

2015 THRIVING FAMILY  
ADVENT CALENDAR

# tales

CHRISTMAS PAST

25 inspiring true stories  
of the season

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PAPER ILLUSTRATION BY GAIL ARMSTRONG  
LINE ART BY DREW POZZA

—Parents' Guide—

# THANK YOU

for downloading "Tales of Christmas Past," the 2015 *Thriving Family* Advent calendar.

## ABOUT THE POSTER

If you already have a poster, this download includes all the components you'll need to use the Advent calendar.

If you've downloaded this and you don't have an Advent poster, return to the download page.

Assemble your Advent calendar by placing the calendar dates behind the border graphics on the poster, as per the directions found on the following two pages.



## ABOUT THE STORY BOOKLETS

For added fun, you can get single-page printouts to create a booklet library for each story by returning to the download page.

## WHAT TO DO

1. Starting on Dec. 1, read one story each day.
2. Encourage your children to listen carefully to determine which icon on the calendar matches something from the story. Once they find the correct picture, carefully remove that icon (or fold it out) to reveal the date.
3. After you read each story, your children can cut the matching picture from the Object Cutouts page and paste it onto the gray square at the top of each story.
4. At the bottom of most stories in the parents' guide, you'll notice a description for a short video or other extra that complements each story in some way. Visit [ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras) to find the links to these extras.



**Before showing these videos to your children, please screen them. Focus on the Family's links to these related videos do not imply endorsement of the videos nor the random ads associated with them.**

# Calendar Dates

These two pages include the dates needed to assemble your interactive Advent calendar. You'll be making a frame of numbers hidden behind the frame of icons on the poster.

Cut along dashed lines.

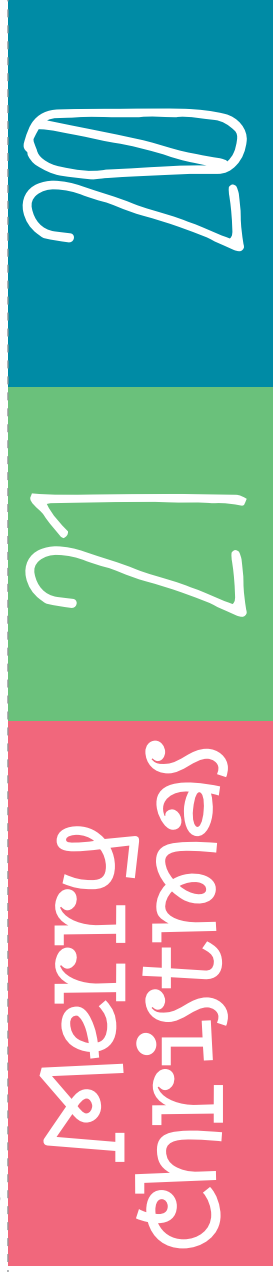
Glue or tape Rectangle A to the tab of Rectangle B to make a long strip.

Line up the top edge of the long strip to the top back edge of the poster.

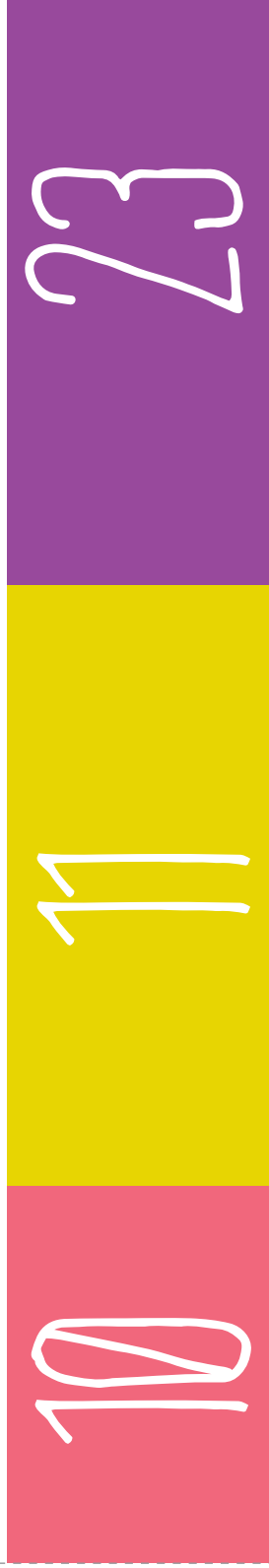
Glue the lower edge of the strip to the back of the poster.



Rectangle A



Rectangle B



Rectangle C



Glue Rectangle C to Rectangle D to make a long strip.

Line up the bottom edge of the long strip to the bottom back edge of the poster.

Glue the top edge of the strip to the back of the poster.



Rectangle D



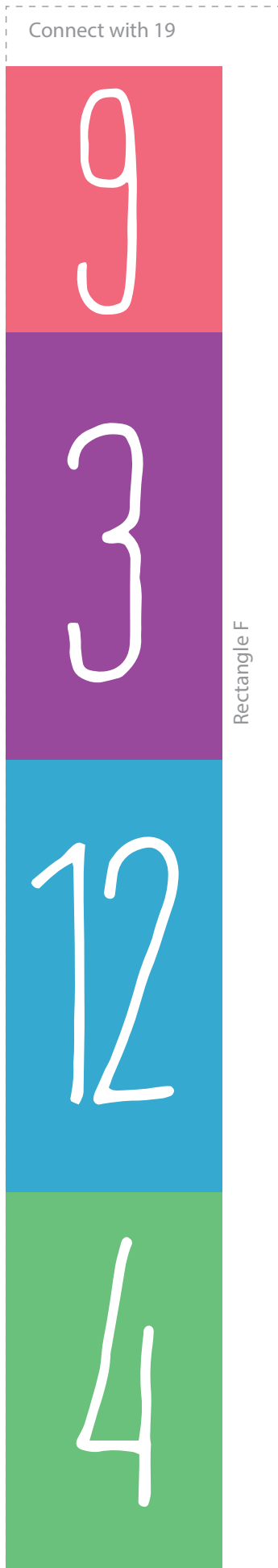
Rectangle E

Cut along dashed lines.

Glue Rectangle E to Rectangle F to make a long strip.

Line up the left side of the long strip to the left, back side of the poster.

Glue the right edge of the strip to the back of the poster.



Connect with 19

Rectangle F



Rectangle G



Connect with 24

Rectangle H

Cut along dashed lines.

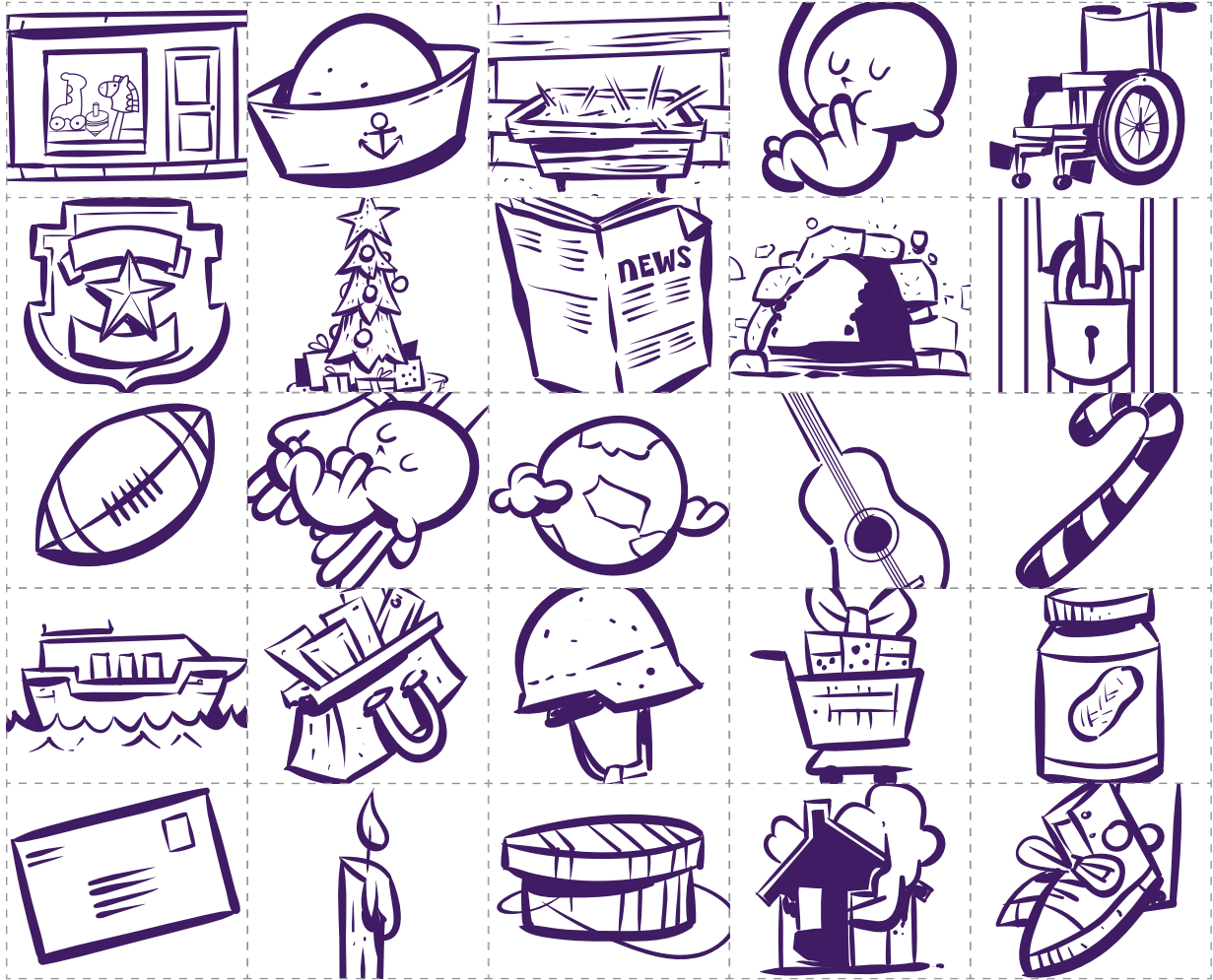
Glue Rectangle G to Rectangle H to make a long strip.

