

# PRAYING THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

From Thanksgiving to Christmas, we face some of the toughest spiritual tests of the year. The sure way to face them well is to make a rich habit—and generous gift—of prayer.

**By Jeff Hopper**

**WHAT'S WITH THIS CHRISTMAS MESS** we've gotten ourselves into?

Maybe we can, as some friends in the faith do, blame it on the Church for ever getting involved in trying to counter a seasonal pagan celebration with a "Christian" holiday. But in truth, this Christ-Mass moved along from its inception in the third or fourth century until well into the twentieth century before it turned into the commercial free-for-all we often see today.

Some point the finger at novelist Charles Dickens, whose beloved *A Christmas Carol* ignited attention to the "humanity" of the season over and above its Christ-pointing roots.

Then again, we might go right to Scripture and train our light-dazzled eyes on the magi from the East. After all, weren't they the first unexpected guests intruding on important family time?

Oh, the holidays, stretched out now from at least the end of October, right through the after-Christmas sales. Black Friday, that sacred shopping day, is spilling into Thursday night now. We don't even know how to rest when we're given a day off!

But in the midst of times like these, we have a wonderful role as men and women who live in the kingdom of God. We are, Paul wrote, "ministers

of reconciliation." When a season like the one that closes each year yanks people even further from God, we are called to offer another possibility, a life realigned with the one who offers eternal life.

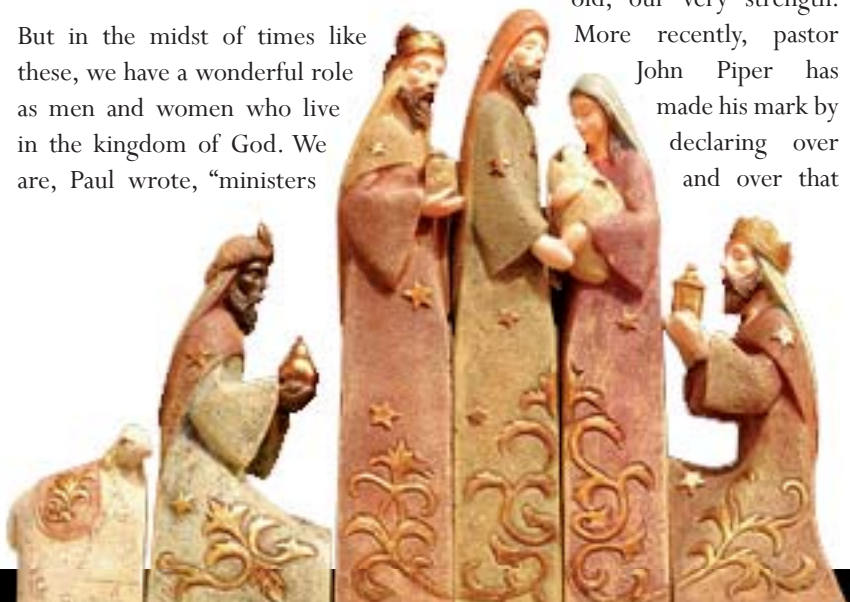
In order to do this well, we must recognize both what is challenging and what is excellent about the season, and we must endeavor to make everything we can about the holiday season *personal*.

## THE ENEMY AT CHRISTMAS

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that there is an enemy at work, one who has set himself against the ways of God and made it his business to disturb our spirits just when we should be resting in the Lord. This enemy is, of course, Satan. And while it is common in the church to pay him the most attention at Halloween—a holiday that is said to belong to his devotees—the enemy is perhaps best at using the allurements of the lighter holidays, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, to set us up for trouble.

The enemy's effort is founded first of all in his hatred of joy. True joy in the Lord is, Ezra told the Israelites of old, our very strength.

More recently, pastor John Piper has made his mark by declaring over and over that



“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” Joy and satisfaction—now there are two oft-touted Christmas characteristics!

