

How to Celebrate Christmas When You're Empty



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Many people approach the holiday season on empty. They may be depleted financially, emotionally, or suffering loss or separation from loved ones. Holidays raise expectations for happy gatherings of friends and family, good food and presents. They can also bring the dread of walking on eggshells or being alone. Chances are, even in the best of times, someone will get sick or be in a bad mood and another won't appreciate your gift. How do we protect ourselves from the holiday pressures and blues? How do we celebrate Christmas when we feel empty?

1. Recognize the Influence of Christmas Past

Growing up, Christmas was one of the happiest times of the year for me. My father, who tended to be a workaholic the rest of the year, loved Christmas. He decorated our tree and strictly supervised any contribution my sister and I made. He made sure we added tinsel icicles one at a time. Boring. But we enjoyed this time with Daddy.

On Christmas Eve, Mama set out a spread of delicious food for the friends and family who dropped by throughout the evening. Daddy sprawled on the floor to play games this one magical night of the year. We exchanged gifts before bed.



My charmed Christmases ceased at age 16. Mama was too sick the next Christmas to celebrate. The following Christmas we spent an awkward afternoon with my soon-to-be stepmother. After that, my sister and I dreaded Christmas. We were confined in a house where we were the outsiders.

My past experiences with Christmas impacted my expectations and emotions for future Christmases. I wanted to recreate the delight I felt when I was young. But the holiday also resurrected painful memories.

My husband, on the other hand, didn't share my good memories of early Christmases or the loss of later ones. His parents ran a small grocery store where both worked through Christmas Eve. Long holiday hours left them exhausted. He spent time alone while his friends engaged in holiday festivities.

Both of us brought our past into our expectations for Christmas. In our early Christmases together, a melancholy spirit descended upon my otherwise playful husband the week of Christmas. While I tried to recreate and savor the joy I remembered as a child, Larry wanted to withdraw during the holiday.

2. Amend Your Expectations for the Season

“She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them” (Luke 2:7 NIV).

One year, before I headed toward home for the holidays, I wondered where I would stay. I couldn't stomach another stay with someone who begrudged my existence. As I prayed about the situation, the words of a Christmas song came to mind: “no room, no room for Jesus.”

Mary and Joseph knew what it was like not to have a place to stay. Mary had the added hardship of being in labor that first Christmas. Knowing Mary, Joseph, and Jesus understood my problem comforted me. Instead of feeling like an outcast, I experienced the fellowship of connecting with my Lord and His earthly family.

While there was no room at the inn, God provided a cave or stable. When there was no bed, He provided a manger (animal's eating trough). He took care of this family, just not in the way I would expect the King of the Universe to provide for His only Son, but in a way that would turn out to be better.





Inns in biblical times usually didn't offer private suites. They often consisted of walled in areas around a well where many families gathered. The stable provided a private place to give birth and to host the worshiping shepherds.

The arrangement provided a special sign for the shepherds to recognize Jesus. "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12 NIV). Jesus was the only baby who fit this description.

Mary's family may not have believed her story and been there to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but angels filled the heavens announcing the good news to the shepherds. God didn't meet my expectations for how to care for the woman carrying His Son, because His ways are higher than ours. In other words, His ways are always better.

I thanked the Lord He understood my need and would make a way for me. And He did. My girlfriend's mother called to invite me to be with them. My heavenly Father met my need.

Don't let the past or our culture produce unrealistic expectations for the season. Your heavenly Father knows your needs. Look to Him to fill them. It is often in our needs that we come to know Him better.

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32 NIV).

3. Surrender the Expectations You've Placed on Yourself

Another Christmas, my to-do list squashed my holiday spirit. I sat with the Lord and listed each concern in my journal. I surrendered my expectations for how they should turn out.

My journal looked something like this:



- **Concern:** My gifts need to be purchased, wrapped, and mailed in time to arrive across the country before Christmas. I don't see how that can happen.
Surrender: Lord, if they arrive after Christmas, the world won't end. I choose to enjoy You in this moment and season and do the best I can without fretting.
- **Concern:** I want people to be glad they signed up for my workshop at the conference that begins the day after Christmas. But I don't have time to prepare properly.
Surrender: I trust you to give me what to say for Your people when I need it. This is about Your glory, not how clever or polished I appear.
- **Concern:** I want my baking done before my friends arrive.
Surrender: If that doesn't happen, I can bake with them or pick something up.