Line up the right side of the long strip to the right, back side of the poster.

Glue the left edge of the strip to the back of the poster.

# object cutouts

**JUST FOR FUN:** When the day is completed, cut out the object for that day and paste it on the parents' guide page.



DAY 1

Genesis 1:1-10

## In the Beginning

**Can** you imagine spending Christmas Day floating around in space? In the years since the beginning of the space program, a few astronauts have had the opportunity to celebrate the holiday while in orbit around Earth. Christmas in space looks different than what might happen in your home. Astronauts may eat turkey for dinner, but it arrives in a plastic pouch, not on a platter with all the trimmings. And there's not much room for a tree, although in 1973, astronauts aboard Skylab 4 wired together some empty food cans to create a crude Christmas tree. Modern astronauts have been able to bring aboard a few simple decorations, including a fireproof fabric "tree" that attaches to a wall like a poster. But gifts are rarely exchanged. Everything on a spacecraft has to be tested to make sure it isn't too big, too heavy or doesn't have an odor or chemical makeup that would harm the astronaut's tiny, delicate living environment.

The first Christmas in space was during the 1968 Apollo 8 mission. This was a big moment for humans in space: For the first time, humans would fly over the surface of the moon. And for part of that orbit, the astronauts would transmit radio and video back to Earth. This special transmission would be heard by the largest audience ever to listen to a human voice.

"Do something appropriate," NASA told the three astronauts, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders.

They talked it over. It would be Christmas Eve, but they knew that reading from the Gospel of Luke wouldn't work. Not everyone on Earth listening would be celebrating Jesus' birth. But there was something that would translate to the world's different religions and cultures: the belief that God made our world. So as part of their broadcast, the astronauts read the account of the creation of the earth, as told in the first 10 verses of Genesis.

As the astronauts orbited the moon, they were treated to a breathtaking view of Earth from the farthest distance that any human had ever traveled. Bill Anders, who had been trained to capture high-quality images of the moon, began snapping pictures of Earth rising from the horizon of the moon. His famous photograph "Earthrise" gave humanity a new perspective on their planet. Pilot Jim Lovell later said that the whole experience was like rediscovering Earth, even though their mission had been to learn about the moon.

Astronaut James Irwin, who flew on the later 1971 Apollo 15 mission to the

moon's surface, wrote about that unique perspective on our world:

You can see the Earth like a beautiful, fragile Christmas tree ornament hanging against the blackness of space. It's as if you could reach out and hold it in your hand. . . . I felt I was seeing the Earth with the eyes of God.

### extra

Watch a portion of the PBS documentary that tells the story of the first Christmas Eve in space.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/adventextras)

DAY 2

Romans 8:38-39

## Is Jesus Still Here?

**In** 2013, a wildfire started in a dry field near the Black Forest area outside Colorado Springs, Colorado. Dry winds and record-setting heat stoked the flames, and within a few hours the fire raged out of control. Towering flames swept through neighborhoods and wooded countryside. Before the wildfire was contained, it burned more than 14,000 acres and destroyed 486 homes. The Black Forest Fire was the most destructive wildfire in Colorado's history.

Ted Robertson's home was one of those destroyed in the fire. When Ted returned to his family's property after the fire, he was shocked to see how little of the home remained. The house had burned completely down to its foundation. The brick fireplace and metal water heater stood like lonely towers in a wasteland of ash and rubble. As he picked his way through the wreckage, Ted found the remains of his family's possessions—blackened kitchenware, a twisted metal bed frame, a porcelain doll's head dusted in ash.

But on this summer afternoon, Ted actually had Christmas on his mind. Years earlier, his wife, Teresa, had made a ceramic Nativity scene, complete with shepherds, wise men and animals in the stable. The crown jewel of the set was a

tiny, detailed figurine of the baby Jesus. The Nativity scene had become a treasured part of their family Christmas celebrations, but in their rush to leave the house before the fire swept through their neighborhood, Ted and Teresa had been unable to take the Nativity set with them. And so now Ted sifted through the blackened remnants of their home. *Is Jesus still here?* he kept wondering. Oh, how many times have we all asked that same question amid the pain and loss of life, in those times when it seems that God is silent.

In a corner of the concrete slab where the garage used to be, Ted Robertson finally found the charred remnants of the Nativity scene. And buried deep in ash on the old garage floor, he found the tiny figurine, undamaged by the fire that had caused so much destruction.

Ted believes that finding the Jesus figurine in the rubble was the first step in recovering from the pain of the fire. "We've gone from apprehension to hope," Ted told a local news station. "We're going to recover some parts of our life that we thought were lost."

And isn't that the real hope of Christmas? In the darkest of times, Jesus is always there.

### extra

Watch video clips from Ted's search of his burned home.

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# The first Christmas flight

**Can** you imagine a world without airplanes? That's how it was on Dec. 17, 1903, as two brothers prepared to test their "Flyer" machine. Wilbur and Orville Wright had been experimenting with flight for years. In fact, their 1902 glider would later be recognized as the world's first steerable flying machine. But it could only glide on air currents. On this cold, windy morning a week before Christmas, the brothers were focused on a higher goal: to fly a machine that could take off from the ground and power itself through the air. The two had built a light-weight engine that could transform their glider into a self-powered airplane—if they could just get the machine off the ground. On their first attempt, the engine had stalled and the machine had crashed before takeoff, breaking the wing.

But this time the engine worked. At 10:35 a.m., with five witnesses present, the aircraft took off from a track and stayed airborne for 12 seconds, flying a distance of 120 feet. The brothers performed three more tests that morning, taking turns piloting. Their last flight was 850 feet—longer than two football fields!

What did Orville and Wilbur do after their exciting first flights? They shared the good news, of course! This was long before the age of mobile phones, or even the widespread use of regular telephones,

so the brothers walked into town—Kitty Hawk, North Carolina—to send a telegram back to their family in Ohio. The message gave details about their successful flights and said that the brothers would be home for Christmas. There was also a brief instruction: "Inform press."

You might think this would have been the front-page story of every newspaper in America. Humans had conquered flight! But most newspapers weren't all that interested. While there were a few brief reports, the historic event was mostly a nonstory. One editor was reported to have looked at the telegram and remarked, "How nice. The Wright brothers will be home for Christmas."

Why the disinterest? Most people at the time viewed human flight as the domain of dreamers and fiction writers. And other inventors had said they could fly. Why get worked up about yet another claim? There was also a general lack of understanding of flight mechanics and the significance of the Wright brothers making self-powered flight possible. At any rate, by the time the brothers sat down to Christmas dinner with their family, the story was mostly forgotten. Most people went about their usual Christmas celebrations without mentioning that the age of human flight had begun. It's

perhaps not too different from many modern Christmas celebrations, when we're focused on the little stories of the season—the shopping, the traveling, the cooking—and often neglect the truly world-changing news that God sent His Son, Jesus, as a gift to all mankind.

Eventually, the Wright brothers did get the recognition they deserved. After several more public flights, the Wright brothers convinced the world of the truth of their Christmas flight: They were indeed the first to successfully fly a powered airplane.

## extra

It looks like a backward airplane! Check out the Wright Brothers' Flyer machine in action.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/AdventExtras)



DAY 4

Psalm 139:13-16

## Life Is a Miracle

“I just want one thing,” the woman whispered. “If I’m still alive at Christmas, can I go home?”

Dr. Joseph MacDougall looked sadly at the woman in the bed. He knew the woman shouldn’t leave the hospital, but he promised that she could go home. It probably didn’t matter. He didn’t think she’d still be alive at Christmas.

In December 1947, tuberculosis was killing 23-year-old Eleanor Munro. When her husband had returned from World War II, he came home with an undetected case of TB. Having no immunity, Eleanor had contracted the disease. It targeted the lower lobe of her right lung—an almost impossible place to reach for treatment.

After several failed procedures, her doctors tried a risky experiment: use pressurized air to force Eleanor’s diaphragm (the main breathing muscle) up against the hole in her lung. If the diaphragm could press up into that hole, it could work a bit like a large bandage, sealing the hole and allowing it to grow back together. But when the operation nearly killed Eleanor, Dr. MacDougall was forced to tell her there was nothing else they could do for her.