Yet if we were to stand outside our biggest local department store the day after Christmas, when the crowds wait in line to return their gifts and spend even more, we would struggle to find one soul who would report that their holiday was marked with “joy and satisfaction.” A little pleasure, perhaps. A smile, a laugh, and a full belly. Maybe even a gift they wanted. But real, live joy and satisfaction? It’s not happening.

Why? Because the enemy uses the modern emphases of Christmas to create unrealistic, unfulfilled expectations in people or to allow them a measure of satisfaction—but it is a measure far below what their souls tell them is truly out there.

The enemy may also try to steal people’s attention from focusing on the coming of the Lord incarnate. Christmas remains a religious attraction to many because, unlike Easter’s dual message of death (where people must face the pains of mortality) and resurrection (which many consider so much hocus-pocus), Christmas presents a little child, innocent and beautiful. Visitors still turn up for church at Christmas—if they are not too distracted!—but not so much at Easter anymore.

### OUR EXALTANT VIEW

The chief way that we counter the work of the enemy in this season is by combining exaltation and expectation. It is true that some believers again point to the Christmas holiday and suggest that we should not celebrate because of the day’s “pagan origins.” Perhaps. But this certainly does not mean we should not celebrate Christ.

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So we counter the enemy by focusing on the Messiah who has come and who is to come again. We lift up his name in song and in prayer and in Scripture reading and in preaching—just as we always do!

Moreover, we make a significant connection between the comings of Christ. He came once to make the perfect sacrifice; he is coming again to “bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28). The coming of the Messiah was the biggest thing on the minds of the Jewish people in Rome-occupied Israel before the birth of Jesus. We might make an argument that the second coming of the Messiah should be the biggest

thing on the minds of believers today, for he will bring the enactment of our salvation. Make Christmas a holiday of expectation, just as Christians who attend to the Advent have done for centuries.

It is no accident that in John 14:1-4 Jesus coupled the words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me,” with the promise, “I am going to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am.”

Both the Advent and the New Year are times of expectation. And when it is Jesus we expect, the Messiah to whom we turn our eyes, then we are moved to exaltation. Our Hallelujah choruses touch the Audience of One for whom the hallelujahs are meant; our nativity scenes depict not only the miracle of birth and family but the first identity of the one who would be accredited to us by signs and miracles; and even our gifts given to one another signify not only love among friends but the grace of God given freely to us.

**W**HEN WE SET OUT TO MAKE THE holidays a season of prayer, then, there are three arenas for our prayer. We will pray against the evil, pray in the good, and pray with grace for others. So let’s look at each of these directions for prayer.

### PRAYING AGAINST THE EVIL

If you have read this far into this article, it would suggest that you are a person firm in your belief in Jesus. You know him not only as the baby in Bethlehem’s manger but as the miracle worker from Galilee, the atoning sacrifice at Calvary, and the risen King ascended to the right hand of God. Which means one more thing:

you have friends and family who do not believe this at all!

One of the greatest attacks of the enemy during holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas arises out of the chasm between those who love Jesus and those who do not. You may have an excellent relationship with those who share your holiday meals, but who decides whether that meal is initiated with prayer? And if it is, how long and how strong is that prayer? What often occurs when there is a rift like this in our holiday relationships is that we get to thinking, *Oh, I don't want to spend the holidays with them. They are so turned against the Gospel. They just won't see Jesus for who he is.* And in that thinking, our hearts are hardened toward those who need salvation. We cannot do this! We cannot allow ourselves to expect that the heart of our dearest friends will *not* be changed. Jesus captured us; he can surely capture them. And so our first prayer against evil must be a prayer against ourselves. **We must pray that our hearts will not be hardened to those who need our grace-filled, Jesus-style love.**

After the prayers of your lips, be reminded that this kind of grace and love will show itself on your tongue. Proverbs 18:21 offers this: “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” At holiday time, you might remember this truth in prayer through a humorous picture: “Lord, let the fruitcake of my lips contain the fruit of your Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Second, the holidays are a time that will wear us out and wear us down. That is, we will face physical and spiritual weariness if we are

not “prayered” and prepared. On the prayer side, make a habit of sitting in your car for a minute before you leave and a minute before you get out, using this time to seize quiet and pray. What should you pray? Look at 1 Peter 1:8-9: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” **What a powerful holiday prayer, to ask for the constant infilling of “inexpressible and glorious joy!”** That’ll preach—not only through your words but through all that you express in this season.

