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# *Welcome to the Christmas ADVENTure!*

## *What is Advent, you ask?*

The term Advent literally means “coming,” and it’s a time to prepare our hearts for Christ’s coming into the world and into our lives. Advent is a traditional season of the church, celebrated by Christians for centuries during the four weeks leading up to Christmas.

This Advent season, God is inviting you to look back with wonder at His arrival on earth, and to look inward and allow your heart to be more deeply connected to Jesus Christ, the Savior and King of Kings.

Throughout the pages of this Advent devotional and activity guide, you’ll find activities for families with young children, as well as for individuals and older kids – there’s something here for everyone to help you stay focused on Christ throughout the season.

You will also find a weekly guide for having your own home Advent candle lighting ceremony. This simple time of lighting a candle, reading a scripture, and having a meaningful discussion with family or friends can help you stay connected with others and experience the Christ of Christmas together.

This Christmas, in the midst of the inevitable distractions, interruptions, and busyness of the season, you can choose to experience God’s presence in deep and meaningful ways. By preparing your head, heart, and hands to encounter Jesus and share Him with others, this can truly be a Christmas to remember.

*Oh Come let us adore Him!*



# Head, Heart & Hands

## *The Framework for this Advent Guide*



The Bible tells us that the reason for Christmas is this: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

It all began with the most extravagant gift ever given. God showed up with skin on so that we could know him personally. Immanuel—God with us—is the most remarkable event in history, and we are invited to respond. But how?

Jesus gives us the answer when he says,

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Matthew 22:37).

God invites us to respond to His love by worshiping Him with our heads, hearts, and hands. He wants all of us—holding nothing back. He wants us to know Him with our minds, experience Him with our hearts, and serve Him with our hands.

This is the invitation of Christmas, and this is how we can draw near to God during Advent. Each day in this Advent guide, there will be a scripture to read and reflect on (mind), a prayer to pray (heart), and an activity to participate in (hands).

When the Bible speaks about how we worship God in all these ways (head, heart, and hands), it uses the term soul—the total sum of who we are. Let us give Jesus Christ the gift He most desires this Christmas—the gift of our whole selves.

# ⊙ *Weekly Themes* ⊙

Throughout Advent, this guide will help you focus on different aspects of the season and prepare your heart for Christ's coming.