“It’s in God’s hands now,” he told her, although he really meant, “We’ve run out of hope.”

Surprisingly, Eleanor did survive until Christmas—barely. Dr. MacDougall believed that the trip home would probably end her life, but he’d made a promise. With strict instructions not to hold her 1-year-old and to wear a germ mask when talking to anyone other than her husband, he released her from the hospital.

The following night, Eleanor returned, and her health continued to decline. Day by day, she moved a little closer to death. After several weeks had passed, though, Eleanor began to feel nauseous. She couldn’t keep any food down. These new symptoms seemed strange to Dr. MacDougall, and he wondered if the disease had entered its final stage.

“Maybe she’s pregnant,” a colleague joked.

They ran a pregnancy test. She *was* pregnant! Impossible! How could another life develop within a body on the verge of death?

Dr. MacDougall was sure that the woman’s body would reject the new life and that she would never live to see the baby. But she kept living. And so did the child within her. By June, she was getting better. Her fever went down. She began to gain weight. The TB cavity was no longer growing. An X-ray showed why: The growing child in Eleanor’s womb was causing her diaphragm to push up

against the lower lobe of her lung, sealing the hole. The baby was saving the mother’s life.

In early September, when a healthy baby boy was born, the hole had healed completely, and soon Dr. MacDougall released Eleanor from the hospital for good.

Years later, in his notes on Eleanor’s case, Dr. MacDougall wrote the following:

It does not matter if it never happens again. Indeed, it is not likely to happen again now that we have the drugs to cure tubercular cases like hers, but that’s not the point. It happened, and it happened, I’m convinced, because there is a force in nature, a wisdom, a balance, a mystery beyond man’s comprehension—and man should recognize and accept it.

I still remember with delight the Christmas cards she sent me for years. They were just ordinary cards, with the usual printed greetings and her name. But, to me, they were like monuments to a miracle of Christmas.

**extra**

“The decision lay with God.” Read Dr. MacDougall’s reflections on Eleanor’s miraculous journey through tuberculosis.

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## The Walk of Faith

Is there anything better at Christmas than a warm, wriggling puppy? Except something was wrong with this one. As Reuben Stringfellow looked at his friend's dog and her brood of puppies, he noticed that one of the pups had only two normal legs and one tiny stump of a third. It was clear the mother was rejecting this helpless puppy, knowing that the weaking wouldn't be able to find a place to feed. Reuben pulled the little dog from under the mother, wrapped her in his football jersey and brought her home to ask his mom if they could fix her. "No," Jude Stringfellow responded. "But maybe we can help her."

The puppy was nearly dead, but with warm milk and water, a comfortable bed and lots of love, Jude nursed the pup to health over the weeks of Christmas. Not long after the holidays, Jude and her family officially adopted the puppy from the owner, naming her Faith.

But the puppy still couldn't walk, only sort of push herself along the floor. Most of the time, Jude and her family carried Faith around, helping her into bed or down the porch steps to go outside. Jude took Faith to a veterinarian, who said the future didn't look good for the under-sized puppy. "Unless she learns to move entirely on her hind legs, she'll wear the front of her body down, perhaps even

wearing a hole in her chest," the vet told Jude. "I think you should consider putting this little doggie to sleep."

Jude refused to lose hope, and she took encouragement in the veterinarian's suggestion that Faith could possibly learn to move entirely on her hind legs. But had such a thing been done before? Could they actually teach a dog to walk upright?

It wasn't easy. Jude started by putting the front of Faith's body on a tiny skateboard, to let her get used to the idea that her two good legs really could power her about. There were some accidents along the way, but as those two legs grew stronger, Jude started using spoonfuls of peanut butter to encourage Faith to stand up. Then one day, after months of practice standing, Faith took a first, tentative hop on her hind legs. Her family showered her with praise—and another couple spoonfuls of peanut butter! Gradually, Faith learned to balance on two legs, leaping along at the beginning, but eventually putting one paw in front of another. It took six months, but Faith could finally stand up and walk on her own.

Faith lived for 12 years, and during that time, Jude and her family say they were always blessed by the dog's resilience and joy-filled spirit. She was the Christmas gift that gave every day of the year. Jude

decided to share that blessing with injured soldiers returning home from war. Jude and Faith made hundreds of visits to veterans hospitals. "Faith just walks around barking and laughing, excited to see them all," Jude told the Associated Press. "There is a lot of crying, pointing and surprise. From those who have lost friends or limbs, there can be silence. Some will shake my hand and thank me. There is a lot of heartfelt, deep emotion."

### extra

"Hey, that dog can walk on two legs!" See footage of Faith in action.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/AdventExtras)

## Good Gifts From Above

As a little girl, Lejla Allison had a life filled with love and laughter. But then came the reports: War was coming to Bosnia.

Lejla and her friends had never heard of war. What did it mean? They soon found out. Men went away to fight. Store shelves emptied. Rockets blasted buildings. Children were not always free to go outside and play. *War* became a very familiar word. It meant pain and poverty.

Lejla's parents believed she still needed to go to school, even though it was a long walk and their daughter didn't have the proper supplies. Her notebook had been filled several times already. Whenever she filled it, she would turn back to the beginning, erase the previous lessons and then begin writing lightly on the worn paper. Lejla's shoes were even worse than her notebooks. Filled with ragged tears, they offered little protection against the winter snow. Her dad had tried to repair the shoes with wire, and her mother covered her feet with socks and plastic bags, but the cold always crept in, and Lejla arrived at school with numb feet.

Then came a day that would change Lejla's life. It was a frigid morning in December, and Lejla pleaded with her mom not to make her walk to school. But her mom wrapped her feet again, telling

her daughter that education was very important. As Lejla walked to school, she grew angrier with every step. She hated reusing notebook paper and wearing shoes that were garbage. She hated war. She hated her whole miserable life.

As Lejla approached the school, she saw a group of children standing outside, holding colorful boxes. They seemed very happy. A boy told her that some foreigners were inside, giving out the boxes. "Go get one!" he said.

Lejla wondered why she needed a box, but she went inside and lined up. When it was her turn, an older man asked how old she was. "Ten," she replied. The man turned to a stack of boxes and handed Lejla a shoebox decorated with pretty paper. Could there really be shoes inside this shoebox? She sat down and unwrapped the box as quickly as she could. Yes, shoes! A beautiful pair of new shoes, in just the size she needed. She also found pencils and notebooks and some other small gifts.

Lejla began to cry. Who could have known to give her shoes? And new notebooks? She went back to the man who had given her the box. "Who are these gifts from?" she asked. "These gifts are sent from Jesus," the man replied. "He is the greatest gift."

That night, Lejla wrote a letter to this man, this Jesus, explaining her gratitude. At school, she gave the letter to the man who had given her the shoebox. "Can you give this to Jesus?" she asked.

The man explained to Lejla that Jesus already knew about every word she'd written. "Jesus is God," he said. "God's only Son." The man told Lejla that Jesus had come on Christmas long ago to save the world from sin. That day at school, Lejla invited Jesus to be the Lord of her life.

Today, Lejla lives in the United States with her husband and two children. Her family's favorite Christmas tradition? Filling shoeboxes with gifts and treats for needy children. Lejla knows firsthand that the love of Jesus—the foundational joy of Christmas—often arrives in small packages.

### extra

Watch a short film about Lejla's story.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)

## Boots on Patrol

As the busy holiday shopping season of 2012 was ramping up, New York City police officer Larry DePrimo was finishing his patrol in Times Square. He heard people giggling.

"Look at that guy!" someone said. "It's the middle of winter, and he's walking around barefoot!"

DePrimo looked over and noticed an elderly homeless man with no socks or shoes. He had large blisters on his feet. DePrimo could feel the bitter cold seeping through his own boots, even though he was wearing two layers of socks. He walked over to the man, bent over and asked him his name. "Don't you have any shoes?" he asked.

"It's OK, sir. I don't need no shoes," the man, Harry, replied. "But God bless you."

DePrimo then asked the man what size shoe he wore. He found a nearby Sketchers store. "I'd like to buy a pair of boots, something that will last awhile," DePrimo told a salesperson.

A few minutes later, he walked out of the store carrying a pair of all-weather boots, size 12. The manager of the shoe store had applied his own employee discount to give the cop a better deal on the pair of boots.

DePrimo handed the boots and a pair of socks to the homeless man, who was surprised at the officer's gift. "That's mighty nice of that cop," Harry later said. "Last time someone gave me new shoes, I think I was 10 years old."

The story might have ended there, with DePrimo walking back to his post and Harry trying on his new footgear. But a tourist had snapped a picture of the police officer as he knelt on the sidewalk to hand the boots to Harry. The picture was posted on the New York Police Department's Facebook page. After two days, the image had been shared more than 133,000 times and "liked" by more than 409,000 people. The tourist wrote on her Facebook post, "The officer expected NOTHING in return and did not know I was watching."

DePrimo was surprised by how his little act of kindness touched so many lives. People would often come up to him and say, "What you did inspired me to do a great thing for another person."

DePrimo feels humbled by the experience. He keeps the receipt for the boots as a reminder that it's worth it to do the right thing. "You see something like this, and you remember that people have it worse," he told the *New York Daily News*.

