

Years ago, my friend Libby and I gave a talk at Ozark Conference Center called “Traditions – Tried, True, and New.” We compiled a list from many of our friends on “Everyday and Special Day” family traditions. I have continued to add to this list and want to share it with you to jump start your thinking. Some of the traditions incorporate spiritual truths, some foster family togetherness, and some are just for plain ole family fun and memory making times.

### **Traditions – Tried, True and New**

Here’s a smorgasbord of everyday, birthday, and holiday ideas we gathered from several families. Some of the ideas are free, and some take a little planning and effort. They all provide for family togetherness, special memories, and teachable moments of recounting God’s faithfulness throughout the generations. Obviously, you cannot try all these ideas, but we hope they will motivate you to think about how you can establish your own family traditions.

#### **Everyday Traditions:**

- We have a “Do unto others” plate that we put at a family member’s place at random. Whenever it is your turn to have “the special plate,” each family member shares what they appreciate about you.
- Pajama Run – on a “nothing special” night after the kids have their pajamas on and are tucked in bed, but not asleep, we will announce “Pajama Run!” and head to Sonic for ice cream.
- We have a special song for each child that has been “their song” we sing to them at bedtime.
- We have family devotions and prayer after the evening meal.
- We eat hotdogs and s’ mores during the first fire of the season in the fireplace.
- Make snow ice cream when it snows.
- Daddy/Daughter dates – Daddy calls up daughter and “asks her out.” It’s a special time for the two of them and helps the daughter learn how she should be treated. (Daddy opens car door, etc.)
- On each child’s 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, as they are entering the young adult years, we give them a piece of jewelry to wear as a reminder of God’s standard of purity.
- A date night with Daddy the night before they start kindergarten
- Nanee gathers other family members into her kitchen to pass down the skill of making a Norwegian family recipe called lefse.
- Grandparents plan time with grandkids one at a time, so they can have special time with each one.
- When kids are young, they get to take turns sleeping in bed with Mom if Daddy has to travel for work.
- Grandma and Grandpa name their cars! Kids look forward to riding in “Fiddle de dee” (the name of the current vehicle) and seeing what kind of car toys are stowed in the back of the seats for them for the trip to grandparents.

- When kids and grandkids visit, we set computer's screen saver to slide show of various visits or trips. The kids enjoy remembering or guessing how old they were or where we were when the picture was taken.
- We print a photo album (usually just 4 pages of shots and captions) to take home after a visit to Doty and Big Daddy's.
- Tea parties with the girls – let the girls set the table and choose dishes.
- Grandma has a “NO WHINING” button that WORKS and wears it anytime grandkids visit!
- Grandparents have a mouse that is really a big mayonnaise jar with a skirt that hides treats for kids that finish their meal without whining.
- We have a play “mouse” that hides on a bookshelf or over a doorway that must be “found” before anyone can go to bed on the first night of a visit at the grandparents.
- Family Food – The menu requests never vary; at family gathering of any kind, we just pull out the recipes for Gammy's Rolls, Gammy's Green Beans, Gammy's slaw and Rommy Don's corn pudding. Doesn't matter what else we have or what the season –that's going to be on the table!
- A habit started early in marriage in an effort to focus on things other than the “issues that consumed us” was a long leisurely cup of coffee in the bedroom early in the morning. We made a determined effort not to talk about kids, work, problems, marriage, or money – but to talk about things that mattered beyond ourselves. We continue that habit today – 30 years later.
- In an effort to make the Sunday rush more manageable, when the kids were small we took them to IHOP on Sunday mornings. We took wet towels in a baggie, cleaned up the syrup, and dressed them for Sunday school in the car so the house would still be clean when we got home from church! Lunch would be ready in the crock pot, and then after lunch we could all take a nap!
- About three times a year we'd have a marathon family game – lasting three to five nights – something like Risk or hearts or spades where we could tally up the points and have a champion! We'd also have popcorn and dessert.

### **Vacations:**

- Surprise Vacations! Don't tell the kids your destination! They have had tons of fun guessing where we are going once we were loaded in the car.
- We had a big can that we would throw change in for family vacations. Kids enjoyed taking the big can to the bank and getting back “real” money. Then they would go through closets and drawers to find clothes and/or toys to take to the consignment store and would eagerly await the call to come and get the proceeds. We'd count up the money and plan the vacation accordingly. The kids seemed to enjoy being a part of the planning and the “sacrifice.”
- We always start off any family trip or vacation with a stop at Starbucks.
- We vacation with another family each year. Our children are close in age and we enjoy each others' company. We have many treasured memories together!

- Mom and Dad go on an Anniversary trip each year. It's good for Mom and Dad and teaches children the priority of the marriage relationship.
- We enjoy vacations at "family camps" like the ones at Ozark Conference Center.
- Each of our kids goes on a "10 year old birthday adventure" sometime in their 10<sup>th</sup> year. If a boy, then the trip is with dad; if a daughter, the trip is with mom.

### **Birthdays:**

We always serve birthday breakfast in bed. Breakfast is presented on a tray with the whole family gathered to sing "Happy Birthday." Mom and Dad always video the chaos.