## *Week*

## *Theme*

Advent Week 1. . . . . Preparing the Way of the Lord

Advent Week 2. . . . . Welcoming the Lord

Advent Week 3. . . . . Paying Attention to the Lord

Advent Week 4. . . . . Worshiping the Lord

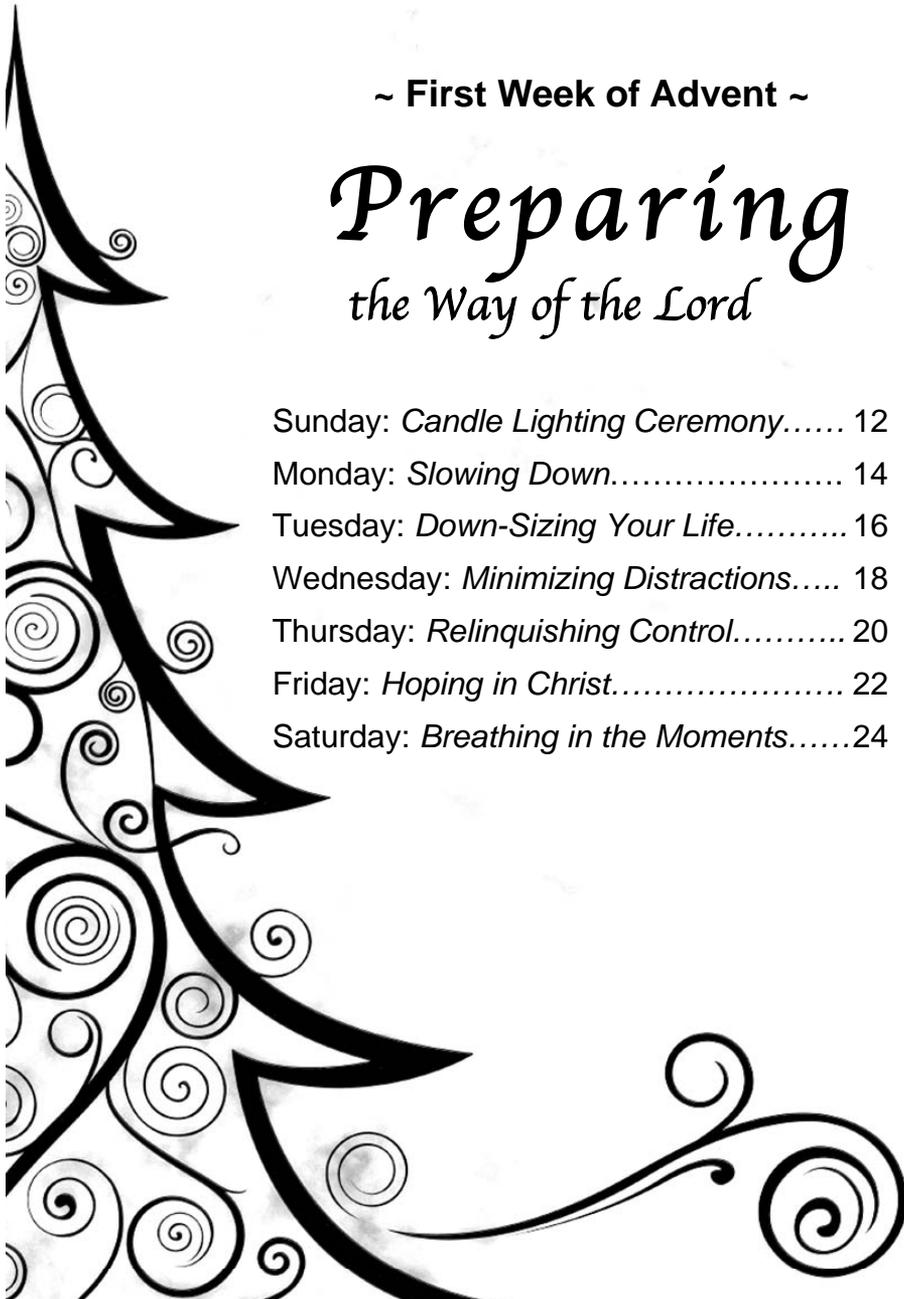
## *Sundays In Advent*

Each Sunday, in place of activities for your "HANDS", you'll find questions to discuss over a Sunday meal. Talk about them with your family, spouse, roommate, or other friends. These questions will help you evaluate choices and follow through on your desire to keep Christ at the center of your celebration.

Also, on Sundays you will find a simple Advent candle lighting ceremony that can be used with your home Advent wreath (see directions for making a wreath on the next page). This ceremony can help mark the passing weeks, and remind you of the significance of the season.

*(Note: there are three pages in this guide for Sundays, and two pages for all other days.)*





~ First Week of Advent ~

# *Preparing*

*the Way of the Lord*

Sunday: <i>Candle Lighting Ceremony</i> .....	12
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# First Sunday of Advent

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## Preparing the Way of the Lord



### Questions to Discuss over the Sunday Meal

*Gather with family or friends over a meal and talk together about how you can prepare the way of the Lord in your lives and celebrate a Christ-centered season. For families with younger children, select which questions will be most appropriate.*

1. What did you like best about some of your recent Christmas celebrations? What did you like least?
2. What are 2-3 Christmas events or activities you wouldn't want to miss? (Take time now to put them on your schedule.) How can Christ be at the center of those?
3. If you could eliminate an activity or two from your schedule this season, what would it be and why?
4. How can you create margin for the unexpected interruptions that will come?
5. Think for a few moments about what you can do when you face distractions and disappointments this season. What will you say to yourself and others? To God? How will you stay Christ-focused when things don't go as planned?
6. For Mary, saying "yes" to God meant surrendering whatever expectations she may have had for her future and opening herself up to God's plans. What expectations for this season do you need to surrender to God? While making plans for celebrating this season, how can you stay open to God's plans? How can you prepare the way of the Lord in your life this season by saying "yes" to God?

## ~ First Sunday of Advent ~

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# Preparing the Way of the Lord



### *Advent Candle Lighting*

for families with young children (read the following out loud)

**Parent:** Today we light the first candle in our Advent wreath.

**Children:** Christmas is coming!

**Parent:** God is inviting us to slow down and prepare our hearts to celebrate Jesus' birth.

**Children:** Christmas is coming!

**Parent:** When the angel told Mary she was going to have a baby, she opened her heart to God. She said "yes" to God and welcomed His plans for her life.

**Children:** Christmas is coming!

**Parent:** Even though Mary knew the days ahead might be hard, she prepared the way of the Lord. She traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth and they talked together about God and prepared for Jesus' birth.

**Children:** Christmas is coming!

**Parent:** As we light this candle in our Advent wreath, we promise to slow down, too. We promise to prepare the way of the Lord by opening our hearts to Him and taking time to remember what's most important this Christmas.

