrots, diced
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 6 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup cooked chicken, shredded
- 1 cup rice, cooked
- ½ cup cream or half-and-half
- 1 tsp thyme
- Salt and pepper to taste

### **Instructions**

1. Melt butter in a large pot. Add onion, carrots, celery, and garlic; cook until softened.
2. Stir in chicken broth, thyme, salt, and pepper. Simmer 15 minutes.
3. Add cooked chicken and rice. Stir gently.
4. Pour in cream and simmer another 5 minutes. Adjust seasoning and serve warm with bread.

## **Apple Cranberry Crisp**

Sweet apples and tart cranberries bake together under a golden oat topping for a dessert that tastes like the season itself. It's an easy dish to pull together and feels just right after a night of candlelight and carols.

### **Ingredients**

- 4 apples, peeled and sliced
- 1 cup fresh or frozen cranberries
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ cup rolled oats
- ½ cup flour
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 6 Tbsp butter, cold and cubed

### **Instructions**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9x9-inch baking dish.
  2. Toss apples and cranberries with sugar and cinnamon. Spread into dish.
  3. In a bowl, combine oats, flour, and brown sugar. Cut in butter until crumbly.
  4. Sprinkle topping over fruit.
  5. Bake 35–40 minutes, until fruit is bubbly and topping golden. Serve warm.
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## Old-Fashioned Molasses Cookies

These soft, spiced cookies are the kind that remind you of your grandmother's kitchen. Rolled in sugar, they sparkle on a plate and bring a taste of tradition to a cold night.

### Ingredients

- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 egg
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup molasses
- 2  $\frac{1}{4}$  cups flour
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp ginger
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp cloves
- $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp salt

### Instructions

1. Cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Beat in egg and molasses.
2. In another bowl, whisk flour, soda, spices, and salt. Add to creamed mixture.
3. Roll dough into 1-inch balls, then roll in sugar. Place on baking sheet.
4. Bake at 350°F for 8–10 minutes. Cool on wire rack.

## **Holiday Popcorn Mix**

This cheerful mix is part treat, part decoration. You can string it for the tree or scoop it into bowls for a movie night. The peppermint adds just enough festivity to turn plain popcorn into something special.

### **Ingredients**

- 8 cups popped popcorn
- 1 cup pretzels, broken
- ½ cup peanuts or almonds (optional)
- 1 ½ cups white chocolate chips, melted
- ½ cup crushed peppermint candy

### **Instructions**

1. Spread popcorn, pretzels, and nuts on a large baking sheet.
  2. Drizzle with melted white chocolate and stir to coat.
  3. Sprinkle with crushed peppermint.
  4. Let harden, then break apart into chunks. Store in airtight container.
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## Hot Spiced Cider

Nothing says home like cider simmering on the stove. The warm spices fill the whole house, and a mug in your hands feels like holding a little piece of peace itself.

### Ingredients

- 1 gallon apple cider
- 1 orange, sliced
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 6 whole cloves
- 2 star anise (optional)
- ¼ cup brown sugar (optional, to taste)

### Instructions

1. Pour cider into a large pot or slow cooker.
2. Add orange slices, cinnamon, cloves, star anise, and sugar.
3. Simmer gently on low heat for at least 30 minutes.
4. Strain spices if desired. Serve hot in mugs.

## **Family Nativity Devotional**

### **Mary**

#### **Scripture Reading: Luke 1:30–31, 38 (NLT)**

*"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus... Mary responded, 'I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.'"*

#### **Family Reading**

Mary was a young woman when the angel Gabriel appeared to her with astonishing news — she would be the mother of God's Son. She might have felt nervous, even scared, but Mary chose to trust God. She said "yes" to His plan, even though she didn't understand everything. Mary reminds us that when God asks us to obey, we can respond with faith instead of fear. Her story teaches us that peace comes when we place our trust in God.

#### **Family Activity**

Add Mary to your Nativity set. Talk about what it means to say "yes" to God. Then, as a family, write down small ways you can each say "yes" to God this week (sharing toys, helping with chores, showing kindness, praying for someone). Put the slips of paper in a jar and call it your "Yes to God" jar.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- How do you think Mary felt when the angel appeared to her?
- Why is it sometimes hard to say "yes" to God?
- What are some small ways we can follow Mary's example in our family this week?

#### **Prayer**

"Lord, thank You for Mary's faith and her willingness to obey You. Help us to trust You even when we feel afraid or don't understand everything. Give us the courage to say 'yes' to Your plan in our lives. Amen."

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## **Closing & Reflection**

As this chapter comes to a close, we are reminded that Christmas is not just about busy schedules, decorated trees, or even special meals. At its heart, it is about peace — the peace that entered the world through Jesus and the peace we invite into our homes when we choose trust and obedience, just as Mary did.

The activities, traditions, recipes, and homemade gifts in this chapter are not only fun ways to celebrate but also gentle reminders that peace is something we practice. Whether it's baking bread to share with neighbors, lighting a candle to welcome Christ's presence, or making simple handmade gifts with children, each moment becomes an opportunity to turn our hearts toward Him.

Take time as a family to sit together at the end of the day. Let the house grow quiet for just a few minutes, maybe with the glow of the tree or the flicker of a single candle. Breathe deeply and thank God for His peace — a peace that cannot be shaken by storms, weariness, or even the unknown.

### **Reflection Questions**

- Where did you notice God's peace in your home this week?
- How can we, as a family, bring peace to others during this Christmas season?
- What is one way we can slow down and say "yes" to God like Mary did?

## Chapter 3: Gathering Around the Tree

***"Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.'"***

*— Luke 2:10 (NKJV)*

### **Devotional Reflection**

There's something about a Christmas tree that draws us in. Long before the lights are strung or the ornaments are hung, its very presence in the living room feels like an invitation. Children dash around in excitement, parents stand back with a mix of nostalgia and responsibility, and suddenly the ordinary space of a home feels set apart. The tree becomes a gathering place.

In many ways, that's what the first Christmas was, too: a gathering. Shepherds came from the fields, angels came from heaven, wise men journeyed from afar, and Mary and Joseph cradled the newborn Savior. Around the manger, God gathered people into His story — people who never would have stood together otherwise. That little stable became a meeting place of heaven and earth, rich and poor, near and far.

The Christmas tree in our homes can remind us of this truth. It is more than decoration; it's a picture of what God does in Christ. He gathers His people to Himself and makes ordinary places holy.

### **A Symbol of Light**

When the tree lights up for the first time, the room shifts. Darkness is pushed back, and a new kind of warmth fills the space. It's a glimpse of what Christ came to do: to bring light into the world's darkness. Every twinkling bulb becomes a reminder that the Light of the World still shines.

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But light doesn't just stay on a tree. Just as we plug in the string of lights and watch them glow, we are called to remain connected to Christ, our source of light. Without Him, we're like bulbs unplugged from the strand — still made for brightness, but unable to shine. Gathering around the tree gives us a chance to pause and ask: are we staying connected to the One who gives us life and light?

### **The Stories in the Ornaments**

For many families, ornaments hold stories. There's the paper angel a child made in Sunday school, the glass ball from Grandma's tree, the mismatched bauble that marks a family vacation, or the wooden cross gifted by a friend. Each one carries memory, meaning, and love.

In a way, those ornaments mirror the people God gathers. Each person in the Christmas story brought something unique: Mary her trust, Joseph his obedience, shepherds their awe, wise men their gifts. None of them looked the same or played the same role, yet all were needed to tell the full story of Christ's coming.

When we look at our tree, we can remember that God gathers us with all our uniqueness and imperfections. Together, we become part of His beautiful display of grace.

### **A Place for Joy**

Gathering around the tree is rarely quiet. There's laughter, sometimes bickering, sometimes tears when a favorite ornament drops. But that's family life — and joy is found in the middle of it, not apart from it.

The angels didn't announce Christ's birth with hushed tones but with a song of joy. "Good news of great joy," they declared. That joy didn't depend on perfect circumstances — Mary was far from home, Joseph was weary, and the shepherds were frightened. Yet joy broke in.

So, too, joy can break into our homes even when the tree is crooked, the lights are tangled, or the cookies burn. Joy comes not from perfection but from presence: the presence of Christ in our midst.

## **An Invitation to Worship**

At the end of a long day of decorating, when the house is quiet and the tree glows softly in the dark, something holy settles in. In those moments, the tree feels less like decoration and more like an altar. Not because of the tree itself, but because of what it points to: a Savior who came to dwell with us.

The first people to gather at the manger came in worship. The shepherds bowed low. The wise men knelt and offered gifts. Mary treasured every word in her heart. Worship is still our best response to the gift of Christ.

So when your family gathers around the tree this year — whether in the bustle of hanging ornaments or the quiet of an evening glow — let it be a place of worship. Let the lights remind you of His light, the ornaments remind you of His people, the laughter remind you of His joy, and the gifts remind you of His love.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What does your Christmas tree represent to you — decoration, memory, or something deeper?
  2. Which ornament on your tree carries the most meaning, and how does it remind you of God's presence in your story?
  3. How can your family use the time around the tree to slow down and worship instead of just rushing through tradition?
  4. What does it look like for you to shine Christ's light in your home and community this season?
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## The Tree That Gathered Us

The cedar stood at the edge of the field, half-hidden beneath the first veil of snow. It wasn't grand by any means — not tall and perfect like the ones you might see in glossy store windows. Its branches leaned a little on one side, and the needles weren't as full as the trees farther into the woods. But when Mama saw it that December afternoon, she smiled. "This is the one," she said softly, resting her mittened hand on its trunk.

The children stood around her, boots crunching on the frosty ground. Caleb squinted up at it, his breath curling in the cold air. "It's kinda crooked," he admitted.

"Crooked trees make the best Christmas trees," Daddy said with a chuckle. He handed the saw to Jacob, their oldest, who bent down proudly to make the first cut. The younger ones clapped their mittened hands while the saw teeth bit into the wood. Before long, the cedar toppled with a soft whoosh into the snow. Together, they hauled it home, branches catching on coats, everyone laughing as they slipped and tugged along the path.

By the time they reached the farmhouse, the sky was dimming, and smoke from the chimney rose in a steady ribbon. Mama pushed open the door, and the warm air rushed out, smelling of apples and woodsmoke. She shooed the children inside while Daddy trimmed the base of the trunk and set the tree in a wooden stand by the front window.

"Not bad at all," Daddy said, stepping back to admire the way the cedar leaned just slightly, as though bowing toward the room.

The children crowded around, excitement bubbling. Ornaments waited in boxes on the table: handmade stars from old hymn pages, pinecones brushed with flour paste and glitter, dried orange slices strung on twine, and a few treasured glass baubles wrapped in soft rags.

"Wait," Mama said gently, raising her hand. "Before we cover it with sparkle, let's remember what it's for."

She brought the brass candlestick from the mantle and set it on the small table by the tree. When she lit it, the flame reflected in the window glass, a double glow against the deepening night. "This tree will be the place we gather," she said. "For stories. For songs. For prayers. Every time we look at it, let it remind us that the Light of the World has come."

The children hushed, their eyes fixed on the flickering flame. Even Caleb, always fidgeting, stood still for a moment. Then Mama clapped her hands. "Now, let's begin!"

They strung popcorn and cranberries first, the children's small fingers fumbling with needle and thread while Mama watched to keep pricked fingers from turning into tears. Annie worked with the precision of a seamstress, her line neat and even. Caleb's popcorn chain sagged with gaps and breaks, but he proudly announced it was "creative." Lydia, tongue poked out in concentration, strung three kernels, then promptly ate the next two.

When the garlands were ready, Daddy lifted each child in turn to loop the strands around the tree. The cedar seemed to sigh happily beneath its new adornment.

Next came the ornaments. Annie hung her hymn stars carefully, smoothing each page before tucking it among the branches. Caleb clambered onto a chair to hang his lopsided cinnamon ornament from last year. Lydia, too small to reach, handed hers to Daddy, who knelt and let her choose the lowest branches.

Finally, Mama unwrapped a delicate glass ball, a gift from her grandmother. She held it up, the lamplight catching the painted nativity scene on its surface. The children gasped softly.

"This one goes in the center," Mama said. "Because Christ is the center of it all."

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When it was settled on a sturdy branch, the room felt different. The fire popped in the hearth, the lamplight glowed, and the cedar filled the house with the clean, sharp scent of winter woods.

After supper — potato soup, fresh bread, and applesauce — the family returned to the tree. Daddy settled in his chair, Bible in hand. The children curled on quilts around the hearth.

"Tonight," Daddy began, "we'll read about the shepherds." His deep voice rolled through the room as he told of the angels breaking into the night sky with their song: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace..*

When he finished, there was silence for a moment. Caleb broke it with a grin. "If angels showed up in our pasture, the cows would run straight through the fence!"

Everyone laughed, and then Mama leaned forward. "That's why it matters. God didn't choose palaces or perfect places for His news. He chose ordinary people, in ordinary fields." The children nodded. Annie whispered, "Like us." "Exactly like us," Mama said.

Then they sang — "Silent Night," voices rising softly, harmonies thin but sweet. The cedar seemed to listen, holding their song in its branches.

Not every evening was so calm. A few nights later, as the snow piled higher outside, tempers began to fray indoors. Annie scolded Caleb for breaking one of her paper stars. Caleb yelled that Lydia had knocked over his block tower.

Lydia burst into tears, clutching her rag doll. Mama sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead. The tree sparkled in the corner, but the room felt anything but peaceful.

"Enough," Daddy said firmly, his voice steady but kind. "Come here. All of you."

They gathered, reluctant and sniffling, around the cedar. The brass candle sat waiting on the table beside it. Daddy struck a match and lit the wick. The flame glowed, casting long shadows.

"This tree isn't just for looking pretty," he said. "It's where we remember who we are — and Whose we are. Peace isn't always easy. It's something we choose."

He looked at Caleb, then at Annie, then at Lydia. "So tonight, before we sing, each of you will say one thing you love about the others."

The children squirmed. But slowly, they obeyed. Caleb mumbled, "Annie makes pretty stars." Annie said softly, "Caleb makes us laugh." Lydia sniffled and whispered, "I love when Jacob carries me piggyback."

By the end, the tears had dried, and giggles returned. They sang again, and Mama thought the song sounded fuller, stronger, because it was sung by hearts learning peace.

As Christmas drew closer, the tree filled not only with ornaments but with small treasures made by hand. Annie stitched a tiny felt heart. Caleb carved a crooked wooden bird with Daddy's help. Lydia pressed flowers between Bible pages and made little bookmarks.

One evening, Mama brought out a basket of cards. "These are for neighbors," she explained. "We'll deliver them tomorrow." Each card held a verse and a note of blessing. The children tucked in a popcorn chain or cinnamon ornament.

"Why do we give these instead of big gifts?" Annie asked. Mama smiled. "Because the best gift is showing someone they're remembered. Just like God remembered us that night in Bethlehem."

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At last, Christmas Eve arrived. The cedar, though humble, stood proudly in its corner, garlands swaying when the children brushed by. Snow pressed thick against the windows, muffling the world.

After supper, they gathered again. The manger scene on the table had waited all season, empty. Tonight, Mama lifted the tiny carved figure of baby Jesus and placed Him in the straw.

The children hushed, eyes wide. Even Caleb didn't fidget. They sang "O Come, All Ye Faithful," voices trembling with wonder. Then Jacob prayed, thanking God for the gift of His Son.

When they opened their handmade gifts — a bookmark here, a carved bird there, a stitched heart passed from hand to hand — the cedar seemed to glow brighter. Not from candles or lights, but from the love gathered beneath it.

Later, after the children were tucked into quilts, Mama stood by the tree one last time. The brass candle burned low, the cedar fragrant, the house hushed in peace. She whispered a prayer of gratitude.

"Lord, thank You for this crooked tree. Thank You for gathering us around it. May we always find our peace in You."

The flame flickered, steady and sure, as if to say *Amen*.

## **Activities & Traditions**

### **For Younger Children**

#### **1. Ornament Storytime**

Have each child pick one ornament from the tree and make up a short story about it—how it got there, what it means, or who it might remind them of. This sparks creativity while helping them see the tree as more than decoration.

#### **2. Quiet Tree Time**

Set a timer for three minutes. Turn off all the lights except the tree and encourage children to sit quietly, watching the lights. Afterward, let them share what the lights made them think of. This helps little ones practice stillness.

#### **3. Candy Cane Hunt**

Hide a few candy canes in the branches of the tree. Each child can find one while being reminded that the candy cane shape looks like a shepherd's staff—guiding us back to Christ.

### **For Teens**

#### **1. Ornament Reflections Journal**

Ask your teen to choose an ornament that has meaning (family heirloom, handmade, or store-bought). Have them journal about what it represents, how it connects to faith, or a memory tied to it. Share around the tree if they feel comfortable.

#### **2. Tree-Lighting Playlist**

Invite teens to create a playlist of carols or worship songs for when the tree is lit each evening. This gives them ownership and connects music to family tradition.

#### **3. Acts of Peace Challenge**

Encourage teens to think of three "peace-making" actions they can take during December (apologizing, helping a sibling, writing a kind note). They can write these on slips of paper and tuck them into the tree as reminders.

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## **For the Whole Family**

### **1. Tree Blessing Night**

Once the tree is decorated, gather around it and pray together—asking God to bless everyone who comes into your home this season. Each family member can pray one sentence aloud.

### **2. Memory Ornament Box**

Every year, place a small box or envelope under the tree. Each person writes down one favorite memory from the year and tucks it inside. When decorating the next year's tree, open the box together and read last year's memories.

### **3. Candle-and-Carol Evening**

Choose one evening during Advent to turn off all the lights except the tree and candles. Sing carols as a family, then read Luke 2 by the tree. It creates a quiet, reverent atmosphere for remembering why you gather.

## Homemade Gift and Basket Ideas

### 1. "Evening by the Tree" Basket

Fill a basket with:

- Cozy socks
- A small candle (pine or cinnamon)
- A short family-read book or story collection
- Cocoa mix with marshmallows

This gift encourages slowing down and savoring a quiet evening beside the Christmas tree.

### 2. Tea & Quiet Basket

Line a small box with a tea towel and fill with:

- Assorted teas or loose-leaf blends
  - A handmade bookmark tucked into a devotional or journal
  - A jar of honey with a tied wooden dipper
- Perfect for giving a friend or neighbor a restful, reflective moment.

### 3. Cozy Craft Basket

For grandparents, aunts, or friends who enjoy handmade touches:

- Cinnamon-applesauce or salt dough ornaments
- A spool of ribbon or twine for hanging
- A handwritten instruction card encouraging them to decorate their own tree
- A small sprig of evergreen tied with twine for scent and beauty

### 4. Sweet & Simple Treat Basket

Line a bread basket with fabric and add:

- A loaf of homemade bread wrapped in parchment
- A jar of apple butter or spiced jam
- A tin of cookies or shortbread

Attach a card with Psalm 34:8: *"Taste and see that the Lord is good."*

### 5. "Quiet Evening" Basket

For families or couples needing rest:

- A soft throw blanket tied with ribbon
  - Two mugs with cocoa packets
-

- A small puzzle or deck of cards for lighthearted fun
- A hand-penned Scripture card or prayer tucked inside

## **6. Family Game & Snack Basket**

Encourage gathering around the table:

- A classic card game or small board game
- A jar of homemade snack mix or caramel corn in a clear bag with ribbon
- A thermos of hot cocoa (for gifting locally) or cocoa packets
- Napkins and a note: "*Gather, laugh, enjoy — Christ is with us.*"

## Comfort Foods for the Season

After the tree is trimmed and the carols fade into quiet, the kitchen often becomes the heart of Christmas. Comfort foods remind us that the simplest meals—shared slowly, with laughter—can be just as memorable as the fanciest holiday feast. These recipes bring warmth and joy to the table, perfect for gathering the family close after a long winter day.

### 1. Classic Meatloaf with Sweet Glaze

*Serves 6*

- 1 ½ lbs ground beef
- 1 egg
- ¾ cup breadcrumbs
- ½ cup milk
- ½ onion, diced
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp salt, ½ tsp pepper
- Glaze: ½ cup ketchup, 2 Tbsp brown sugar, 1 tsp mustard

Mix beef, egg, breadcrumbs, milk, onion, and seasonings. Shape into a loaf in a greased pan. Stir together glaze ingredients and spread evenly on top. Bake at 375°F for 50–60 minutes, until juices run clear. Slice and serve warm.

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### 2. Cheesy Scalloped Potatoes

*Serves 8*

- 4 large potatoes, thinly sliced
- 2 Tbsp butter
- 2 Tbsp flour
- 2 cups milk
- 1 ½ cups shredded cheddar
- ½ cup Parmesan
- Salt, pepper, paprika

Layer potatoes in a greased dish. Make a sauce by whisking butter, flour, milk, and cheeses over medium heat until thickened. Pour over potatoes, sprinkle with paprika. Cover with foil and bake at 375°F for 1 hour, uncovering for the last 15 minutes to brown.

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### **3. Hot Chocolate Bread Pudding**

*Serves 6–8*

- 6 cups cubed day-old bread
- 3 cups milk
- 1 cup cream
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup cocoa powder
- 4 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup chocolate chips
- Whipped cream or marshmallows to serve

Whisk together milk, cream, sugar, cocoa, and eggs. Pour over bread cubes in a greased dish and let soak for 20 minutes. Stir in chocolate chips. Bake at 350°F for 45 minutes, until set. Serve warm with whipped cream or marshmallows.

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### **4. Sugar-Crusted Christmas Morning Donuts**

*Makes about 12*

- 1 can refrigerated biscuit dough
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ stick butter, melted

Cut the center out of each biscuit to make rings. Fry in hot oil (350°F) until golden brown, about 1 minute per side. Drain briefly on paper towels, then dip in melted butter and roll in cinnamon-sugar mixture. Serve warm with cocoa or coffee.

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### **5. Sweet & Salty Christmas Snack Mix**

*Serves a crowd*

- 6 cups pretzels
- 4 cups Chex cereal
- 2 cups popcorn
- 2 cups holiday-colored M&Ms
- 2 cups mini marshmallows
- 12 oz white chocolate chips, melted

In a large bowl, combine pretzels, cereal, popcorn, and M&Ms. Drizzle melted white chocolate over and stir to coat. Spread on parchment paper and sprinkle with marshmallows. Let harden, then break into clusters. Perfect for gifting in jars or tins.