- Birthday "spanks" by Daddy ('til about age 16) - Lots of laughter included.
- Birthday person chooses special dessert (not limited to cake) and it's served on a special plate.
- Birthday person gets meal of their choosing – either cooked at home or at restaurant.
- We use shaving cream to write a birthday greeting and decorate the yard on birthdays. It will last through the night and then is easy to wash away.
- During the birthday meal, each family member says something that they admire about the birthday person.
- Grandma and Grandpa take each child and a friend out to eat and shopping during week of child's birthday. Then birthday child and friend get to sleepover at grandparents' house.

### **Fourth of July:**

- Extended family from all over gather at Nanee and Papa's farm to spend several days together around the 4th. It's a time of reminiscing for the older ones and of letting the younger cousins get to know each other. Then on the actual day of 4<sup>th</sup>, friends join in the celebration for a huge potluck, games, and fireworks! We celebrate faith, freedom, family, and friends all on the 4<sup>th</sup>!

### **Thanksgiving:**

- Before the meal, we put each family member's name in a basket. After the meal, we pass the basket and each person draws a name of another family member. We go around the table and each person says what they are thankful for about the person whose name they have drawn.
- The week before Thanksgiving each child picks out a character from the Thanksgiving story (example: John Smith or Pocahontas) and then after the meal, shares with the family what they have learned about that person. Sometimes the kids have even dressed up like their character!
- On Thanksgiving we also share one thing we're thankful to the Lord for from the past year. After eating, we always take a walk. Then we come back for pie and games.
- With everyone around the table, we've traditionally made thin and crispy gingerbread cookies. Roll out the dough and cut in all cookie cutter shapes. We add mini M&Ms to accent on top.
- We invite foreign college students and/or shut-ins to our home for Thanksgiving dinner.

- We place three kernels of corn at each place setting. Before dessert, we pass around a small basket and each one tells three things they are thankful for as they place their kernels in the basket.
- We make semi-homemade rolls! Allow bag of frozen rolls to thaw in frig overnight. Roll in olive oil. Dock by snipping an x on top. Sprinkle Rosemary and Kosher salt on top. Rise and bake. Yummy! Makes a huge basket. My newly married daughter just baked and took rolls to small group dinner to carry on the tradition.
- I “googled” and found clean and corny Thanksgiving and turkey jokes and riddles on the internet. I printed them and cut them into individual slips of paper; then folded them and put them in a basket. The kids pull them out and read them as we are waiting for the turkey to cook. They are silly, silly jokes, but the kids love it.
- We each tell one thing we are most grateful for this year or something God has done in our lives this year. We do this before we eat the Thanksgiving meal. After dinner, we draw names for one special Christmas gift for one member in our family.
- I cut out fall leaves from construction paper and Thanksgiving morning everyone takes a leaf and writes down what they were thankful for. Along with the leaves I take pictures of our family at Thanksgiving and make a scrapbook of the yearly leaves of Thanksgiving and pictures from that special holiday. Whoever joins us for Thanksgiving makes a leaf. We also have a Thanksgiving journal that we leave out the month of November and each family member that is home writes in it regularly. We have done this for years and I have enjoyed reading back over the entries from previous years and seeing the Lord's faithfulness and provision.

### **Christmas:**

- We try to include all members of the family (believers and non-believers) in our Christmas Eve share time by having each family member share changes in their life over the last year. It's a non-threatening way for non-believers to participate and for believers to share what God has done during the year.
- Dessert on Christmas Eve is always a “Happy Birthday, Jesus” cake.
- All the kids sleep in oldest sibling's room on the night before Christmas. They put pallets on the floor and fall asleep to a movie.
- On Christmas Eve, we read of Christ's birth from Luke. We play games, eat finger foods and lots of cookies, and everyone gets to open one present. We hide a small pickle ornament on the tree with a small gift for whoever could find it first (German tradition). We also watch Christmas videos like “The Grinch who Stole Christmas” or “Christmas Vacation.” In the morning, we have a big breakfast and then open presents with lots of Christmas music. At about 2:00 or 3:00 we have our big Christmas dinner.
- We open English Crackers (decorated tubes with treats in them) as part of our Christmas fun.
- We read a Christmas book together during the month of December.
- When our girls reached college age, they announced that THEY were making Christmas dinner. Yummy! Hope that is a tradition that continues!

