

DECEMBER



THE CENTERPIECE OF

Christmas

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PRACTICAL WAYS TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS WITH JOY AND REVERENCE

During the short weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, *obligation* rather than *joy* can easily be the centerpiece of our hearts due to the high demands of our time, energy, and focus. When I was a little girl, my grandmother taught me a simple song about how to spell *joy*—*Jesus, Others, and You*. In the spirit of living out this season with true *joy*, we will look at Psalm 150:1-6, specifically unpacking the purpose and importance of praise during the Christmas season.

Who Should Praise

Consider the characters making up the first Christmas story: a virgin girl, a courageous husband, a band of lowly shepherds, a caravan of regal wise-men, and heavenly angels. From outcasts, to elitists, to the divine, all took part in reverencing the presence of God's gift to mankind—Jesus. From various backgrounds and for specific roles, they were called together for the express purpose of giving glory and honor to Jesus. Like them, we too are called to the joyous worship of Christ the King.

Psalm 150:6 says that “everything that has breath should praise the Lord.” He is the Giver of the very breath in our lungs. Without Him, we could do nothing (John 15:5). We could not so much as move without God's will permitting it.

For Mary, worshipping was reflected in her obedience to God's will, regardless of the certain personal ridicule to be endured. For Joseph, his worship was reflected in his courage to trust the Lord as he took on the role of Jesus' earthly father. For the shepherds, their irrepressible joy was expressed in their immediate haste to see the Christ Child after the holy angels shared the good news of His arrival. The wisemen undertook a long, arduous journey at considerable cost to bow at Jesus' feet and to present Him with

customary gifts of royalty. What God wanted from each of these was their joyful heart of worship.

Discussion:

What names did the prophet Isaiah say that Jesus would be called in Isaiah 9:6?

What is the result of God's plan at Christ's coming according to the following verse in Isaiah 9:7? Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. How does this peace change the way we live? Do you need to apply this peace to any 'unpeaceful circumstances' in your life? How will Christmas help you do this?

Reflection:

Imagine you are being transported to the manger scene in Bethlehem, on that first Christmas day. What gift would you bring to present to Jesus? What would you say to this Holy Family?

Application:

When we imagine ourselves bowing at the manger, we should be overcome with great tenderness and humility. Consider writing Jesus a Christmas card, praising His willing obedience and great love that brought Him to the world to bring eternal hope. Place the Christmas card somewhere visible as a reminder of His goodness this Christmas season.

When We Praise

“From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same, the Lord's is to be praised (Psalm 113:3, KJV).” Recently, it was recorded that the average American only spends 3.6 minutes a day in “formal” worship. But the Bible says in Hebrews 13:15 (NIV), “let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess His name” (emphasis mine). The very next verse gives us another important action step to follow, especially at Christmastime—“do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (verse 16, KJV). Did you know that praising God is His gift to you? When we praise Him, our spirit is renewed (Isaiah 40:31), and we are reminded with Him all things

are possible (Matthew 19:26).

Praising God for His goodness and greatness should fill us to overflowing, leading us to do good works and to share with others. When our spirits are filled with Him, we can't help but bless others around us. What better time to be a blessing than at Christmas?

Discussion:

- What specific instructions about worship did God give His people in Deuteronomy 12:4-7?
- How might these instructions relate to the church today?

Reflection:

- Do you have a specific time that you spend praising God? What barriers keep you from praising God throughout the day?

Application:

In the hustle and bustle of Christmas decorating, praising God can feel more like a chore than a joy. This year, commit to praising God while putting up the Christmas trimmings.

- Decorating the tree: thank Jesus for His ever-green love for you (Psalm 106:1).
- Wrapping presents—thank Jesus for wrapping you in a robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10).
- Stringing lights—thank Jesus for being unconquerable Light in the darkness (John 1:5).

Where We Praise

On that first Christmas day, a musty stable was transformed into a majestic scene because the presence of Jesus was in it. A band of nobodies were the first worshippers of the Christ Child. They were common shepherds who, just moments before, had been tending flocks in a field. But it was to these unlikely characters that “the holy angels proclaimed good tidings of great joy” of Christ’s birth.

Isn’t that great news for us? We don’t have to be great, or important, or in a formal “holy place” to be completely changed and transformed by the presence of God. We don’t have to wait to go to a sanctuary

to praise God. When we receive Christ, our bodies become the temple of the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Anywhere we go, God is present inside of us. Even our humble kitchens, our cars, and dining tables can be transformed into a holy ground when we spend intimate time praising the Lord.

In ancient biblical times, the wilderness travels of Israel necessitated improvised worship. Whereas, inhabiting the Promised Land made way for regular rhythms of worship. Israel corporately worshipped God at set times, seasons, and places. In the setting of Psalm 150, they worshipped God in the sanctuary.

God is present with us in our mundane, everyday life. Therefore, even while performing tasks typically not regarded as “spiritual,” we can turn that time into an act of worship to God.

Discussion:

- Read Deuteronomy 12:10-12. What do words like “rest” (verse 10), “safety” (verse 10), and “rejoice” (verse 12) have to do with a regular, consistent standard of corporate worship?
- According to John 4:21-23, what did Jesus say about the location of worship? What kind of worshipper is the Father seeking?

Reflection:

What unlikely place in your everyday life can you make a place of worship? How should we love the Lord? (See Matthew 22:37). How is that reflected in your moment-to-moment life?

Application:

It is easy to compartmentalize times of praise and worship. To remind yourself God should be praised in all circumstances, choose your most dreaded daily task as a time to sing a Christmas song to God. (Think, Joy to the World, O Come Let Us Adore Him, Majesty, etc.)