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## **6. Maple-Glazed Roasted Carrots**

*Serves 6*

- 2 lbs carrots, peeled and halved lengthwise
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 2 Tbsp maple syrup
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- Salt and pepper to taste

Toss carrots with oil, maple syrup, cinnamon, salt, and pepper. Spread on a baking sheet and roast at 400°F for 25–30 minutes, until tender and caramelized.

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## **Family Nativity Devotional**

### **Joseph**

#### **Scripture Reading: Matthew 1:20–21 (NLT)**

“As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. ‘Joseph, son of David,’ the angel said, ‘do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’”

#### **Family Reading**

Joseph probably never expected his life to change so quickly. He was an ordinary carpenter, preparing to marry Mary, when suddenly everything felt uncertain. Mary was expecting a child, and Joseph was left with questions and fears. But in the middle of his doubt, God spoke to him in a dream.

Joseph could have turned away. Instead, he listened and obeyed. He trusted God’s word, even though it didn’t make sense at first. And because he obeyed, he became part of God’s greatest story — raising Jesus here on earth. When we place Joseph in the Nativity, we remember that obedience isn’t always easy, but it always leads us closer to God’s plan.

#### **Activity**

Place Joseph in your family Nativity scene. Talk about how his obedience helped prepare the way for Jesus. Optional: Give each child a piece of wood (a block, popsicle stick, or even a small stick from outside). Write “Trust & Obey” on it as a reminder that Joseph was a carpenter who trusted God with his work and his family.

## **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think Joseph might have felt afraid at first?
- Have you ever had to do something hard because you knew it was the right thing?
- How can we trust God like Joseph this Christmas?

## **Prayer**

“Lord, thank You for Joseph’s example of obedience. Help us to listen when You speak, even if we don’t understand everything. Give us the courage to trust You with our family, our choices, and our future. Amen.”

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## **Closing & Reflection**

The angels declared peace on that first Christmas night, and Joseph showed us what peace looks like when it's lived out — steady trust, quiet obedience, and choosing faith over fear. As we close this chapter, let's remember that peace doesn't come from everything being perfect. It comes from knowing Christ is with us in every moment.

Whether it's gathering around the tree, cooking a simple meal, or placing Joseph in your Nativity, every small act of faithfulness prepares room in your heart for Jesus. Just like Joseph, we are called to trust even when the path feels uncertain, and to find peace in God's promises.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. Joseph obeyed God even when it was hard. What is one small way you can practice obedience to God this week?
2. Where do you need peace in your life right now — in your home, your heart, or your relationships?
3. How does slowing down with your family (through stories, meals, or traditions) help you feel closer to Christ?
4. Joseph trusted God with Mary and Jesus. Who or what do you need to entrust to God this Christmas?

## Chapter 4: Giving from the Heart

*"You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully."  
— 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NLT)*

### Devotional Reflection

Christmas is often marked by the exchange of gifts. We wrap them in bright paper, tie them with bows, and place them under the tree with anticipation. For children, especially, the excitement builds as they wonder what will be waiting for them on Christmas morning. But in the flurry of shopping carts and shipping deadlines, it's easy to forget the heart of giving: not to impress, not to outdo, not even to meet expectations — but to love.

Scripture reminds us that God cares more about the heart behind our giving than the gift itself. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that God loves a cheerful giver. That word cheerful doesn't mean forced smiles or fake joy. It means giving that flows naturally out of gratitude, giving that delights in blessing others.

And isn't that what Christmas is truly about? God Himself gave us the greatest gift — His Son. He didn't give reluctantly or half-heartedly. He gave fully, joyfully, with love that knew no bounds. Every other gift we give is simply an echo of His generosity.

### The Weight of "Perfect Gifts"

If we're honest, many of us feel pressure when it comes to gifts. The lists from teachers, coworkers, extended family, and friends can feel endless. We wonder if our gifts will measure up. Will they be liked? Will they seem thoughtful enough? Will they look impressive?

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But what if giving was never meant to be about perfection? What if, instead, it was about presence? About slowing down long enough to notice what someone else might need, or what might bring them a moment of joy, and then offering it with love?

I think of the widow in Scripture who gave her two small coins (Mark 12:41–44). Jesus praised her, not because her gift was large, but because it came from the heart. In the same way, a pan of cookies wrapped in wax paper and tied with string can carry more love than the most expensive store-bought item.

### **Homemade Giving**

There's something uniquely tender about homemade gifts, especially edible ones. They are humble, tangible acts of love. A mason jar layered with cookie mix says: *I took time to think of you, and I wanted to bless your home with something warm and sweet.*

A box of chocolate-dipped pretzels or caramel rods speaks not of perfection but of care — hands busy in the kitchen, a sprinkle of creativity, the joy of wrapping and delivering. Fudge, buckeyes, mounds balls — these aren't fancy or extravagant, yet they become treasures because they're tied to memory, to thoughtfulness, to love shared at a table or over a doorstep.

Homemade gifts also remind us that giving doesn't have to be expensive. Some of the most meaningful acts come from what we already have in our cupboards, paired with intention. A jar of homemade jam, a loaf of bread, or even a bag of spiced nuts can communicate abundance without costing much at all.

### **Giving that Looks Like Christ**

When God gave us His Son, He wasn't giving out of surplus. He was giving Himself. That's the essence of Christmas giving: not to offer the most dazzling package, but to offer something of ourselves. Our time. Our creativity. Our listening. Our love.

Maybe this year, giving from the heart looks like:

- Writing a letter of encouragement instead of buying a gift card.
- Baking bread and delivering it to a neighbor who lives alone.
- Inviting someone over for cocoa instead of sending a package.
- Involving your children in making small homemade gifts so they learn that giving is about participation, not perfection.

Giving like Christ often requires slowing down. It requires choosing to step away from the frenzy and instead stepping into intentional love.

### **Teaching Children the Joy of Giving**

As parents, we have the privilege of teaching our children what it means to give with joy. That might mean letting them stir the fudge, roll the buckeyes, or dip the pretzels. It might mean encouraging them to make a card, string a ribbon, or deliver the basket themselves.

Children learn not from what we say but from what we do. When they see us giving out of love — even when it's simple, even when it's small — they learn that giving is not about obligation, but about joy.

Imagine your little ones carrying a plate of cookies to the next-door neighbor, knocking shyly, and then smiling as the neighbor's eyes light up. Those moments plant seeds of generosity that can grow throughout their lives.

### **Reflection on the Greatest Gift**

Every act of giving during Christmas can be a reminder of the greatest gift we've received. When we give cookies, we can remember the Bread of Life. When we give something sweet, we can remember the sweetness of His promises. When we wrap a jar or a basket, we can remember that Christ was wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger — the most unexpected gift in the humblest wrapping.

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And when we give with joy, we can remember that God delights in cheerful giving, not because He needs what we offer, but because He delights in our love.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. When you think about giving at Christmas, do you feel more pressure or joy? Why?
2. Can you recall a gift you received that was simple but deeply meaningful? What made it special?
3. How could you involve your children or family in giving from the heart this year?
4. In what ways can your giving point others back to Christ, the greatest gift?

## The Kitchen of Kindness

Snow had fallen heavy overnight, leaving the homestead wrapped in white. The pines along the lane bent low under their frosted coats, and the world seemed to hush, as if all of creation were pausing to listen. Inside the farmhouse, however, the hush didn't last long.

"Do we get to start today, Mama?" Caleb burst into the kitchen, his cheeks still red from fetching kindling for the stove. He was nearly bouncing out of his boots. "You said Saturday was for gift-making!"

Mama wiped her flour-dusted hands on her apron and smiled. "That's right, son. Today we begin our Christmas giving."

The table was already cleared of schoolbooks, now covered with bowls, spoons, and the special stack of recipe cards Mama only pulled out in December. On the counter sat mason jars, ribbon, brown paper, and sprigs of holly waiting to be tied.

Annie, twelve, sat at the far end, her pencil hovering over a notebook. "Can I keep the list this year? I don't want us to forget anyone."

"Perfect idea," Mama nodded. "We'll call it our Kitchen of Kindness List."

Lydia, the littlest, clapped her hands. "I'll stir! I'm good at stirring."

Daddy chuckled as he came in from the cold, stomping snow from his boots. "Looks like I'd better stay out of the way or I'll be stirred into something myself." He bent to kiss Mama's cheek. "But I'll taste-test, if you need a volunteer."

The room filled with laughter, warm and bright, as the morning's work began.

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Their first project was Mama's famous chocolate chip cookie mix in a jar. She lined up the mason jars, each gleaming in the lamplight.

"All right," she said, "we'll layer the ingredients carefully so they look as pretty as they taste."

Annie measured flour with practiced precision, leveling each cup with the back of a butter knife. Caleb, a little too eager, dumped in brown sugar with both hands until Mama caught him. "Slow down, Caleb. Gentle hands make cheerful jars."

Lydia placed the chocolate chips on top like jewels, giggling each time one slipped into her mouth instead of the jar. When the jars were filled, Mama tied squares of red-checked fabric over the lids with twine. "Annie, write out the baking directions to attach."

Annie bent over her notebook, her careful script spelling out: *Add 1 egg, 1 stick butter, bake at 350 until golden.* She cut the cards into neat squares and punched holes for ribbon. "There," Mama said, stepping back. "Simple, but each jar carries love."

Caleb studied the row of jars proudly. "Who are these for?"

"Mr. Grayson down the road, for one," Mama said. "He lost his wife last year, and I think warm cookies will feel like company. And the Millers—remember they just had a new baby. A jar for Pastor and his wife. And the rest—well, we'll see who God puts on our hearts."

By late morning, the stove was bubbling with a pot of melting chocolate. Caleb's eyes widened at the sight. "We get to dip them all the way in?"

"As far as your patience allows," Mama said with a wink. Pretzel rods were lined up on parchment paper, ready for their bath. Caleb plunged his rod into the melted chocolate with such force that half the pot nearly sloshed onto the stove.

"Gentle!" Mama laughed, steadying his hand.

Annie worked more carefully, dipping each rod, then rolling it in crushed candy canes for a peppermint sparkle. Lydia, with chocolate smeared from cheek to chin, decorated hers with sprinkles that landed on the table, the floor, and occasionally the pretzel.

"Each one looks different," Annie observed, eyeing the uneven creations.

"That's the beauty of it," Mama said softly. "Love never looks exactly the same. But it's all sweet in the end."

When Daddy passed through, he pretended to steal one, earning loud protests from the children. "Don't worry," he said with a grin, "I'll wait until you're not looking."

By afternoon, the kitchen smelled rich and warm. The fudge bubbled in a saucepan, sugar and butter blending into a glossy mixture. Mama handed the spoon to Annie, who stirred steadily. "It has to be just right," Mama explained. "Not too soft, not too hard. Like peace—it comes from patience."

Lydia leaned on the counter, chin propped in her hands. "Who's getting the fudge?"

"Widow Henderson, of course," Mama said. "She told me last year she hasn't had fudge since her husband passed. I think she'll be glad for a taste of it again."

When the fudge was poured into pans and cooled, they cut it into neat squares, wrapping them in wax paper and tying them with string. Annie carefully wrote Widow Henderson's name at the top of the list.

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As the shadows stretched across the snow outside, the family sat close by the lamplight, rolling buckeyes—peanut butter balls dipped in chocolate until only a small circle of gold showed through. Caleb popped one in his mouth before Mama could stop him, his grin betraying the chocolate on his lips.

“These are Ohio candies,” Daddy explained, though the children had heard it before. “Shaped like the buckeye nut, shiny and brown with a golden spot.”

“I think they taste better than any nut,” Lydia declared. Later, Mama showed Annie how to roll coconut filling for mounds balls, dipping them in dark chocolate. “Sometimes the sweetest gifts are the simplest,” she said, “and they remind us that giving doesn’t have to be fancy to be full of love.”

The next day was Sunday, bright and clear. After church, the family bundled baskets with scarves, mittens, and extra quilts in the wagon. Each basket held a mixture of jars, pretzels, fudge, buckeyes, and notes written in Annie’s careful hand.

First stop was Mr. Grayson’s. The old man opened the door slowly, his shoulders stooped, his eyes surprised. “We brought you something,” Caleb announced, thrusting forward a jar of cookie mix.

“For me?” Mr. Grayson’s voice cracked. “Well now. I can’t bake much anymore, but I’ll try.”

“Maybe we can help you,” Annie offered shyly.

The old man’s eyes filled with tears. “I’d like that.” He touched the fabric-topped jar as though it were gold.

At Widow Henderson’s, Mama placed the fudge in her hands. The woman held it close, whispering, “Just like he used to make.” Her lips trembled into a smile.

The Millers, weary from newborn cries, received their basket with relief. "This means supper without thinking," Mrs. Miller said, brushing tears from her eyes. "Thank you."

At each home, something more than food was exchanged. It was joy, presence, love wrapped in simple packages.

That evening, back in the farmhouse, the family gathered around the fire. Empty baskets leaned against the wall, but hearts felt full.

"Mama," Caleb said sleepily, curling against her, "giving feels like Christmas inside me."

Mama kissed his hair. "That's because it is. When we give, we're sharing the heart of Christ Himself."

The candle on the table flickered, steady and warm, casting its glow on the tired but smiling faces around it. The kitchen smelled faintly of chocolate and cinnamon, the counters dusted with flour, the sink stacked with dishes. But no one minded.

Because in the giving, they had received more than they could measure.

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## Activities & Traditions

### For Younger Children

- **DIY Paper Snowflakes & Indoor Snowball Fights** — Cut festive snowflakes from colored tissue paper for window decorations, then scrunch extras into “snowballs” for a playful indoor toss.
- **Christmas Eve Bag** — Each child receives a box with a cozy pair of pj’s, a holiday story or small activity, and a treat to ease into the night before Christmas.

### For Teens

- **Volunteer Together or Support a Charity** — Partner with a local soup kitchen, gift drive, or toy donation. Teens helping out tangibly learn the heart of giving.
- **Holiday Photo & Ornament Swap** — Each year, take a family photo or allow teens to choose or design an ornament that reflects the year. It becomes a keepsake and a conversation starter.

### For the Whole Family

- **Advent Calendar with Acts of Kindness** — Instead of candy, fill each day with a small act of kindness or a scripture slip you complete together.
- **Drive Through Christmas Lights** — Bundle up, sip cocoa, and tour your neighborhood’s light displays—music optional but highly encouraged!
- **Letters to Jesus Before Gifts** — Before unwrapping presents, take turns writing grateful, heartfelt notes to Jesus. It sets a worshipful, giving-centered tone.

## Homemade Gift & Basket Ideas with Recipes

### Mason Jar Cookie Mix

#### Ingredients (for 1 jar):

- 1 ¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp baking soda
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ cup brown sugar, packed
- ½ cup white sugar
- 1 cup chocolate chips
- ½ cup holiday sprinkles

#### Instructions:

1. Layer the ingredients in a 1-quart mason jar in the order listed.
  2. Seal the jar, tie with a ribbon, and attach a tag with baking directions:  
*"Pour jar contents into a bowl. Add ½ cup melted butter, 1 egg, and 1 tsp vanilla. Mix well. Drop spoonfuls onto a baking sheet. Bake at 350°F for 8–10 minutes."*
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### Chocolate-Dipped Pretzel Rods

#### Ingredients:

- 1 bag pretzel rods
- 2 cups semi-sweet or milk chocolate chips
- 2 tsp coconut oil or shortening
- Toppings: crushed candy canes, sprinkles, or chopped nuts

#### Instructions:

1. Melt chocolate and coconut oil together until smooth.
  2. Dip pretzel rods halfway into the melted chocolate.
  3. Roll in toppings and place on parchment paper to set.
  4. Package in clear treat bags tied with festive ribbon.
-

## Homemade Fudge

### Ingredients:

- 3 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 1 (14 oz) can sweetened condensed milk
- 4 tbsp butter
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

### Instructions:

1. Line an 8x8 baking dish with parchment paper.
  2. Melt chocolate chips, butter, and condensed milk over low heat, stirring constantly until smooth.
  3. Stir in vanilla and salt.
  4. Pour into dish and smooth the top. Chill 2–3 hours until firm.
  5. Cut into squares and package in tins or gift boxes.
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## Buckeyes

### Ingredients:

- 1 ½ cups peanut butter
- 1 cup butter, softened
- 6 cups powdered sugar
- 4 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 2 tbsp shortening

### Instructions:

1. Mix peanut butter, butter, and powdered sugar until dough forms.
2. Roll into small balls and place on a lined baking sheet. Chill until firm.
3. Melt chocolate chips with shortening.
4. Dip each ball into chocolate, leaving a small circle of peanut butter exposed.
5. Return to baking sheet and chill until set.

## **Mounds Balls**

### **Ingredients:**

- 3 cups shredded sweetened coconut
- 1 (14 oz) can sweetened condensed milk
- 3 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 2 tbsp shortening

### **Instructions:**

1. Mix coconut and condensed milk until sticky.
  2. Roll into small balls and place on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Freeze for 30 minutes.
  3. Melt chocolate chips and shortening until smooth.
  4. Dip each ball in chocolate and place back on the sheet. Chill until set.
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## **Christmas Morning Basket (Snack Mix Idea)**

### **Snack Mix Ingredients:**

- 4 cups Rice Chex cereal
- 2 cups pretzels
- 2 cups holiday M&Ms
- 1 cup peanuts or almonds
- 12 oz white chocolate, melted

### **Instructions:**

1. Mix cereal, pretzels, M&Ms, and nuts in a large bowl.
2. Pour melted white chocolate over and stir until everything is coated.
3. Spread onto parchment paper to harden. Break apart and package in bags.

### **Basket Assembly:**

- Add fresh cinnamon rolls (or a jar mix), a bag of snack mix, a packet of flavored coffee or cocoa mix, and a candle or ornament.
  - Line a basket with a holiday towel and arrange items neatly.
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## Comfort Foods for Giving from the Heart

There's something deeply personal about sharing food. Long after ribbons are untied and wrapping paper is tossed away, the memory of a warm meal lingers in the heart.

Edible gifts don't have to be complicated or expensive; they only need to be made with love. Whether you're preparing supper for a neighbor recovering from illness, gifting a busy young family something homemade, or gathering your own children around the table, these comfort foods carry the message: *you are cared for*. Below are six recipes that bring comfort to your own home — and travel well if you'd like to give them away as a gift.

### 1. Chicken Pot Pie with Flaky Crust

#### Ingredients:

- 1 lb boneless, skinless chicken breast (cooked & diced)
- 1 cup frozen peas
- 1 cup diced carrots
- 1 cup diced potatoes (pre-cooked until tender)
- ½ cup diced onion
- 4 tbsp butter
- ⅓ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup milk
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp black pepper
- ½ tsp dried thyme
- 2 refrigerated pie crusts

#### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 425°F.
2. In a skillet, melt butter and sauté onions until soft. Stir in flour and cook for 1 minute. Slowly whisk in chicken broth and milk until thickened. Season with salt, pepper, and thyme.
3. Stir in chicken, peas, carrots, and potatoes.
4. Line a 9-inch pie dish with one crust, fill with mixture, and top with second crust. Seal edges and cut slits for steam.
5. Bake for 30–35 minutes, until golden brown. Let rest 10 minutes before serving.

*Gift idea: Bake in a disposable pie tin, wrap in foil, and deliver warm with a note that says, "For a cozy evening at home."*

## **2. Baked Ziti with Cheese**

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 lb ziti pasta
- 1 lb ground beef or Italian sausage
- 1 jar (24 oz) marinara sauce
- 1 can (15 oz) tomato sauce
- 1 tsp Italian seasoning
- 1 cup ricotta cheese
- 2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

### **Instructions:**

1. Cook pasta until al dente, drain.
2. In a skillet, brown meat until cooked through. Drain excess fat. Stir in marinara, tomato sauce, and Italian seasoning. Simmer 10 minutes.
3. Layer half of pasta in a greased 9×13 pan, spread half of meat sauce, spoon ricotta in dollops, and sprinkle with mozzarella. Repeat layers.
4. Top with Parmesan.
5. Cover with foil and bake at 375°F for 25 minutes. Remove foil and bake another 10 minutes until bubbly.

*Gift idea: Assemble in a foil baking dish, attach a tag with "Bake uncovered at 375°F for 25 minutes" if giving unbaked.*

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### 3. Shepherd's Pie

#### Ingredients:

- 1 lb ground beef or lamb
- 1 cup diced onion
- 1 cup frozen peas and carrots
- 2 tbsp tomato paste
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 1 cup beef broth
- 3 cups mashed potatoes (prepared)
- ½ cup shredded cheddar cheese (optional)

#### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. In a skillet, cook ground beef with onions until browned. Stir in tomato paste, Worcestershire, and beef broth. Simmer until slightly thickened. Add peas and carrots.
3. Spread mixture into a greased 9×9 dish.
4. Top with mashed potatoes, spreading evenly. Sprinkle with cheese if desired.
5. Bake for 25–30 minutes until potatoes are golden.

*Gift idea: Deliver in a baking dish covered with foil. Write a note: "This meal is hearty enough for the whole family."*

## 4. Cheesy Broccoli & Rice Casserole

### Ingredients:

- 2 cups cooked rice
- 2 cups broccoli florets (lightly steamed)
- 1 can (10.5 oz) cream of mushroom or chicken soup
- 1 cup sour cream
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp black pepper

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. In a large bowl, combine rice, broccoli, soup, sour cream, 1 ½ cups cheese, garlic powder, and pepper.
3. Spread into greased 9×13 dish. Top with remaining cheese.
4. Bake 25–30 minutes until hot and bubbly.

*Gift idea: Send with a small loaf of homemade bread for a full meal.*

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## 5. Homemade Dinner Rolls

### Ingredients:

- 1 cup warm milk (110°F)
- 2 ¼ tsp active dry yeast (1 packet)
- ¼ cup sugar
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 1 tsp salt
- 3 ½–4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 egg

### Instructions:

1. In a bowl, combine warm milk, yeast, and sugar. Let sit 5 minutes until foamy.
2. Stir in butter, salt, egg, and 3 cups flour. Add more flour gradually until dough is soft.
3. Knead 6–8 minutes until smooth. Place in greased bowl, cover, and let rise 1 hour.
4. Punch down and divide into 12–15 balls. Place in greased 9×13 pan. Let rise 30 minutes.
5. Bake at 375°F for 15–18 minutes until golden. Brush with melted butter before serving.

