

Countdown to Christmas

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NEW CITY PRESS
Enkindling the Spirit of Unity

Published in the United States by New City Press
136 Madison Avenue, Floors 5 & 6, PMB #4290
New York, NY 10016
www.newcitypress.com

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Cover Design: Gerrod Martinez

ISBN: 978-1-56548-635-5 (Paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-56548-640-9 (E-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024945389

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

Like many people, Christmas has always been our favorite time of the year. Our whole lives become immersed in the season, with Christmas music coming from every source and Christmas-themed shows on television. The stores are decorated, our homes are decorated, and knickknacks that would never see the light of day under normal circumstances are proudly displayed on our shelves because they have a Christmas theme.

This amazing time between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day seems to fly by each year. This whirlwind is partially because it's a fun season, and as they say, time flies when you are having fun. But it also seems to pass quickly because of all the preparations that need to be made. There are so many things to do because we want Christmas Day to be perfect: the perfect meal, the perfect gifts, the perfect tree, the perfect decorations. It needs to be just right!

We have four kids, and for the first few years of parenting, we really struggled with balance at Christmas time. We had this incredible desire to make the season magical. We wanted it to be memorable for them and us, and yet, with each added activity and

event during the season, we also felt like we were losing the true meaning of Christmas. Don't get me wrong; we were not ignoring the fact that Christmas was the celebration of Jesus' birth. We talked about Christmas being Jesus' birthday, and our church did a great job teaching our kids and providing great opportunities for family discussions. But it honestly felt like we were straddling two different paths each Christmas. We had one foot solidly on the traditionally commercial Christmas path and the other on the celebration of the birth of Jesus. They weren't conflicting—they were just different. And if we were honest with ourselves, Jesus wasn't getting the attention he deserved.

Then came our breakthrough. After a few years of frustration and regret, we decided to put Jesus back at the center of our Christmas season. What helped us do this was choosing to celebrate Advent as a family. Now, for many Christians around the world, this is as natural as Santa Clause is to the United States, but in our Christian tradition, we never used the word Advent or celebrated anything like it in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

For centuries, Christians have celebrated the weeks leading up to Christmas as a time of expectation and waiting. Advent simply means arrival. It is a season of expectation for the arrival of the birth of Christ, a countdown to Christmas that focuses on Jesus.

So, we started a new tradition. Each day leading up to Christmas, our family sits down and reads a small devotional that tells the story of the coming birth of Jesus. The whole Bible points in expectation to the birth of the Savior, so we start with the creation of the world and walk through the Scriptures right up to his birth. This family devotional time has become the foundation and rhythm of our season for the past few years. It is a short five-to-ten-minute time each day that allows our family to refocus on what the season is about.

We want to be clear that we do not think the other Christmas traditions are bad. In fact, we're not proposing that we remove any of them. We still decorate for Christmas, put lights on the house, and purchase gifts. We have a very traditional Christmas celebration, but at the foundation of it all is a countdown through Scripture to the arrival, or advent, of Jesus.

By shifting the focus of our preparations for Christmas to the person of Christ, we bring new depth and joy to our Christmas celebration. We also join with Christians around the world in unity as we take this journey. Although our cultures vary in how we celebrate Christmas, our faith unites us as we focus on Jesus.

The *Countdown to Christmas* book contains the readings we developed as we put this new tradition into practice. We invite you to take the journey with us this Christmas, whether you are taking it alone, with your family, or with some friends. We pray that this Christmas season is more Jesus-focused than the last.

Merry Christmas!

Ryan and Adrienne Nuñez

How To Use This Book

The *Countdown to Christmas* is designed to be read by individuals or as a family. The book is divided by date. You simply read each day's selection on the assigned day, beginning on December 1 and ending on December 25, Christmas Day.

Each day has a few questions that can be used for personal reflection or discussion with your family or group.

Making It Fun

Let's get real for a minute. When we started celebrating the countdown to Christmas that first year, we had a picture in our minds of how it would be. It went a little like this: at the end of each day, we would lovingly call our children to come to the living room for our devotional. Our kids would come the first time they were called and quietly sit on the floor, eagerly waiting for that day's story. They would watch and listen with rapt attention, clinging to every word that was said. (We think we can feel the eye-rolls now as you read this). Well, maybe that is a bit of

an exaggeration, but you get the idea. We had very high expectations.

We sometimes have unrealistic expectations of our children and their attention spans. For this endeavor to succeed, we would need to make this tradition attractive to our kids. We wanted our children to LOVE this time we spent focusing on the coming Savior. There was only one thing to do—we needed to raise the “fun factor.” To accomplish this, we decided to integrate some of the things we loved about Christmas and make them part of our countdown to Christmas tradition. We encourage you to consider what your family enjoys at Christmas and to be creative about integrating those activities into your daily countdown to Christmas time. Here are some of the things we do that may help you to get your creative juices flowing.

