

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Advent

axis

You're Invited . . .

to bring the beauty of Advent spirituality into everyday life as you learn about the real season of Advent and all the riches it holds.

— What is Advent? A way to countdown to Christmas, right?

Well, yes and no. Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas. But Advent is actually not intended to be an extension of Christmas, which is what usually happens (i.e. Christmas music the day after Halloween!). In fact, Advent is a completely different season of its own. One might argue that a proper Christmas cannot be had without a proper Advent first.

— What does the word “Advent” mean?

It means “coming” or “arrival.” The observance of advent actually points to and causes us to reflect on three arrivals: Christ’s first arrival in Bethlehem, His second coming in the future that we anticipate, and His arrival in each of our hearts personally. In that way, Christians are always living in Advent, in the expectation of Christ’s future coming again. The admonition given us in the New Testament is “pray and watch”! Advent reminds us to do both, not only leading up to Christmas, but all year long.

— What’s the purpose of Advent?

“Advent, more than any other time of the church year, invites us [to embrace the spiritual discipline of waiting](#).” Advent helps us remember that salvation *is coming* and *has come*. It’s a time of waiting, reflecting, contemplation, repentance, longing, and, in the midst of all these (and most importantly), hope. It’s light breaking into darkness. Sometimes Advent is called “Little Lent” because of the tone of the season, which is a little more somber, held back, and reserved. In today’s day and age, we tend to want to skip straight to the party without pausing to remember why we’re celebrating. Advent reminds us that we are a people of promise in a world of impatience. Advent helps us pause by reminding us of the condition of our hearts before God and why we so desperately needed Him to come as He did. It gives us space to long for and prepare for Him to come again to bring the final restoration of all things, just as the song says: “Let every heart prepare Him room.”

— Could you give a general overview of Advent?

Traditionally the first two weeks point toward Christ’s second coming, and the last two weeks are oriented toward waiting for the celebration of His birth/incarnation. This waiting and anticipation is joyful but isn’t full-out celebration yet. That’s reserved for the full twelve days of Christmas. A good way to remember it is that if Advent is rhythm, Christmas is revelry. See the list of practical suggestions below for ways to bring these rhythms into daily life. There’s no hard and fast prescription; it’s up to you and your family to decide exactly how you want to do Advent.

— Don't we already have enough holiday traditions?

That's a fair question. We probably have more than enough (which may indicate how much our hearts long for reasons to feast and for the rhythms of the seasons). Yet somehow the countdown-to-Christmas version of Advent has become popular in recent years, bringing us calendars centered around everything—from chocolate to legos to socks and let's not forget The Elf on the Shelf! (Is he creepy to anyone else?!) With the added stress and consumerism it's now attached to, it's understandable to wonder if it's worth including in our already busy schedules. So in order to determine which traditions we should cling to and which we should abandon swiftly, we need to take time to assess as a family whether or not our Advent and Christmas traditions help shape our hearts and root us in the Gospel story. There may be nothing inherently wrong with some of our traditions, but perhaps we're settling for less than the best God is offering. Perhaps we've been content playing in the shallow waters when we could be exploring the depths of the ocean.

— So when does Advent start?

It begins four Sundays before Christmas. So in 2017, Advent begins December 3 and ends December 24, according to the Christian calendar.

— Back up. What's the Christian calendar?

Instead of ordering time around Presidents, wars, and bank holidays, the Christian calendar tells a different story. And that story actually begins with Advent. Unlike the calendar we typically follow, the Christian year doesn't begin on January 1, but on the first day of Advent. (Try saying "Happy New Year!" on December 3 this year and see how many strange looks you get!) After Advent comes the Twelve Days of Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and finally Pentecost.

Though not something we often think about because they seem so *normal*, how we tell time, the rituals we keep, and the holidays we commemorate matter because they tell our cultural story and very clearly communicate what we value. That's why the Christian calendar is both unique and universally applicable to Christ followers all over the world. The purpose of the Christian or liturgical calendar is to order our physical and spiritual lives around an alternative narrative.