*Gift idea: Wrap a warm batch in a clean tea towel and deliver with a jar of homemade jam.*

## 6. Caramel Apple Crisp

### Ingredients:

- 6 medium apples, peeled & sliced
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- ½ cup caramel sauce (plus more for drizzling)
- 1 cup rolled oats
- ½ cup flour
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- ½ cup butter, melted

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Toss apple slices with lemon juice and spread in a greased 9×13 dish. Drizzle with caramel sauce.
3. In a bowl, combine oats, flour, sugar, cinnamon, and butter. Sprinkle mixture over apples.
4. Bake 35–40 minutes until topping is golden and apples are bubbly. Drizzle with extra caramel before serving.

*Gift idea: Assemble in a disposable baking pan and deliver unbaked with instructions: "Bake at 350°F for 35–40 minutes."*

# Family Nativity Devotional

## The Angels

### **Scripture Reading:**

*Luke 2:8–11 (NLT)*

*"That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. 'Don't be afraid!' he said. 'I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!'"*

## Family Reading

The angels didn't come with wrapped boxes or coins or baskets of food. They came with something greater: the message of Jesus' birth. They gave the shepherds a gift of words — hope, joy, and peace. This shows us something important about giving. Sometimes the most meaningful gifts are not the ones that cost the most money, but the ones that point people to God's love.

Imagine the shepherds on that dark hillside. They weren't expecting a heavenly choir, but God chose them to be the first to hear the good news. The angels' song was a gift: *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth."* This message still echoes today. At Christmas, we can give that same gift — the reminder that Christ has come and His peace is for everyone.

## Activity

### **Add the Angels to the Nativity Set.**

Place your angel figures in the stable or above it, near the shepherds. As you do, talk about what it might have been like to suddenly see the sky filled with angels singing.

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**Craft Idea (younger kids):** Cut out paper angels and let children decorate them with glitter or crayons. Write a word on each angel such as *peace, joy, love, hope*. Hang them in a window or on the tree.

**Teen Activity:** Write a short Christmas card to someone who might be lonely (a grandparent, neighbor, or friend) and include a Bible verse about peace. Teens can hand-deliver or mail it.

**Family Activity:** Go caroling as a family (or sing together at home) just like the angels sang. Even one song, sung with joy, can bless someone deeply.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think God chose shepherds — ordinary, working people — to first hear the message from the angels?
- How is sharing good news like giving a gift?
- Can you think of a way your family could “be like the angels” this Christmas and spread joy or peace to someone else?
- What gift has someone given you that didn’t cost money but meant a lot to you?

### **Prayer**

“Father, thank You for sending the angels to announce the birth of Your Son. Thank You that their message was for all people, including us. Help us to share the gift of peace and joy with others through our words, our songs, and our actions. Teach us to give from the heart, just as You gave us Jesus. Amen.”

## Closing & Reflection

As we end this chapter, we are reminded that giving doesn't always look like shiny packages under the tree. The angels gave their song. The shepherds gave their worship. Mary gave her trust. Joseph gave his obedience. And God gave His Son — the greatest gift of all.

When we give from the heart, whether it's a simple jar of cookie mix, a warm casserole for a neighbor, or words of encouragement tucked in a handwritten note, we reflect the heart of the Father. These gifts may seem small, but in God's hands they grow into blessings that ripple outward, touching lives in ways we may never see.

This Christmas, ask yourself and your family: *Are we giving only from our hands, or are we giving from our hearts?* Edible gifts, homemade baskets, songs sung by the fire — they all carry the same message when wrapped in love: "You matter. You are seen. Christ came for you."

Make space to pause, pray, and remember: the most valuable gift you can give is the presence of Christ shining through you.

## Reflection Questions

1. Which gift from this chapter inspired you most — food, homemade, or words of encouragement? Why?
  2. Who in your life could use a reminder of God's peace and presence right now?
  3. How can your family create a tradition of "giving from the heart" each year?
  4. What do you think it means to give like the angels — freely, joyfully, without expecting anything in return?
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## Chapter 5: Cozy Nights by the Fire

***"For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."***

— Matthew 18:20 (NLT)

### **Devotional Reflection**

There's something almost sacred about the quiet of a winter evening, when the day's work is finished, the lamps glow soft, and the family draws close to the fire. The world outside might be cold, but the warmth of home is more than the wood in the stove or the crackle in the fireplace. It's the presence of God that makes the ordinary holy.

When Jesus promised that He would be "among" those who gathered in His name, He wasn't speaking only of church sanctuaries or crowded revivals. He was speaking of living rooms and kitchens, barns and basements — anywhere His people would stop and remember Him. Even in the smallest, simplest places, His Spirit meets us.

For many families, winter evenings are a chance to slow down. The rush of holiday errands quiets, the darkness outside comes early, and what's left is the gift of presence.

These are the nights that shape memories — a stack of board games spread across the rug, a favorite movie playing on the TV, a puzzle lit by the firelight. It may not seem like much, but these moments are forming the culture of your family. They are teaching your children, without a lecture or a list, that joy is not found in things but in togetherness.

### **The Ministry of Togetherness**

It can feel easy to dismiss evenings at home as "nothing special," especially in a culture that tells us memories require vacations, tickets, or expenses. But the ministry of togetherness is not small. When we sit shoulder to shoulder on the couch, laugh at the same line in a movie, or pass a bowl of popcorn from hand to hand, we are building something sacred.

Children long for security, not extravagance. They need to know their place at the table, their spot on the couch, their role in the family is safe and cherished. The warmth of the fire and the comfort of shared traditions whispers that truth in ways words alone cannot.

Think of the disciples sitting around the fire with Jesus on the shore after His resurrection. Scripture tells us He had prepared fish and bread for them, meeting them not with a sermon first, but with a meal. The Son of God Himself knew that eating together, resting together, and sharing together builds trust and peace. If Jesus valued the simple ministry of a meal by the fire, then surely our evenings at home can become holy ground too.

### **Choosing Simplicity**

Cozy nights are not about perfection. They don't require every pillow to be fluffed or every dish to be washed before you sit down. They don't demand a curated movie list or gourmet snacks. They simply invite you to pause and be present.

Maybe your fire is not in a hearth but a candle on the table or a string of twinkle lights across the mantle. Maybe your games are missing half their pieces, and maybe your popcorn comes from a bag instead of a pot. None of that matters. What matters is the heart behind it: gathering to rest, to laugh, to remember God's goodness in the middle of your ordinary.

### **Passing Peace to the Next Generation**

One day, your children may not remember the details of what you cooked or which game you played. But they will remember the atmosphere of home. They will carry with them the way the firelight fell on the walls, the sound of laughter mingling with crackling wood, and the comfort of knowing they belonged to something steady and safe.

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These nights whisper to them about the heart of God — a Father who welcomes, who delights in His people, who longs for us to sit close and simply be with Him. In a world that clamors for performance, these cozy nights train our families to value presence.

So let us not underestimate the sacredness of movie nights, game nights, and evenings by the fire. They are not fillers in the calendar; they are anchors. They are the living sermons that teach our children about joy, rest, and the nearness of Christ.

### **How to Begin**

You don't have to overhaul your schedule. Start small:

- Choose one night each week in December to be a "fire night" — gather in the living room, light candles or the fireplace, turn off extra screens, and choose one activity together.
- Let the children help plan. Maybe it's pizza night, maybe popcorn and a movie, maybe a silly game. The activity isn't the focus — the togetherness is.
- End the night with a short Scripture reading or a prayer of thanks. Keep it simple, but keep it consistent.

The fire may die down, the snacks may be eaten, but the memory of peace will linger. And that peace is the gift of Christ, who makes every corner of our homes holy when we invite Him in.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. When you picture your family gathered at home, what feeling do you hope your children carry with them into adulthood?
2. How can you simplify your evenings to make more room for cozy, unhurried time together?

3. What ordinary place in your home could become a “gathering spot” for peace and joy this season?
4. How can you invite Christ’s presence into your next family night — not through pressure, but through a simple prayer or Scripture?



## Cozy Nights at Home

The first snow had begun to fall that evening, soft and gentle flakes twirling down from the heavens like feathers released from a pillow. The children pressed their faces to the windowpane, their breath fogging the glass as they squealed at the sight. "It's sticking!" one of them shouted, tugging at his mother's hand. She smiled, the corners of her mouth turning upward as she brushed a stray hair back from her cheek.

It was one of those evenings that begged for slowing down, for turning inward, for making home the place everyone wanted to be. The old fireplace in the living room had already been set with kindling. Soon the crackle of flames would echo through the house, sending its warmth into the corners of the room where blankets and pillows had already been piled high.

"Tonight, we're staying in," their father announced with a grin, shaking off his coat at the door. His boots carried in the faint smell of snow and the bite of cold air. "No rushing, no errands. Just us."

The children clapped, knowing what that meant. It wasn't just a cozy night; it was *family night*. The kind where the world seemed to pause, where laughter rang louder than the ticking of the clock, and where memories quietly stitched themselves into the fabric of their lives.

Mother tied her apron snugly around her waist as she pulled out the mixing bowls. "Who wants to help with supper?" she called. Instantly, little feet padded into the kitchen. Even the teenagers, who had been halfway lost in their own worlds earlier that day, leaned over the counter to see what was on the menu.

"Make-your-own pizzas tonight," she announced. "And maybe, if everyone works together, we'll have time for a special treat afterward."

The kitchen erupted in chatter. One child pulled out the mozzarella, another began chopping vegetables, while the youngest carefully spread tomato sauce with a spoon. Their mother stood back for a moment, just watching. She loved this part most — the clumsy little hands working alongside the steady ones, the simple rhythm of family blending together over food.

The dough had been made earlier in the day, rising slowly on the counter under a towel. Now, each child pressed and stretched their own piece into the shape they liked — some round, some awkwardly square. The toppings were scattered like confetti: pepperoni, onions, peppers, olives, and even pineapple for those who insisted it belonged on pizza. Laughter filled the kitchen as flour dusted their noses and sleeves. Their father reached over to steal a slice of pepperoni, only to be swatted playfully by his oldest daughter. “Hey! That’s for the pizzas!”

Within minutes, the aroma of baking bread and sizzling cheese filled the air. It mixed with the faint smoky scent drifting from the fireplace, creating a warmth that wrapped itself around every heart in the room.

While the pizzas baked, another pan was set on the stove. Butter melted slowly, its golden pool bubbling gently as kernels of corn were poured in. Soon, the popping began, a cheerful crackle that matched the snapping of logs in the fireplace. The youngest children danced at the sound, clapping their hands in delight.

“Caramel corn?” one asked hopefully, eyes wide.

“Caramel corn,” their mother confirmed with a smile. As the sweet mixture was stirred, a familiar memory unfolded. This was more than food; it was a tradition passed down, a recipe that had filled the home with sweetness for years. Soon, sticky fingers would be licking away caramel, and laughter would be muffled by full mouths.

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But that wasn't all. On the counter, a round loaf of dough had been cut into small pieces, dipped in melted butter, and rolled in herbs and cheese. It was assembled into a pull-apart bread — a golden crown of comfort. As it baked, the smell of garlic and cheddar wafted through the kitchen, making everyone glance at the oven door impatiently.

By the time the pizzas were pulled out, the table was crowded with warm, homemade goodness: bubbling pizza pies, fluffy bread bursting with herbs, bowls of nachos drizzled with canned cheddar cheese, and that irresistible caramel corn cooling on wax paper.

With plates piled high, everyone carried their food into the living room. The firelight flickered across the walls, casting a glow that made the whole house feel like it had exhaled in peace. Pajamas and blankets made their appearance, and soon the couch was a patchwork quilt of cozy bodies.

The oldest boy had dug out a stack of old-fashioned games — no batteries, no screens, just laughter and imagination. Charades began, with dramatic reenactments that made everyone clutch their sides in hilarity. The teenagers, usually too “cool” to join in, laughed the loudest when their father attempted to act out “dancing elephant.”

When the games paused, the family settled back with bowls of popcorn for the movie. The flickering light of the TV mingled with the warm glow of the fire, but no one noticed the blend of old and new. What mattered most was the togetherness — the steady heartbeat of family life.

As the movie ended and the fire dwindled, the younger children begged for just a little more time together. Their mother had an idea. She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with something colorful: small tubs of homemade playdough she had dyed to look like scoops of ice cream.

“I thought we could try this out tonight,” she said, handing each child a container. “Tomorrow, we’ll wrap some up as gifts for friends.”

The children squealed in delight, scooping the playdough with a toy ice cream scoop and pretending to serve one another. The room was filled with the scent of vanilla extract, which had been stirred into the dough, making it all the more believable. Even the older ones joined in, laughing at the silliness of building “ice cream sundaes” out of playdough. It wasn’t about the toy itself, but about the memory it created — the homemade joy that reminded everyone that the best gifts don’t come from a store.

As the night drew to a close, the last of the caramel corn was nibbled, the fire burned down to glowing embers, and the children began to drift off beneath their blankets. Their mother tucked the youngest into bed, whispering prayers of gratitude as she kissed their foreheads. She lingered for a moment, watching the rise and fall of their breathing, her heart swelling with a quiet contentment. Back in the living room, her husband sat with the teenagers, talking about school, friendships, and dreams for the future. It was simple, but it was rich — a kind of wealth that couldn’t be measured in dollars.

Later, when the house was finally still, she stood by the window once more. Snowflakes still fell, covering the world in white. She thought of the night — the laughter, the food, the silly games, the sticky caramel corn — and she knew these were the moments her children would carry with them forever.

A cozy night at home wasn’t just a pause in the week; it was the rhythm of family, the melody of love, the heartbeat of a home. And in a world that hurried so quickly, these nights were the anchor, holding them close to one another and to God’s goodness.

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## Cozy Activities & Traditions

### For Younger Children

- **Indoor Campout:** Set up a tent in the living room or drape blankets over chairs to make a fort. Add flashlights and stuffed animals, then tell stories or read picture books inside.
- **Homemade Playdough Ice Cream Shop:** Just like in the story, dye playdough in pastel colors, add a drop of vanilla extract for scent, and give kids ice cream scoops, cones, and cups. They'll play for hours pretending to serve sundaes.
- **Movie & Pajama Parade:** Let the kids pick a short animated movie, but before it starts, have them "parade" through the living room in their pajamas with stuffed animals, like a little bedtime march.
- **Build-Your-Own Snack Plate:** Use muffin tins and let kids fill each section with different snacks (grapes, crackers, cheese cubes, popcorn). It feels special because they get to "design" their own tray.
- **Storytime Under the Blanket:** Dim the lights, turn on the fireplace or a lamp, and read aloud a cozy seasonal story while everyone snuggles under one big blanket.

### For Teens

- **Board-Free Games:** Play old-fashioned games like *20 Questions*, *Telephone*, or *Would You Rather*—they may roll their eyes at first, but soon laughter will take over.
- **DIY Pizza Competition:** Each teen makes their own mini pizza, and everyone votes (secretly, so no hurt feelings!) for categories like "Most Creative" or "Looks Most Like a Real Pizzeria Pizza."
- **Late-Night Cocoa Talks:** Make hot chocolate with whipped cream, then stay up a little later than usual just talking—no phones allowed. Teens often open up when they know you're listening without distraction.
- **Photo Memory Challenge:** Print out old family pictures and play a guessing game—what year was it? Where were we? Teens love nostalgia mixed with a little humor.

- **Karaoke Night:** No fancy machine needed—just a phone, YouTube lyrics, and the willingness to be silly together.

### **For the Whole Family**

- **Homemade Pizza Night:** Everyone builds their own pizza, just like in the story, then eats by the fire while watching a family favorite movie.
  - **Pull-Apart Bread Sharing:** Make cheddar-herb pull-apart bread and set it in the middle of the table, letting everyone pull pieces with their hands while sharing one thing they're thankful for.
  - **Old-Fashioned Game Night:** Charades, Pictionary on scrap paper, or "Act Out a Bible Story" can spark plenty of giggles.
  - **Family Gratitude Jar:** Set a jar in the living room, and on cozy nights, have each person add a slip of paper with something good from their week. Read them aloud once the jar is full.
  - **Seasonal Movie Marathons:** Pick a theme (classic musicals, Christmas specials, Little House episodes) and make it a tradition to watch together with caramel corn or popcorn.
  - **Craft & Gift-Making Evenings:** Spend one night making simple homemade gifts together—like playdough tubs for kids, hot cocoa mix jars for neighbors, or homemade ornaments for the tree.
  - **Storytelling Around the Fire:** Turn off the screens and let each person share a story. It could be a real family memory, a made-up tale, or even a silly "round-robin" story where each person adds a line.
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## Homemade Gifts & Basket Ideas

One of the sweetest parts of cozy nights at home is not just enjoying them ourselves, but finding little ways to share that warmth with others. Homemade gifts don't have to be fancy or expensive — often, it's the simple, thoughtful touches that people remember the most. Below are a few ideas that tie right into the themes of this chapter. Some are perfect for kids to help make, and others are wonderful for blessing a neighbor, teacher, or friend.

### 1. Ice Cream Playdough Gift Set

This one is always a hit with kids. You can dye homemade playdough in pastel shades to look like scoops of strawberry, mint, or vanilla ice cream. Stir in a drop of vanilla extract and the whole set smells delicious (though not for eating!).

#### Playdough Recipe:

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup salt
- 2 cups water
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons cream of tartar
- Food coloring (choose fun “ice cream” colors)
- A drop or two of vanilla extract

Cook everything together in a saucepan until it forms a soft dough. Cool completely, then store in washed-out tubs or small plastic containers.

**Gift Basket Idea:** Add a dollar-store ice cream scoop, plastic cups or cones, and package it all in a basket lined with colorful tissue paper.

### 2. Hot Cocoa Night Basket

This is a cozy gift that invites someone to slow down and enjoy a simple pleasure.

- Fill mason jars with layers of cocoa powder, sugar, and powdered milk.
- Add a small bag of mini marshmallows tied with ribbon.
- Tuck in a bar of chocolate or peppermint sticks.
- Pair with thrifted mugs or dollar-store cups, and nestle everything in a basket with a warm blanket or fuzzy socks.

### 3. Homemade Caramel Corn Gift Bag

Caramel corn is one of those recipes that makes the whole house smell sweet. You can bag it up as a cheerful “just because” gift or tuck it into a movie night basket.

#### **Caramel Corn Recipe:**

- 10 cups popped popcorn
- 1 cup brown sugar
- ½ cup butter
- ¼ cup corn syrup
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Melt butter, sugar, and syrup together. Boil for 5 minutes without stirring. Remove from heat, stir in soda and vanilla, then pour over popcorn. Bake at 250°F for 45 minutes, stirring every 15 minutes. Cool before bagging.

**Gift Idea:** Place the caramel corn in clear cellophane bags tied with ribbon. Add a tag that says, “*Just Add a Movie Night.*”

### 4. Family Game Night Basket

For families with kids of any age, a game night basket is both fun and practical.

- A simple deck of cards or dice games
- A printed list of charades or “20 Questions” ideas
- A bag of nachos with a can of cheese
- A pair of cozy socks for each family member

Write a small note: “*Unplug, laugh, and play together.*” It’s a reminder that the best family fun doesn’t require screens.

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## 5. Kids' Craft Basket

If you want something hands-on for little ones, this basket is perfect.

- Small jars of homemade finger paint (recipe below)
- A stack of plain paper or a roll of butcher paper
- Cookie cutters for stamping shapes
- A few inexpensive paintbrushes or sponges

### Homemade Finger Paint Recipe:

- 1 cup flour
- 4 cups water
- 4 tablespoons salt
- Food coloring

Cook over medium heat until thick, stirring constantly. Divide into jars and tint with food coloring. Cool completely before gifting.

Wrap everything in a tote bag or basket lined with tissue paper. Kids will love opening it up and diving into creativity.

## 6. "Snow in a Jar" Kit

This one makes a wonderful winter gift for children. It's simple, sensory fun that feels magical.

### What to Include:

- A jar filled with 2 cups baking soda
- A small container of white hair conditioner (½ cup) or shaving cream
- A card with directions: *"Mix together to make fluffy play snow. Store in a zip-top bag when finished!"*
- Optional: add tiny toy animals, a plastic shovel, or little cookie cutters.

Package it with a pair of mittens or a scarf, and you have a fun indoor winter activity that's sure to make kids smile.

## Closing Thought

Homemade gifts don't just save money — they tell someone, *"I thought of you."* They carry with them the warmth of a family kitchen, the laughter of children at the table, and the heart behind the time it takes to create. Whether it's a basket for a friend, a little play kit for the kids, or a bag of caramel corn for a neighbor, these gifts keep the spirit of cozy nights alive and spread it beyond your own walls.

## Comfort Foods for Cozy Nights

When the nights turn chilly and the fire crackles in the hearth, nothing brings a family together quite like comfort food. These recipes aren't fussy or complicated — they're the kind that fill the house with inviting aromas and keep everyone lingering a little longer around the table. From gooey bread to sweet popcorn balls, each one is made for sharing, laughing, and making memories.

### 1. Cheddar & Herb Pull-Apart Bread

This bread never lasts long on the table. It comes out of the oven golden brown, cheesy, and ready for everyone to tear apart with their hands. I like to bake it when we're playing board games, because it feels like the perfect snack to share in between turns.

#### Ingredients

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 packet (2 ¼ tsp) yeast
- 1 ⅓ cups warm water
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 teaspoons Italian herbs
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- ¼ cup melted butter (for dipping pieces)

#### Directions

1. In a large bowl, dissolve yeast and sugar in warm water. Let it sit until foamy, about 5 minutes.
  2. Stir in flour, salt, garlic powder, herbs, and butter. Mix and knead until dough is smooth. Let rise until doubled, about 1 hour.
  3. Punch dough down and cut into small pieces (about the size of a walnut). Dip each piece into melted butter, then roll in cheddar cheese.
  4. Pile the coated pieces into a greased bundt pan. Cover and let rise again for 30 minutes.
  5. Bake at 375°F for 25–30 minutes until golden.
  6. Flip out onto a plate and serve warm, letting everyone pull apart pieces with their fingers.
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## 2. Make-Your-Own Pizza Night

There's something magical about letting everyone build their own pizza. Some kids pile on cheese until you can't see the crust, while others make careful patterns with pepperoni. It's messy, fun, and absolutely delicious.