The following Christmas, DePrimo was promoted from street cop to full detective, but he will not soon forget his experience with the homeless man. "Everyone around the station now calls me 'Boots,'" he says with a smile.

### extra

Watch what happened when police officers in Lowell, Michigan, pulled over residents one snowy afternoon.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)

DAY 8

John 10:7-16

## A Shepherd's Cane?

**Who** made the first candy cane? Who thought to put stripes on it? Why does the modern version look like the letter "J" if you turn it upside down?

Despite being one of the most popular treats of the Christmas season, no one really knows who invented the modern candy cane. Still, there are some good stories. One fanciful tale depicts the efforts of a candy maker in the 1600s who was dismayed at a government ban on public displays of Christianity. To give local children a visual reminder of Jesus, he allegedly created the candy canes and the explanation that its shape, colors and other features represented different truths about Jesus. Another more widespread story tells of a German choir-master, back in 1670, who was worried that children attending the Cologne Cathedral's Nativity service would be unable to sit still. So the choirmaster asked a candy maker to craft white sugar sticks he could give to the children to keep them from fidgeting during the service. The choirmaster thought of shaping a hook on top of the candy sticks, like a shepherd's staff, to help the children remember the shepherds who had come with their flocks to visit the baby Jesus. The choirmaster is also said to have taught the children that the white stick was a good reminder of how Jesus, our Good Shepherd, lived a perfect life.

So are the stories true? Probably not. The first written references to candy canes come from the 1800s, so those earlier dates are likely incorrect. But there does seem to be some evidence that churches throughout Europe did indeed give candy sticks to children for Christmas. It isn't too much of a stretch to suggest that those candy sticks helped kids sit still during the long Christmas service. (There are plenty of adults who might have enjoyed that part of the service, as well!)

As for the hook—was it really meant to resemble a shepherd's staff? Perhaps, although there isn't any clear evidence. It's possible that the hook was added years later as a sort of bonus feature: so that children and parents could easily hang them on a Christmas tree.

While these stories probably aren't historically accurate, we can still look at a candy cane and remember the shepherds who visited the baby Jesus and consider the truth that Jesus himself is our Good Shepherd. And even if we don't have them during church anymore, we can all agree that candy canes make our Christmas celebrations just a bit sweeter.

### extra

How do you make an old-fashioned, handmade candy cane? Stripe by stripe! Watch the painstaking process.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/adventextras)

## The Game-Day Train

As December 2004 wound down, there was plenty of bad news mixed in with the warm and fuzzy stories of Christmas cheer and hope for the new year. For Bennett and Vivian Levin, the stories that struck them most were of wounded soldiers coming home from war. The couple wondered how they could help. They recognized that the wealth they'd been blessed with couldn't bring back a soldier's leg or restore sight to a veteran blinded by shrapnel. But maybe they could still do something that would show love and support to these brave men. Something with . . . their trains.

Yes, some people own their own trains, and the Levins had quite a collection. In addition to two locomotives, the couple owned three historic railway cars, which had been restored with luxurious wood paneling, comfortable seating and gourmet dining facilities. As might be expected from a couple who owned their own trains, the Levins had a love for the history of railroads in America, and they wanted to restore an old tradition. Many years ago, trains carried important guests to the famous Army vs. Navy football game in Pennsylvania. The tradition came to an end in 1975, when the Pennsylvania Railroad company went out of business. Bennett and Vivian thought that the best way to revive the ceremonial trip would

be by giving wounded veterans this VIP treatment.

"We wanted to give them a first-class experience," Bennett told the *Philadelphia Daily News*. "Gourmet meals on board, private transportation from the train to the stadium, perfect seats—real hero treatment."

Bennett talked with other owners of vintage rail coaches, asking if they might lend their cars for the trip. Then the couple talked with the commanding general at different hospitals for veterans. Vivian contacted local businesses, who donated tickets for the best seats, right on the 50-yard line, along with a big lunch in a guest dining room at the stadium. Volunteers packed gift bags, filled with blankets, binoculars and football memorabilia. Each wounded vet was allowed to bring a friend or family member. But the Marines who participated declined to bring a guest, requesting instead that the seat be given to another Marine.

As the pieces of the project came together, the Levins established some rules. No media would be allowed. Politicians and even senior military officials were likewise not invited. The Levins wanted to avoid publicity, allowing their passengers to truly enjoy the train ride, with no pressure to pose for cameras,

respond to reporters' questions or adhere to military protocols.

On a cold day in December 2005, after months of planning, the Army-Navy Game Train was ready to ride once more. This time it featured steam locomotives and 18 vintage railway cars. It also had a new name: the Liberty Limited.

The project was a huge success, and the Liberty Limited made repeat trips in subsequent years. After that first train trip was over, Bennett admitted that he was a bit nervous to meet his guests that morning. "[But] they made it easy to be with them," Bennett said. "They were all smiles on the ride to Philly. Not an ounce of self-pity. . . . They were so full of life and determination."

### extra

Watch the story of Honor Flight, an organization that provides free airline trips to World War II veterans so they can visit the war memorials in Washington, D.C.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)

## The Hatbox Baby

**When** most children ask their parents about their birth, they hear stories of growing tummies and months of waiting—painting baby rooms, visiting doctors and nurses, and enduring the long hours of labor. And then the joy of new life, a precious baby to hold and love.

Sharon Elliot was 57 years old when she first learned the story of how she really arrived in her family.

“I want to tell you the truth,” her dying mother, Faith, said. And then she began to tell an extraordinary story:

On Christmas Eve of 1931, a couple named Edwin and Julia Stewart were driving across the Arizona desert on their way back to the Phoenix area after celebrating Christmas with family. As they crossed the cold, barren terrain, their car broke down. Ed grumbled a little and got out to take a look. Julia walked away from the car to stretch her legs.

She was about 150 feet from the car when she heard a sound that she couldn't identify. Was it an animal? When the wind calmed for a moment, she heard the sound again. Was that actually a baby crying? Julia called for her husband to come help look. They found a cardboard hatbox on the ground. Edwin nudged the box with his shoe, and a muffled wail rose into the desert air. He took

the lid off, and inside the box was a tiny, red-haired baby girl wearing flower-print pajamas.

They were both horrified at the discovery because it seemed to mean that a mother had abandoned her baby in the middle of the desert! The baby was cold and weak, and as soon as Edwin had gotten the car running again, they rushed her to the first police station they could find in Mesa, Arizona. The police chief took the baby to a nearby maternity home, and after a few weeks, a judge ruled that the baby would be put up for adoption. Several couples applied to adopt the little girl, but because of nasty weather, only two couples showed up to be interviewed. One of those couples already had a child, so the judge said that Faith Morrow and her husband would be the little girl's parents. The judge then ordered the adoption records to be sealed.

“And that's how you came to be my daughter,” Faith whispered, finishing the story.

Sharon was shocked. She had many questions, more than her mother could answer. She began to research her story. Sharon discovered that the story of “The Hatbox Baby” had once been quite famous. Every Christmas for years after the fateful night, newspapers around

the country would retell the story, marveling at the miraculous odds of the Stewarts' car breaking down so close to the abandoned baby, and wondering what ever happened to the girl. As Sharon looked for clues, she became convinced that there was more to the story than the popular account. Was the meeting in the desert arranged ahead of time? Did the Stewarts perhaps even know her birth mother?

Today, Sharon is 84 and still doesn't have many answers. She told CBS News that she's OK with that. “It's so long ago—it doesn't matter to me,” she says. “I had a nice family. I grew up happy.”

And that, perhaps, is the only answer to this mystery that really matters: On a cold Christmas Eve long ago, a lost child was found and brought inside to the warmth and love of a family.

### extra

What happens when a mother doesn't want her baby? See the story of the humble pastor who takes these children in.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)

DAY 11

Isaiah 25:4

## The Great Christmas Rescue

**“Captain,** the enemy has started attacking Hungnam.”

Capt. Leonard LaRue looked out from the bridge of his cargo ship, the *S.S. Meredith Victory*, anchored off the port city of Hungnam, Korea. In the distance, he could see fiery explosions followed by towering billows of smoke. The *da-boom* of nearby cannon fire rattled the hull of his ship. He wasn't a military officer, but he knew that the tide of this war had turned.

Communist troops from North Korea and China had overwhelmed U.S. forces and their allies, forcing them to withdraw to the south. As enemy forces closed in, Korean civilians fled their homes, hoping to escape death or capture. Thousands of refugees gathered at the docks, desperate to get aboard any ship that was leaving. More than 190 ships were aiding the evacuation, but there were more people than military ships could carry. A radio request had come in, asking if any cargo ships could help in the rescue.

“Let's get to a dock and start unloading the cargo,” Capt. LaRue ordered. “Maybe we can get the rest of these people to safety.”

“Captain, there are well over 10,000 people down there. The other ships have taken all they can.”

“We must try,” LaRue replied. He knew it would be a dangerous mission. While the ship could probably handle the weight, it would be difficult fitting that many people aboard. And the accommodations were sparse. There were a few warm beds for the 12 crew members and a small supply of food and water, but nothing that could provide for the needs of all the refugees. They would have to be loaded into the cargo areas and onto the main decks, exposed to the freezing cold of late December.