- Mom wraps a small box with twelve layers of different wrapping paper – one layer for each of the twelve days before Christmas. Between each layer of paper is a note with instructions for something for the family to do together. One activity might be to bake Christmas cookies; another note may say: “Go outside, look at the heavens, and sing “Silent Night.” Some other ideas are: take baked goods to neighbors, go Christmas caroling, act out the Christmas story, drink hot chocolate and watch “It’s a Wonderful Life.” You get the idea! Then on Christmas Day, when you unwrap the last layer of paper and open the box, inside is the baby Jesus from our nativity scene. Place Baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas morning.
- Always make dough ornaments together. This is childhood tradition that my husband and I began our first year of marriage to have more ornaments and we haven't missed a year since. Everyone has a baby Jesus represented on the tree and a cross.
- We make a paper chain with 25 links from red and green construction paper. On each link we write an attribute of Jesus with a corresponding verse. The countdown to Christmas begins on December 1<sup>st</sup> as we remove a link each day and read the attribute and verse about the Savior.
- Begin a jigsaw puzzle and leave it out for all to work on over the holidays.
- Papa reads the Christmas story from the Bible on Christmas Eve. The youngest reader in the family reads the story “A Very Special Night.” We sing a Christmas carol, and each family member (aunts, uncles, cousins and everyone) says what they are thankful for. We have a time of prayer and then open presents.
- We enjoy Christmas music, doing for others as a family, and spending time with friends. We also started having evangelistic Christmas parties for our neighborhood. Our neighbors hardly ever see each other, so they look forward to this time. My husband reads the Christmas story and weaves in the Gospel. Each neighbor brings an appetizer or Christmas cookies to share (They love bringing something.) and we play games. This was a step of faith for me but has proved to be a wonderful blessing. Several neighbors said they had lived in the neighborhood for 18 years and had never gotten together. We were challenged to do this through some friends - the wife shared with me that early on in their marriage, her husband came to her with the idea, and she thought he was crazy. They didn't know their neighbors at all. But they had an evangelistic Christmas party and from that night a church was born and is 1000 members strong now in Richardson, TX. I am looking forward to having our neighbors in this year.
- We go the Candlelight Tour of Homes and The Dickens Christmas Festival in our town.
- We join with another family to go to Branson for one night during the holidays. We bundle up and brave the cold at Silver Dollar City to see the lights, listen to the music, watch the Christmas parade, and see a Christmas show. Then we go back to wherever we are staying for the night and eat goodies and play games.
- We enjoy going to see our church concert each year and seeing the play “A Christmas Carol.”
- When the kids got older, we started going to a rustic cabin for the week prior to Christmas to get away from phone and cultivate the sense of “family” instead of busyness. It’s become a tradition we continue even now with grandchildren.
- Go on a treasure hike (red bows tied to bushes lead the way) for some hidden goodie.

- We have a Christmas clock that chimes a different carol on the hour. We use it to try to remember to pray for each other and the “season” each time we notice the chime.
- Nanee and Papa host a “Kids Christmas Party” the week before Christmas. Grandkids and their friends and parents come to eat “kid friendly food” (hot dogs, mashed potatoes, mac & cheese) and to hear the Christmas story shared. We have a “birthday cake for Jesus.” Each child brings a wrapped \$1.00 gift to exchange and a canned good to donate to missions.
- Listen to carols and decorate the Christmas tree together.
- Send a note to an older saint from church, offering to do some task for her as a gift. For example, you could offer to help decorate the tree or wrap presents.
- Attend Christmas Eve service together.
- When we decorate the tree and it's time to put the angel on top, we sing 3 verses of "Joy To The World" (with only the tree lights on).
- We always have warm chocolate chip cookies on Christmas morning.
- The day before Christmas, we go out to a restaurant with special friends and exchange gifts.
- We open new pajamas on Christmas Eve and then have pictures taken in front of the tree.
- We bake Christmas goodies with another family – some goodies to keep for the holidays and some to give away. After the baking time, both families go out for pizza.
- After we adopted our daughter, I realized that she wouldn't know any of the fun or serious Christmas carols that most almost-4-year-olds know, so I started singing them to her on her bed each night, with only her Christmas lights on. At first, one of the siblings sang with me, then bit by bit the older ones heard and trickled in. Now, each Christmas season, we sing in my daughter's room many nights, and whoever wants to join in can, of course. We sing it ALL --- from “Rudolph” to “Away in a Manger.” It's been a fun way for my adopted one to learn and to help her speech, and it gives the older ones a good excuse to sing the "little kid" songs! We've had tons of fun trying to remember all the verses of “Frosty the Snowman,” then ending with the beautiful harmony on the lullaby of “Silent Night.”
- When we have Christmas dinner with just our immediate family, each member of the family gets to pick a favorite dish for us to eat.
- We make it a “family together” event to pick out the Christmas tree.
- We put on Christmas music and everyone helps to decorate the tree. On Christmas Eve, we read from the Bible - the story of the birth of Jesus - and then we go to a candle light church service. We come home and open the gift of the name we drew for each other at Thanksgiving. I assemble my breakfast strata recipe and place it in the refrigerator. Christmas morning I (mom) get up before everyone and put the strata in the oven. We open gifts and then eat the strata.

- Our kids do jobs for us over the fall, like raking leaves, to earn money to purchase gifts for each of their siblings. They usually have around a \$10 limit per sibling which causes them to be thoughtful and creative in their shopping. It also makes them more appreciative for the gifts.
- When we decorate the tree, the kids put their baby ornament on the tree before any other ornament.
- “We always” have mom’s special recipe of cream cheese crescents for breakfast after stockings on Christmas morning.
- Preferably on Christmas Eve, but at least during the week of Christmas, we pile everyone in the car for the sole purpose of going to look at Christmas lights.

My prayer for you is that God would be the focus of your “Everydays” and your “Special Days” as you celebrate His faithfulness from generation to generation.