**(Light the first candle)**

**All together:** Christmas is coming!

## ~ First Sunday of Advent ~

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# Preparing the Way of the Lord



### *Advent Candle Lighting*

for individuals, couples, or families with older children

**Candlelighting:** As we light the first candle, we begin our celebration of Advent. In this moment, we slow down our hearts and minds to focus on God and prepare the way of the Lord in our lives this season.

*(Light first candle)*

**New Testament Scripture:** Read Luke 1:26-45

**Reflection:** The news Mary received from the angel must have been shocking and confusing—but her heart was open to God. After the angel reminded her that “nothing is impossible with God,” Mary responded by saying, “May it be to me as you have said.” This was her way of saying “yes” to God. Mary then prepared herself for God’s plan by seeking out her cousin Elizabeth. Together they talked about what God was doing and took time to reflect on the Christmas miracle coming into the world.

**Prayer:** Father, please help us make room in our hearts for Your coming this season. Help us to prepare for Your coming by slowing down and focusing on You. And like Mary, help us to say “yes” to Your plans in our lives. No matter what this season holds, let us hold on to You and keep You at the center of our celebrations. Amen.

**Old Testament Scripture:** Isaiah 7:14

**Sing:** Sing or listen to a favorite Christmas carol.



# Slowing Down

**Today's Scriptures:**

*"Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)*

*"And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'" (Luke 1:46-47)*



## **Head**

### **Thought to Ponder:**

Mary took time to slow down and prepare her heart for the coming of Christ. After she learned that she was pregnant, she traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth—who was pregnant with John the Baptist. The two women spent time together talking about God's plans and what was to come. Mary found encouragement and support from Elizabeth as she prepared for the birth of Jesus. Mary also focused her heart on God by praising Him and remembering who He is.

As you begin this Advent season, consider who might be an "Elizabeth" in your life. Who can give you support and encouragement to focus on God and celebrate a Christ-centered Christmas? Make plans to connect with that person in the coming days and weeks, encouraging each other to follow through on your plans for keeping your focus on Jesus. Also consider how can you slow down today and focus more on God. Take time to remember who God is and praise Him, just as Mary did.



## **Heart**

### **Invitation to Pray:**

Lord, we praise You and thank You for loving us so much that You sent Your Son to earth. Please help us slow down this week and focus on You. Help us to remember that we don't have to go through the day on our own—You are Immanuel, God with us, and we are never alone. Help us to be still and know that You are God and You are good. Amen.



## **Hands**

*Pick one or two activities that can help you and your family keep a Christ-centered focus.*

**Time Out** Create a "Time Out" room (not for discipline but for slowing down). Whenever someone from the family goes into that area, they are not to be disturbed except for emergencies. We all need some time to be alone with God. We need a break from the busy and loud activities of the season to simply be with Jesus.

**Christmas Kiss Countdown Calendar** Take a long piece of plastic wrap, colored ribbon, and enough candy kisses for each day from now till Christmas. Lay out a long piece of plastic wrap on a table, then place the kisses in a single line lengthwise on the plastic. Roll plastic tightly around the kisses in a long roll, twisting the plastic between each piece. To hold candy in place, tie a ribbon between each piece. Then each day have your children untie one kiss to countdown the days in sweet style. Make it a game to "slow" down and instead of eating the chocolate quickly, let it slowly dissolve on your tongue.

**A Chair for Jesus** At dinner time, put an extra chair at the table for Jesus. Use this visual cue to help you slow down and remember that He is there with you.

**Hide God's Word** Consider memorizing God's word this season and hiding it in your heart. Before each meal, remain standing behind your chairs and recite a verse of the Luke 2 Christmas story (or another selected passage). Add a new verse every few days and recite the entire passage up to that point. By Christmastime, you'll be able to tell the story from memory.

**Get Puzzled** Set up a puzzle on a table for everyone to work on. Invite visitors who come to your home throughout the season to help with it. Use this time to slow down and enjoy each other's company.





# Down-sizing Your Life



## **Today's Scriptures:**

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)*



## **Head**

### **Thought to Ponder:**

God longs to give us a Christmas filled with more of His peace, joy, and love. But as today's scripture reminds us, we must intentionally place God at the center of our lives this season so that we can receive all the good gifts He has to give us. This may mean down-sizing some of our expectations and activities to make more room for Him in our lives.

Consider the following questions: Who are you trying to please or satisfy with your Christmas plans this year? Does any part of your Christmas celebration plans cause you apprehension? How can you eliminate or change your plans to relieve your fears, reduce your stress, and place Christ at the center of your season?



