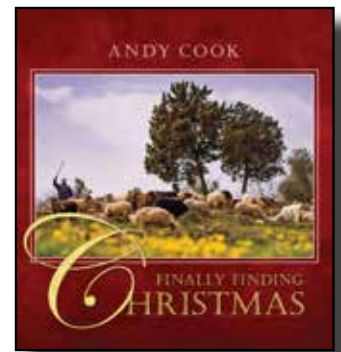


Twenty-Five Ways to Finally Find Christmas

In Andy Cook's book, *Finally Finding Christmas*, Jim and Sarah Ricketts come home from Israel with a renewed passion to enjoy Christmas. Perhaps you, too, are looking for practical ways to keep Christ at the center of the holiday season. Here are 25 ways to keep the Bible's message of hope at the center of your own celebration and to bring joy to others. Perhaps this list will help you brainstorm other ways to turn this Christmas into the most joyful season you've ever known!



Build a "Coke-crate" countdown calendar.



Here's an awesome way to bless your family or another family with children at home. The investment of time is high in the

beginning, but the annual payoff is priceless. You're about to give a family you love 24 reasons to remember your generosity every year!

First, find an old-fashioned, wooden soft-drink crate. Designed to hold 24 bottles, these antiques are perfect for a 24-day countdown to Christmas.

You'll also need to find some small white boxes with removable lids from a local craft store. Print out the numbers 1 through 24 in a font size large enough to fit on the narrow end of each box. You'll also want to print out a biblical Christmas phrase letter by letter, for the opposite narrow end of each box. A phrase like, "UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN" works well.

Inside each box will be a Bible verse related to the Christmas story and a family activity. Use your imagination and the Internet (search for "family Christmas fun,") for ideas. Some of our favorites include decorating dad



Using an old soft-drink crate, you can make an unforgettable countdown calendar. Inside each box are scripture verses and activities. This project requires a lot of preparation, but it can be used year after year!

or another adult like a Christmas tree, handing out candy canes to retail clerks, making Christmas cookies for a neighborhood fire department and making a birthday cake for Jesus. If you're getting this ready for another family, there will be times when you can request a video phone call or cell-phone photos so you can see the results and join in the fun.

On the first day of December, children will open the first box, follow the instructions and then *turn the box around*. A key Bible verse will be unveiled day by day in your Countdown Crate.

It is imperative that all ingredients for the family activities be included in the gift. Use a big box or large leaf bag with each activity grouped in an easy-to-find way.

Yes, it's a lot of work. But imagine the impact! Families already struggling to find time together will almost be guaranteed of spending a few minutes together each day in the 24 days leading up to Christmas. In addition, they'll be telling the story of Jesus with each day's Bible verse and the message on your countdown crate.

Each element of the countdown crate is reusable. You'll want to refresh ideas and craft materials each year.



Adopt a family ministry project.

Got adult family members in your life? Raise money for a need in your community or your family's circle of friends. Do this *instead of* buying gifts for one another. You'll provide real help for a needy cause and build bonds in your family. Know of a family whose home has been damaged by fire, tornado or hurricane? They probably need help in rebuilding. Or what of individuals battling disease or unemployment? The ministry opportunities are all around you!

Support someone in full-time ministry.

Know of someone who's in full-time ministry without full-time financial support? Decide what you can give on a monthly basis and let your friend in ministry know about your decision to provide year-long assistance. Who are these ministers? People serving in Africa or your own community, perhaps. Don't forget about seminary students. Are they not ministers in training? Whoever you support, they'll never forget your kindness.



Volunteer at a local ministry.

All around you are opportunities to help feed the hungry, house the homeless and encouraged those who are struggling in life. You might be aware of a local pro-life ministry, prison ministry or an organization like Habitat for Humanity.

Do the homework, make a choice and ask how you can help in January, February and March. Who knows? You may have just given yourself an amazing Christmas gift!

Give a dinner date to young parents.

To be clear, the couple will have the dinner date. You'll keep the children! To make it really special, provide some money for the dinner and/or a movie. If you've been dreaming up craft ideas for the Coke-Crate countdown, you'll even have some neat activities for the children!





Read a Christmas book to children.



There are countless age-appropriate Christmas books available in bookstores and libraries. Yes, many of the books have secular themes. But you can choose some with biblical themes and concepts, too.

If you're not used to children in your lap as you read, you'll fall in love with the idea very quickly. But be prepared ... one book is never enough!

Send a card of thanks to a minister.

Got a pastor, associate pastor or small-group leader who has impacted your life in a positive way? Give a gift to both of you. Write a letter, telling him or her how he or she has made a difference in your life. Ministers get plenty of negative feedback. What a gift a hand-written letter of thanks is ... at any time of the year!



Send someone else a hand-written letter.



Who in your life needs a letter? All around us, there are friends and family members in prisons, on deployment, in nursing homes or recovering from surgery. Yes, you could text some of them. Yes, you could e-mail them. But there's nothing that says "Christmas" like a hand-written letter for the holidays.



Pay for someone's lunch or dinner.