As the crew unloaded their cargo of fuel and military supplies, they wearily watched the communist forces bombarding the city. U.S. battleships provided cover fire, but they didn't have much time. As night fell on Dec. 22, Capt. LaRue ordered his crew to start loading refugees. Using makeshift elevators, they lowered pallets full of people down into the cargo holds, crowding them in shoulder to shoulder. When the cargo holds were full, they filled the upper decks of the ship with more people. In all, 14,000 people came aboard that night, including 400 babies and children. They were only able to carry some clothes and a few scraps of food.

The following afternoon, the ship began chugging away from the harbor. After navigating through minefields and avoiding detection by enemy aircraft, the ship

arrived at Koje Island late on Christmas Day. There the crew unloaded the refugees. Despite the journey through the wet cold, the cramped quarters and the shortage of food and water, not a single life had been lost during the two-day voyage. Crew members actually unloaded more people than they'd loaded on: Five babies had been born on the trip.

It was, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, the greatest rescue by a ship in human history.

When the war was over and his ship decommissioned, LaRue joined the Benedictine Order of monks. In one of his writings, the former sea captain said, “I think often of that voyage . . . how such a small vessel was able to hold so many persons and surmount endless perils without harm to a soul. And as I think, the clear unmistakable message comes to me that on that Christmastide, in the bleak and bitter waters off the shores of Korea, God's own hand was at the helm of my ship.”

### extra

View a slideshow of pictures from Capt. LaRue's brave Christmas voyage.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)



## A Second Chance

**Shortly** into her marriage, Mary Kay Beard discovered a surprising fact about her husband: He was an expert safecracker. He taught Mary everything he knew, and their marriage soon turned into a bank-robbing partnership. When her husband abandoned her a few years later, Mary continued her crime spree by herself, using her shooting and safecracking skills to rob more than a dozen banks. It all came to a screeching halt in 1972 when she was caught by the FBI and sent to prison.

Locked in her cell with nothing to do, Mary began to read the Bible. She remembered the faith that her mother had tried to instill in her long ago. Mary recommitted her life to Jesus, praying that God might give her a second chance to turn her life around.

Mary spent six Christmases in prison. Every Christmas, Mary saw church groups bring the inmates simple gifts of shampoo, toothpaste and soap. During her first year, Mary was puzzled by how her fellow prisoners treated these simple toiletries. They organized the items, dividing them into little piles. They'd even trade with each other. "Anyone take two shampoo bottles for a tube of toothpaste?" they'd call out. Then the women would wrap each set in pieces of newspaper or scraps of fabric.

Mary soon understood. During the annual visitation day with their children, these women gave the small packages as Christmas gifts. The children would rip open each package and give their mothers a big hug. "Thank you so much, Momma," the kids would say.

Mary watched as each child's face brightened with joy. The gift itself didn't seem to matter. What mattered was that it came from their mother.

After her release from prison, Mary Kay worked at Prison Fellowship—a ministry to inmates. One of her first tasks was to start a Christmas program. She remembered the toiletries that prisoners gave their children. She knew there were many children who would be separated from a parent during the holiday. Mary wondered, *What if we could help prisoners give presents to their children?*

Mary and her team of volunteers visited prisoners to invite them to sign up. They called the caregivers of the children to make up wish lists. They then put a big Christmas tree in a shopping mall and encouraged shoppers to buy presents for these kids. Someone had the idea to put the children's names on paper ornaments shaped like little angels. Within a few days, all 100 ornaments had been taken from the "Angel Tree." So Mary visited more prisons, called more caregivers and put

up more angels. That year 556 children received gifts from their parents in prison. But it was only the beginning.

Since that first year, more than 9 million children around the world have received gifts from churches that participate in the Angel Tree program. What's more, those gifts have built many bridges between churches and families who have a loved one in prison, giving churches the opportunity to share the love of Jesus with those families.

Mary says the credit all goes to God. "I had no idea God could use me after the mess I had made of my life. But God is not limited by us in any way."

### extra

From crook to Christmas angel. See the story of Mary Kay Beard.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)

DAY 13

Luke 6:31;  
Proverbs 28:6

## Honesty Is Infectious

If there were any guy on the streets of Manchester, England, who could have used a special Christmas blessing that year, it was Alan Dent. He'd spent the last five years without a home, sleeping every night at a temporary city shelter. He earned a little money by setting up a chair on a downtown street corner and playing songs on his recorder. People walking by would put a few coins in the metal can sitting beside him, perhaps even stopping for a few moments to listen. At the end of the day, Alan would take his can full of coins to the bank around the corner to deposit them or exchange them for paper money. It allowed him to buy a hot evening meal and a few basic supplies, but it was hardly a comfortable living.

"I've just not had the best luck," the 69-year-old told the *Manchester Evening News*.

Then one cold afternoon shortly before Christmas, Alan noticed that someone had left a purse on the pavement near his coin can. It felt full. Was it a gift? A little extra Christmas generosity to a man down on his luck?

Probably not. Alan looked inside and found keys, tissues and a driver's license—along with a bank card and what looked like a good amount of cash. The bank

card was for the same bank where he took his coins, so he gathered up his things and brought the purse to the branch around the corner.

"I believe this belongs to one of your customers," he told the teller.

That customer was Sandy Sharples, a mother and insurance salesperson. She was overjoyed to get the call from the bank that her lost purse had been turned in, with the money—about \$100—still inside. And she was surprised to hear that the person who turned it in was the homeless man who spent his days on a nearby street corner.

"It has all moved me incredibly. A person who clearly needs money hands in money," said Sandy, who later gave Alan a reward for turning in the purse. "This lovely, kind gentleman has made me believe . . . in the Christmas spirit all over again."

But Alan Dent's larger reward may be knowing that his moment of honesty apparently became contagious. The *Manchester Evening News* reported that over the Christmas holiday and into the new year, police noticed a large increase in the amount of lost property being turned in to the city center. Police and TV reporters dubbed this phenomenon the "Alan Dent effect," noting that Alan's

famous act of kindness had likely inspired many in the city to follow in his footsteps. When told of the rush of lost property that had been turned in, Alan responded that he hadn't thought that his act was all that special.

"Wouldn't most people have done the same thing?" he asked.

Still, Alan was glad to hear of the increase in kind behavior. "Honesty is infectious it seems," he said. "It's very moving if more people are doing the right thing."

### extra

"It wasn't mine!" Watch two more stories about the infectious quality of honesty.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/AdventExtras)

## Wheels for Lauren

**When** little Lauren Gross came into the world, there wasn't much hope for her future. She was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), and doctors said she wouldn't survive more than two or three years. But the doctors were wrong. Lauren grew up in a loving home and began to do many of the same things that other kids do: She rode a bus to school, supported sports teams and joined school choir. At home, she enjoyed reading, listening to music and playing video games.

Lauren doesn't do all these things the same way you or I might do them. Because of her SMA, Lauren is quadriplegic. She lives most of her life in a high-tech wheelchair. She needs the help of a ventilator to breathe and a nurse to help with the tasks of everyday life.

But while Lauren's body is weak, her mind is healthy. She communicates and participates in school by using a special computer that she controls with her eyes. The computer has a camera that tracks where her eyes move. To type messages, she moves her eyes from one word or letter to another, blinking to make her selections. Her eyes are very fast! This computer even gives Lauren a way to play musical instruments and control her video game system.

In 2014, Lauren was a senior in high

school, and she had the same hopes and dreams as many of her classmates: to go to college and see more of the world. She also wanted to go to church more often and maybe attend a Chicago Bulls basketball game every once in a while. But transportation was a problem. There would be no school bus to take her to the nearby college, and she had in recent years found that public transportation was often unreliable for her special needs.

"What if we got a van?" she asked her dad one day.

It wasn't the first time the idea had come up, but Lauren's father, David, began researching the possibility again. Vans that could carry Lauren's wheelchair were quite expensive, and when he told his daughter the price, about \$50,000, they both knew that it wasn't in the family budget.

But Lauren would not be deterred. She started posting on Facebook, telling friends and family members about her recent acceptance at a local college and the need for reliable transportation. She then set up a page at GoFundMe, an online fundraising service. As the Christmas season arrived, donations trickled in. But Lauren was still a long way from her goal.

Word began to spread. One of Lauren's past caregivers contacted a family

member who was a newspaper reporter. He was honored to feature Lauren's story in his column. Shortly after the newspaper hit the stands, a reporter for a Chicago-area television station brought a crew to the Gross home and recorded a segment for an upcoming evening news broadcast.

Once the TV story aired, donations started pouring in. Within just a few days, the family had raised more than \$60,000, enough to pay for the wheelchair-accessible van, vehicle insurance and several tanks of gas. A week before Christmas, Lauren and her father picked up the van from the dealership. Her first trip? Her dad drove her around the parts of town known for their elaborate Christmas light displays.

David said that he was extremely humbled by all the gifts of love for his daughter. "[College] was her dream, and now she'll be able to realize it," David told local news station WGNTV. "We're going to keep going and enjoy every moment for as long as we can."