An invisible weight lifted off of my shoulders as I yielded each item to the Lord. A popular Christmas love song came to mind as I wrote my list. "All I want for Christmas is you." I realized I could apply that to my bridegroom Jesus. In all the world, I already had what I wanted most. I had Jesus, the heart of Christmas.

"Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26 NIV).

That afternoon, my scheduled appointments unexpectedly canceled. I seized the opportunity to race to a nearby mall. I felt like an angel directed my steps as I found gifts for every family member. They were wrapped and mailed that day!

When I surrendered my desires to the Lord, I received His peace. But He didn't stop there. His presence filled my soul and fulfilled the desires of my heart. Experiencing Jesus is more important than what I accomplish.

4. Surrender Your Budget

Did you know that holiday used to signify holy day? When we make this season about pleasing people and our senses, we're tempted to overindulge our purses and our appetites. Holidays become hectic, and we pay the price later when bills come due and we can't buckle our belts.





When my husband was in seminary, a friend and I made a manger scene from soda bottles and fabric scraps. Those humble decorations became some of my favorites. Every Christmas I remember the time spent with my friend when I bring them out.

Have you ever stressed over picking out gifts? I don't remember one Christmas gift my grandmother gave me growing up, but I'll never forget our tradition of baking gingerbread men together. The gift of relaxed engagement is one of the best gifts we can give and receive.

In an affluent society, we may substitute material gifts for gifts of the heart. There is nothing wrong with giving our children and loved ones something fun to enjoy. But we must not let the culture define what makes a good gift.

The Scripture says it is better to give than receive. We've all experienced the thrill of anticipating the joy of someone opening a gift we've handpicked for them. We are the hands and feet of Jesus. Finding a way to engage our children in bringing comfort and joy to someone in need may be a gift that will outlast the latest toy.

My daughter likes to invite her friends over to make a yearly ornament and sip hot cocoa. Afterwards, they share a devotional on Christmas. This has become a favorite Christmas tradition and costs very little per person.

5. Learn from the First Family

It's a punch in the gut when you can't afford the gift you want to give. Mary and Joseph couldn't afford what they wanted to give at Jesus' dedication either.

"But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering" Leviticus 12:8 (NIV).

I'm sure Mary and Joseph wanted to give the best gift for the dedication of God's Son. But when it came time to offer a gift at the dedication of Jesus, Mary and Joseph offered a pair



of doves and pigeons (Luke 2:22-24 NIV). They couldn't afford a lamb for the dedication of the Lamb of God. Mary and Joseph gave what they could, and God the Father received it with delight.

Our Father is the giver of good gifts. If for some reason we can't give what we want this time, it must not be good now. Remember Mary and Joseph and trust God's heart.

"No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Ps. 84:11 NIV).

6. Remember the Greatest Gift

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9 NIV).

Christmas is, after all, about Jesus. The more we set our hearts on Him the fuller we are. Let's end by focusing on Christ. You may want to take the following Scriptures and meditate on a different one each day.

Hundreds of years before Jesus came to earth Isaiah saw Him in His glory ([Jn. 12:41](#)). This is how Isaiah describes what he saw.

"In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne. The bottom of his robe filled the temple. Angels were standing above him. Each had six wings: With two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They called to each other and said,

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Armies!
The whole earth is filled with his glory.'

Their voices shook the foundations of the doorposts, and the temple filled with smoke" (Isaiah 1:1-4 GW).

Jesus, at the First Christmas—for Your Sake Became Poor

The Jesus Isaiah saw "made himself nothing" by coming to earth as a baby that first Christmas and later dying a criminal's death on a cross ([Philippians 2:5-11](#)).





“She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”
(Luke 2:7-12 NIV).

Jesus Today

Jesus reigns in heaven in indescribable glory.

“I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:12-18 NIV).

That You Might Become Rich

Before Jesus returned to heaven, He promised He would prepare a place for us in heaven



so that we can be with Him ([John 14:2-3](#)). Read how Scripture describes our glorious future with Him.

“I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.’

And the one sitting on the throne said, ‘Look, I am making everything new!’ And then he said to me, ‘Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.’ And he also said, ‘It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children” (Revelation 21:3-6 NLT).

When we meditate on Jesus, He fills all the empty spaces within us. Decorations, family, friends, presents and parties without Christ at the center leave us with an empty X-mas. But when Christ fills our hearts, we experience **Christmas**. If you are feeling empty, set your mind on Jesus, not just December 25, but every day.

Merry Christmas

- Learn more about how to deal with unrealistic expectations in [Give Yourself a Break](#).
- Learn more about Mary, Joseph, and the first Christmas in Little [Women, Big God](#).