God's story is too much for us to take in all at once, and sometimes we lose sight of the big story we're part of. Thus the Christian seasons walk us through the different acts of the story and immerse us in it one bit at a time, forming us in grace, prompting us to center our lives around Christ, and reminding us of the gravity and magnitude of what He's done for us. As we walk through each season, we reenact the story He's written and is still writing.

— What is Advent *not* supposed to be?

It's not a way to prove our worth or earn something from God. Sometimes we slip into thinking of spirituality as a way to prove our rightness or holiness: "I am so holy because I do this."

(Pharisees, anyone?) But it's important to remember that what we do during Advent isn't of ultimate importance. Once we've accepted God's gift of eternal life, who we are before God doesn't change, and what He offers He gives by grace alone. But how we live that out—our response to that grace—can vary greatly. Advent and the rest of the Christian seasons help us live out the reality of the story we are part of. Spiritual disciplines—and in this case the disciplines of the Christian year—intensify our experience of living with and in Christ, as well as shape and form us.

— I'm new to Advent, but really like what it has to offer. How do I start the conversation with my family of incorporating it into our traditions?

Start by asking *lots* of questions. This will invite them to be part of figuring out your family traditions together. Ask your teens what holidays (and specifically Christmas) mean to them. Ask them what their favorite traditions are, why they like them, and why your family does them. What does Advent mean? What is Christmas all about? Why do we celebrate the way we do? Why even celebrate at all? By asking these questions, they'll start thinking more deeply about your family's habits, rather than simply doing them because that's what you've always done. It also opens the door to discussion and contemplation, which is much more effective with millennials and Gen Zers than a command issued from above without any explanation or warning.

Remember that the point isn't to overhaul Advent and Christmas in one fell swoop. Talk through some of the ideas mentioned in this guide and ask them what stands out to them and what practical ideas (see following section) they might like to incorporate into your family's rhythms. Start by adding a couple things rather than taking away things that are special to them. And if they're not super thrilled, that's ok! Invite them into Advent but don't force it. If they're not on board, simply start incorporating this way of doing Advent into your own life. Let it be meaningful to you; find joy in it, regardless of their reactions. The hope is that some of these new (but old!) rhythms and traditions will be compelling on their own, that their interest will be piqued, and that they will want to join you and learn more once they see the meaning it brings to you.

— How would you suggest my family's rhythms and routines change during the Advent season?

Have you ever found yourself tired of Christmas once Christmas actually arrived? Or experienced the huge letdown of December 26? This way of observing Advent and then Christmas brings a more natural cycle of waiting and anticipating, followed by a full twelve-day celebration. The hope is that if we observe Advent, we will love Christmas even more.

In light of that, try waiting a little longer to put up decorations or decorating a little at a time. Perhaps you might wait until Christmas Eve to put ornaments on the tree. You could make a playlist of Advent songs but wait to sing the jubilant Christmas carols until the Christmas Day. Maybe you hold off on some of your usual traditions of cookie baking and favorite Christmas movies until the twelve days of Christmas.

— What are practical ways I can bring Advent into my daily life?

As previously mentioned, Advent is much more than a way to countdown to Christmas. But we won't experience the fullness of the tradition without intentional change. Here are a few suggestions for how to begin observing Advent this year:

COMMUNALLY/IN YOUR FAMILY:

- **The Daily Office:** Advent is a great opportunity to bring back the ancient Judeo-Christian practice of [the daily office](#) (i.e. praying during specific times of the day) from [The Book of Common Prayer](#). Aim for gathering once a day as a family during Advent. It takes the pressure off of finding a perfect devotional or coming up with something inspiring to say (a lot of those things are just cheesy to teens anyway) and roots us in the beautiful rhythms used by Christians for many years. When we don't feel like praying, the words in these prayers speak to and form our hearts, reminding us of the truth. ([Here's an online tool](#) for guiding you through the daily office.)
- **Jesse Tree:** [A Jesse tree](#) is a fun Advent tradition that is perfect for younger children (it's very hands-on) and could be fun for teens as well, whether or not you choose to use the ornaments. [The Advent Jesse Tree](#) by Dean Lambert Smith has short simple devotions for both adults and children that walk you through the story leading up to the birth of Emmanuel. Ann Voskamp's book [Unwrapping the Greatest Gift](#) is a little more flowery in its writing but may capture the attention of older children.
- **Music:** Spotify has some good Advent playlists. You can find some that are oriented solely toward Advent rather than including Christmas music. Try "[Midwinter Carols](#)" by Joel Clarkson or "[Simple Advent](#)" by Tsh Oxenreider
 - Here are some great advent hymns and carols to sing: "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," "Of the Father's Love Begotten," "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," and "Joy to the World." (Sometimes somber, mysterious, lamentful, minor-key music is a welcome change from joyful carols.)
 - Ask your teens for ideas of music that reflect the tone of this season: waiting, longing, and hope. Either they'll have some great ideas or they'll be able to find it a lot quicker than we can!
- **Advent wreath:** Whether you buy a traditional [advent wreath](#) with purple, pink, and white candles or simply light a candle you already have, this can be a meaningful way to remind us of the season each time we gather together during Advent and keep vigil as we wait. Light it daily, or every Sunday of Advent. You may let the candles symbolize the virtues of hope, peace, joy, and love, but at the very least let them remind you of the ever-increasing light as your hope builds in anticipation of Christmas.
- **Christian Calendar:** Buy a wall calendar that is divided into pages that correlate with each liturgical season as a reminder that we don't mark time as the world marks time.
- **Advent Calendar:** Use an Advent calendar or some other countdown that fosters togetherness and community, such as drinking a different tea each day or coloring together. You can't rush through a steaming cup of tea! And if phones aren't allowed, the act of drinking it invites reflection and a slower pace. Or if it's chocolate you prefer, why not choose some good quality chocolate and take time to really savor it?
- **Jesus:** Wait to add baby Jesus to the nativity until Christmas morning. (Bonus points if you hide the magi away until Epiphany!)

- **Serving:** Advent practices have always included giving, serving, and reaching out to the poor. Take this as an opportunity to set aside a day (or more) to serve as a family in your community. Ask your teens for ideas on how to do this!

PERSONALLY:

- **Habits:** Consider getting up half an hour earlier than usual during Advent to spend some extra time reflecting, reading, praying, and journaling.
- **Reflection:** Maybe even take a half-day retreat.
- **Confession:** Take time to confess your sins. Write them out, and allow yourself to feel the magnitude and weight of them. Ask God to break in and work in your life. But also remind yourself of the forgiveness we've already been given. "May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image, to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen" (from *The Book of Common Prayer*). This could be a great family activity as well.
- **Pace:** Push back on the busyness and say no to things that aren't life-giving to you and your family.
- **Gifts:** Simplify gift-giving! Don't get caught up in the stress and consumerism that this time of year often brings. Maybe draw names so that each person only buys a gift for one person. Or choose a dollar amount, then let each person buy a gift for themselves in that range. Or, if your family's crafty, make gifts for each other instead of buying them. There are many ways to change our habits in this area so that we can better focus on what we've already been given.
- **Scripture:** Consider using these passages in your personal time or reading them aloud as a family:
 - **Week 1:** Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44
 - **Week 2:** Isaiah 11: 1-10, Psalm 72, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12
 - **Week 3:** Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46-55, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11
 - **Week 4:** Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

You could add to this list anything else that shapes your heart to prepare for the coming of Christ and causes you to recognize your spiritual apathy and return to true worship. *Be creative and see what you can come up with!*

— We're so busy. How will we ever have time for this?!

We hear you! We all tend to be pretty busy, especially during this time of year. This is a good excuse to slow down and say no to some things for the sake of better things. We all long for rest and a slower pace, but that won't happen without intentionality. However, it would be of the greatest irony if reading this caused more stress or burden in your life. Our advice is to start where you are and start small. What's one thing you can change this year? One rhythm you can add? We have total freedom to observe or not observe these liturgical seasons—it's a "get to," not a "have to." And there are lots of great ideas but no prescription for how exactly to go about it. Give it time to figure out how Advent fits into your family's culture. It's hard! But this isn't a to-do list; it's an invitation to something rich and beautiful.