### extra

Watch the news report that led to all the gifts for Lauren's new van.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](http://ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras)

DAY 15

Matthew 5:13-16

## Let Your Light Shine

In the winter of 1989, Romania still suffered under communist rule. At night, lampposts stood like dead tree trunks on the roads and walkways. Indoors, one could only partially escape the dark cold of winter. Oppressive regulations approved by dictator Nicolae Ceausescu kept lights dim and concrete apartment buildings cold. Food was also scarce. Communist officials sold the best produce and meat to other countries in order to pay for their extravagant lifestyles, while Romanian citizens were given food tickets for a weekly supply of thin soup, spoiled vegetables and bread laced with sawdust.

But in the darkness of oppression, a light was growing. Pastor Laszlo Tokes led a church in the western city of Timisoara. His powerful preaching about the love of God filled his church every Sunday. When he began to speak out against the communists' abuses of different people groups, the government tried to intimidate him, stationing armed soldiers around his church to try to scare away churchgoers. Government-hired thugs broke into his home and attacked him and his wife.

The persecution did not silence Pastor Tokes, and communist officials knew they had to do more than just frighten him. He was too popular to execute, as they

had done to so many other opponents. So shortly before Christmas, officials decided to exile Tokes to the tiny village of Mineu, where he would have much less influence.

Pastor Tokes and his wife lived in an apartment above the church. When the police arrived to take Pastor Tokes away, they were stopped by a crowd of people surrounding the church. Christians from many different denominations and people groups had joined together in protest. They sang songs, linked arms and resisted the attempts of police to break through to the church. Word spread, and more people arrived in the courtyard around the church. When night came, a college student named Daniel Gavra took a package of candles out of his coat pocket and began to light them, passing them out to people near him. Other protesters brought more candles. When Pastor Tokes looked out his window later that night, he saw that the dark December night had been pushed back by the light of 1,000 candles.

A few days later, police brought more manpower and were able to force their way through the crowds. But the protesters knew that this was their chance for real change. They gathered again in the city square to begin a full-scale demonstration against the dictator. Once again, as night fell, they lit candles.

Ceausescu began to panic. The next day, he ordered troops to fire on the crowd. Hundreds were shot, and many were killed. Daniel Gavra, the student who'd lit the first candle, lost one of his legs. But the Romanians wouldn't back down.

Within days, the people of Romania, along with many former communists, had risen up to remove the brutal dictator Ceausescu from power. And for the first time in 40 years, Romanians celebrated Christmas in freedom.

### extra

See more of Daniel Gavra's story.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/adventextras)

DAY 16

2 Corinthians 4:6

## Unseen Wonders

**One** evening during December of 1879, a newspaper reporter walked briskly along the streets of Baltimore. It was a cold night, but the Christmas shopping season was in full swing. Shoppers bustled along the sidewalks, carrying bags and packages wrapped in brown paper. Store windows were aglow with beautiful displays of toys, gifts and colorful decorations. This man had little interest in the holiday's festivities—and he certainly didn't believe the season had any true significance. *A Savior born in Bethlehem? Bah, humbug!*

As the reporter passed a storefront, he overheard some children talking excitedly about the display. Something was unusual about this group, so he stopped to hear what they were saying. Two little girls were telling their sister about all of the wonderful items presented in the window. Toys, oversized candy canes, bright Christmas decorations. This girl was blind—presumably since birth—and her sisters were having a difficult time describing what was inside the glass case. The man was struck by their dilemma. He'd never considered how one might describe to someone without sight what something *looks* like—how to express colors and patterns to someone who had never experienced such things. As he walked away that night—his mind

buzzing with these questions—he had an idea for his next newspaper column.

As Christmas drew closer, this gentleman attended a meeting led by Dwight Moody, a well-known Christian minister. The reporter believed this minister to be something of a crooked salesman—spinning lies and false stories to attract audiences—and he wanted to catch him in one of these deceptions. But the reporter was surprised when Mr. Moody spoke about a newspaper story he'd read recently, a story about two girls trying to describe beautiful Christmas decorations to their blind sister. "That is just my position in trying to tell other men about Christ," the preacher said. "I may talk about Him; and yet they see no beauty in Him that they should desire Him. But if they will only come to Him, He will open their eyes and reveal Himself to them in all His loveliness and grace."

The newspaperman was so moved by the sermon—especially the part with the story about the three sisters—that he stayed after the service to speak with the preacher. "I was there!" the reporter told Mr. Moody. "I wrote that story. It's all true!"

As the room emptied, the two began to talk. The reporter confessed to the minister that he'd never understood the appeal of Jesus, but that he now wanted to

experience the grace and beauty that Mr. Moody spoke of.

He wanted to see for himself.

### extra

Watch an inspiring story of a girl's journey from darkness into light.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/AdventExtras)

DAY 17

Ephesians 2:13-19

## A Night of Silence

As darkness fell on Dec. 24, 1914, an eerie silence fell along a long stretch of the Western Front—the main fighting zone in France during World War I. No gunfire. No artillery. No rockets. Soldiers looked cautiously over the tops of trenches. Would there really be no fighting tonight?

As dawn broke, a song came drifting across the frozen battlefield. The British troops looking over the edge of their trench would have sung with different words, but the tune was familiar: *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht. Alles schläft; einsam wacht.* (Silent night, holy night. All is calm; alone and awake.)

German soldiers tentatively stood up from the opposite trench, holding their helmets high or waving small Christmas trees. “Merry Christmas!” some called across the field. “We no shoot, you no shoot. Agree?”

A day of peace? For Christmas? Battle-weary soldiers from both sides looked at each other in surprise, and then climbed out of their trenches and into the scarred battlefield that separated them. The men greeted each other, shared pictures, traded small gifts. In some sectors, men even played games of soccer, making do with the supplies they had at the time—an empty beef can as a ball, helmets and

uniforms as field markers. Others held burial services to say goodbye to friends who had been killed.

The informal truce spread across much of the Western Front, which wound across 400 miles of the French countryside. The truce didn’t last long—in some areas only a day or two, and in others until New Year’s. And while the level of friendliness varied, there are reports that nearly 1 million men were involved in the event.

Sadly, the momentum of this war was building, and each side’s leaders, upon hearing reports of the unofficial truce, forbid their soldiers from future visits with the enemy. The Christmas truce is often seen as a symbolic moment of peace and humanity amid one of the most violent events of human history.

### extra

Watch a dramatic re-creation of the World War I Christmas truce.

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DAY 18

Acts 20:35

## Letters from China

**Lottie** Moon couldn't understand why her cousin Sarah wanted to get on a boat and go to another country. "Are your parents making you go?" she asked incredulously. "Why wouldn't ya'll want to stay here?" She pointed toward her family's vast plantation. It was a lovely afternoon. A gentle breeze cooled the porch where the two girls sat. "Isn't this just the most beautiful place in the world?"

Sarah nodded. "I'm going to miss Virginia," she said. "But Dad taught us that Christians should take the Gospel to those who haven't heard it. He wants us to go to Jerusalem and help Jewish people understand that Jesus is the Messiah. And I really want to go, too."

Lottie fought back tears. "Why would you go all that way just to share some old fairy tales?"

Sarah sighed. "I wish you still recognized God's love, Lottie. But please, let's write. I want to know everything that's going on here."

"Yes!" Lottie promised. "I'll write every week!"

Lottie did write her cousin, but she continued to reject the truth about God. But in college, Lottie attended a church

missions meeting that changed her mind. Lottie told her friends she would go to the meeting for a bit of fun, but she walked away knowing that she needed Jesus to lead her life and that she wanted to help others know Him. Lottie worked as a teacher for several years, but she was eventually accepted by a missions organization to go to China. She would work as a teacher, near where her sister Edmonia served.

When she arrived in China, Lottie learned that the life of a missionary was often very strange—and very difficult. She didn't understand the Chinese culture, and it took much effort to get past the people's natural distrust of foreigners. She started several schools, teaching and loving the children as best she could. She made them cookies and talked to them about Jesus.

Lottie and Edmonia lived in very poor conditions, and there was too much work for their little team. Edmonia's health was suffering. Lottie learned that this was true for many other missions teams, and she wondered how she could help. She remembered the wealth and comfort of plantation life in Virginia, and how uncarving she had once been about missions work. Maybe people back home just needed to know what missionary life was really like.

Lottie began writing letters back to her home church. She explained how difficult life was for overseas missionaries. She asked for more people and greater funding. She encouraged churches to set up a special time every year, the week before Christmas, to give toward the needs of missionaries in the field.

The legacy of those letters continues to this day. Every December, the week before Christmas, Southern Baptist churches take up a special offering for missionaries around the world. Churches hold fundraising dinners. Children earn money through bake sales or birdhouses they've built. One year, these donations covered the cost of a house for a missionary family in Zimbabwe.

After 40 years of serving the Chinese people, Lottie Moon died on Christmas Eve, 1912. Through her life and her letters, American Christians were encouraged to remember every Christmas that it truly is "more blessed to give than to receive."

### extra

Watch how Lottie Moon's story continues to inspire Southern Baptist missionaries today.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/AdventExtras)

## A Tree Story

**If** you really think about some Christmas traditions, they seem kind of strange. For example, why do we chop down perfectly good evergreen trees and prop them up in our living rooms every Christmas? And yet can you imagine Christmas without a Christmas tree?