Go out to eat at your favorite restaurant. See an individual, couple or family enjoying a meal? Make it even more enjoyable by anonymously paying for their meal! Just ask the waitress or waiter to explain they've just been given a Christmas gift. More than likely, they'll pass the gift along to someone else!

Hand out some Christmas cash.

Put a \$20 bill in five different envelopes, or a \$10 bill in 10 envelopes. Carry the envelopes with you during December. When it's time, give one of the envelopes to a waitress, your mail carrier or the first tired retail worker you see. Smile as you hand out the gift, being sure to add a "Merry Christmas" blessing with it!

An alternative to this option is to buy a few \$10 gift cards to a local fast-food restaurant. Everyone gets hungry during December!



Ask for ministry as your gift.

Got some folks buying you a gift this year? Why not make it really hard on them and ask them to spend an hour in some kind of ministry in your honor. All you want, you'll tell them, is a selfie photo and the stories!

Read part of the Christmas story every day.

You can find several plans on the Internet that range from a day to a full month of readings. Here's a suggestion for a seven-day plan:

Sunday: Isaiah 7:13-14 and Isaiah 11:1-10

Monday: Luke 1:1-25

Tuesday: Luke 1:26-38

Wednesday: Luke 2:1-21

Thursday: Luke 2:22-40

Friday: Matthew 2

Saturday: Luke 2:41-52



Set up a nativity scene.

At home, at work or in your church, a nativity scene is a silent reminder of why there's a "Christ" in "Christmas." They come in sizes big and small. The figurines can be simple or exquisite. No matter where you put it, a nativity scene will speak volumes to others about your Christmas priorities.





Go caroling!



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Bring a little Joy to the World on a Silent Night in your own neighborhood. Know who would really appreciate the short, front-door visits? People who can't get out at night. Pick three or four songs, maybe 10 friends (with at least one good singer in the mix) and make your rounds from 6-7:30 p.m. Then grab a meal together in the home of someone in the group and celebrate the good time.

Take children on a ministry visit.

Been to a nursing home lately? It can be a dreary place. Nothing brightens the hallways like a child or two. Want to teach children how to be in ministry? Teach them a song to sing for the residents. Ask them to make Christmas cards (you'll need to help) or simply color a drawing as gifts for those you visit.



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Attend a Christmas Eve church service.

Mark it on your calendar. Invite someone to go with you. Take the whole family! Here's a scheduling hint: It'll probably be on December 24!



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Schedule a "story hour" of memories.

Turn off the TV, stop the social media and tell your favorite Christmas stories. Try it at your next family gathering ... but be prepared for the one-hour time slot to go into overtime.



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Make a gingerbread house!

This works best as an activity with children, but who wouldn't like a house made of graham crackers, icing, gumdrops, peppermints and candy canes? The Internet is filled with great ideas and recipes. And by the time it's over, all your house-makers are filled with gumdrops!

Have a cookie-decorating contest.

Whether you're hosting a house full of adults or a room full of children, this will keep a group busy, happy and talking for half an hour or so. Make the cookies in advance and get all the decorating ingredients ready. You'll want icing, sprinkles and small candies on hand. Encourage creativity and have some extra cookies around. Otherwise, the temptation to eat the artwork will be overwhelming!



Give a gift to your local heroes.

Speaking of cookies, there's not a firehouse or police station in the world that wouldn't appreciate a tin of Christmas goodies. The same goes for the staff at your church, the teachers at the nearest school or the guards at a nearby military base. Be sure to leave a note of thanks with your gift!

Prepare dinner for another family.

Perhaps this would be a senior adult couple, a minister's family or a family dealing with a special challenge. Look around you ... who would appreciate a home-cooked meal this Christmas?



Give a gift to Jesus.

This works best if everyone in your household participates. Write down something you're going to do as a follower of Jesus in the coming year. Put the promise in a gift bag or a wrapped box with the other gifts in your home. At some point on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, open your gift to Jesus and share with others what that gift will be. Perhaps you'll read the Bible every day. Perhaps you'll keep a devotional diary. You could jot down your intention to volunteer in a particular ministry, create a healthy habit or join a small group at your church. Sharing your intentions with others will help you actually do what you've promised ... and that will be a gift to both you and Jesus!

Shut it all down for a complete day.

Christmas is notorious for being a busy, noisy season of the year. So mark one day on your calendar where you'll watch no television, take no phone calls, visit no social media page or watch any news reports. Instead of finding that there's nothing to do, you might find that taking a long walk, reading a book, visiting a neighbor or grabbing a nap is actually a lovely way to spend the holiday!



Read the Christmas story on Dec. 24.

Nothing says Christmas quite like Luke's account of the events. Reading Luke 2:1-20 in your home on Christmas Eve, just before bedtime, will help children of all ages remember the greatest gift ever given, and why we're all celebrating.



Have a ministry plan for Christmas Day.



What can you do on Christmas Day that would help you and others remember whose birthday we're celebrating? If you're traveling to a family event, serving food, clearing tables and washing dishes with a joyful attitude is certainly one way to model the way Jesus served. If you're near a site that serves meals to the hungry on Christmas Day, perhaps that would be an option. The point? Don't let Christmas Day be an afterthought. Plan now to do something meaningful. Serving others just might be the best gift you receive this Christmas!