### Ingredients

- 1 recipe homemade pizza dough (see recipe at the end)
- 1 jar pizza sauce
- 2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese
- Toppings: pepperoni, sausage, onions, peppers, mushrooms, olives, pineapple — whatever your family likes

### Directions

1. Roll out dough into personal-sized crusts. Place on greased baking sheets.
  2. Spread each with sauce and sprinkle generously with cheese.
  3. Add toppings as desired — no two pizzas will look the same.
  4. Bake at 425°F for 12–15 minutes until cheese is melted and bubbly.
  5. Serve hot and let each person proudly announce their creation.
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## 3. Jello Popcorn Balls

A cheerful, old-fashioned treat that feels like it came straight out of Grandma's kitchen. Sweet, chewy, and brightly colored, these popcorn balls are a hit with kids and grown-ups alike.

### Ingredients

- 10 cups popped popcorn
- 1 package (3 oz) strawberry Jell-O (or flavor of choice)
- 1 package (10 oz) marshmallows

### Directions

1. Place popcorn in a large mixing bowl, removing unpopped kernels.
2. Melt marshmallows over low heat, stirring constantly until smooth.
3. Stir in the Jell-O powder until dissolved and brightly colored.
4. Pour over popcorn and mix well to coat.
5. Butter hands and quickly shape into balls. Set on waxed paper to cool.

**Tip:** Wrap each ball in plastic wrap for school lunches, parties, or cozy movie nights.

#### **4. Loaded Nacho Platter with Cheddar Sauce**

Nachos are the ultimate “everyone grab a bite” food. Spread across a big tray, topped with beans, salsa, cheese, and extras, they’re perfect for setting in the middle of the living room during game night.

##### **Ingredients**

- 1 large bag tortilla chips
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 jar salsa
- 1 can nacho cheddar cheese sauce (or homemade if you prefer)
- 1 cup shredded cheese (cheddar or Monterey Jack)
- Optional toppings: sour cream, guacamole, jalapeños, diced tomatoes, green onions

##### **Directions**

1. Spread tortilla chips on a large baking sheet.
  2. Sprinkle with beans, salsa, and shredded cheese. Drizzle with canned cheddar sauce.
  3. Bake at 350°F for 10 minutes, just until hot and melty.
  4. Serve immediately with extra toppings on the side so everyone can dress their nachos their way.
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#### **5. Monkey Bread (Cinnamon Pull-Apart)**

Sticky fingers and lots of giggles — that’s what happens when you serve monkey bread. Each piece is coated in cinnamon sugar, baked into a golden bundt, and drizzled with buttery caramel glaze. It’s a breakfast-meets-dessert kind of comfort food.

##### **Ingredients**

- 2 cans refrigerated biscuit dough (or homemade)
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 1 cup brown sugar

##### **Directions**

1. Cut biscuit dough into quarters.
  2. In a bowl, mix sugar and cinnamon. Roll dough pieces in the mixture.
  3. Place coated pieces in a greased bundt pan.
  4. Melt butter with brown sugar until smooth, then pour over dough.
  5. Bake at 350°F for 30–35 minutes until golden brown.
  6. Flip out onto a serving plate. Let everyone pull apart pieces while it’s still warm and gooey.
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## 6. Homemade Pizza Rolls (Pinwheels)

Think of these like bite-sized pizzas, perfect for snacking while playing charades or watching a movie. They're fun to make, fun to eat, and disappear faster than you'd expect.

### Ingredients

- 1 tube refrigerated pizza dough (or homemade)
- ½ cup pizza sauce
- 1 ½ cups shredded mozzarella cheese
- ½ cup pepperoni slices, chopped
- Italian seasoning

### Directions

1. Roll out pizza dough into a rectangle.
2. Spread evenly with sauce, sprinkle with cheese and pepperoni.
3. Roll up tightly from the long side, then cut into 1-inch slices.
4. Place pinwheels on a greased baking sheet. Sprinkle with Italian seasoning.
5. Bake at 400°F for 12–15 minutes until golden and bubbly.
6. Serve with extra sauce for dipping.

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## Homemade Pizza Dough

Here's a scaled-down version of my favorite dough recipe. It makes enough for two large pizzas or several personal-sized ones.

### Ingredients

- 1 package (2 ¼ tsp) yeast
- 1 ⅓ cups warm water
- 1 ½ tablespoons sugar
- 1 ½ tablespoons oil
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 ¼ to 3 ½ cups flour

### Directions

1. Dissolve yeast and sugar in warm water. Let stand 5 minutes until foamy.
2. Stir in oil, salt, and flour, adding just enough flour to form a soft dough.
3. Knead until smooth and elastic, about 5–7 minutes.
4. Place in a greased bowl, cover, and let rise until doubled, about 1 hour.
5. Punch down, roll out, and use for pizza or pizza rolls.

## **Closing Thought**

Comfort food has a way of softening the edges of life. These recipes are more than just meals — they're invitations. Invitations to gather, to linger, to laugh a little longer by the fire. When you set a plate of monkey bread in the middle of the table or pass around a tray of nachos, you're not just filling bellies, you're filling hearts. And those are the moments that stay with us, long after the dishes are washed.

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## **Family Nativity Devotional**

### **The Manger**

#### **Scripture Reading: Luke 2:6–7 (NLT)**

“And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.”

#### **Family Reading**

When Jesus was born, He wasn't placed in a grand cradle or even a warm bed. Instead, Mary laid Him in a manger — a feeding trough for animals. The King of Kings, the Savior of the world, came in the humblest way possible.

The manger reminds us that God does not need fancy or perfect things to do His work. He comes into ordinary places and fills them with His glory. Just like He came into a stable, He wants to come into our homes and into our hearts.

Sometimes we may feel small, overlooked, or unimportant, but the manger shows us that God values humility. Jesus' first bed was simple, but His presence made it holy. That same truth is for us — when Jesus is welcomed into our lives, even the most ordinary places become extraordinary.

#### **Family Activity**

Place the manger and Baby Jesus into your Nativity set. Take a few minutes as a family to sit quietly around it, thanking God for sending His Son in such a humble way.

Optional craft idea: Make a simple paper or cardboard manger. Throughout the week, encourage family members to “fill the manger” with strips of paper, each one written with acts of kindness or ways they showed love. By Christmas, the manger will be full — a gift of love for Jesus.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think God chose such a simple place for Jesus to be born?

- How does the manger remind us that Jesus is for everyone, not just the rich or powerful?
- What are some ordinary places in your own life where you can welcome Jesus?

### **Prayer**

“Lord, thank You for sending Jesus into the world in such a humble way. The manger reminds us that You meet us where we are — in the ordinary, everyday moments of life. Help us to welcome You into our homes and hearts, not just at Christmas but every day. May our lives be a place where Your love rests. Amen.”

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## **Closing & Reflection**

As we place the manger in our Nativity, we are reminded that Christmas is not about perfection, but about presence. Jesus did not arrive in a palace or even a comfortable home, but in a stable — showing us that God meets us in the simple, messy, and ordinary places of life.

The manger whispers a truth we all need to hear: you don't have to be important in the world's eyes for God to draw near. He chose a feeding trough, He chose shepherds, He chose humble beginnings — and He still chooses us today.

When we slow down enough to welcome Him, our ordinary homes and families become holy spaces filled with His love. The manger shows us that Jesus is not far away, but close, right in the middle of our daily lives.

Take time this week to gather around the Nativity, letting the manger remind you of God's closeness. Breathe deeply and thank Him for choosing to come near.

## **Reflection Questions**

- Where do you notice God in the ordinary parts of your life?
- How can your family make room for Jesus this week, even in small ways?
- What does the manger teach you about humility and God's love?

## Chapter 6: Hospitality at Christmas

### ***Romans 12:13 (NLT)***

*"When God's people are in need, be ready to help them.  
Always be eager to practice hospitality."*

### **Devotion**

Christmas has a way of filling our calendars and our homes. There are lists to check, meals to plan, and traditions to keep. The tree goes up, the stockings are hung, and before long, every day in December feels full. Yet in the middle of all this busyness, the heart of Christmas whispers something simple: *make room*.

When Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, there was no room left in the inn. The town was crowded, people were traveling for the census, and space was scarce. The Savior of the world was about to be born, yet no one thought to say, "Come in, we'll make space for you." So Mary laid her baby in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, because that was all that was available.

It's easy to look back on that night and wonder how anyone could turn them away. If they had only known who was knocking on their door, they would have opened it wide. But the truth is, we often do the same thing. Our lives get so full — full of schedules, full of responsibilities, full of distractions — that when Jesus gently asks for space in our hearts, we sigh and say, "There's no room."

Hospitality, at its core, is about making room. Not just in our homes, but in our lives. It's about noticing the people God puts in front of us and saying, "Yes, come in. You belong here." And it's about remembering that when we welcome others, we welcome Him.

Hebrews 13:2 tells us, *"Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it."* What a thought — that in opening our door to someone in need, we may actually be welcoming a messenger of God, or even Christ Himself.

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Hospitality doesn't have to be elaborate. It doesn't require a spotless house, expensive dishes, or gourmet meals. In fact, some of the most meaningful moments happen in ordinary, imperfect spaces. Hospitality is sharing a pot of soup with a neighbor who's lonely. It's pulling out an extra chair for a friend who drops by unannounced. It's making a little extra snack mix to hand to the delivery driver who stops at your door for the third time that week.

Sometimes we make the mistake of confusing hospitality with entertaining. Entertaining is about impressing. It focuses on how things look and what people will think of us. Hospitality is about welcoming. It focuses on people, not perfection. It asks, "How can I make this person feel loved and cared for?"

Christmas offers us countless opportunities to practice this kind of open-hearted living. It might mean delivering a plate of homemade cookies to someone you don't know well but want to bless. It might mean inviting someone into your living room, even if the toys are scattered and the laundry isn't folded. It might mean slowing down long enough to listen to someone's story, even when your to-do list is long.

I think of the innkeeper in Bethlehem. He didn't know that the weary couple at his door carried the Son of God. He probably felt overwhelmed, with every bed already taken and every corner full. His "no room" made sense in the moment — but what a missed opportunity.

What if hospitality is less about having everything ready, and more about simply being willing? What if the most Christlike thing we can do this Christmas isn't adding more to our schedule, but opening our hearts and homes in small, faithful ways?

When Jesus walked this earth, He noticed people. He saw Zacchaeus in a tree, a woman drawing water at a well, little children eager to be near Him.

He welcomed those who felt unwelcome. He made space for those who had been pushed aside. That's what hospitality looks like: not just opening our doors, but opening our eyes to see who needs a place at the table.

The beauty of hospitality is that it doesn't just bless the guest — it blesses the host. When you open your home to others, your own life expands. You experience the joy of giving, the sweetness of shared moments, and the quiet satisfaction of knowing you reflected God's love in a tangible way.

As you move through this Christmas season, take a moment to look around. Who might need an invitation? Maybe it's a neighbor who doesn't have family nearby. Maybe it's a coworker who's grieving a hard year. Maybe it's simply the friend who feels overlooked. Hospitality isn't about doing something grand. It's about doing something.

A tray of cookies, a pot of coffee, a listening ear, a simple "you're welcome here" — these are gifts of the season. They don't cost much, but they mean more than we can imagine. Remember, the manger wasn't impressive. It wasn't polished or fancy. But it was enough. It became the place where God's glory rested because it was offered. In the same way, your home, your table, your life doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be open.

So this Christmas, make room. Make room for Jesus in the quiet corners of your heart. Make room for others, even when it feels inconvenient. Make room for love, laughter, and presence over perfection. That is hospitality — and it is holy.

### **Reflection Questions**

- Do I struggle more with entertaining (trying to impress) or with hospitality (simply welcoming)? Why?
  - Who might God be asking me to invite in — to my home, my table, or my time — this Christmas season?
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- How can I create space for Jesus in my life, even in the middle of holiday busyness?
- What small act of hospitality could I offer this week to reflect Christ's love?

### **Closing Thought**

Hospitality at Christmas isn't about having the perfect home or the perfect plan. It's about choosing to open what you already have and trusting God to use it. A plate of cookies, a warm smile, a chair at the table — these simple things can become sacred when offered in love. And when we open our doors, we may just find that Christ Himself has walked in.

## Hospitality at Christmas — A Story

Snow began to fall just after noon, soft flakes drifting across the fields. By late afternoon, the world was white and quiet, as if holding its breath for Christmas. Inside the little farmhouse, the kitchen glowed warm with the smell of butter and cinnamon.

On the table lay pans of golden Chex Mix cooling in clusters, a bowl of glossy ranch pretzels waiting for the oven, and neat rows of sausage balls rolled by Micah's flour-dusted hands. Ella shaped cheese balls, one rolled in pecans, one with cranberries, and one dusted with Old Bay. Ruthie peeked under the table at a shoebox she had decorated with brown paper and red string — a gift for Miss Leda next door, filled with crayons and glue sticks for her visiting grandchildren.

"Careful with that pan, love," Mama said, sliding cookies aside to cool. Papa came in from the cold, shaking snow from his boots. "The Martins are outside with something covered in foil," he grinned. "Looks like pride in their eyes. I'd say folks are coming, storm or not."

This was their new tradition — **Bring-a-Board Night**. Instead of one family preparing the whole meal, everyone brought a tray: a donut board, a taco tray, sliders, fruit shaped into a Christmas tree, or cookies stacked high. Tonight, their small home would be filled with friends, food, and laughter.

As the lantern was lit on the porch, the first knock came. The Martins tumbled in with a donut wreath from the bakery, Mrs. Martin laughing at her "cheat." Next came Miss Leda with her famous spice cookies, and Ruthie shyly pressed the shoebox gift into her hands. "For the little ones," she whispered. "For their tired grandmother too," Miss Leda replied warmly.

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The pianist from church arrived with a fruit board, the Klines with buttery sliders, and even Mr. Jensen the mailman came, carrying jars of cider and cocoa. Soon the table brimmed with trays, each telling a story of family and memory.

Then came a timid knock. Papa opened the door to a stranger — a man with snow on his shoulders and a violin case in hand. His truck was stuck in a ditch nearby. “Come in,” Papa said without hesitation. “We’ve room.” The man, Joel, smiled sheepishly. “I don’t have food to share, but I do have this.” He tapped the violin case.

“Music counts double,” Miss Leda declared, and soon Joel was seated at the table with a plate piled high. After cocoa and sausage balls, he lifted his bow, and the first clear note of *O Come, All Ye Faithful* filled the room. Conversations quieted. Neighbors leaned in, eyes shining, as Joel’s violin carried familiar carols through the little farmhouse.

The children joined in, their small voices riding the melody. Then Ruthie slipped behind her cardboard puppet stage. With a shepherd, lamb, and angel cut from coloring book pages, she told the story of Bethlehem. Her voice trembled at first, but when the little lamb nuzzled the baby puppet, the room chuckled softly. The applause that followed wrapped her like a blanket.

Later, neighbors explained their boards — donuts that reminded Mrs. Martin of her mother, cocoa that Mr. Jensen had perfected, fruit arranged to honor “the garden in winter.” Laughter rose as plates refilled. The simple food stretched, just as Mama always said bread dough does.

Before the night ended, Papa helped pull Joel’s truck from the ditch, but not before one more song. His violin played *Silent Night*, so gentle that for a moment the whole house seemed hushed in worship. The notes lingered like candlelight.

When at last coats were pulled on and trays carried home, the little farmhouse was quiet again. Crumbs and laughter clung to the table. Mama and Papa packed extra plates — snack mix, pretzels, sausage balls — to deliver to neighbors in need the next day.

Ruthie peeked at the Nativity before bed. She straightened the tiny wooden manger and whispered, "Thank You." The house settled into silence, holding the memory of welcome. Hospitality had not required a perfect home or an elaborate feast. It had required only open doors, willing hands, and the courage to make room. And in that making room, they had all felt it — Christ Himself, present in the ordinary, turning their small farmhouse into holy ground.

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# Activities & Traditions for Hospitality at Christmas

## For Younger Children

1. **Hospitality Helper Cards** – Have children make small “welcome cards” with crayons, stickers, or stamps. Keep a stack by the door so they can hand one to each guest who visits during the season.
2. **Little Hands, Big Plates** – Let kids help pack neighbor plates with cookies, snack mix, or pretzels. Encourage them to choose the treats and decorate the plate with a simple bow or homemade tag.
3. **Puppet Show of Welcome** – Using simple puppets (coloring pages on popsicle sticks), children can act out the Nativity story or a short skit about welcoming guests.

## For Teens

1. **Snack Board Challenge** – Ask teens to create their own “board” to bring to a family gathering. It could be nachos, sliders, donuts, or even a cocoa bar. This gives them ownership and a chance to contribute creatively.
2. **Hospitality Project** – Encourage teens to choose someone outside the family (a neighbor, teacher, church friend) and bless them with a homemade snack or treat they make themselves.
3. **Silent Host** – Teens can take turns being the “quiet host,” watching for small ways to help: refilling drinks, clearing plates, or making space for guests. Afterward, talk as a family about what they noticed when they practiced attentive hospitality.

## For Families Together

1. **Hospitality Basket Tradition** – Assemble a basket with a cheese ball, crackers, and perhaps a jar of jam or cocoa mix. Deliver it as a family to a neighbor or friend.
2. **Open House Night** – Designate one evening where neighbors and friends can drop by for cocoa and cookies. Keep it simple: no big meals, just warm drinks, snack trays, and an open door.

3. **Board Night Tradition** – Adopt the “Bring-a-Board Night” idea yearly. Each family or friend group brings a different tray — savory, sweet, or themed. Rotate who hosts so everyone gets to participate.
4. **Cookie & Cocoa Carols** – Pair up a simple act of hospitality with caroling. Take cocoa and cookies to share with someone while singing a carol at their door.

These activities strike a balance between **fun, practical, and meaningful** — helping children, teens, and families see hospitality as both a joy and a ministry.

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## **Homemade Gifts for Kids & Families**

Hospitality doesn't just show up on the table — it can be tucked into a basket or wrapped up in a homemade surprise. These simple gifts are easy to put together, full of heart, and sure to bring joy long after Christmas morning.

### **Craft Supply Kit**

Every child loves the freedom of paper, scissors, and glue. A small shoebox or plastic bin can be transformed into a "creation station." Fill it with crayons, glue sticks, stickers, scissors, and a stack of paper. Decorate the lid with wrapping paper or fabric scraps and tie it with a bow. This is a gift that sparks imagination again and again.

### **Dress-Up Box**

An old suitcase or sturdy box becomes a treasure chest when you fill it with scarves, floppy hats, costume jewelry, and other odds and ends. Add a mirror if you have one. Kids will spend hours creating plays, parades, and royal courts, discovering the joy of stepping into another character for a while.

### **DIY Puppet Theater & Puppets**

Take a cardboard box, cut a window in one side, and paint or drape fabric for curtains. For puppets, glue pictures (from coloring books or hand-drawn art) to cardstock, cut them out, and attach them to popsicle sticks. Bundle it all together with a note: "*Put on Your Own Christmas Play!*" Families can act out the Nativity, fairy tales, or silly made-up stories.

### **Homemade Coloring Books**

Print or trace simple pictures and staple them between decorated covers. Children can also make their own story-themed coloring books by drawing a few pages and leaving space for siblings or friends to color. This small project becomes both a gift and a keepsake.

### **Felt Play Kitchen Food**

Cut and stitch (or glue) felt into pizza slices, cookies, fruit, or sandwiches. A few squares of brown felt make perfect "bread," while circles of red and green become "toppings." Tuck the pieces into a little basket or tin. Pretend meals will be served again and again from these playful creations.

### **Christmas Book Countdown**

Instead of giving all the books at once, wrap seven (or twelve, or even twenty-four) Christmas books individually and number them. Each evening leading up to Christmas, children can unwrap one book to read together as a family. The anticipation makes story time a gift in itself, and the tradition can be repeated every year with new or well-loved books.

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## **Comfort Foods for Hospitality**

Hospitality often begins with something small — a tray of snacks, a bowl of candy, a plate of something warm from the oven. Comfort food has a way of making people feel at home, even if they're only stopping by for a short visit. These recipes are simple enough to make ahead, easy to share, and always welcome on a Christmas table.

### **Jell-O Popcorn Balls**

Bright and colorful, popcorn balls have been delighting children for generations. This version, flavored with Jell-O and marshmallows, adds a sweet, fruity twist. Wrap them individually in clear bags and tie with ribbon for a fun neighbor gift, or pile them in a tin for sharing at a party.

#### **Ingredients**

- 10 cups popped popcorn (plain, not buttered)
- 1 (3 oz) package strawberry Jell-O (or any flavor you love)
- 1 (10 oz) package marshmallows
- 3 Tbsp butter

#### **Instructions**

1. Place popped popcorn in a very large bowl.
2. In a saucepan, melt butter and marshmallows over medium heat, stirring until smooth.
3. Remove from heat and stir in Jell-O powder until well blended.
4. Pour mixture over popcorn and toss gently until coated.
5. Grease your hands lightly with butter, then shape into balls.
6. Cool completely before wrapping or serving.

The cheerful colors make these treats especially festive, and kids will love helping to form the sticky balls with their hands.

## Sausage Balls with Cream Cheese

A platter of sausage balls on the table says *welcome home*. These savory bites are a Southern classic, but the addition of cream cheese in the mix makes them extra tender and flavorful. They're perfect for snacking straight from the oven, but they also travel well in a tin or basket when you're blessing a neighbor.

### Ingredients

- 1 lb bulk pork sausage
- 1 (8 oz) package cream cheese, softened
- 2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 1 ½ cups baking mix (like Bisquick)

### Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C).
2. In a large bowl, combine sausage and softened cream cheese. Stir until mostly blended.
3. Add cheddar and baking mix, mixing until a soft dough forms. (It may take some work, but the cream cheese helps everything come together.)
4. Roll into 1-inch balls and place on an ungreased baking sheet.
5. Bake 20–25 minutes, until golden brown and cooked through.

Serve warm with a little mustard or barbecue sauce, or pile them high in a dish right on the coffee table — they won't last long. With their savory flavor and soft texture, these sausage balls make any gathering feel like family.

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## **Peanut Brittle**

Old-fashioned candy has a charm that never fades. Peanut brittle is crisp, sweet, and nutty — the kind of treat that cracks and crunches with each bite. It's perfect for packing into jars, tins, or little parchment bags tied with string.

### **Ingredients**

- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup light corn syrup
- ¼ cup water
- ¼ tsp salt
- 1 cup peanuts (salted or unsalted)
- 2 Tbsp butter
- 1 tsp baking soda

### **Instructions**

1. Butter a baking sheet and set aside.
2. In a heavy saucepan, combine sugar, corn syrup, water, and salt. Cook over medium heat, stirring until sugar dissolves.
3. Continue cooking, without stirring, until mixture reaches 300°F on a candy thermometer (hard crack stage).
4. Stir in peanuts and butter. Remove from heat.
5. Quickly stir in baking soda — the mixture will foam.
6. Pour onto prepared baking sheet and spread thin. Cool completely, then break into pieces.