Why We Praise

When we gather for worship, we leave behind a world of incapability, impossibility, and inconsistency. We focus our attention on God for His mighty acts, for His omnipotence, and for being the Creator

of all (Psalm 150:2). We are reminded He is more than able to work in and through us and our circumstances to accomplish all He has called us to do and to be (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Everything has a purpose and reason for being in relation to Christ. He created everything, not just the physical world but also the spiritual realm. To bring praise and glory to Jesus is the ultimate goal of creation. He intimately created each of us so we could have an intimate relationship with Him.

“For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for Him” (Colossians 1:16, KJV).

Jesus Christ is God’s answer to our sin problem. We no longer carry the guilt for our sins (past, present, and future). Jesus gave us a hope that extends beyond the grave. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit who teaches, guides, and protects us.

There is great danger in not praising God. Neglecting to praise His goodness and promises can lead to forgetfulness and ungratefulness for all He has done. We become self-focused, self-reliant, and self-willed. The further we drift from God, the more we are lured into sin, which leads to an ineffective life and witness.

Discussion:

- Read Hebrews 13:15. Why is praise called a “sacrifice”?
- In James 1:17, how does God’s unchanging nature help us praise Him in all things, regardless of whether times are good or bad?

Reflection:

Think back on the Lord’s past faithfulness to you. When has God’s presence brought you through one of your darkest seasons?

Application:

Remembering God’s faithfulness to us in difficulty should spur us on to encourage others. Consider writing a Christmas card with words of hope to someone going through a difficult

season to offer encouragement to them. Share how you have seen God’s faithfulness in your own life and are praying for their breakthrough.

How We Praise

In Psalm 150:3-5, we see God praised in the sanctuary with a glad music ensemble including the trumpet, lute, harp, timbrel, stringed instruments, and loud, clashing cymbals. Musicians collected their combined talents to stir Israel’s hearts and voices to praise God. Music is a powerful way to encourage believers from all backgrounds, regardless of singing ability, to lift their voices in praise to God because He is the centerpiece of praise.

The fruit of the Spirit enables us to live out a life of praise—one full of “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

God has given us the gift of music to magnify His name. The Bible has a lot to say regarding the posture of our hearts when entering the Lord’s presence. Consider these verses as they relate to musical celebrations in Scripture and discuss what implications they have for us today:

Psalm 96:1-3: “O sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the earth. Sing unto the Lord, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people.”

Psalm 100:2: “Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing.”

Ephesians 5:19: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”

Discussion:

- What does it look like to “sing to the Lord a new song”? How does newness keep our relationship with Him thriving?
- Do you pray for a good attitude before serving? Why do you think we are encouraged to come to God “singing”?

- Even if you are not musically “gifted,” what are ways that you can make “melody in your heart” and make a “joyful noise” and encourage others to do the same?

Reflection:

A song in the heart is evidence of someone full of joy. What things, people, or circumstances are you allowing to mar your joy and thereby your cheerful countenance? The Lord requires your surrender, then He will help you lay down that negative issue and fill you fully with Himself.

Application:

Consider serving in song during Christmas:

- Serve by assisting in a children’s Christmas play. Thank Jesus for the Christmas story being told “out of the mouth of babes” (Matthew 21:16).
- Sing in the choir or praise team at Christmas; thank Jesus the angels declared His birth.
- Coordinate a Christmas caroling event at a local nursing home. Join voices to share the joy of the season!

Encouraging Others to Praise

Psalm 150 is a directive: Praise God...*everyone!* God is not a respecter of persons (Romans 2:11). We should be reminded at Christmas that God uses all kinds of people in His plan to draw others to Himself.

We can share the joy of Christmas and the love of Christ with all those around us by leading by example and by involving them in Christmas celebrations. Everyone should be encouraged to take part in celebrating the magnificent, miraculous birth of Christ!

When we accept Christ as our Savior, the Holy Spirit gives each believer at least one spiritual gift (Romans 12:4-8). It’s like a Christmas gift that “keeps on giving” the rest of our lives! This gift is to be used to build up the church and share His light with the world.

Discussion:

- What barriers make praising at Christmastime difficult, inconvenient, or a back-burner priority?

- Read Romans 12:15. How can we help others praise the Lord, regardless of the circumstances they are currently facing? Jesus taught, “In everything, do to others what you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12, NIV).
- As Christ-followers, how can we encourage others to praise in the manner we would like to be encouraged?

Reflection:

What are your spiritual gifts? (If you don’t know, find spiritual gift assessments online.) How can you commit your specific spiritual gift(s) to bless someone else this Christmas?

Application:

Every time we enter the presence of God, our lives are powerfully transformed. Who doesn’t need that? When we encourage others to praise God, we invite them to the very source of true joy and peace. Consider the following service activities to share Christ’s love, care, and good news:

- Encourage an unlikely person in your sphere of influence to assist with a Christmas activity or invite them to a Christmas celebration.
- Generously give to others as an expression of gratitude for what you have received.
- Keep your Christmas cards. In January, choose a card each and pray for the ones who sent it. Then, let them know you prayed.
- Coordinate a blanket drive for a nursing home, children’s services, or domestic abuse center.

In closing, may the Christ of Christmas bring all you need to overflow with joy at His coming. *W*

Joy to the world the Lord is come

Let earth receive her king

Let every heart prepare Him room

And heaven and nature sing

And heaven and nature sing

And Heaven and Heaven and nature sing!

About the Writer: April Tummins serves in her local church in Dickson, Tennessee, as a Sunday School teacher, youth worker, and worship leader. She is married to her husband Philip and is the mother to Grant and Oliver. She enjoys daily encouraging others to live for Christ.