



DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

SPECIAL DAYS

PREPARATION

- Prepare for a game of *Pass the Parcel*: each layer of the present has a question for the group instead of a prize. Use festive music, eg *Upbeat Christmas songs instrumental* by BGM Songs Deluxe
- Source resources to make Christmas crackers: recycled craft materials, lots of kitchen roll middles, paper, tissue paper, twine, glue, scissors, plus slips of paper for the joke and gift
- Provide paper and pens for writing song lyrics
- Be ready to share some of the group's favourite Christmas songs, eg using YouTube or Christmas CDs

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Are you ambushed by expectations to celebrate? Dizzied by all the opportunities to engage in the preparations of Christmas? Or are you finding it all a bit tricky because life seems different now: family have moved away; the family has become smaller/bigger; or friends are distant or unwell?

How can we occasionally break from the glorious messiness and sometimes loneliness of Advent and ask ourselves or someone else, 'How are you doing?' How can we ground ourselves in the answers that come, celebrate the reality of and the reason for the season, and defy expectations!

ACTIVITIES

GAME

Play *Pass the Parcel* to some festive music eg *Upbeat Christmas songs instrumental* by BGM Songs Deluxe (link below). When the music stops, unwrap a layer to reveal the question and read aloud. Members can discuss as a group or with the person next to them. The idea is to get people learning a bit more about one another, finding shared interests or something to have a conversation about. Make sure there are enough opportunities for everyone to join in if they want to.

Here are some 'Would you rather?' questions. More ideas can be found on parade.com:

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- * Drink tea or coffee?
- * Holiday at the beach or in the city?
- * Enjoy the spring or the autumn?
- * Be a host or a guest?
- * Share your story or listen to someone else share their story?
- * Read a book or watch a film?

CRAFT

Show the group how to make a Christmas cracker: [Make your own Christmas crackers](#) by Zero Waste Club (link below). As well as a paper crown, here are some ideas to include in the crackers.

Christmas jokes

Surely everyone loves laughing - or groaning - at the Christmas cracker jokes! Encourage your group to keep cracking jokes while they make their crackers. Here are some more if you need them:

- * [Whychristmas.com](#)
- * [Goodhousekeeping.org](#)
- * [RD.com](#)

Gift

Crackers are famous for their small, often single-use (or useless!) plastic gifts. For the gift today, why not offer a gift of time, talent or skill. Encourage members to think about, suggest and put their name to a gift that someone else in the group might really appreciate. For example:

- * Some homemade or shop-bought festive treats.
- * The offer of a carwash or a lift somewhere.
- * A garden tidy up.
- * A coffee after church or during the week.
- * The offer of prayer or a listening ear.
- * A walk round the local park.

If there are children or young people in the group, consider some appropriate ideas for them too.

Thought

As the crackers are pulled maybe later in the session and the gifts and joyful offers are shared, remind the group that this family of God is creating an environment of care that can be the gift that keeps on giving into the New Year too.

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WRITE

Challenge the group, in small groups, families or individually - whatever their preference - to write a Christmas song to the tune of a favourite carol.

Encourage members in the song to think about Advent and Christmas as honestly as they can, including the challenges and frustrations of the season. However, the song must include a refrain celebrating the gift of God's love in the birth of Jesus, or should end with a line celebrating the real gift of Christmas - Jesus.

BIBLE READING/THOUGHT

📖 'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

(Matthew 1:21)

📖 'Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"'

(Genesis 3:8-9)

📖 'And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.'

(Ephesians 3:17-19)

📖 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!'

(Philippians 4:4)

As well known as the Christmas story is, one of the things we need to be reminded of is that God had a choice. He chose to become weak and human; he chose to come to earth as a baby with the purpose of showing humanity what he is like and being our redeemer.

We can decorate this truth with tinsel and twinkling lights, but the real gift of Christmas is that Jesus came to suffer and to die so that we can have eternity with him and be restored to a fully intimate relationship with him - the relationship that was shattered in the beginning when God then needed to call out to Adam and Eve, 'Where are you?'

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We can know without doubt that when we are suffering, grieving, feeling low, feeling lonely, feeling materially poor, that God has experienced those struggles himself.

The Christmas story is God himself leaving Heaven to save us. It shows us who God is and what Jesus was willing to do to create a way for all those of us in hiding to be found and covered in righteousness. It is the 'rooting and grounding' we need when we are tempted to believe that our peace and joy comes from other people, material goods and wealth and a big lavishly decorated Christmas tree.

As you get ready for Christmas Day, be aware of the times when you feel strong and confident, as well as the times when you are sad or are struggling and finding things more difficult. Remember your friends here in this group and the gifts and experiences you have shared together, not just during this session but throughout the year, as you have celebrated the ups and downs of real life with real people. The Christmas adverts might try to sell us an image of what it should be like; but we know differently - we know the gift that keeps on giving and we can 'rejoice in the Lord always'.

PRAYER

End with this prayer, reflecting the activities that have been enjoyed during the session. You can make it a responsive prayer with the words 'we celebrate' being said out loud by everyone - perhaps joyously!

Father God,

Unwrapping the layers of life that can stop us experiencing the essence of your love which makes sense of everything else ... **we celebrate.**

Being surprised again by the small, fragile, precious gift that makes no sense - a baby ... **we celebrate.**

May the joy in our hearts stand up defiantly to the worldly expectation of celebration; because while glitter and glow, lists and laughing, tinsel and turkey dinners are amazing, they can't say 'love' like you can.

As we embrace this Advent time in preparation to remember Jesus' birth, however we are feeling, help us to say ... **we celebrate.**

If we are grieving ... **we celebrate**

If we are excited ... **we celebrate**

If we feel lonely ... **we celebrate**

If we feel happy in a crowd ... **we celebrate**

If we are overwhelmed ... **we celebrate**

If we are tired ... **we celebrate**

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If we feel anxious ... **we celebrate**
If we feel peaceful ... **we celebrate**

May the times we choose to celebrate teach us something about you
and enable others to see you in us.

Thank you for Jesus.

Amen.

SONGS

- ♪ SASB 357 'Come on and celebrate'
Watch the [lyric video](#) by sanders2378, the [lyric video](#) by Chet Valley Churches, or the [brass instrumental video with lyrics](#) by Kelston Stanford Salvation Army
- ♪ SASB 14 'For the beauty of the earth'
Watch the [lyric video](#) by BBC's Songs of Praise uploaded by mkariobangi, or the [lyric video](#) of John Rutter's setting by Maylis Susan, or the International Staff Songsters [lyric video](#) of John Rutter's setting by lovegodand loveothers
- ♪ SASB 39 'Joyful, joyful, we adore thee'
Watch the official [lyric video](#) by Reawaken Hymns, the [lyric video](#) feat Collin Raye by Cassie Thompson, or the [instrumental brass lyric video](#) by Stotfold Salvation Army

WEBSITE AND CONTACT DETAILS

- Connect website: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/connect
- Family Ministries website: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/families
- Emails: familyministries@salvationarmy.org.uk
- Facebook: @sarmyfm
- Twitter: @ukifamily
- Instagram: safamily_ministries



Family Ministries

Having faith in the family

Providing intergenerational support, training and resources for

Children | Adults | Everyone