Make a Special Snack

Our family loves food. Two of the things we love about Christmastime are the amazing desserts and seasonal beverages you can either make or buy at your local coffee shop. A warm plate of chocolate chip cookies can pretty much get our kids to do anything. So, we started making a special treat to accompany our countdown to Christmas time. Some nights it would be cookies, sometimes cinnamon rolls, sometimes

popcorn, but it was always special, something that we didn't have all the time. Hot chocolate is usually the drink of choice for our family, so we have it readily available, with a cute Christmas mug for each person. We have to tell you, our kids love it.

The "Countdown to Christmas" Tree

Like many families, we have moved to a pre-lit Christmas tree that we decorate the day after Thanksgiving. It is a fun day that we can spend with our kids, making our tree as gaudy as possible. But growing up, we always enjoyed the smell of fresh pine in the house, so as we were building our countdown to Christmas tradition, we decided to add to it a smaller, fresh Christmas tree. We call this tree our "Countdown to Christmas" tree. It sits in our living room right next to where we do our devotionals. We string a set of lights on this tree, and at the beginning of December, we begin to decorate it. Each night during our family devotional, one of the kids adds an ornament to the tree that symbolizes that evening's story. By the end of December, the tree is decorated with ornaments that tell a story of the coming Savior.

An added activity, should you want one, is making ornaments that coincide with each story. The sky is the limit with something like this and you can let your imagination run wild. If you are not the crafty

type, you can purchase a set of ornaments and write a number on each one for the countdown to Christmas. Kids do well with interactive activities, and ours really love this part of our tradition.

The Surprise Chocolate

Another “fun factor” in our countdown to Christmas tradition is the use of an Advent calendar. At the beginning of the season, we buy each of the kids a chocolate-filled calendar that has a little door for each day. You have probably seen them in the stores at Christmastime. Our kids love this little treat, and at the end of our devotionals, each of the kids is allowed that day’s chocolate. It is very simple but something they look forward to every night.

I am sure there are many other ideas that you and your family will dream up, but these are just a few activities we use to make our time special. We hope you truly enjoy this journey you are about to take with your family and that it is as big of a blessing to you as it has been to us.

DECEMBER 1

In the Beginning

In the Bible are four books that we call the Gospels, or Good News: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They each tell the account of the life of Christ. Over the next twenty-five days, we will be reading selections from each of these books as well as many other passages from the Bible.

Each Gospel author begins his account at different starting points. Mark begins with Jesus at the age of about thirty. Matthew and Luke begin with the birth of Jesus. John, however, takes us back to the beginning of the universe.

As we start this countdown to Christmas, we need to be mindful of the fact that Jesus did not come into existence on that first Christmas morning. Jesus has always existed.

In the beginning the Word already existed.
The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He existed in the beginning with God.
God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except
through him.

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.

So, the Word became human and made his
home among us. He was full of unfailing
love and faithfulness. And we have seen
his glory, the glory of the Father's one
and only Son.

(John 1:1-5, 14)

John begins his gospel account by making sure that the reader understands that Jesus is God. This fact is central to all that we believe as Christians. If Jesus were not God, then his mission on earth would be empty. Jesus came down to earth to rescue mankind from their sins. Jesus proved he was God by conquering death and rising from the dead on the third day. But let's not get too far ahead here; that's another holiday.

What we celebrate on Christmas is the day God became man. He took on flesh and bones. Jesus was 100 percent God and 100 percent man. If you are good with numbers, you probably realize that the math on that does not add up. That is why it's a mystery. No one can fully grasp this attribute of God. The fact that I cannot fully understand

this attribute does not leave me feeling nervous or doubtful. I would have much more reason to be nervous or doubtful if I worshiped a God I *could* fully comprehend and understand.

What we learn here in the first few verses of the Gospel of John is that Jesus, God the Son, the second member of the Trinity, has always been. You might be wondering why John uses “Word” instead of the proper name “Jesus” in the opening statements of his Gospel. The answer can be found as we look at the first verses in Genesis, the very beginning of the Bible. In this passage, we find all three members of the Trinity. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.” (Gen 1:1-3)

The first two members of the Trinity are obvious; “God” is God the Father, and the “Spirit of God” is the Holy Spirit. But where do we find God the Son, Jesus? We find Jesus when we see how God went about his creative work.

In the first act of creation, God created light. How did he do this? By speaking—he used words. God used his words to speak everything into existence. As we look at John again, what does it say about the Word?

December 1

It says, “God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.” (John 1:3) Jesus was the agent of creation—the Word.

As we begin this countdown to Christmas, may we remember that we are celebrating not the birth of a great man or leader, not the birth of a prophet, but the human birth of the eternal Creator of the Universe. God loved us so much that he chose to come to earth. That is what we celebrate on Christmas Day.

Reflection Questions

1. The text mentions that Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent man. Why is it described as a mystery, and how does this mystery contribute to our understanding of God?
2. Reflect on the connection between the act of creation and the role of Jesus as the Word. How does this idea help us understand Jesus' significance in the Christmas story?

Christmas Connection

Christmas is the time when we celebrate that God came down to earth. Jesus was not just a good man, a great teacher, or an important prophet. He was God! God loved us so much that he came to earth. That is what we celebrate on Christmas Day.



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