On the prepared side, we must recognize that from the beginning, God built rest into the cadence of a

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well-lived life. The Lord of the Sabbath is calling you to lay down your wall-to-wall calendar, your overfull inbox, and your self-imposed obligations so that you may attend to him. Don’t put another appointment on your phone until you’ve blocked out the hours of rest you will give to God. You have limits. Recognize them, and meet them with quiet and with solitude, according to the example of Jesus himself.

Third, we must be on guard against the draw of materialism. You may think, *No worries, I nailed this one long ago. I even ask people to give to World Vision rather than buy me a gift.* And yet you allow yourself to be pulled into finding “the perfect gift” for everyone on your list. Gift-giving can be an exercise symbolic of grace, yes. But it can also be an exercise in idol-chasing: “It’s the thought that counts, but it’s the smile on their face when I give them the best gift of the season that counts more!”

We confront such sin with prayer. **We ask that our pursuit of the material is replaced by our expression of the eternal.** A material gift cannot replace love, especially as it is expressed in the time, attention and concern that mark our desire to see those we love not “get what they want” but “receive what they most need.”

Finally, when we pray against the evil that invades the season, we must recognize the common occurrence of depression and loneliness that flood over many people during the holidays. Be on the lookout for those who have been widowed or lost a parent or child in the past year. Lift them up by name in prayer, asking God to bring his unmatched comfort in this time. And make yourself available as an an-

swer to your own prayers, for God may want you to make the phone call or the visit that delivers his words of encouragement. Depression, because it is the absence of joy and brings loss of compelling purpose, is the agent of the enemy to turn people's eyes from Christ and onto themselves. **Pray that joy will reign in the hearts of those you know who are prone to depression this season, not forgetting that you may need this prayer yourself!**

#### INVITING THE GOOD

In our assessment of the evil that arises during the Thanksgiving-to-Christmas season, we have already spoken of the prayers that run counter to that evil—prayers for joy and comfort. But let's review four directions for our prayer that invite God's good into the season.

**1. Compassion.** Against the hardening of your heart during this season, pray that God will instill you with compassion. Pray that he will give you eyes and ears for those whose needs actually beg the question, "Is there no better way than this?" These are people whose hearts may already be open to Jesus. When you pray for compassion, you are actually submitting your holiday hours to God, allowing him to turn you from your shopping or eating schedule so you can sit with a friend—old or brand new—and speak openly about the offer of abundant and eternal life delivered through the one who came at Bethlehem. There is a better way. With compassion, you will be ready to point it out to those who are earnestly, even desperately, seeking it.

**2. Joy.** Every Christmas season, we sing it: "Joy to the world! The Lord is come." But is this the message of our

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lives during these potent weeks? We must reflect the joy that comes with eternity-minded contentment, and we can only do this if joy fills us. The prayer here, then, is simple: "Lord, strengthen me with your joy. Let my life be a constant reflection of what truly thrills my heart—the joyous salvation we have in Jesus!"

**3. Sincere love.** We are all young at love. The patient, kind, selfless, protective, trusting, hope-filled, persevering love of 1 Corinthians 13 is the work of a lifetime, layered in by fits and spurts. Only eternity will perfect what is so limited in our human expression. And yet Christ is in us. He is the fullness of joy, the hope of glory, the igniter of true love. Willingly, he

gave his life for us. How willingly will we give our Christmas season for others? In prayer, ask God to make you an agent of his love this season, one who carries grace as his ambassador to the holiday table where you share space with those who need his touch.