## **Heart**

### **Invitation to Pray:**

Father, please forgive me for the ways that I expect the wrong things from the Christmas season. Help me to reduce the clutter in my life so that there is room for more of You in my life this season. May Your life be born in me today. Amen.

**Song to Sing:**

Joy to the world! The Lord is Come;

let earth receive her King;

let every heart prepare him room,

And heaven and nature sing (*repeat 2X*).



**Hands**

*Pick one or two activities that can help you and your family keep a Christ-centered focus.*

**New Year's Letters** Instead of sending Christmas cards this year, consider down-sizing your "To Do" list by sending New Year's letters instead. Not only will this downsize your activities, it will also allow you to respond to Christmas cards and gifts received during the season.

**Young kids Toy Swap** Many kids have more toys in their closet than they ever play with. To encourage the spirit of giving in your children, and to help them get into the down-sizing spirit, have them go through their toys and find several in good shape that they no longer play with. Ask your children to select several toys they can give away to make room for the new toys they will receive at Christmas. Then find a local shelter collecting gifts for needy families—and if possible, take your kids with you to deliver their donations. This will allow your kids the chance to experience the joy of giving firsthand.

**The Simplify Game** Play the "Simplify Game" by asking yourself and your family these questions: How can we reduce clutter, busyness, and distraction a little bit each day this week? What will we give up to make room for the Christ-child in our celebrations? As you think of specific ideas, write them on slips of paper and crumple them up—then symbolically surrender them to God by throwing them into a trash can or fireplace. Cheer and give points for each "simplify" paper that makes it in.

**YouTube—Prepare Ye The Way** Remember the 1970's production of GodSpell? Even though this isn't a "Christmas" musical, you can go to YouTube.com and watch a clip of the song "Prepare Ye The Way"—a song sung by John the Baptist, calling people to prepare their hearts for the coming of Christ. This melody will stay with you throughout the day and help you remember to keep your heart open to Him.



# Minimizing Distractions



## **Today's Scriptures:**

*"Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in Him, and He will do it. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him." (Psalm 37:4-5, 7, NASB)*

*"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah; 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"" (Matthew 3:1-3)*



## **Head**

### **Thought to Ponder:**

Distractions are inevitable. It's not a matter of *if* they will happen—it's a matter of how we will respond to them *when* they happen. What are some kinds of distractions that were a challenge for you last Christmas season? What kinds of distractions do you anticipate might be a challenge for you this year?

When we prepare the way for the Lord in our lives, we'll be more prepared to respond to distractions in God-honoring ways. One of the ways we prepare the way of the Lord in our lives is by making straight paths for Him, which involves removing barriers that might block God's work in our lives. What things in your life might be barriers to the Lord coming fully into your life today? How can you remove those barriers and prepare the way of the Lord?



## **Heart**

### **Invitation to Pray:**

.Father, help me to recognize the barriers in my life today that might block your work in my life. Help me to remove those barriers and minimize anything that might distract me from You. Amen.



## **Hands**

*Pick one or two activities that can help you and your family keep a Christ-centered focus.*

**Reducing the TV Trap** There are lots of fun Christmas shows to watch this season, but too much TV can add to our stress and increase our appetites for every new toy and gadget being advertised. Be selective about which programs to watch, and avoid watching any “live TV” during this season. Record your shows so that you can fast forward over the commercials. (Unless you play the “Commercial Game” below.)

**The Commercial Game** Young kids can have a hard time distinguishing between cartoons and commercials, especially when the ads are selling spin-off characters and toys from your kid’s TV shows. Commercials create a sense of dissatisfaction in kids, making them want more. Help your kids by watching some TV with them, and every time a commercial comes on have your kids call out, “Commercial!” — to help them get in the habit of identifying ads. Then help your kids learn to understand the messages in these ads by asking questions like: What is this commercial trying to tell us is most important? What is this commercial telling us about how to be happy? About what we need in our lives? Are these messages all true?

**Make a “JOY Jar”** Each day, think about what you’ve seen God do that day. What are you thankful for? What brought you joy today? Make a “Joy Jar”, and have family members write their joys on slips of paper to be placed in the joy jar each day leading up to Christmas. On Christmas Day, open the jar and share the joy with the whole family.

**House Blessing** Pray a blessing over your home as a way to prepare your heart and home to be Christ-centered throughout the season. Invite your family and/or a few friends to go through each room of your home praying for the activities that will take place in each room, and for the people who will gather there. (For example, pray God’s blessing on your front door that those who enter your home will feel welcomed and will sense God’s presence and love as they enter.)

## **The Christmas ADVENTURE**

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