A batch of brittle feels like stepping back in time — simple ingredients transformed into something extraordinary.

## Ranch Pretzels

Salty, tangy, and completely addictive, ranch pretzels are a snack that always disappears fast. They're inexpensive to make and look lovely tucked into a mason jar or cellophane bag.

### Ingredients

- 1 lb bag mini pretzels
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 1 packet ranch dressing mix
- ½ tsp garlic powder

### Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 250°F.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together oil, ranch dressing mix, and garlic powder.
3. Add pretzels and toss until evenly coated.
4. Spread pretzels on a baking sheet and bake 15–20 minutes, stirring once.
5. Cool completely before packaging.

They're a perfect filler for hospitality baskets and a quick nibble to set out when friends stop by unexpectedly.

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## Old Bay Cheese Ball

A cheese ball on the table is the ultimate symbol of welcome. This version, with Old Bay seasoning, adds a flavorful twist that makes it stand out. Serve it with crackers, pretzels, or fresh vegetables — or wrap it up as the centerpiece of a hospitality basket.

### Ingredients

- 2 (8 oz) blocks cream cheese, softened
- 2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 2 Tbsp Old Bay seasoning
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ cup chopped pecans (optional, for rolling)

### Instructions

1. In a mixing bowl, combine cream cheese, cheddar, Old Bay, and garlic powder until smooth.
2. Shape mixture into a ball.
3. Roll in chopped pecans if desired, or sprinkle with extra Old Bay.
4. Wrap tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 2 hours before serving.

Simple, savory, and full of flavor, this cheese ball is easy to make ahead and always a hit at gatherings.

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## **Cookie Dough Dip**

This sweet dip is a playful twist on a childhood favorite — cookie dough you can eat by the spoonful without worry. It's creamy, chocolatey, and just right for a cozy evening with friends.

### **Ingredients**

- ½ cup (1 stick) butter, softened
- ½ cup brown sugar, packed
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 8 oz cream cheese, softened
- 1 cup powdered sugar
- 1 cup mini chocolate chips

### **Instructions**

1. In a saucepan, melt butter with brown sugar over medium heat. Stir until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla. Cool to room temperature.
2. In a large bowl, beat cream cheese and powdered sugar until smooth.
3. Add the cooled butter-sugar mixture and blend until creamy.
4. Stir in mini chocolate chips.
5. Chill before serving with graham crackers, pretzels, or apple slices.

Sweet and shareable, this dip turns any gathering into a party — especially when paired with laughter and fellowship.

### **Closing Note**

Each of these recipes tells its own story. They don't require fancy ingredients or long hours, just a little care and a willingness to share. And when placed on a table or tucked into a basket, they become more than food — they become an invitation. An invitation to gather, to laugh, to linger. That is the heart of hospitality.

# Family Nativity Devotional

## The Shepherds

### Scripture Reading: Luke 2:15–16 (NLT)

“When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.”

### Family Reading

The shepherds were out in the fields doing their normal work — watching sheep. It was an ordinary night until everything changed. A sky full of angels appeared and gave them the most wonderful news: the Savior had been born.

The shepherds didn’t waste any time. They didn’t wait until morning or stop to change clothes. The Bible says they *hurried* to Bethlehem. They wanted to see Jesus for themselves. And once they found Him, they couldn’t keep the good news to themselves. They went and told everyone what they had seen.

The shepherds remind us that Christmas isn’t just about hearing the story — it’s about responding. When we hear that Jesus has come, the best thing we can do is run to Him and share His love with others.

### Family Activity

- **Nativity Set:** Add shepherds to your family Nativity. Place them near the manger to show how they came quickly to see Jesus.
  - **Younger Kids:** Make simple “shepherd staffs” by bending candy canes or using paper cutouts. Place them near your Nativity as a reminder of the shepherds’ visit.
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- **Teens:** Write down one way you can “share the good news” like the shepherds this week (sending an encouraging text, inviting a friend to church, helping a neighbor).
- **Family Idea:** Bundle up and go outside for a short “night walk.” Look at the stars and imagine what it must have been like for shepherds to suddenly see the sky filled with angels.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think the shepherds hurried to see Jesus right away?
- What does it mean to “share the good news” in our world today?
- Who in your life might need encouragement or hope this Christmas?

### **Prayer**

“Lord, thank You for choosing ordinary shepherds to hear the good news first. Help us to be like them — eager to seek You and willing to share Your love with others. Give us joy as we tell the story of Jesus, and courage to point people to You. Amen.”

## **Closing & Reflection**

The shepherds remind us that Christmas is not a story to sit still and admire from far away — it is news that invites us to move. When they heard the angels' announcement, they hurried to see Jesus with their own eyes. And once they found Him, they couldn't help but tell others.

We, too, are invited to respond. Christmas calls us to move closer to Jesus — not just with our words, but with our actions. Like the shepherds, we don't need fancy titles, perfect clothes, or great knowledge to come to Him. We simply come as we are.

And when we do, our lives become part of the story God is still writing. Every word of encouragement, every plate of cookies shared, every prayer whispered for a friend — all of it becomes a way to carry the good news of peace into the world.

## **Reflection Questions**

- Where in your life do you need to “hurry” toward Jesus instead of waiting?
  - What is one simple way your family could share the good news of Christmas with others this week?
  - How does it encourage you that God chose ordinary shepherds to be the first witnesses of Jesus' birth?
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## Chapter 7: Joy in the Kitchen

### **Scripture Reading: Psalm 34:8 (NLT)**

*"Taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!"*

### **Devotion**

At Christmas, the kitchen becomes the heart of the home. While the living room might hold the tree and the presents, and the entryway might greet guests with wreaths and candles, it is the kitchen that carries the heartbeat of joy during the season. The oven hums with life, spoons clatter against bowls, and the air fills with the warm aromas of cinnamon, butter, and sugar. Flour drifts across countertops like snow, and laughter rises above the sounds of measuring and mixing.

Every family has their own rhythm in the kitchen. Some pull out long-cherished recipes from worn cards passed down through generations. Others try something new each year, adding to their own tradition with each attempt. For many, Christmas wouldn't feel complete without at least one day spent baking together — rolling dough, cutting shapes, and sprinkling sugar over cookies still warm from the oven.

But here's the truth: baking day is rarely tidy. When little hands are involved, sprinkles spill, icing drips, and flour settles on every surface. Cookies come out uneven, shapes get broken, and at least one batch ends up a little too brown.

And yet, if you ask a child years later what they remember, it won't be the burnt edges or the sticky counters. They will remember the joy — the giggles when the icing ran wild, the pride of seeing their own creations on the tray, and the love that filled the room like the scent of fresh bread.

This is what joy in the kitchen teaches us: perfection is not required for something to be beautiful.

Psalm 34:8 invites us, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*" Baking becomes a living illustration of that invitation. Just as cookies draw children to the counter and bread brings family to the table, God calls us to come close, to taste His goodness, and to know His joy. He doesn't demand perfect results or spotless aprons. Instead, He welcomes us into His work, just as we are.

Think about a child helping to stir cookie dough. The parent could make it faster and cleaner by doing it themselves, but that isn't the point. The point is that the child is included, even if flour flies and chocolate chips end up on the floor.

God treats us the same way. He invites us into His work, not because He needs us, but because He delights in us. This season, when the kitchen grows noisy and the mess grows large, let it be a reminder of grace. Life itself is often messy. Our plans get jumbled, our best efforts turn out uneven, and sometimes we feel like we're making more of a mess than anything good. But in the middle of it all, God brings joy. He takes our imperfect offerings and makes something beautiful out of them, just as a tray of cookies — misshapen or not — brings delight when it's shared around the table.

There's also something about baking that speaks of waiting. Dough must rise. Cookies must bake. Bread needs time in the oven before it's ready to eat. In a culture that rushes through everything, the kitchen teaches us to slow down. It teaches us to trust the process, to enjoy the waiting, and to savor the results when the time is right. Advent itself is like that: a season of waiting, trusting that God is at work even when we cannot see the finished product yet.

And when the waiting is over? Joy. The oven timer dings, trays come out golden, and the house fills with the unmistakable scent of something good. In the same way, God's promises always come through at the right time. The joy of Christmas morning, the joy of gathering with family, the joy of Christ's presence in our homes — all of it reminds us that the waiting is worth it.

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This year, as you gather for your baking day, embrace it all. Embrace the laughter, the sticky counters, the sprinkles that roll across the floor. Invite your children into the process, even if it slows things down. Let them use paper plates for sprinkles, mix icing in their own little bowls, and decorate cookies however they choose. Don't stress over perfection — embrace the mess, because the mess is where the memories are made.

And while the cookies cool and the bread rises, consider putting a simple meal in the crockpot — a pot of chili or a stew that will be ready when the baking is done. Hospitality and joy in the kitchen aren't only about desserts. They are about creating space for nourishment, laughter, and rest. A warm meal waiting at the end of the day ensures that the joy of baking doesn't end when the sugar rush fades, but continues as you gather around the table together.

Christmas joy in the kitchen is really a reflection of God's joy with us. Just as we invite children into the work of mixing and decorating, God invites us into the joy of His presence. Just as we delight in seeing the creations that come out of the oven, He delights in us, His children. And just as the house is filled with fragrance when bread bakes, our lives are filled with His goodness when we welcome Him in.

So taste and see this season. Taste the cookies, the bread, the candy, but more than that — taste the joy of God's presence. See His goodness in the laughter of children, in the warmth of shared meals, and in the simple beauty of flour-dusted counters. For joy is not found in perfect cookies or flawless celebrations, but in the God who makes every moment holy when we invite Him in.

## Reflection Questions

- When you think back on past Christmases, what kitchen memories bring you the most joy?
  - How can you make space for baking together this year, even if it feels messy?
  - What does it mean to you personally to “taste and see that the Lord is good”?
  - How can your family embrace the waiting of Advent the way we wait for bread to rise or cookies to bake?
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## Story: Joy in the Kitchen

The first snow had come quietly in the night, softening the world with its gentle blanket. By morning, the house on Maple Street seemed to glow. Frost edged the windows like lace, and the air outside carried that unmistakable hush that only comes with winter. Inside, the fireplace crackled, filling the living room with warmth.

Sarah stood at the kitchen sink, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, watching the snowflakes drift from the sky. Her youngest, Lily, pressed her nose against the cold glass, leaving little foggy prints behind. In the other room, the boys—Caleb and Joshua—were already building towers with their wooden blocks, their laughter spilling into the kitchen.

It was their baking day, a tradition Sarah loved as much as her children did. It wasn't written on any calendar, but they all knew: one Saturday in December, the kitchen would belong to flour, sugar, sprinkles, and joy.

She turned, surveying the counter where she had laid everything out the night before—flour canisters, bags of sugar, tubs of sprinkles, little bowls of food coloring for icing, and stacks of paper plates. Cookie cutters in the shapes of stars, trees, and gingerbread men waited by the rolling pin. Next to them sat the recipe box, worn soft at the corners, a gift from her grandmother years ago.

"All right, bakers," Sarah called, her voice rising above the chatter. "Aprons on!"

The children came running, Lily tripping over her own slippers as she hurried to the drawer where the aprons were kept. Each apron had its own story—Caleb's was plain blue with a paint stain across the front, Joshua's was green with pockets that always ended up full of sprinkles, and Lily's was a tiny red one with snowmen dancing across the fabric.

Sarah tied on her own, a faded floral one that had seen countless Christmases.

"Can we start with the cut-out cookies?" Caleb asked, eyes bright.

"Cut-out cookies it is," Sarah said, lifting the heavy mixing bowl onto the counter.

As they measured flour and sugar, the kitchen came alive. Lily, standing on her stool, insisted on cracking the eggs, though most of the shell ended up in the bowl. Joshua carefully counted out the cups of flour, while Caleb stirred with determination, sending puffs of flour into the air. It drifted down on their hair and eyelashes, making them look like little bakers caught in their own snowstorm.

"Oops," Joshua giggled as the flour puffed across the counter.

"Oops is half the fun," Sarah said with a smile.

Once the dough was chilled, they rolled it out on the floured table. Cookie cutters pressed into the dough, leaving trees, bells, and stars scattered across the counter. Caleb worked quickly, lining his shapes in neat rows. Lily, however, pressed the same cutter into the dough again and again, stacking all her stars into a wobbly tower.

When the first tray went into the oven, the children pressed close to watch through the window, waiting for the cookies to puff and turn golden. The sweet scent of sugar and butter began to drift through the house, and even Sarah felt her heart lift.

While the cookies baked, Sarah pulled out the candy cane bread dough she had risen early that morning. "This one is a little trickier," she explained, dividing the dough into three ropes and showing the children how to braid them together before curving the braid into the shape of a candy cane. The boys leaned close, fascinated, while Lily draped hers more like a lopsided snake than a candy cane.

"It's beautiful," Sarah assured her. "Every candy cane is special."

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When the cookies came out, the real fun began. Each child had a paper plate with their own pile of sprinkles and bowls of brightly colored icing. Sarah gave the same speech she did every year—*"This is your plate. You can decorate however you like. There's no such thing as too many sprinkles."*

The kitchen quickly turned into a joyful mess. Icing dripped onto the table, sprinkles skittered across the floor, and Lily managed to paint her cookie entirely blue. Caleb concentrated so hard that his tongue stuck out while he carefully lined red sprinkles on a star. Joshua decorated one cookie after another, then proudly declared he was starting his own bakery.

By the time the last tray cooled, the counters were a cheerful chaos. Plates of cookies spread across the table, each one unique, each one perfectly imperfect. Sarah looked at them and felt her heart swell.

After a quick clean-up—more laughter than actual cleaning—the children settled in the living room with mugs of cocoa, cookies piled on napkins, and cheeks flushed with happiness. Sarah ladled soup from the crockpot into bowls, grateful for the easy meal she had prepared that morning.

As they ate together, Caleb leaned against her shoulder. "Mom," he said softly, "this was the best baking day yet." Sarah smiled, brushing a strand of flour from his hair. "You say that every year."

"Because it's always true," he replied. She looked around the table at her children, their faces glowing in the candlelight. The mess in the kitchen could wait. For now, the house was filled with joy — not the polished, picture-perfect kind, but the kind that lingers in the heart.

And Sarah thought, *This is it. This is joy in the kitchen. Not perfect cookies, not tidy counters, but this — laughter, togetherness, and love that tastes as sweet as sugar.*

## **Activities & Traditions**

### **For Younger Children**

#### **Cookie Decorating Stations**

Set out paper plates, little bowls of sprinkles, and plastic knives for icing. Give each child their own set so there's less arguing and more joy. Encourage creativity — even if the cookies don't look "right," they will be remembered with delight.

#### **Mini Cookies**

Give little ones their own cookie dough and let them roll out and cut out any shape they want. These don't usually bake well, especially if they are too thin or too thick but it is all about the fun.

#### **Cookie Swap with Stuffed Animals**

After baking, invite the kids to host a pretend cookie party for their stuffed animals or dolls. Let them serve cookies on toy dishes and "share" the joy of baking with their favorite companions.

### **For Teens**

#### **Bake & Share Challenge**

Give teens responsibility for one batch of cookies or bars to make mostly on their own. Let them choose the flavor and then package them up to deliver to a neighbor, friend, or grandparent.

#### **Recipe Keeper Journal**

Encourage teens to start a "Christmas Kitchen Journal" — each year, they can copy down recipes they've made, add photos or doodles, and jot down funny memories. Over time, they'll have their own collection of family food traditions.

#### **Creative Decorating Contest**

Host a family cookie-decorating contest. Categories can be "Most Festive," "Most Creative," or "Most Likely to Be Eaten First." Teens especially enjoy the challenge and a chance to show their creativity.

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## **For Families Together**

### **Baking Day Tradition**

Pick one day each December to be your family baking day. Make it special by playing Christmas music, wearing aprons, and not worrying about the mess. Capture a family photo each year in the kitchen, messy and all.

### **Cookie Plates for Neighbors**

Set aside a portion of your cookies or candy to arrange on plates, wrap in plastic, and deliver together as a family. Add a handwritten note or a verse card for a personal touch.

### **Crockpot Supper Tradition**

To keep energy up and stress down, make a simple crockpot meal (like chili, stew, or chicken and noodles) in the morning of baking day. That way, when the counters are dusted in flour and trays of cookies are cooling, supper is already waiting.

### **“First Bite Blessing”**

When the first cookies come out of the oven, gather the family, break one cookie in half, and share it together. Say a prayer of thanks for God’s goodness and the joy of being together before everyone digs in.

These activities build on the joy of baking day while creating **repeatable family traditions** that children will carry with them into adulthood.

## Homemade Gift & Basket Ideas for Children

The best gifts don't always come from a store. Children treasure the things that spark creativity, imagination, and family time. These baskets can be assembled at home, often using thrifted or homemade items, making them meaningful and affordable.

### 1. Mini Gingerbread House Kit

Every child loves building something they can later eat. A gingerbread house kit can be as simple as graham crackers and frosting, but it brings hours of joy.

#### What to Include:

- A small box of graham crackers or pre-baked gingerbread rectangles
- A container of thick royal icing (or a tub of store-bought frosting)
- Plastic knives or piping bags
- Bagged candies, pretzels, marshmallows, and sprinkles
- A paper plate for the base

#### Instructions for Gifting:

Arrange the items in a festive basket or box. Add a little card that says: *"Build your own Christmas cottage!"* Children can decorate alone or with siblings, and the finished houses make sweet holiday centerpieces before being devoured.

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### 2. Rock Painting Kindness Kit

This gift combines creativity with encouragement. Painted rocks can decorate a garden or be left in public places with kind words for others to find.

#### What to Include:

- A handful of smooth, flat river rocks
  - A set of acrylic paints in small bottles
  - A few paintbrushes
  - Permanent markers for writing words or designs
  - A sheet of inspirational phrases (like "Joy," "Peace," or "You are loved")
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### **Instructions for Gifting:**

Package paints and brushes in a small craft box or tin. Add the rocks in a drawstring bag. Encourage children to paint and then share their creations around the yard, neighborhood, or local park.

### **3. Tea Party Basket with Freezer Cookies**

A thrifted tea set can become a child's delight when paired with real cookies they can pull out for special tea days.

#### **What to Include:**

- A small teapot and cups (find at thrift stores)
- A tin of mini cookies you've baked and frozen (sugar cookies, shortbread, or biscotti)
- A small container of cocoa mix or fruit tea bags
- Paper doilies for serving

#### **Instructions for Gifting:**

Wrap the tea set carefully in tissue, then tuck it into a basket with the cookie tin and cocoa. Attach a tag that says: "*For tea parties on cozy days.*" Children will delight in setting the table and feeling grown-up as they sip and snack.

### **4. Pretend Bakery Kit**

Children love to play "store," and a bakery is one of the easiest pretend set-ups to create.

#### **What to Include:**

- A shoebox or small crate as the "bakery counter"
- Paper doilies and cupcake liners
- A paper chef's hat (easy to fold from white paper)
- Felt or clay "cookies" and "cupcakes," or even salt-dough shapes painted and dried
- A small sign that says "*Open for Business!*"

#### **Instructions for Gifting:**

Place all items in the shoebox with the sign on top. Add play money or a little notepad for "taking orders." This simple gift invites endless imaginative play — children can role-play serving customers after watching the real baking in the kitchen.

## 5. Play Dough or Clay Mini Food Kit

Perfect for children who love dolls or action figures, this gift lets them craft their own pretend foods.

### What to Include:

- A few tubs of homemade playdough or oven-bake clay (in different colors)
- Small plastic tools (rolling pin, plastic knife, cookie cutters)
- A tiny muffin tin or silicone mold for shaping pretend foods
- A small storage box or container

### Instructions for Gifting:

Add a little card: "*Create your own mini foods for dolls and tea parties!*" Children can roll out pizzas for their toys, shape cookies for doll tea parties, or bake clay foods in the oven (with adult help) to keep as play accessories.

## 6. Cereal Necklace Kit

This gift is simple but endlessly fun for little ones who love crafts and snacks.

### What to Include:

- A box of colorful cereal (like Fruit Loops)
- A bundle of yarn with the ends taped for easy threading
- A small decorated container for finished necklaces
- A plastic bag to keep supplies tidy

### Instructions for Gifting:

Package the cereal in a mason jar or zipper bag, add the yarn, and tuck it all into a gift bag. Children can spend a quiet afternoon making edible jewelry — and snacking while they create.

These baskets all share a theme: *they are more than toys — they are invitations.* Invitations to play, to create, to imagine, and to share joy with others. That's the kind of gift that lasts long after the wrapping paper is gone.

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## Comfort Foods for Joy in the Kitchen

### Classic Cut-Out Sugar Cookies

Every baking day needs cut-out cookies. These are the ones children remember — soft, buttery, and ready for sprinkles and icing. They may not always be perfectly shaped, but they always taste like Christmas.

#### Ingredients

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 ½ tsp vanilla extract
- ½ tsp almond extract (optional but wonderful)
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt

#### Instructions

1. In a large bowl, cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in egg, vanilla, and almond extract.
2. In a separate bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt. Gradually add to butter mixture.
3. Divide dough in half, flatten into discs, and wrap in plastic. Chill at least 1 hour.
4. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Roll dough on a floured surface to ¼-inch thick. Cut into shapes with cookie cutters.
5. Bake 8–10 minutes, until edges are just set but not browned. Cool completely before decorating.

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### Royal Icing for Decorating

Icing makes cookie day sparkle. This simple version dries firm enough for stacking, but is easy for little hands to spread and shake sprinkles over.

#### Ingredients

- 4 cups powdered sugar
- 3 Tbsp meringue powder (or 3 egg whites if preferred)
- 6–8 Tbsp water
- Food coloring, sprinkles, and sanding sugar for decorating

#### Instructions

1. In a mixing bowl, beat powdered sugar, meringue powder, and 6 Tbsp water until glossy and smooth. Add more water, a teaspoon at a time, until it's spreadable but not runny.
2. Divide into small bowls, tint with food coloring, and let children decorate cookies on their own plates.

## Candy Cane Bread

This festive bread is braided, curved into the shape of a candy cane, and drizzled with icing for a centerpiece-worthy treat.