**4. Spiritual renewal.** If this has been a difficult year for you or someone you know, you can expect this: without renewal in Christ, the holidays will almost certainly not make a good year bad. So we do well not only to pray "defensive" prayers against what godless circumstances that surround us, but to go on the offensive in prayer. Ask the Lord to make this season the best of your year in terms of spiritual refreshing and growth. Again, ask him for a harvest of fruit in this season—fruit in your own life and fruit in your relationships with others. Now is the time to make investments in heaven, where our stored treasures last.

#### INTERCEDING FOR THOSE IN NEED

Finally, we must become intercessors for those who need the love and mercy of God. If you are unfamiliar with the function of intercession, it is simply this: to form a bridge from one person to another. Scripturally, we are told that both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit intercede for us before the throne of God. In fact, Paul wrote to the Roman believers that they would find times when they could not express themselves to God. In this hour the Holy Spirit would intercede for us "through wordless groans." Obviously, our sin demands such intercession, for in our unholiness, there is a gap between us and God. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross bridges this gap.

But Scripture also establishes that we may pray for others, bringing them

to God's throne, in the same way that we confidently approach that throne ourselves. Paul asked expressly for prayers that he could not carry alone: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me" (Romans 15:30). To the Ephesians, he wrote, "Keep on praying for all God's people." And most specifically, we find the work of intercession in Paul's letter to his beloved protégé, Timothy: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people."

Intercession is love played out in prayer.

To intercede at this time of year, take on these three practices:

- **Be specific about names.** You don't buy gifts for "the world" or your "family." You buy gifts for specific individuals. Pray in the same way, taking time to remember people one by one.

- **Be specific about these people's needs.** Again, this is about attentive concern. Yes, God knows what these individual friends need. But there is great value in taking the time in prayer to express to God their specific needs, because this softens your heart for the hours you spend with these people; your conversations with them will carry the spirit of your conversations with God about them. Again, slow down and pray well, emphasizing spiritual needs—from salvation to mature holiness—as you pray for your individual family members, friends, and colleagues.

- **Be specific about the needs of the season.** We have spent time reviewing the evil that arises during the

holidays, as well as considering the godly characteristics that we want to pray into place. Keep these in mind as you pray for others. For instance, you may pray, "Lord, my friend is facing her first year without her husband. This can be such a difficult, depressing time. Won't you please touch her heart, filling her loneliness with a strong awareness of your great presence? Bring her joy in the midst of her mourning, and allow her to come out of this season praising you more than ever."

A simple, effective practice you can implement is to print a calendar of the season and write the name of one family member or friend on each day of the calendar (of course, you

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may do the same thing in your mobile device or tablet). Each day, take that attentive, concerned time to pray for this friend. Make it your most important gift to your friends this season. If you send personal Christmas cards, you may also add the note "praying for you this season," which can provide the spark for a conversation the next time you meet.

**I**N CONCLUSION, WE OFTEN LAMENT THE disappearance of Christmas from the commercial outlets in our local malls. But the spirit of Christ never resided in these "Christmas sales" or even "Christmas trees" as it was. The spirit of Christ resides in those who are committed to him and who bear his name. By our prayers and our prayer-fueled living, we have opportunity to render this spirit in the three great traits of the season—joy, love, and peace. As words and as wishes they are little more than sentiments. But in the people of Christ, they are the expressions of his life in us. Let us live that life as shining lights in this season and every season onward.

*Author's notes: The seeds of this article were sown more than 15 years ago with my friend, Keith Cappelluti, who deserves a note of thanks here. For those looking for an outstanding prayer resource when praying for children and grandchildren, allow me to recommend Lord, Bless My Child, by William and Nancy Carmichael.*

Jeff Hopper is COO and resource editor for Links Players International. Information about this ministry may be found at [www.linksplayers.com](http://www.linksplayers.com).

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