— Can't we just celebrate in the same way we always have?

Sure! But it's also good to realize that a lot of our culture's liturgies and traditions might not do that great of a job of orienting our hearts back to God or placing our lives in the center of His Kingdom and the big story He is writing. It's more important than ever for the church and for Christian families to have compelling ways to draw our kids deeper into God's story—the key word here being “compelling”! Unfortunately, many of our traditions have devolved into mere imitations of culture with a little Jesus thrown in. Is that compelling? Or is it just confusing?

There's so much beauty to be discovered in these seasons of the Christian year if we simply take the time.

— Won't my teens just roll their eyes at this?

Teens' lives are moving at breakneck speed most of the time. As parents we might find ourselves becoming afraid that if our church culture or family culture doesn't measure up to the fast pace and excitement of the culture at large, our teens will get bored and not have compelling reasons to stay in the faith.

In the book *You Are What You Love*, author James K.A. Smith proposes that, in our quest to captivate teens' attention and keep things relevant, we've “created youth ministry that confuses extroversion with faithfulness” and acted like “sincerely following Jesus is synonymous with being ‘fired up’ for Jesus, with being *excited* for Jesus, as if discipleship were synonymous with fostering an exuberant, perky, cheerful, hurray-for-Jesus disposition like what we might find in the glee club or at a pep rally.” He argues that ancient and historic worship, disciplines, and practices of the faith can actually be a “life-giving gift” to today's teens and like giving them “rafts to make their way into the river of grace.” Whether or not this might be true of your teen, consider giving it a try. It just might be what they didn't know their hearts were longing for.

— Is this how we combat materialism?

As Christians, we rightly push back on the consumerism and materialism that have come to mark this time of year, but sometimes we do it to our own detriment. As part of downplaying material possessions, it's not uncommon to hyper-spiritualize things, treating the physical world as a distraction from what's “really important.” But consider the true meaning of this season: God incarnate, the Word made flesh. Spirit and flesh united forever. This physical world, and what we do with our bodies, and what we eat and look at and listen to and experience, matters. Beauty matters. Our children aren't going to *only* be shaped by what we say. Things like kneeling to pray, lighting candles, listening to beautiful music, and lingering at the table over delicious food that nourishes both our bodies and souls matter. The things we do with our bodies and experience with our senses are powerful to help us understand God's ways and shape what we love. How our kids feel about Advent and Christmas, and what they experience is just as important as what they *know*.

A final thought

As we ponder this Advent arrival and what it means to be ready, we may see the sin and mess of our lives. We may start to think of how we need to make our hearts right before God. But if this is something we could do on our own, then *we wouldn't need rescuing*. This is the Gospel in Advent. We have no more capacity and ability to change and clean up our hearts than we do to make the sun rise. But we wait with expectancy that the sun *will* rise, that Christ *will* come. Our job is to stay awake.

And being ready doesn't mean we've perfectly cleaned up our lives. Rather, we're ready for the bridegroom to come and rescue us. The purpose of the spiritual disciplines of Advent—and of all spiritual disciplines—is to keep us awake. We wait with joyful anticipation and with full assurance that God will rescue us, full assurance that He will return to redeem everything. We want to be awake when the sun begins to rise. We look to that future day, but we also ask Him to break in on our lives, regularly. Light breaking into darkness. Come, Lord Jesus!

Resources

[Ancient-Future Time](#) by Robert E. Webber

[You Are What You Love](#) by James K.A. Smith (Note: We can't recommend this book enough. It explains in depth why our daily routines and habits matter and how they shape what we ultimately love.)

[Our Common Prayer: A Field Guide to the Book of Common Prayer](#) by Winfield Bevins (a primer on *The Book of Common Prayer* with some great information, tools, and beautiful ancient prayers) keepingadvent.com (has great explanations and resources)

And for more information, check out our "[Parent's Guide to the Twelve Days of Christmas.](#)" As we mentioned earlier, this way of observing Advent only makes sense if you follow it with a full celebration of Christmas!

We're creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out axis.org/guides each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.