### Ingredients

- 2 ¼ tsp (1 packet) active dry yeast
- ½ cup warm milk (110°F)
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- ¼ cup butter, melted
- 2 eggs
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp almond extract
- ½ cup cherry pie filling or strawberry jam (for the stripe)

### Instructions

1. Dissolve yeast in warm milk with a pinch of sugar. Let sit 5 minutes until foamy.
  2. Stir in sugar, butter, eggs, almond extract, and salt. Add flour one cup at a time, kneading until a soft dough forms.
  3. Place in a greased bowl, cover, and let rise 1–2 hours until doubled.
  4. Divide into three ropes. Spread a thin line of pie filling down the center of each rope. Pinch closed and braid together.
  5. Curve into a candy cane shape on a greased baking sheet. Let rise 30 minutes.
  6. Bake at 350°F for 25–30 minutes, until golden. Drizzle with simple icing once cooled.
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## **Peanut Butter Blossoms**

Soft peanut butter cookies crowned with a chocolate kiss — a cookie that never fails to disappear quickly from the tray.

### **Ingredients**

- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened
- ½ cup peanut butter
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup brown sugar, packed
- 1 large egg
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 ¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp baking soda
- ½ tsp salt
- 2 Tbsp milk
- 30–36 chocolate kisses, unwrapped

### **Instructions**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C).
2. Beat butter, peanut butter, and sugars until creamy. Add egg, vanilla, and milk.
3. Stir in flour, baking soda, and salt. Mix until just combined.
4. Roll dough into 1-inch balls and place on baking sheet.
5. Bake 8–10 minutes, until lightly golden. Immediately press a chocolate kiss into the center of each cookie.

## Hearty Crockpot Chili

While the oven fills the house with sweets, this chili quietly simmers in the background, ready to welcome tired bakers at the end of the day.

### Ingredients

- 2 lbs ground beef (or half beef, half sausage)
- 1 onion, chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cans (15 oz) kidney beans, drained
- 1 can (15 oz) black beans, drained
- 2 cans (15 oz) diced tomatoes
- 1 small can tomato paste
- 1 ½ cups beef broth
- 2 Tbsp chili powder
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- ½ tsp cayenne (optional)
- Salt and pepper to taste

### Instructions

1. In a skillet, brown meat with onion and garlic. Drain and transfer to crockpot.
  2. Add beans, tomatoes, tomato paste, broth, and seasonings. Stir well.
  3. Cover and cook on low 6–8 hours (or high 3–4 hours).
  4. Serve with shredded cheese, sour cream, and cornbread.
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## Sweet Skillet Cornbread

Golden and slightly sweet, this cornbread pairs perfectly with chili and fills the house with its own cozy aroma.

### Ingredients

- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 Tbsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 cup milk
- 2 eggs
- ⅓ cup vegetable oil or melted butter

### Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C). Grease a cast-iron skillet or 8-inch baking dish.
2. In a large bowl, whisk cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt.
3. In another bowl, mix milk, eggs, and oil. Stir into dry ingredients until just combined.
4. Pour batter into prepared skillet.
5. Bake 20–25 minutes, until golden and a toothpick comes out clean. Serve warm with butter and honey.

# Family Nativity Devotional

## The Animals

### Scripture Reading: Luke 2:6–7 (NLT)

“And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.”

### Family Reading

When Jesus was born, He wasn’t placed in a royal crib or a palace nursery. He was laid in a manger — a feeding trough for animals. The stable was simple, filled with hay, and likely filled with creatures too: oxen, donkeys, sheep, maybe even a curious cow.

It’s easy to imagine the quiet shuffle of hooves, the soft bleating of sheep, and the gentle warmth of animals nearby. While the world outside was busy and crowded, the stable was humble and still. And it was here — among ordinary animals — that the Savior of the world took His first breath.

The animals remind us of something important: God’s love reaches into the ordinary. He didn’t come to earth in riches or comfort, but in simplicity and humility. Just as animals welcomed Him with their quiet presence, we can welcome Him into our ordinary homes and hearts.

### Family Activity

Place the animals into your Nativity set. Talk about how they were part of the very first Christmas. Then, choose one way your family can “welcome Jesus” this week in simple, humble ways. Ideas might include setting aside time to pray together, helping someone in need, or making a simple gift for a neighbor.

Optional Craft: Using construction paper, let younger children draw or cut out animals for a paper stable. Write one “humble way” to serve Jesus on each animal (such as “share toys,” “be kind,” “say thank you”).

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## Discussion Questions

- Why do you think God chose such a humble place for Jesus to be born?
- How does it make you feel to know Jesus was surrounded by ordinary things — even animals?
- What are some “ordinary” ways we can welcome Jesus into our lives this Christmas?

## Prayer

“Lord, thank You for choosing a humble stable for the birth of Jesus. Thank You that even the animals were part of Your story. Teach us to welcome You into our ordinary days with simple hearts of love. Help us to remember that You are with us, no matter how small or simple our home may seem. Amen.”

## **Closing & Reflection**

The animals in the stable remind us that God's story often begins in the quiet, ordinary places we might overlook. A manger wasn't glamorous, but it became holy because Jesus was there. In the same way, our kitchens, living rooms, and bedtime routines can become holy ground when we invite Christ into them.

Children don't need perfection; they need presence. The animals had nothing to give but their warmth and stillness, yet even that was enough. God doesn't ask us to bring Him wealth or grandeur — He asks us to bring our ordinary lives and trust Him to make them extraordinary.

So as you look at the animals in your Nativity set this week, remember: nothing is too small for God to use. Even the humblest stable can hold a King. Even the simplest home can shine with His presence.

## **Reflection Questions**

- What is one "ordinary" place in your home where you can remember to welcome Jesus this season?
  - How can our family practice humility, like the animals in the stable?
  - What does it mean to you that God chose simplicity to reveal His greatest gift?
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## Chapter 8: Celebrating Together

### **Scripture Reading: Luke 2:13–14 (NLT)**

*"Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.'"*

### **Devotion**

There is something sacred about Christmas Eve. Even before the first candle is lit or the first carol is sung, the night seems to carry its own weight of wonder. The world feels hushed, as if creation itself is waiting. In many homes, children dress in their coziest pajamas, families gather around tables or fireplaces, and the air carries a blend of cinnamon, pine, and anticipation.

But Christmas Eve is more than a prelude to presents. It is a night that invites us to pause. To breathe. To remember. To step back from the busy rush of December and mark this moment as holy.

On that first Christmas Eve, shepherds stood watch under a quiet sky. They were not expecting anything extraordinary. Their world was ordinary, filled with sheep and chilly night air. Yet in a blink, heaven broke open. A single angel appeared, then an entire host filled the sky with song. The shepherds had never seen such light, such glory, such uncontainable joy. And the message was clear: *the Savior has come.*

What strikes us is the shepherds' response. They didn't hesitate, question, or wait until morning. They hurried to Bethlehem. They wanted to see for themselves the child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And when they found Him, their ordinary night turned into a celebration unlike anything they had known.

Our Christmas Eve meals, whether elaborate or simple, are a reflection of that same invitation. When we gather together, we echo the angels' song: *Glory to God, peace on earth*. Around the table, we practice what the shepherds did — making room for the miracle, leaning in to see Jesus, and sharing the joy with one another.

Christmas Eve meals do not have to be perfect to be meaningful. Some families roast a ham or turkey, others ladle bowls of hearty soup, while still others choose finger foods and cocoa around the tree. The food itself matters less than the spirit in which it is shared. A loaf of bread and a pot of stew can carry as much holiness as a feast when Christ is at the center.

Perhaps your home is filled with noise, little feet scampering, and cousins spilling cocoa on the floor. Or perhaps it is quiet, with just a handful gathered close. Either way, Christmas Eve is a chance to remember that God enters both the crowded and the still places. The stable was not silent because of perfection, but because God's peace rested there. That same peace is offered to our homes today.

To celebrate together means to choose presence over performance. It means we set aside the checklist — the perfectly set table, the flawless meal, the tidy living room — and instead focus on being with one another. Children will not remember if the napkins matched or if the cookies were arranged just so. They will remember laughter, candlelight, prayers whispered before the meal, and the feeling of being together.

One family tradition is to light a single candle at the center of the table and read aloud the story from Luke 2. Another family makes it a practice to sing one carol before dessert. Still another sets aside an extra chair, remembering those who cannot be present, and thanking God for the hope of reunion. These little traditions root the evening in meaning and remind us that Christmas Eve is not about what is on the table, but who is at the table.

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When the angels filled the sky, they sang of glory and peace. Glory to God — because He had kept His promise. Peace on earth — because Christ Himself had come to dwell with us. When we gather this Christmas Eve, our celebration becomes part of that ongoing song. Every prayer, every laugh, every bite of bread shared together whispers, *Glory to God, peace on earth.*

So do not worry if your home feels ordinary. Remember the manger. Remember the animals, the straw, the stable. Remember that Christ chose to come there. And He chooses to come to us now, not because our tables are perfect, but because our hearts are open.

This Christmas Eve, whether you eat soup and bread, a casserole, or a grand meal, invite Christ to be your honored guest. Let the table be more than a place to eat — let it be a place of peace. For in celebrating together, we echo the angels and welcome the King.

### **Reflection Questions**

- How does your family usually mark Christmas Eve, and how could you make it more centered on Christ this year?
- What does it mean to you that the shepherds “hurried” to see Jesus? How can you bring that same eagerness into your Christmas Eve?
- How might your family practice “peace on earth” around your own table this season?

## Story: A Christmas Eve Supper

Snow had been falling all day in Maple Hollow. The kind of steady, soft snow that wrapped the whole town in quiet, as if someone had placed a quilt over the earth. Lights glowed in the windows of houses along Main Street, each one a little beacon of warmth against the winter dark.

At the end of Cedar Lane stood the old Whitaker farmhouse, white clapboards trimmed in green, smoke curling from the chimney. Inside, the kitchen was alive with sounds and smells: the low simmer of soup on the stove, the rhythmic chop of vegetables, and the sweet, steady sound of laughter. Margaret Whitaker leaned over the table, dusting flour from her apron as her daughter, Anna, set out bowls. Anna's cheeks were flushed from running in and out of the cold, and her hair still glistened with melted snowflakes.

"Almost ready, Mama," Anna said, straightening the stack of spoons beside the napkins.

"Almost," Margaret replied, stirring the pot with a wooden spoon. "This old recipe never fails. There's nothing better than soup and bread on Christmas Eve."

The tradition had begun years before, when Margaret's mother had first insisted that Christmas Eve should be simple. "Save the feasting for Christmas Day," she would say. "On Christmas Eve, let the food be humble, so the joy feels bigger." And so it had continued — a pot of soup, fresh bread, and the family gathered around the fire.

The door banged open, and James came stomping in, Anna's younger brother, bringing a rush of cold air with him. His arms were full of logs for the fire. "The snow's deep," he declared. "Almost up to my knees." He shook the flakes from his cap and grinned. "But the stars are out now. You should see them."

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Behind him came little Clara, dragging her rag doll and announcing that her toes were frozen. Margaret knelt to tug off her boots and set them by the fire. "We'll warm you up soon enough," she said.

The family moved together like clockwork, each taking a part in the preparations. James set the logs on the hearth, Clara helped lay out mismatched mugs for cocoa, and Anna lit the candle in the middle of the table — a single white taper in a brass holder. The flame flickered, casting a golden glow. By the time the soup was ladled into bowls, the farmhouse was warm and full of light. They gathered at the table, Margaret at one end, her husband, Thomas, at the other, and the children tucked between. Outside, the wind whispered through the bare trees, but inside, the world felt still.

Thomas cleared his throat, reaching for the worn family Bible. It was another tradition — before eating on Christmas Eve, the story from Luke would be read aloud. He opened to the familiar passage, his voice deep and steady: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them..."

The children leaned close, listening. Clara's eyes grew wide, as if she could almost see the angels in the night sky. When Thomas read the final words — "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" — a quiet filled the room.

Margaret whispered, "Amen."

Bowls were passed, bread was broken, and soon the table buzzed with talk and laughter again. The soup was hearty, filled with carrots and potatoes, the bread soft and steaming. Butter melted instantly on the slices, and no one complained about the simplicity of the meal. It was enough — more than enough.

After supper, Margaret brought out a plate of cookies. Not fancy ones, but sugar cookies the children had decorated the day before. Some were heavy with sprinkles, others unevenly iced, but each one told a story. James chose the lopsided star he'd made, Anna carefully selected a tree with red sugar crystals, and Clara grabbed one so thick with sprinkles it nearly glowed.

With cocoa in hand, the family gathered in the living room. The fire crackled, the candle still burned on the table, and carols played softly on the old record player. They sang together, voices blending in imperfect harmony, filling the farmhouse with joy.

When the last song ended, Thomas leaned back in his chair. "Do you know," he said softly, "this is my favorite part of Christmas. Not the gifts, not the feast tomorrow — just this. Us, here together."

Margaret nodded, her heart full. The children sprawled on the rug, Clara curled against Anna, James flipping through a book of Christmas poems. Everything felt wrapped in peace. And for a moment, Margaret thought of that stable in Bethlehem. How simple it must have been. A feeding trough, hay scattered across the floor, animals breathing in the dark. Yet into that humble place, heaven had broken open. Glory had come down.

Here in their farmhouse, with soup bowls drying in the sink and crumbs still on the table, it felt much the same. Ordinary things had become holy, not because they were grand, but because love was present.

The snow continued to fall outside, but inside the Whitaker home, Christmas had already arrived.

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## A Birthday Cake for Jesus

One of the most meaningful traditions your family can begin is baking a **Birthday Cake for Jesus**. On Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, it becomes a centerpiece of celebration — a sweet reminder that Christmas is about more than gifts under the tree. It is the birthday of our Savior.

The cake itself is full of symbolism. Each layer, color, and decoration tells the story of why Jesus came and what He has done for us. Children love this tradition because it gives them something tangible to see and taste, while adults treasure the reminder that the Gospel is simple enough to share over a slice of cake.

### The Shape

The cake is baked **round** to represent the world into which Jesus was born.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” — *John 3:16*

To begin the celebration, many families like to sing together:  
*Joy to the world! The Lord is come,  
Let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare Him room,  
And heaven and nature sing...*

### The Layers

- **Bottom Layer — Chocolate**

This dark layer reminds us that our hearts are muddy and stained with sin.

*“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*  
— *Romans 3:23*

Jesus came into the world because we needed a Savior.

- **Middle Layer — Red (Strawberry or tinted cake)**  
 The red layer represents the blood of Jesus, shed for the forgiveness of sins.  
*"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."* — Ephesians 1:7
- **Top Layer — Green (Vanilla cake tinted green)**  
 The green layer reminds us of the new life we have in Christ.  
*"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."* — 1 John 5:12  
 Jesus also said, *"I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."* — John 6:35
- **Frosting — White**  
 The pure white frosting stands for the righteousness and purity of Christ, which now covers us.  
*"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* — 2 Corinthians 5:21

## The Decorations

- **Red Hearts Around the Cake**  
 These symbolize Christians all around the world, united as His witnesses.  
*"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."* — Mark 16:15
  - **Gold Star on Top**  
 This represents the star that heralded His birth and guided the wise men. It shines as a reminder that the grace of God includes all.  
*"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* — Galatians 3:28
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- **The Candle**

In the center of the star sits **one large red candle**, representing Jesus, the Light of the World. Light the candle and remember His words:

*"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." —  
John 8:12*

## **Family Activity**

After lighting the central candle, let each person light their own small candle from it. As the room fills with light, talk about how one flame becomes many when it is shared. In the same way, when we carry the light of Jesus into the world, His truth multiplies through us.

Then close by singing together:

*Silent night, holy night!*

*All is calm, all is bright.*

*Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child,*

*Holy Infant so tender and mild,*

*Sleep in heavenly peace...*

## **Reflection Questions**

- How does the cake help us understand the story of Jesus?
- What part of the symbolism speaks to you most this year?
- How can our family carry the light of Jesus into the world after Christmas is over?

This tradition can be done as one large cake or several smaller cakes to share. However you prepare it, the Birthday Cake for Jesus will leave a lasting impression — a sweet and holy reminder that the best gift of Christmas is Christ Himself.

## **Homemade Gift & Tradition Ideas**

### **1. Sibling Secret Santa with Good Deeds**

Each child draws a sibling's name secretly at the start of December. All month long, they do hidden acts of kindness for that sibling — folding laundry, leaving a candy on their pillow, writing a secret encouragement note. On Christmas Eve, everyone gives a small \$10 gift to the person they've been serving. Before opening, each child guesses who their "Secret Santa" was. This tradition not only builds fun anticipation, it teaches children that giving is about thoughtfulness, not just things.

### **2. Handmade Ornament Exchange**

Once a year, each family member makes a simple ornament: painted wood slices, cinnamon-scented salt dough shapes, hand-sewn felt stars, or even paper snowflakes covered in glitter. On Christmas Eve, the ornaments are exchanged, admired, and hung on the tree together. Over the years, the tree will fill with family-made treasures — each one holding a memory from Christmases past.

### **3. "Open the Book" Tradition**

Wrap seven Christmas books and label them for the week before Christmas. Each night, let a child unwrap one, and the family reads it together before bedtime. These can be picture books, thrifted story collections, or classics like *The Night Before Christmas*. It's a gentle way to slow down at the end of the day and draw the whole family into the wonder of the season.

### **4. Christmas Eve Candlelight Service**

Bundle up and attend a candlelight service as a family. The hush of the sanctuary, the glow of candles, and the sound of "Silent Night" sung together is an unforgettable reminder of the true Light of the world. Even the youngest children sense the holiness of the moment, and it sets the tone for Christmas morning.

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## **5. Christmas Lights & Cocoa Drive**

Load everyone into the car with travel mugs of hot cocoa, play Christmas carols, and drive around town to admire Christmas lights. Some families vote for their favorite house, while others make it a quiet time of soaking in the beauty. This tradition combines simple joy with togetherness — no wrapping paper required.

## **6. Christmas Eve Story Circle**

Before bed, turn off all the lights except the tree. Gather in a circle and take turns sharing a memory from past Christmases, or something you're grateful for this year. For families with younger children, parents can share favorite Christmas stories from their own childhood. It becomes a living chain of memories passed from generation to generation.

## **Christmas Eve Menu & Recipes**

Christmas Eve is a night of anticipation. The stockings are hung, the tree glows in the corner, and little ones count the hours until morning. The food should be warm and comforting, simple enough to let the cook enjoy the evening, but special enough to mark the occasion. Here is a full menu that balances both.

### **Main Dish Option 1: Baked Ham with Brown Sugar Glaze**

#### **Ingredients:**

- 1 fully cooked bone-in ham (7–9 pounds)
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup honey
- 1/4 cup Dijon mustard
- 1/2 cup orange juice (or apple cider)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cloves

#### **Instructions:**

1. Preheat oven to 325°F. Place the ham in a large roasting pan. Score the surface in a diamond pattern, cutting about 1/4 inch deep.
  2. In a small saucepan, whisk together brown sugar, honey, mustard, juice, and cloves. Simmer gently for 5 minutes until slightly thickened.
  3. Brush half of the glaze over the ham. Cover loosely with foil and bake for 1 ½ hours, basting with juices every 30 minutes.
  4. Remove foil, brush with the remaining glaze, and bake uncovered another 30 minutes, until caramelized and golden.
  5. Let rest 15 minutes before slicing. Serve warm with Butterhorn Rolls.
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## **Main Dish Option 2: Roast Chicken with Herbs**

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 whole chicken (4–5 pounds)
- 3 tablespoons olive oil or melted butter
- 1 lemon, halved
- 1 onion, quartered
- 6 garlic cloves, smashed
- 2 sprigs rosemary
- 4 sprigs thyme
- Salt & pepper

### **Instructions:**

1. Preheat oven to 425°F. Pat the chicken dry with paper towels.
2. Rub the outside with oil or butter, then season generously with salt and pepper.
3. Stuff the cavity with lemon, onion, garlic, and herbs.
4. Place chicken in a roasting pan. Roast for 1 hour–1 hour 15 minutes, or until juices run clear and the thickest part of the thigh reaches 165°F.
5. Let rest 10 minutes before carving. Serve with salad and rolls.

## Side Dish: Butterhorn Rolls

Soft, buttery rolls shaped like crescents — these are a treat every time they appear on the table.

### Ingredients:

- 1 package (2 ¼ tsp) active dry yeast
- 1/4 cup warm water (110°F)
- 3/4 cup warm milk (110°F)
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 1/2 to 4 cups flour
- 2 tablespoons melted butter (for brushing)

### Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, dissolve yeast in warm water. Let stand 5 minutes until foamy.
  2. Add warm milk, sugar, melted butter, egg, and salt. Stir to combine.
  3. Mix in 3 1/2 cups flour, adding more if needed, until dough is soft but not sticky.
  4. Knead on a floured surface 6–8 minutes, until smooth and elastic. Place in a greased bowl, cover, and let rise 1–1 ½ hours, until doubled.
  5. Punch down dough and divide into two balls. Roll each into a 12-inch circle. Cut each circle into 8 wedges (like pizza slices).
  6. Roll each wedge from the wide end toward the tip to form crescents. Place on greased baking sheets. Cover and let rise 30–45 minutes, until puffy.
  7. Bake at 375°F for 12–15 minutes, until golden brown. Brush with melted butter before serving.
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## **Side Dish: Winter Green Salad with Cranberries**

A refreshing, colorful salad to balance the richness of the meal.

### **Ingredients:**

- 6 cups mixed greens (spinach, arugula, or romaine)
- 1/2 cup dried cranberries
- 1/2 cup crumbled feta or goat cheese
- 1/3 cup toasted pecans or walnuts
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Salt and pepper, to taste

### **Instructions:**

1. In a large bowl, toss greens, cranberries, cheese, and nuts.
2. In a jar or small bowl, whisk olive oil, vinegar, honey, mustard, salt, and pepper.
3. Drizzle vinaigrette lightly over salad just before serving.

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## **Dessert: Jesus' Birthday Cake**

This is the heart of the Christmas Eve meal. Whether large or small, every detail of this cake tells the story of the Savior's birth and why He came. (See devotional instructions earlier in this chapter for full meaning and symbolism.) Bake it, decorate it, light the candle, and sing together before serving.

## **Festive Christmas Eve Punch Ideas**

### **Cranberry Sparkle Punch**

A bright, fizzy drink with the colors of Christmas in every glass.