The custom has its roots in ancient times, long before Jesus arrived in Bethlehem. Evergreen trees and branches had been used to decorate homes during different winter celebrations for thousands of years. The evergreen branches reminded people that winter would not last forever. The sunshine and green trees of spring were coming soon. While many of these celebrations were pagan in nature, the central message of hope—that the bleak cold of winter would someday end—was probably why Christians began adapting the custom, to remind them that God rescues us from the dark and gives us eternal life with Him.

Many early Christmas trees were not really evergreen trees at all. Across northern Europe, people put small cherry or hawthorn trees into pots and brought them inside in the hopes that they would flower at Christmastime.

There were even early artificial trees, although they looked quite different from the modern plastic tree. Those who

couldn't afford a real tree made pyramids of wood and decorated them with paper, apples and candles.

The first documented use of an evergreen tree at Christmas and New Year's celebrations was probably in the town square of Riga, Latvia, in 1510. Not much is known about the tree or the ceremony, except that it was attended by men in black hats and that after the ceremony, they burned the tree! There is evidence that this tradition continued into subsequent years, with celebrations of singing and dancing around a large tree that was, as the night and year ended, set on fire.

Sixteenth-century German preacher Martin Luther may have added his own contribution to the tradition of the Christmas tree. As Luther was walking through the woods one night before Christmas, he looked up to see the stars shining through tree branches. He was so struck by the tree's beauty that he went home and told his children that it reminded him of Jesus, who left the stars of heaven to come to Earth at Christmas. Some historians have suggested that this contributed to the idea of adding candles to the branches of the Christmas tree. In many parts of Europe, candles are still used to decorate Christmas trees, although many people, of course, now prefer to use the less fire-prone electric

lights.

Whatever Christmas trees you come across this season, take a moment to appreciate their beauty, especially the warm glow of the lights. And may they remind you that the dark of winter does not last forever. Indeed, a real light has come into the world, a light for all mankind: Jesus!

### extra

Find out why hundreds of Chicago residents had to spend one Christmas without a tree.

[ThrivingFamily.com/AdventExtras](https://www.thrivingfamily.com/adventextras)



DAY 20

Deuteronomy 10:21;  
Exodus 15:26

## Life Is a Gift

**It** was early in the afternoon on Christmas Eve when Mike Hermanstorfer's 30-minute nightmare began.

He was at his wife's hospital bed, trembling with fear. Tracy wasn't responding. Mike took her hand in his. Her arm didn't move. Her skin was cold.

"Tracy, can you hear me?" Mike said. No response. The EKG machine told the only tale that really mattered at the moment: His wife's heart had stopped beating.

Hospital workers quickly sounded a "Code Blue" alert—resuscitation needed for a cardiac event. They had to act fast: Tracy was in the hospital to give birth; now she and her baby were dangerously close to death.

Dr. Stephanie Martin was in a nearby room when she heard the alert from the delivery area. She sprinted to the room where Mike bent over the bed of what he believed was his dead wife.

"I couldn't allow this father to lose both his wife and child, especially on Christmas Eve," Dr. Martin later said.

Doctors attempted to resuscitate Tracy with chest compressions and a breathing tube. But after four minutes, she remained unresponsive. Knowing that the risk for brain damage for the baby would increase very soon, the staff

performed an emergency Caesarean section.

Coltyn Hermanstorfer was born limp and silent. Doctors detected a faint pulse, however, and immediately began trying to resuscitate the little boy. As they worked, Mike held Coltyn, not knowing whether his son and his wife would live or die.

But then Tracy took a small, weak breath, her first in several minutes. The EKG machine began to show a pulse. It was a tiny, barely perceptible blip on the screen, but it was real. Doctors rushed her to a separate operating room to finish the surgery and put her on a ventilator.

Hospital staff continued working on baby Coltyn. In a few minutes, his skin became a healthy pink color. Then, suddenly, his lungs sucked in air and he gave out a loud wail. "I thought he was dead until he gasped for air," Mike later told NBC News. "Most parents can't stand the sound of a crying baby, but I'll tell you . . . that's one of the best sounds you can ever hear."

Mike says it felt like the hand of God had reached down and touched his son. The baby's life seemed to "begin in my hands," Mike said. "That's a feeling like none other. Life actually began in the palm of my hands."

Just as this new father was beginning to comprehend that his son would really live, doctors reported more good news: Tracy was in stable condition, breathing on her own.

In about a half-hour's time, Mike went from the despair of believing that he'd lost his wife and son to the joy of having them both returned. "It's changed my life," he said. "You don't take anything for granted."

### extra

Watch an interview with Mike and Tracy Hermanstorfer as they talk about their scary Christmas at the hospital.

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DAY 21

Isaiah 2:4

## The final Christmas of the USS New York

**The** *USS New York*—for years the finest battleship in the U.S. fleet—arrived in New York Harbor in December of 1945. It was part of a mighty fleet of 41 warships—“the greatest concentration of naval might ever seen in New York Harbor,” according to one newspaper.

Can you imagine being there for that display of strength? But this wasn't a mission of war. The Axis powers of World War II had surrendered unconditionally earlier that year, and many of these ships had been put to work bringing American soldiers home. This year marked the first peacetime Christmas in five years. A time for a real celebration. The Department of the Navy had ordered all ships back to harbor to allow sailors to have a Christmas break.

But crew members aboard a few of the ships had an important mission to attend to first: hosting a special Christmas celebration for 1,000 children from poor families. The mighty *New York* was one of those ships. She had been hosting these Christmas celebrations for the past 30 years whenever she wasn't called to active duty elsewhere. Over the years, thousands of children had come aboard on Christmas Day for a big dinner, entertainment and fine gifts.

How did such a tradition begin? The story goes that in early December of 1915,

a few sailors from the *New York* were talking about how they should celebrate Christmas since they wouldn't be able to make it back home. As they walked the streets of New York, one sailor suggested that they round up a bunch of poor kids and give them the best Christmas dinner they'd ever had. The others agreed, and the captain soon gave his approval. Preparations got underway. Sailors and local businesses donated money for food and gifts—dolls for the little girls and authentic sailor's outfits for the boys. Word spread, and more funds poured in. Even Thomas Edison, the famous inventor, gave a donation.

The party was a tremendous success, and the captain said afterward that nothing warmed his heart more than seeing all those children on board his ship, eating a big dinner, opening gifts and enjoying the company of his sailors. The Navy wrote to the ship's crew, applauding them for their generous Christmas spirit. And so the tradition began.

For the *New York's* final Christmas party, in 1945, event organizers requested each child's measurements be taken ahead of time. When the children came aboard for the party, they found a fitted navy-blue coat with matching woolen cap. As in past years, there were other gifts, candies and heaping platters of food. Children were given a special tour of the ship, and

they went home that night holding tight to their gifts and the memories of a very unique Christmas celebration.

The following year, the *New York* was taken out of service. She was used for bombing tests and target practice. The old battleship did not go down easily. On her final assignment, she was towed out to sea while newer warships and aircraft bombarded her for eight hours. Finally, she rolled over and sank to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, where she rests to this day. The mighty battleship had served in both world wars and had hosted presidents, kings and queens on its decks—but she is remembered by many as the site of the best Christmas party they'd ever attended.

### extra

Watch a homecoming celebration for the recently commissioned *USS New York*, a modern battleship forged using steel from the World Trade Center.

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## Layaway Angels

**For** Marilyn Garcia, Christmas of 2014 was going to be sparse. She'd been working two jobs, and it was still difficult making ends meet. She was about to move into a smaller home, which would help with the bills, but it meant that she wouldn't have a Christmas tree this year.

She didn't mind not having a tree, but she wanted to give her granddaughter one special Christmas gift this year. Marilyn thought that if she could put aside a little money from each paycheck, she could afford the Hello Kitty toy car that her granddaughter had her heart set on. Marilyn put a deposit on the car at her local Wal-Mart, and she agreed to make the layaway payments over the weeks before Christmas. If she could pay off the balance by late December, she could take the toy home and have it wrapped in time to surprise her granddaughter on Christmas.

But as the layaway deadline approached, Marilyn knew she wasn't going to be able to afford the remaining balance on the gift. She called the Wal-Mart customer service counter and asked if she could have an extension for paying off her granddaughter's gift. She was surprised to hear the employee tell her that no extension was needed. "The balance has been paid," the worker said.

"Excuse me?" Marilyn asked. "You say it has been paid?"

"That's right!" the worker told her. "Earlier today, an anonymous man came in and paid off a bunch of layaway accounts. Merry Christmas! You can come pick up the car whenever you like."

Marilyn was shocked by the news, but she wasn't the only one to have this surprising conversation with customer service. The weaker economy had inspired many stores to bring back their layaway programs to help lower-income families purchase gifts for their children. An anonymous group of "layaway angels" had visited many of these stores to pay off those gifts. In 2013, two Massachusetts Toys "R" Us stores reported receiving approximately \$20,000 each in donations to pay off layaway accounts. And at Marilyn Garcia's Pennsylvania Wal-Mart, an anonymous man walked in and donated more than \$50,000, covering approximately 100 layaway accounts that included kids' items such as toys, bicycles and electronics.