Ingredients (makes 8–10 servings):

- 4 cups cranberry juice (chilled)
- 2 cups pineapple juice (chilled)
- 1 liter ginger ale (chilled)
- Fresh cranberries and orange slices, for garnish

Instructions:

1. In a large pitcher, combine cranberry juice and pineapple juice.
2. Just before serving, stir in ginger ale.
3. Pour into individual glasses filled with ice. Garnish each glass with a few cranberries and a slice of orange.

*Tip:* For extra sparkle, dip the rims of glasses in sugar before filling.

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### **Holiday Cream Soda Float**

A playful, creamy treat that children and adults both love — like dessert in a glass.

Ingredients (makes 6–8 servings):

- 1 liter cream soda (chilled)
- 1 pint vanilla ice cream
- Whipped cream (optional)
- Holiday sprinkles or crushed candy canes

Instructions:

1. Place a small scoop of vanilla ice cream in the bottom of each glass.
2. Pour cream soda over the top until the glass is nearly full.
3. Top with whipped cream and a few sprinkles or crushed candy cane pieces.

*Tip:* Serve with striped straws or long spoons for an extra festive touch.

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## **A Christmas Eve Table**

Set the table with candles, serve the meal simply, and linger long enough to remember what you're really celebrating. Whether you choose ham or chicken, whether the rolls are perfectly shaped or a little lopsided, the joy is in being together. As the meal closes with the Birthday Cake for Jesus, the family is drawn again to the heart of Christmas — **Emmanuel, God with us.**

# Family Nativity Devotional

## The Star

### Scripture Reading

Matthew 2:9–10 (NLT)

“After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!”

### Family Reading

The night sky over Bethlehem held a miracle — a star so bright that wise men followed it across deserts and mountains. That star led them to Jesus, the Light of the World.

The star reminds us that God never leaves us wandering in the dark. He always gives light to guide us closer to His Son. Just as the star led the wise men, God’s Word and His Spirit lead us today.

At Christmas, the star on top of the tree or above the Nativity isn’t just a decoration. It is a reminder that Jesus is our guiding light. When we feel lost, unsure, or afraid, we can lift our eyes and remember: God’s light still shines.

### Family Activity

- Add a star to your Nativity set or place one above the stable.
  - For younger kids: Make paper stars with glitter or foil and hang them in the window as a reminder of God’s light.
  - For older children and teens: Each person can write one way they need God’s guidance this year on a paper star. Place the stars around the Nativity or tape them to the tree.
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Optional: Take a family walk outside on a clear night and look at the stars together. Talk about how small we feel under the sky, and yet how God knows each of us and sent His Son for us.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think God chose a star to lead the wise men to Jesus?
- How does God guide us today when we don't know what to do?
- What is one area in your life right now where you need God's light?

### **Prayer**

"Lord, thank You for the star that led the wise men to Jesus. Thank You for giving us Your light, so we don't have to walk in darkness. Guide our steps this Christmas and into the new year. Help us to follow where You lead and to trust that You always bring us closer to Jesus. Amen."

## **Closing & Reflection**

The star is more than a symbol of Christmas night — it is a reminder that God’s light always shines in the darkness. Just as the wise men lifted their eyes to the star and followed where it led, we too are invited to lift our eyes to Christ. His light doesn’t always show us the whole journey, but it always leads us step by step closer to Him.

In our homes, the “star” might look like pausing for prayer together, reading Scripture as a family, or even showing kindness to one another when it is hard. These small acts shine like light in a dark world. Every time we choose love, peace, or forgiveness, we are following the star that leads to Jesus.

As Christmas draws near, let the star on your tree or above your Nativity be more than decoration. Let it be a gentle nudge to keep looking to God for guidance. And just like the wise men, may our response be joy — joy in the One we have found and joy in knowing that He still leads us today.

## **Reflection Questions**

- Where have you noticed God’s light shining in your family this week?
  - How can our home be like a “star” that points others to Jesus?
  - What is one way we can choose joy, like the wise men, this Christmas?
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## Chapter 9: Christmas Morning Joy

*Luke 2:16–20 (NLT)*

*"They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them."*

### Devotional

Christmas morning has a kind of magic to it. The house is quiet just before dawn, but already full of expectation. Stockings bulge, lights glow softly on the tree, and children whisper down the hallway, eager to see what awaits. Yet long before wrapping paper, ribbons, or stockings, there was another Christmas morning — the very first one — and it was filled with a different kind of joy.

The shepherds had been startled awake by angels the night before. They could hardly contain themselves as they rushed into Bethlehem, dusty and breathless, to see if what they had been told was true. And when they arrived, it was exactly as the angel had promised: Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. Imagine their relief, their awe, their sheer joy at being the first to meet the Savior of the world.

That joy did not end in the stable. Luke tells us that the shepherds spread the word. They told everyone what they had seen, and they returned to their fields glorifying and praising God. In other words, their Christmas morning joy overflowed. It couldn't be contained; it spilled into their community.

Christmas morning in our homes can mirror that same joy. Yes, there is laughter over gifts and delight in traditions. But beneath it all is something deeper — a joy that doesn't depend on what's under the tree, but on Who came into the world. This is the joy that Mary held quietly in her heart and the shepherds shouted with gladness. It is the joy we are invited to carry, not just for a morning, but for all our days.

In our busy, gift-filled culture, it is easy to let Christmas morning become only about presents. Children rip through wrapping paper in a blur; parents try to keep the coffee hot and the camera ready. But this chapter of the story — the manger, the angels, the shepherds — invites us to pause. It reminds us that joy is not found in more things, but in Emmanuel, God with us.

What if, before tearing open the gifts, we read Luke 2 together as a family? What if we lit a candle and prayed, thanking God for His Son? What if Christmas morning became not just the culmination of wish lists but the celebration of the greatest Gift ever given?

This joy is for the whole family. For children, it looks like wonder — knowing that Jesus came as a baby, small and real, not so different from themselves. For parents, it looks like gratitude — knowing God entrusted His Son to the world so that we might have life. For grandparents, it looks like memory — seeing the faithfulness of God through generations, and rejoicing that He is still keeping His promises.

And this joy doesn't stop when the stockings are emptied or the last gift is unwrapped. Just as the shepherds returned to their fields rejoicing, we too carry Christmas joy into ordinary days. Whether it is washing dishes after the big meal, playing board games by the fire, or even stepping into a new year, the joy of Christmas goes with us. It is steady, unshakable, anchored in Christ Himself.

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On that first Christmas morning, heaven and earth were joined in a stable. Angels sang, shepherds rejoiced, and a mother held her child close. Every Christmas morning since then, our joy echoes theirs. We gather not just around a tree, but around a truth: *the Savior has come, and He is with us still.*

So this year, embrace the joy. Let it bubble over in songs and laughter. Let it rest quietly in your heart, like Mary. Let it proclaim, like the shepherds, that the story is too good to keep to yourself. Christmas morning joy is not fleeting. It is eternal — for the Child in the manger is also the King of Heaven, and He reigns forever.

### **Reflection Questions**

- What brings you the deepest joy on Christmas morning — and how can you connect that joy back to Jesus?
- How does the shepherds' response to the good news inspire the way we celebrate today?
- What is one way your family can carry the joy of Christmas into the days and weeks that follow?

## Christmas Morning Joy

Snow had fallen in the night, quiet and deep, laying a white blanket over the farmyard. The old house, warmed by its woodstove, seemed to breathe in rhythm with the hush outside. Long before the sun rose, small feet could be heard padding down the upstairs hallway, stopping at the top of the stairs, whispering excitedly.

"Do you think it's time yet?" Clara, the youngest, whispered, her eyes wide and sparkling in the half-dark.

"Not until the lamp is lit in the kitchen," her older brother Samuel replied in a tone both serious and teasing. It was the family tradition: no child was allowed down the stairs on Christmas morning until Father struck the match and Mother lit the kitchen lamp. Only then could they tumble down together.

The three children waited, wrapped in their quilts, peeking through the banister as though it were a stage curtain. At last, they heard the gentle creak of floorboards below.

Father's voice carried softly as he read from Luke 2, just as he did every Christmas morning before anything else.

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus..."

The words were familiar, like a carol sung year after year, yet they still hushed the children's chatter. When Father finished, they heard the strike of a match, then the glow of the lamp filled the kitchen window. That was the signal.

"Now!" Samuel whispered, and the children flew down the stairs, their laughter filling the little house.

The tree in the parlor glistened with paper chains, strings of popcorn, and a few treasured glass ornaments. Beneath it lay a modest gathering of parcels wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. Mother, already stirring the pot of porridge on the stove, smiled at the happy scene.

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Before anyone could reach for the packages, Father gathered them close. "First things first," he said, placing a small frosted cake on the table. A single red candle flickered on top, casting its glow on the children's eager faces.

"The Birthday Cake for Jesus," Clara whispered reverently. They sang softly, their voices rising in the little kitchen: *Happy Birthday, dear Jesus*. When the song ended, Samuel leaned forward and blew out the candle, grinning shyly. Father prayed a simple prayer of thanks, and only then did the feast of gifts begin.

Each child had only two parcels — one practical, one for delight. Samuel received a new pair of mittens, hand-knitted by Mother, and a wooden whistle carved by Father in the evenings after chores. Anna unwrapped a length of ribbon and a small book of poems, while Clara squealed with joy over a cloth doll with button eyes.

There were no mountains of wrapping paper, no noisy gadgets, yet the joy in the room was rich and full. Mother watched with shining eyes, her hands resting on her lap for once. Father leaned back in his chair, smiling at the noise, the laughter, and the warmth that filled the house more than the stove ever could.

After the gifts, Mother served porridge sweetened with honey, and the children gobbled it down quickly, eager to get outside into the snow. Samuel was already pulling on his boots, dreaming of the sled run he'd planned on the hill behind the barn. Clara begged to bring her new doll along, "so she can see the snow too."

Bundled in scarves and coats, the children tumbled outside, their voices carrying across the frosty air. Father and Mother stood at the doorway, watching them play in the morning light, hearts brimming.

Inside the house, the fire crackled, and the tree lights twinkled in the parlor window. Mother returned to the kitchen to set bread to rise for the midday meal, while Father tended to the firewood. Yet even in their quiet tasks, the joy lingered — not only the joy of the children’s delight, but the deeper joy of Christ’s presence in their home.

By afternoon, neighbors began to arrive, stamping snow from their boots, carrying baskets of food to share. The kitchen table grew crowded with pies, roasted meats, jars of pickles, and loaves of bread. Laughter and carols filled the little house as friends and family gathered, their voices mingling in song and conversation.

Later, as the winter sun dipped low, the family gathered once more around the tree. Clara, sleepy now, curled up in Mother’s lap with her new doll. Samuel dozed on the rug, the whistle still clutched in his hand. Anna, thoughtful as always, read softly from her book of poems.

Father looked around the room, his eyes lingering on each child, then on Mother. He reached for the Bible again, and in the hush of evening, he read aloud from John’s Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Mother nodded, stroking Clara’s hair. The words were true — truer than ever on this Christmas Day. The light had come, and because of it, their home, their hearts, and their lives were filled with joy.

The lamp in the kitchen flickered one last time before being turned low for the night. Outside, the stars shone bright over the snow-covered fields, and inside, the joy of Christmas morning lingered still — a joy that came not from gifts or gatherings, but from the One who was born that holy night so long ago.

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## Christmas Morning Activities & Traditions

### 1. Scripture First

Before stockings or gifts, gather the family in pajamas around the tree or the manger and read **Luke 2:1–20** together. Some families light a candle while reading, or let children act out the Nativity with simple figures. Beginning with God’s Word sets the tone that this morning is about Jesus first.

### 2. Birthday Cake for Jesus

Sing *Happy Birthday* to Jesus and light the candle on the cake before presents begin. For little ones, this anchors the excitement of gifts in the greater gift of Christ’s birth.

### 3. Gift-Giving Traditions

Families celebrate gift time in many different ways:

- **All at once:** Children dive in, tearing into wrapping paper with squeals of delight. The room fills with laughter and piles of ribbons.
- **One at a time:** Each person takes turns opening a gift while others watch. This slows the pace, builds anticipation, and allows gratitude to be expressed to the giver.
- **Stockings first:** A simple way to begin the morning — children may open stockings before breakfast, then move to the tree later in the day.

Encourage families to choose what fits their rhythm best — there is no “right way,” only the joy of giving and receiving with love.

### 4. Christmas Morning Breakfast

After gifts or sometimes before, families gather at the table for a festive breakfast. Popular choices include:

- Cinnamon rolls warm from the oven
- A breakfast casserole prepared the night before
- Pancakes shaped like stars or trees
- Hot cocoa with whipped cream

The breakfast table is often as memorable as the gift-giving itself, as it draws the family back together after the flurry of excitement.

## 5. Pajama Morning

Many families spend Christmas morning in cozy pajamas, enjoying the relaxed pace. For children, this makes the morning feel extra special, while for parents it allows space to savor coffee before the day's bustle begins.

## 6. Family Gratitude Circle

Before the rush of the day, pause to let each person share one thing they're thankful for this year. This helps children (and adults) remember the true source of joy is not what's wrapped in paper but what's written on their hearts.

## 7. Games, Music, and Rest

After gifts are opened and breakfast enjoyed, keep the joy lingering with:

- Family board games or puzzles
- Singing carols around the piano or tree
- Watching a favorite Christmas movie together
- Taking a snowy walk (or a sunny one, depending on the climate)

The heart of Christmas morning traditions is **joyful presence**. Whether your family opens gifts one at a time with careful thanks, or all at once with happy chaos, what matters most is that you gather in love, remembering the greatest Gift of all.

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## **Christmas Morning Keepsakes & Traditions**

### **1. Christmas Morning Photo Book**

Keep a simple album or journal just for Christmas morning. Each year, add one family photo (in pajamas, by the tree, around the table) and write a sentence or two about what made this Christmas special. Over time, it becomes a treasured family record.

### **2. Yearly Christmas Letter or Blessing**

Parents (or grandparents) write a short note to each child every Christmas morning — something about what they've noticed, appreciated, or prayed over them that year. These can be tucked into stockings or left under the tree to be read quietly before the rush of gifts.

### **3. Ornament of the Year**

Instead of making baskets, give each child an ornament that reflects something about their year — a hobby, an achievement, or even a family trip. Over time, the tree becomes a living scrapbook of family history.

### **4. Puzzle or Game Tradition**

Keep one wrapped puzzle or board game under the tree each year, labeled "Family Gift." After presents are opened, spend part of the morning putting it together or playing together.

### **5. Christmas Morning Walk**

Bundle up and take a slow stroll around the neighborhood, mugs of cocoa in hand. Greet neighbors, admire decorations, and remember that Christmas joy is for sharing.

### **6. Star Box (Prayer/Memory Box)**

Have a special box under the tree filled with paper stars. Each family member writes down one thing they are thankful for, one way they saw God's light this year, or one prayer for the year ahead. These can be read aloud together before breakfast, then stored away to look back on next Christmas.

These kinds of ideas work well for Christmas morning itself — not focused on making gifts, but on **making memories and carrying joy into the day.**

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## **Christmas Morning Comfort Foods**

Christmas morning deserves foods that are **warm, filling, and joy-filled**. These recipes are designed to be comforting but not fussy — many can be made ahead on Christmas Eve, so the cook can rest and celebrate alongside the family.

### **1. Overnight Breakfast Casserole**

There's nothing like waking up on Christmas morning to the smell of something already baking. This savory casserole combines bread, sausage, eggs, and cheese — hearty enough to satisfy hungry tummies after the thrill of opening gifts. Best of all, it can be assembled the night before.

#### **Ingredients:**

- 1 pound breakfast sausage, cooked and crumbled
- 6 cups cubed bread (day-old bread works best)
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 8 large eggs
- 2 cups milk
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper

#### **Instructions:**

1. Grease a 9x13 baking dish. Layer bread cubes, sausage, and cheese.
  2. In a bowl, whisk eggs, milk, salt, and pepper. Pour evenly over bread mixture.
  3. Cover and refrigerate overnight.
  4. On Christmas morning, uncover and bake at 350°F for 45–50 minutes, until golden and set in the center.
  5. Let rest for 10 minutes before serving.
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## 2. Ham & Cheese Breakfast Bake

This is the savory cousin of French toast bake — layers of bread soaked in a creamy egg mixture, but instead of sweetness, it's filled with smoky ham and gooey cheese. It's comfort food at its best.

### Ingredients:

- 6 cups cubed French bread
- 2 cups diced ham
- 1 1/2 cups shredded Swiss or cheddar cheese
- 8 large eggs
- 2 cups milk
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper

### Instructions:

1. Grease a 9x13 baking dish. Layer half the bread, all the ham, and half the cheese. Top with remaining bread and cheese.
2. In a bowl, whisk eggs, milk, mustard, salt, and pepper. Pour evenly over layers.
3. Cover and refrigerate at least 4 hours or overnight.
4. Bake at 350°F for 45–55 minutes, until puffed and golden.
5. Let cool slightly before serving warm.

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## 3. Mini Quiches

Perfect for little hands, these are savory bites baked in muffin tins. They're versatile — fill them with cheese, spinach, bacon, or whatever your family loves.

### Ingredients:

- 6 large eggs
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1/2 cup shredded cheese
- 1/2 cup cooked bacon or diced ham
- Salt & pepper to taste

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease a muffin tin.
2. Whisk eggs, milk, salt, and pepper.
3. Divide cheese and meat evenly among cups. Pour egg mixture on top.
4. Bake 20–25 minutes, until puffed and golden. Serve warm.

## 4. Cinnamon Rolls

Few things say Christmas morning like the scent of cinnamon rolls in the oven. Whether you make them from scratch or use a prepared dough, these spirals of sweetness feel like celebration on a plate.

### Basic Homemade Version:

- 1 package yeast
- 3/4 cup warm milk
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 1 egg
- 3 1/2 cups flour
- Filling: 1/2 cup brown sugar, 2 tablespoons cinnamon, 1/4 cup melted butter
- Icing: 1 cup powdered sugar, 1–2 tablespoons milk, 1/2 teaspoon vanilla

### Instructions:

1. Make dough with yeast, milk, sugar, butter, egg, and flour. Knead and let rise until doubled.
2. Roll into a rectangle. Spread with melted butter, sprinkle sugar and cinnamon. Roll up and cut into 12 rolls.
3. Place in greased pan, rise again, then bake at 350°F for 25 minutes.
4. Drizzle with icing while warm.

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## 5. French Toast Bake

This dish captures the flavors of classic French toast but without standing at the stove flipping slices. It's baked all at once, golden on top and custardy inside.

### Ingredients:

- 1 loaf French bread, cubed
- 8 large eggs
- 2 cups milk
- 1/2 cup cream
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon

### Instructions:

1. Grease a 9x13 pan. Spread bread cubes inside.
  2. In a bowl, whisk eggs, milk, cream, sugar, vanilla, and cinnamon. Pour over bread.
  3. Cover and refrigerate overnight.
  4. Bake at 350°F for 45 minutes until golden and set.
  5. Serve with syrup or a dusting of powdered sugar.
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## 6. Peach (or Apple) Coffee Cake

This tender cake is perfect for lingering at the breakfast table. With a crumbly streusel topping, it's part breakfast, part dessert.

### Ingredients:

- 2 cups flour
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup butter, softened
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup milk
- 2 cups sliced peaches (or apples)
- Topping: 1/2 cup flour, 1/4 cup butter, 1/2 cup brown sugar, 1 teaspoon cinnamon

### Instructions:

1. Cream butter and sugar. Beat in eggs, then add dry ingredients alternately with milk.
2. Spread batter in greased 9x13 pan. Arrange fruit on top.
3. Mix topping ingredients until crumbly and sprinkle over fruit.
4. Bake at 350°F for 35–40 minutes. Serve warm.

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## 7. Homemade Muffins

Muffins are the unsung heroes of Christmas breakfast: portable, versatile, and always welcome. Cranberry-orange brings festive flavor, while blueberry or chocolate chip are always favorites.

### Basic Batter:

- 2 cups flour
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup melted butter
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup milk
- Add-ins: 1 cup cranberries + zest of 1 orange, or 1 cup blueberries, or 1 cup chocolate chips

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease or line muffin tin.
2. Whisk dry ingredients together. In another bowl, combine wet ingredients.
3. Stir together gently, then fold in add-ins.
4. Divide into muffin cups and bake 18–22 minutes.

## **8. Fruit & Yogurt Parfaits**

A refreshing counterbalance to all the richness, parfaits add color and brightness to the table.

### **Ingredients:**

- 3 cups vanilla yogurt
- 2 cups granola
- 2 cups mixed berries or diced fruit

### **Instructions:**

1. In tall glasses, layer yogurt, granola, and fruit.
2. Repeat layers and serve immediately.

*Variation:* Add a drizzle of honey or sprinkle of cinnamon for extra flavor.

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## **9. Christmas Morning Punch**

Bubbly, bright, and served in individual glasses — this punch is festive and simple.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 cups cranberry juice (chilled)
- 2 cups pineapple juice (chilled)
- 1 liter ginger ale (chilled)
- Fresh cranberries and orange slices for garnish

### **Instructions:**

1. In a pitcher, mix juices. Add ginger ale just before serving.
2. Pour over ice into individual glasses. Garnish each with cranberries and orange slices.

## **Closing Thought**

Christmas morning food doesn't need to be fancy — it simply needs to gather the family back together after the joyful rush of gifts. A casserole pulled warm from the oven, cinnamon rolls on a platter, a glass of sparkling punch — each bite is a reminder that God's good gifts fill our lives with joy. The table becomes another place to celebrate His greatest gift, Emmanuel, God with us.

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## **Family Nativity Devotional**

### **The Wise Men**

#### **Scripture Reading**

Matthew 2:10–11 (NLT)

“When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

#### **Family Reading**

The Wise Men came from far away, following the star that led them to Jesus. They weren't part of God's people, yet they were welcomed at the manger. They brought their best treasures — gold, frankincense, and myrrh — but the greatest gift they offered was their worship.

Their story reminds us that Christmas is for everyone, near and far, young and old. The joy of the manger reaches across the world, inviting all to come and see. The Wise Men teach us that we can bring our best to Jesus too — not gold or spices, but our hearts, our time, and our love.

#### **Family Activity**

- Place the Wise Men in your Nativity set, perhaps a little farther away at first to show their journey, then move them closer each day until they arrive at the manger.
- For younger kids: Make “treasure boxes” out of small containers. Decorate with stickers or paint, then write down ways you can give to Jesus (kind words, helping others, sharing). Place these slips in the box.
- For older kids/teens: Talk about talents and gifts God has given each person. Write one on a card and pray about how you can use it to honor Jesus this year.

## **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think the Wise Men brought gifts to Jesus?
- What kinds of gifts can we give Jesus today?
- How does their journey show that Christmas is for everyone, not just a few?

## **Prayer**

“Lord, thank You for the Wise Men who followed the star and found Jesus. Thank You that they remind us to bring our best to You, not just things we own but our hearts and lives. Help us to offer ourselves to You each day in worship and love. Amen.”

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## **Closing & Reflection**

Christmas morning carries a joy unlike any other. It is not only the joy of gifts and stockings, of cinnamon rolls and laughter around the tree, but the joy of a promise fulfilled. On that first Christmas morning, shepherds hurried to a stable and found the Savior. They returned to their fields glorifying and praising God — and every year, we are invited to do the same.

The gifts we open remind us of the greatest Gift already given. The songs we sing echo the angels' chorus. The joy in our children's eyes mirrors the wonder of the shepherds who knelt before the manger. And the quiet moments, when the house is still and our hearts are full, are like Mary's quiet pondering — treasuring all these things and storing them deep within.

As this chapter closes, let us remember that Christmas morning is more than a holiday; it is a holy day. The joy we feel does not fade when the wrapping paper is gone or the stockings are empty. It is a joy rooted in Emmanuel, God with us — the One who came and the One who still comes into our homes, our hearts, and our lives.

### **Reflection Questions**

- How can we pause amid the excitement of gifts to remember the true Gift of Christmas?
- What part of the Christmas story (shepherds, angels, Mary, Wise Men) speaks to your heart this year?
- How can we carry the joy of Christmas morning into the ordinary mornings of our lives?

## Chapter 10: Carrying the Light Into the New Year

*John 1:4-5 (NLT)*

*"The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."*

### **Devotional**

When the tree has been taken down and the last of the wrapping paper cleared away, it can feel as though Christmas is over. Yet the story of Christmas does not end on December 25th. In truth, Christmas is only the beginning.

The Child born in Bethlehem grew up to heal the sick, feed the hungry, calm the storms, and ultimately give His life for the world. His birth was a spark of light, but His life and resurrection were a blazing fire that still shines today. That light is not meant to flicker for a season and then fade; it is meant to be carried forward, through every ordinary day of the new year.

In our homes, the glow of Christmas may linger in the form of leftover cookies or pine needles still clinging to the rug, but in our hearts, the glow is something deeper. We are invited to carry the peace of the manger, the joy of the shepherds, and the wonder of the Wise Men into January and beyond.

Carrying the light might look like slowing down to pray before rushing into the day. It might look like showing kindness when the world chooses harshness. It might be as simple as lighting a candle at dinner and remembering that Christ is the true Light of the world. Just as the star guided the Wise Men, His light still guides us.

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The new year often comes with resolutions — goals to eat healthier, get organized, or work harder. But what if our greatest resolution was simply this: to carry the light of Christ into our days? Not a light we manufacture by willpower, but the light He gives, shining through us in our words, our actions, our love.

Think of the shepherds again. They didn't stay at the stable; they returned to their flocks. Yet they were forever changed, praising God as they went. In the same way, we return to our work, our school, our ordinary routines. But we return carrying joy, carrying peace, carrying the presence of the One who was born among us.

The world still knows darkness — the uncertainty of the future, the brokenness of relationships, the weariness of everyday struggles. But the good news of Christmas remains true: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." As we carry the light into the new year, we become small reflections of Christ's brightness in the world.

So as the calendar turns, do not leave Christmas behind. Let it echo into January mornings and February evenings. Let the carols you sang and the candles you lit be reminders that Christ is still Emmanuel — God with us. His light is not seasonal; it is eternal.

### **Reflection Questions**

- What is one way you can carry the light of Christ into your daily routine this new year?
- How can your family remind one another of God's presence when the busyness of life returns?
- What promise from the Christmas story do you want to hold onto throughout the coming year?

## A New Year's Light

Snow still lay deep across the countryside, though the days were already a little longer, the sun setting a few minutes later each evening. Inside the farmhouse, the Christmas tree had lost much of its sparkle. A few ornaments had slipped lower on their branches, and the needles fell in little green drifts when the children brushed past. Yet to Clara, the youngest, the tree was still beautiful. She hated the thought of taking it down.

"Do we have to?" she asked one morning, looking up at her mother, who was folding the boxes for ornaments. Mother smiled gently. "Yes, love. Christmas has passed, and the tree has done its work. But Christmas isn't over just because the tree comes down."

Clara wrinkled her nose. "It feels like it is."

Her brother Samuel, always eager to explain things, piped up. "Mama means that Christmas is about Jesus, and He doesn't go away just because the decorations do." Clara sighed but helped anyway, carefully wrapping her favorite ornament — a red-glass heart — in tissue before setting it in the box.

That evening, Father gathered the children near the stove. The air smelled of pine and woodsmoke, and though the parlor felt emptier without the tree, the warmth of the fire seemed to fill the space. He opened the Bible to John 1 and read slowly:

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Father closed the book. "Christmas morning may be past, but the light of Christ is something we carry with us. Into the new year, into every day."

Clara listened quietly, clutching the red heart she had snuck from the ornament box. "But how do we carry light?" she asked.

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Mother reached over and tapped Clara's chest. "We carry it here. Every time you share, forgive, pray, or show kindness, you are carrying the light of Jesus into the world." Clara thought about that as the days ticked toward the new year.

On New Year's Eve, the family had a tradition of their own. While other neighbors might celebrate with parties or fireworks, their house was always quieter. They would sit together around the table with a single candle burning, each person taking a turn to share something from the past year they were thankful for, and one prayer for the year to come.

That night, Samuel went first. "I'm thankful for the harvest being better than we expected. And I pray that I can be more patient with my sisters this year."

Anna, thoughtful and quiet, said, "I'm thankful for the new books I got this Christmas. And I pray that I will grow braver about sharing my faith with my friends."

Mother added, "I'm thankful for our family being healthy this year. And I pray that we keep choosing peace, even when life feels rushed."

Father said, "I'm thankful for the Lord's provision, always enough for today. And I pray for wisdom to lead our family in faith and love."

Finally, it was Clara's turn. She looked at the red-glass heart she had kept hidden on her lap, then whispered, "I'm thankful that Jesus came to be the light. And I pray that I can carry His light, even when Christmas is over."

The candle flickered, casting golden light over their faces. Father nodded with pride. "That's the prayer of the whole gospel, Clara."

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On New Year's Day, the snow stopped long enough for the family to bundle up and walk to church in the village. The path was crisp beneath their boots, and Clara carried the heart ornament in her pocket, feeling its smoothness in her mittened hand.

The church service was simple but full of joy. Hymns rang out in the wooden rafters, and the pastor spoke of beginnings, reminding them that every new year was a chance to walk again in God's light. When the family returned home, the table was already set with a simple meal of ham, bread, and pie.

After dinner, Samuel suggested sledding on the big hill, and the children ran out, leaving the adults to wash dishes and tidy the house. The sun shone pale across the snow, and the world sparkled with brightness. Clara, breathless from the cold, pressed the heart ornament against her cheek and thought again about light.

Later, as the children warmed by the fire, Father placed another candle in the center of the table. He lit it, and then handed each child a small taper.

"This is how the light of Christ spreads," he explained, lighting Samuel's candle from the flame, then Anna's, then Clara's. Soon, the room glowed with four small lights joining the one in the center. "Jesus is the light of the world. But He shares that light with us, and we carry it into the year ahead. Wherever we go, we can bring a little of His light."

Clara's eyes shone as she held her candle carefully. For the first time, she understood. The tree was gone, the gifts had been opened, but the light was still here. And it was hers to carry.

As the family sang a final hymn together, the snow began falling again outside. The farmhouse glowed softly in the dark countryside, a small beacon of warmth and love. Inside, the children leaned close to the fire, their candles burning low, their hearts full.

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The new year had begun, and with it the promise that no matter what lay ahead, the Light of Christ would go with them — steady, bright, and unending.

## Activities & Traditions for Carrying the Light

As the tree comes down and the last carols are sung, it's easy to feel that Christmas is over. But the story of Jesus' birth is meant to continue into every ordinary day of the new year. Simple family traditions can help us carry the light of Christ beyond December, reminding us that His presence shines just as brightly in January as it does on Christmas Eve.

### For Younger Children

Little ones often need something they can see and touch to remind them of truth. Activities that put light in their hands help them remember that Jesus is always with them.

- **Light Jar Craft:** Give each child a small jar and fill it with battery-powered tea lights. Let them decorate the outside with stickers, markers, or star cutouts. At night, when the light glows softly on their nightstand, they'll remember that Jesus is the Light of the World.
- **Blessing Stars:** Cut out paper stars and invite children to write (or draw) ways they can "shine for Jesus" in the new year — helping a sibling, saying kind words, sharing with friends. Hang the stars in a bedroom window where the sun can shine through, a daily reminder that even small acts reflect His light.

### For Teens

Older children and teens are learning to claim their faith as their own. These traditions help them step into the new year with intentionality.

- **Verse for the Year:** Encourage each teen to choose one Bible verse that will guide them into the year ahead. Write it on a notecard, decorate it, and place it somewhere visible — on a mirror, inside a notebook, or taped to a locker door. It becomes a personal anchor, a steady reminder of God's light for their path.
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- **Acts of Light Challenge:** During the first week of the new year, invite teens to secretly do three “light-carrying” acts of kindness — for siblings, friends, or neighbors. At the end of the week, gather and share what they did and how it felt. This tradition helps them see that small choices can make a big difference when done in Christ’s name.

## For the Whole Family

When a family chooses to carry Christ’s light together, ordinary routines are transformed into opportunities for faith.

- **Candlelight Devotion:** On New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day, place a single candle in the center of the table. Light it, and then let each family member light a smaller candle from it. As the flame is passed, invite everyone to share one way they want to carry Jesus’ light in the year ahead. The room fills with warmth, and so do your hearts.
- **Prayer Walk:** Bundle up and take a short family walk around the neighborhood. As you go, quietly pray for your neighbors, schools, and community. Even young children can pray simple words like, “Bless this house” or “Help this family.” It becomes a gentle way to begin the year by remembering that Christ’s light is not only for our home but for the whole world.
- **Family Gratitude Jar:** Place a jar in the kitchen with slips of paper nearby. Throughout the year, write down blessings, answered prayers, and special memories. On Christmas Day the following year, open the jar together and look back at how God’s light carried your family through all seasons.

These activities are not grand or complicated, but neither was the manger. Each one invites families to carry the peace, joy, and light of Christ into the everyday rhythms of the year. Because Christmas was never meant to be packed away with the decorations — it was meant to be lived.

## **Homemade Gifts That Keep On Giving**

Though the decorations are coming down and the wrapping paper has long since been cleared away, the spirit of giving does not have to end with Christmas morning. One of the sweetest ways to “carry the light” into the new year is by offering simple, homemade gifts that continue to bless others long after the season is past. These don’t require fancy supplies or great expense — only willing hands and hearts eager to share God’s love.

### **1. Prayer Cards for the Year Ahead**

Gather cardstock or construction paper and cut it into small rectangles. On each card, write a Bible verse or short prayer, then decorate with colored pencils, watercolors, or stickers. Tuck these cards into lunchboxes, slip them into a neighbor’s mailbox, or mail them to grandparents. One card at a time, they become reminders that God’s Word is living and active all year long.

### **2. Encouragement Jars**

A simple mason jar can hold a year’s worth of encouragement. Write down uplifting quotes, Scripture verses, or short notes of love and fold them into slips. Fill the jar and tie a ribbon around the top with a tag that says, “For the days you need a little light.” The recipient can pull out a note whenever life feels heavy, and it will be as though Christmas comfort lingers through every season.

### **3. Service Coupons**

Instead of wrapping paper, give the gift of service. Make small “coupon books” out of construction paper, with each slip offering something meaningful: washing the dishes, babysitting a sibling, baking cookies, or simply giving a hug. These are especially fun for children to make for parents or siblings. Unlike toys that wear out, these “gifts” multiply in joy every time they are redeemed.

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#### **4. New Year Blessing Bread**

Bake a loaf of homemade bread (or even muffins or rolls) and wrap it in a clean tea towel. Attach a note that reads: "*May this bread remind you of the daily bread God provides in the year ahead.*" Deliver it to a neighbor or friend during the first week of January. The aroma of fresh bread paired with a prayer of blessing is a gift that fills both stomachs and hearts.

#### **5. Homemade Candle**

Candles have long been symbols of warmth and light. A simple mason jar candle — whether poured from melted wax or filled with soy wax beads — can be decorated with ribbon or twine. Add a tag that reads: "*Carry the Light into the New Year.*" Each time the candle is lit, the glow will remind the recipient of Christ's steady presence.

#### **6. Story Stones or Gratitude Stones**

Collect smooth stones and paint or write words such as *Hope, Peace, Joy, or Faith* on them. Place them in a small bag or basket and give them as a gift. Children especially enjoy creating and sharing these with friends. Each stone becomes a small, tangible reminder of God's promises, easy to hold in one's hand on days when encouragement is needed.

These gifts may be humble, but so was the manger. Each one is a chance to extend the joy of Christmas into the days ahead, reminding those we love — and even strangers we meet — that the light of Christ is not bound by a calendar. It shines on, as steady in January as it was on Christmas night.

## Comfort Foods for the New Year

As the bustle of Christmas settles and the new year begins, our homes crave warmth and nourishment. After weeks of sweets and feasting, there's something grounding about hearty soups, golden breads, and simple meals that bring everyone back to the table. These recipes are wholesome, filling, and comforting — the kind of food that carries us through long winter evenings.

### 1. Hearty Vegetable Soup with Ham Bone

A pot of soup simmering on the stove is one of the most comforting sounds and smells of winter. This version makes use of a leftover ham bone, infusing the broth with rich, smoky flavor. Packed with vegetables and beans, it's a meal that stretches easily to feed a crowd.

#### Ingredients:

- 1 leftover ham bone with a little meat still attached
- 10 cups water (or enough to cover the bone in the pot)
- 2 cups diced ham (optional, if you want it meatier)
- 1 onion, chopped
- 3 carrots, chopped
- 3 celery stalks, chopped
- 2 potatoes, diced
- 1 can (15 oz) diced tomatoes
- 1 can (15 oz) beans (kidney, cannellini, or navy), drained
- 2 cups cabbage, chopped (optional)
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 teaspoon thyme or Italian seasoning

#### Instructions:

1. Place the ham bone in a large soup pot. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for about an hour, skimming off foam as needed.
  2. Remove the bone, pick off any meat, and return the meat to the pot. Discard the bone.
  3. Add onion, carrots, celery, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, and seasonings. Simmer another 45 minutes, until vegetables are tender.
  4. Taste and adjust seasoning. Serve hot with bread or popovers.
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## 2. Chicken and Dumplings

This dish feels like a hug in a bowl — tender chicken, creamy broth, and soft dumplings floating on top. It's old-fashioned comfort food at its best, and the kind of meal that lingers in memory long after it's eaten.

### Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon butter or oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 carrots, sliced
- 2 celery stalks, sliced
- 4 cups cooked, shredded chicken (a rotisserie chicken works well)
- 6 cups chicken broth
- 1/2 cup cream or milk
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 teaspoon thyme

### For the Dumplings:

- 2 cups flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup butter
- 1 cup milk

### Instructions:

1. In a large pot, melt butter and sauté onion, carrots, and celery until softened.
2. Add chicken, broth, cream, and seasonings. Bring to a gentle boil.
3. For dumplings, mix flour, baking powder, and salt. Cut in butter until crumbly. Stir in milk until a soft dough forms.
4. Drop spoonfuls of dough into simmering soup. Cover and cook for 15 minutes without lifting the lid, until dumplings are puffed and cooked through.
5. Ladle into bowls and serve warm.

### **3. Beef Stew with Root Vegetables**

A classic for cold days, this stew is hearty and nourishing. Root vegetables add earthy sweetness, and slow cooking makes the beef melt-in-your-mouth tender.

#### **Ingredients:**

- 2 pounds beef stew meat, cubed
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 3 carrots, chopped
- 2 parsnips, chopped
- 3 potatoes, cubed
- 4 cups beef broth
- 1 cup red wine (optional, can use more broth)
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 2 teaspoons thyme

#### **Instructions:**

1. Toss beef cubes in flour with a little salt and pepper. In a large pot, brown beef in oil. Remove and set aside.
  2. Sauté onion until softened. Add tomato paste and cook briefly.
  3. Return beef to pot along with carrots, parsnips, potatoes, broth, and wine. Add thyme, salt, and pepper.
  4. Cover and simmer gently 2–3 hours, until beef is tender and broth is thickened.
  5. Serve hot, preferably with bread or popovers to soak up the rich gravy.
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## 4. Homemade Macaroni and Cheese

After the feasts of December, sometimes what the heart craves most is something simple and familiar. Creamy, baked mac and cheese with a golden top delivers exactly that — comfort in every bite.

### Ingredients:

- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1/4 cup flour
- 4 cups milk
- 4 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon mustard powder (optional)
- 1/2 cup breadcrumbs (optional, for topping)

### Instructions:

1. Cook macaroni according to package directions; drain.
2. In a saucepan, melt butter. Whisk in flour and cook 1 minute. Slowly whisk in milk, cooking until thickened.
3. Stir in cheese until smooth. Add salt, pepper, and mustard powder.
4. Mix cheese sauce with pasta. Pour into greased baking dish.
5. Top with breadcrumbs if desired. Bake at 375°F for 25–30 minutes, until bubbly and golden.

## 5. Popovers

Light and airy, popovers are a delightful side dish for soups and stews. Crisp on the outside and hollow on the inside, they're best served warm with butter or jam.

### Ingredients:

- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 3 eggs
- 1 1/2 cups flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon melted butter

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 425°F. Grease a muffin tin or popover pan.
  2. Whisk together milk and eggs. Stir in flour, salt, and butter until smooth. Batter will be thin.
  3. Pour into cups, filling halfway.
  4. Bake 20 minutes at 425°F, then reduce to 350°F and bake 15 more minutes, until puffed and golden.
  5. Do not open oven while baking or they may collapse!
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## 6. Winter Fruit Salad with Citrus Dressing

After weeks of cookies and candy, this refreshing salad is like a breath of fresh air. Bright citrus, juicy apples, and winter fruits bring lightness and color to the table.

### Ingredients:

- 2 oranges, peeled and sliced
- 2 apples, diced
- 2 cups grapes, halved
- 1 pomegranate, seeds removed
- 2 kiwis, sliced

### Citrus Dressing:

- Juice of 1 orange
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice

### Instructions:

1. Place all fruit in a large bowl.
  2. In a small bowl, whisk together dressing ingredients.
  3. Pour over fruit and toss gently. Serve chilled.
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### **Closing Thought**

These meals remind us that even after the celebration of Christmas has ended, there is joy to be found in gathering around the table. A steaming bowl of soup, a puff of bread pulled apart with eager fingers, or the brightness of fruit on a winter day — each is a way of carrying comfort into the new year. And just as food nourishes our bodies, Christ's light nourishes our souls, steady and sustaining through every season.

# Family Nativity Devotional

## Jesus

*Luke 2:16–17 (NLT)*

*"They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child."*

## Family Reading

At last, the waiting was over. The angels had sung, the shepherds had run, the Wise Men would soon arrive, and the star shone brightly overhead. But the most important part of the story was right there in the manger: Jesus, God's Son, the Savior of the world.

The prophets had promised Him. Mary and Joseph had trusted God for Him. The shepherds had come to worship Him. But this baby, so small and fragile, was the King of Kings. He came not with riches or armies, but in humility and love. His first bed was a manger, showing us that God's love reaches all people — the poor and the powerful, the near and the far.

Jesus is the reason we celebrate Christmas. Without Him, there is no story, no Nativity, no joy. But because He came, we can know God's love personally. And though He was born in Bethlehem long ago, He is still Emmanuel — God with us — today.

## Family Activity

- Place the baby Jesus in the manger of your Nativity set. Let even the youngest child have a turn, reminding everyone that this is the heart of Christmas.
  - Gather around and sing "Away in a Manger" or "O Come, Let Us Adore Him."
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- Optional craft: Cut out a paper heart and write "Jesus" in the center. Place it in your Nativity scene as a reminder that He is the center of it all.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Why do you think God chose for Jesus to be born in a manger, instead of a palace?
- How does Jesus' birth show God's love for us?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus is "God with us"?

### **Prayer**

"Lord Jesus, thank You for coming into the world as a baby. Thank You that You are the center of Christmas and the center of our lives. Help us to remember that Your light still shines today. May our family always keep You at the heart of our home and our celebrations. Amen."

## **Closing: The End of Christmas, The Beginning of Light**

As the last candle flickers low and the tree is carried out to the cold, it can feel as though Christmas has come to an end. The presents are unwrapped, the cookies have dwindled, and the calendar pages turn. Yet the truth of Christmas is this: the story does not end here.

The manger leads us forward — to a cross, to an empty tomb, and to a risen Savior who is with us always. The songs we sang in December still echo in January. The joy of Christmas morning can brighten an ordinary Tuesday in March. The peace proclaimed by the angels can settle over our homes in July.

This book has been filled with recipes, traditions, devotions, and stories meant to help your family celebrate the season. But more than that, each chapter has been an invitation to pause, to gather close, and to remember that the heart of Christmas is Emmanuel — God with us. He is not only the center of our holiday; He is the center of our lives.

So as you close these pages, don't pack away the light with the ornaments. Carry it into every room of your home, every day of the year. Teach it to your children, share it with your neighbors, and let it shine through the ordinary acts of kindness and love.

The season may end, but the Savior remains. And His light — steady, radiant, unshakable — will guide us until we gather again, in every season, to rejoice in the One who came and still comes.

### **Final Reflection Questions**

- How has your understanding of Christmas deepened this season?
  - What is one tradition, recipe, or devotional thought you want to carry into the new year?
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- How can your family be a light for others now that the holiday has ended?

### **Closing Prayer**

“Lord Jesus, thank You for coming near — not just at Christmas, but every day of the year. As we turn the page from this season into what lies ahead, may Your light guide our steps, Your peace rule in our hearts, and Your joy overflow in our homes. Help us to live Christmas daily, carrying Your love into the world. Amen.”