"I'm humbled by it. I'm grateful. I am blessed," Marilyn told CNN. "If I could see that person, I would give them a hug and thank them and . . . pray it is returned to them many [times] more."

### extra

Paid in full! See a news report on the impact of a layaway angel's visit to a Massachusetts Toys "R" Us store.

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DAY 23

Romans 6:23

## Have You Found Jesus?

“Good news,” the police officer said over the phone. “We have found Jesus.”

When workers at the community center in Wellington, Florida, heard the report, they weren't thinking that the officers at the local police department had all simultaneously accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. No, the news meant that police had found their baby Jesus—the small figurine that had been stolen a few days earlier from the Nativity scene set up outside the building.

The missing Jesus at the Wellington community center wasn't the first such case. Every year, news reports from around the country tell of a small but unfortunate truth about the modern American Christmas: Some people get a kick out of stealing parts of the Nativity displays set up outside of homes and churches. More often than not, baby Jesus is the target—possibly because it's easier for the average thief to haul off than a shepherd or one of the wise men's camels. But these thieves probably understand what message they are sending by removing the most important figure from the scene. Sometimes that tone of hostility is clear. In 2008, a church in Pennsylvania noticed that their statue of baby Jesus had been stolen and replaced with a moldy pumpkin.

How did Wellington police find the community center's baby Jesus? Since this wasn't the first time the figurine had been stolen, police officers recommended that a global positioning system (GPS) tracker be installed inside the baby Jesus to help track down the statue in the event it went missing. BrickHouse Security, a surveillance company based in New York, has in recent years donated hundreds of these monitoring devices to various churches, retirement homes and other organizations. When unexpected movement of a Nativity piece occurs, BrickHouse's computer systems send text notifications to alert staff members to the theft. Police can then follow the satellite tracking information through a computer or mobile phone to find the stolen property.

It's not quite a star in the Eastern sky, but it seems to do the job. BrickHouse claims that 100 percent of stolen Nativity figures using their GPS technology have been recovered. Wellington police tracked the community center's stolen Jesus to an apartment complex and found the statue in a young woman's home.

Even with modern technology helping to solve these crimes, it's a shame that it's needed at all. Marion Crum, a resident at a retirement home in Indiana that recently had their Jesus figure

stolen, gave future would-be Jesus thieves a few words of wisdom. “If you want Jesus in your life, you don't have to steal Him,” he said.

Indeed. The real gift of Christmas is that Jesus is free.

### extra

Watch a dramatic re-creation of the first Christmas Eve.

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DAY 24

Isaiah 9:6-7

## A Song Is Born

“*Stille* Nacht, heilige Nacht . . .” The young Austrian priest, Father Joseph Mohr, had written the lines of this poem a couple years before, but now, on the morning of Christmas Eve, he couldn’t stop thinking of them. Especially that first line—it echoed through his mind. He thought, *Perhaps this poem could be part of the Christmas Eve service this evening. And perhaps there could also be a modern twist, maybe something with his favorite instrument, the guitar.*

Of course, if this poem were to become music, he needed a musician’s help. Joseph hoped that his friend, Franz Gruber, the schoolteacher in a nearby village and a gifted musician, could help him put a melody to his words. After a 20-minute walk on that brisk December morning, Joseph knocked on Franz’s door. “Franz, do you remember that poem I wrote a few years ago?” Joseph said. “I know it’s very late to ask, but might you help me develop a melody? I want to perform it tonight at the Christmas Eve service.”

Franz liked a challenge. He took the lyrics from the priest and set to work on it. Soon after, Franz called out, “Father, how does this sound?” and he began to sing the words to his new melody.

That night, Dec. 24, 1818, the song filled St. Nicholas Church. Joseph sang tenor, Franz bass, and the church choir joined the refrain of each verse. The song, “Silent Night,” would go on to become the most popular Christmas carol of all time. Even on that first performance, the churchgoers were struck by the song’s simple, peaceful beauty. The song was performed again on Christmas Day, but it might have stayed there in Oberndorf, Austria, if it had not been for a happy accident: The following year, the pipe organ at St. Nicholas Church broke down.

An organ builder named Karl Mauracher came to repair the giant instrument. No one knows how he came across the song, but he left Oberndorf with a copy of the song and passed it along to a few families of traveling singers that he came across while repairing different organs in the region.

Shortly after, the Rainer family singers sang “Stille Nacht” for Emperor Francis I of Austria and again for Czar Alexander I of Russia. In 1834, the Strasser family sang it for King Frederick William IV of Prussia. Frederick William enjoyed the song so much that he required it to be sung by his church’s choir every Christmas. The song continued to spread through

Europe, and in 1839, the Rainers brought the song to America.

Since then, it has been translated into more than 300 languages and dialects. “Silent Night” remains one of the most beloved Christmas carols; perhaps because of its simple, pure focus on the heart of the holiday: *Christ the Savior is born!*

### extra

Learn how to sing “Silent Night” in German, the song’s original language!

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DAY 25

Luke 2:4-7

## The first Nativity Scene

*So many presents! So many parties! So much shopping! Can't we focus on the real meaning of the season?*

We hear such sentiments every Christmas, but the message isn't new. In fact, nearly 800 years ago—in the year 1223—an Italian friar named Francis of Assisi was saddened by all the presents and parties that seemed to distract people from remembering the reason for Christmas. So Francis asked himself: *How can we get people to focus on Jesus this Christmas?*

While talking with a friend, Francis came up with an idea. He could put on a simple play that recreated the birth of Jesus. "I want to do something that will recall the memory of that child who was born in Bethlehem," Francis said to his friend. "To see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of His infancy, how He lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by."

To Francis' knowledge, such a thing hadn't been done in his church before, so he packed up a horse and traveled to Rome to present his idea to the leaders of the church. The leaders agreed with Francis' reasoning for the play, and they gave him permission to proceed. Francis returned home to look for a location for the play.

Outside of town, he found a large cave. He measured the space, picturing the scene in his mind: a simple manger with animals, hay and a few other details to capture the authentic feel of that long-ago night. With his plan in place, Francis then invited his fellow friars and all the townspeople to a very special Christmas Eve service.

It was a great success. One writer described the excitement of townspeople as they traveled out to the manger scene: "The people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise."

When the people arrived at the manger scene, Francis began to teach about the birth of Jesus. The villagers listened solemnly while the Nativity play Francis had prepared reminded them of the reality of that night long ago. They could see, with their own eyes, how it might have looked. Here was a baby, in a manger, in a cold cave that was a shelter to animals. How humble indeed was the birth of the King of kings!

### extra

Why a stable? Watch Bible teacher Ray Vander Laan explain what that first Christmas looked (and smelled!) like.

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## Object Answer Key

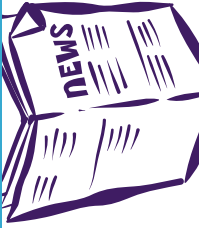
DAY 1



DAY 2



DAY 3



DAY 4



DAY 5



DAY 6



DAY 7



DAY 8



DAY 9



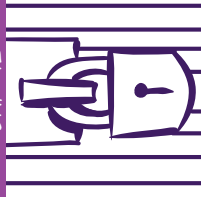
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DAY 11



DAY 12



DAY 13



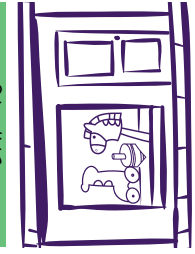
DAY 14



DAY 15



DAY 16



DAY 17



DAY 18



DAY 19



DAY 20



DAY 21



DAY 22



DAY 23



DAY 24



MERRY CHRISTMAS



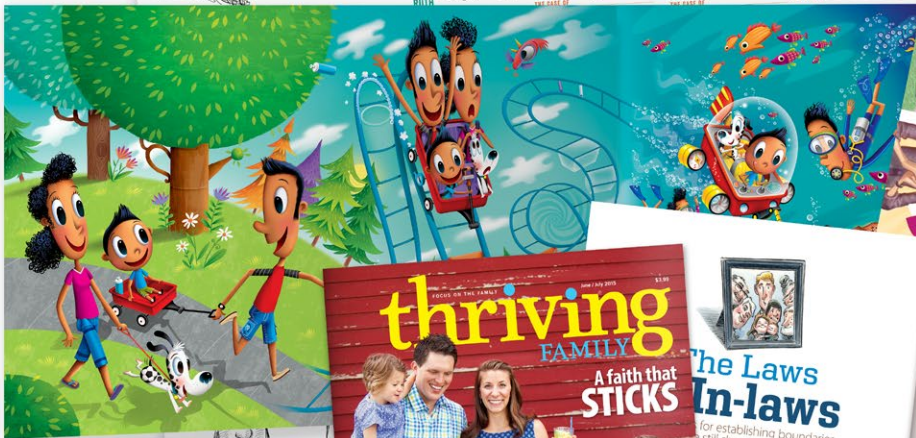
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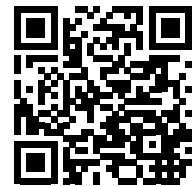
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