The Jesse Tree

*A shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots.* —Isaiah 11:1

“Homes should be training grounds to develop habit patterns that serve Jesus Christ. And then we’ll avoid the tragedy described in Judges 2:10—another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done.” —Howard Hendricks, *Say it with Love*
Ideas to get you started:

- Purchase a separate tree to hang all the ornaments on.
- Purchase a garland to hang the ornaments above a mantel or window.
- Wrap each ornament in a small box to add to the fun each day.
- On Christmas Day, go through the ornaments and see if you can remember what they represent.
- Check out this website for other ideas:
  - Especially number 15-the Advent chain

Reference contained in this booklet:

**Options** written by Cheryl Gochnauer, Marty Machowski and the **Thriving Family** staff in *Countdown to Christmas: Thriving Family’s 2011 Advent Activity Calendar*, Focus on the Family 2011

Devotions written by Deb Nafzinger in “Jesse Tree: A Walk Through the Old Testament to the Birth of Christ” (excluding Rahab, Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph; with alterations to day of creation, shepherds and the manger scene).
Day 1-Creation
Symbol—World
Today’s Reading—Genesis 1:1-26; John 1:1-3

Creation begins our journey to the birth of Christ. As God strung the stars with his words, he was forming a plan for all mankind to see His great power, yet know His amazing grace. We will be learning about many of the special people and events that led up to the birthday of Christ. Did you know that Jesus existed BEFORE He was born as a baby? Let’s see what the Bible has to say about this. Read John 1:1-3 to see how this can be true.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” John 1:1-3

The word “Word” in verse 1 is actually a name of Jesus. The verse could be translated, “In the beginning Jesus already existed.” Jesus existed before creation. He is part of eternity and was with God before time and the world began. The verse in the book of John helps us better understand the first verse of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Thousands of years ago, Jesus was with the Father, creating the heavens and the earth. He was there as light was created, as fish came to life, and as the birds filled the air. He was with God as animals took their first steps, and Adam and Eve breathed their first breaths. After all creation, the Bible tells us in Genesis 1:31 that God looked over all He made and He saw that it was excellent in every way.

This is where we will begin our study on the “birth” day of Christ! We will explore all that God has created and done to prepare us for the birth of Jesus in the coming days.

**Option** Lead your kids into a darkened room to read the verses in Genesis. (You may need a small flashlight.) When you arrive at verse 3, turn on the lights. As you read through the remaining verses, pass around items that offer glimpses of God’s Creation—a leaf from a plant, magazine photos of fish and wildlife. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 2-Adam and Eve
Symbol—fruit and serpent
Today’s Reading—Genesis 3:1-21

Adam and Eve, the first people created, enjoyed their relationship with God. They walked and talked with Him. In fact the Bible tells us that God “dwelt”, or lived among them. God gave Adam and Eve a beautiful place to live called the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2:8 tells us that it was filled with wonderful trees that produced delicious fruit. God told them that they could eat freely of any fruit in the garden except for the fruit that came from one tree. He told them, “If you eat of this fruit, you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Did you know that there was no death in the world at this time?

Adam and Eve took good care of all the plants, animals and trees. While they were enjoying life in the garden, there was someone, however, who was plotting to spoil all that God had made. Satan, an enemy of God, wanted to destroy the special relationship Adam and Eve had with God. He set out to make Adam and Eve disobey God. He went into the beautiful garden disguised like a serpent, or a snake. Satan came to Eve and told her that she would NOT die if she ate from the forbidden tree. In fact, he told her that if she ate it, she would be just LIKE God. She thought about how wonderful it would be to be wise as God, so she decided to eat one of the forbidden fruits. Unfortunately, she talked Adam into eating it too. This was the first sin ever committed and this was when sin entered the world. Sin is disobeying God.

There were consequences for their disobedience. Adam and Eve could no longer walk or talk directly with God. They could no longer stay in the Garden of Eden. Now they had to work, and when they got old, they died. But God still loved them. He already had a plan that would one day bring man and Himself together again. God knew that He would be sending His Son, Jesus to be born on Christmas day.

**Option** Look through pictures of your kids when they were younger, asking your children if they can remember the story behind each image. Then ask if they can remember the first time they disobeyed Mom or Dad. Who taught them to disobey? The Bible teaches that sin was passed down from Adam and Eve to all people. Sin has become part of our fallen nature. It wasn’t a surprise to God when Adam and Eve sinned; even then, He has a plan to save the world. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 3-Noah
Symbol--Ark
Today’s Reading—Genesis 6:5-8

As the years went on, more sin entered the world. People found more and more ways to disobey God. People didn’t love or listen to Him. Genesis 6:5-8 says, The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them.”

But God found one man who loved and obeyed Him and who did what was right and good. His name was Noah. God told Noah his plans to wipe out all the living creatures with a huge flood. But He also told him that He would spare his family if he would build an ark to live in during that time. The ark, or big boat, was 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high! The ark had to be big enough to hold Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives. He also had to have room for two of every kind of animal that lived so that they too could be saved from the floodwaters. Scholars estimate that almost 45,000 animals could have fit into the boat!

Noah worked hard to complete the ark. Finally, the big day came to board it. For 40 days and 40 nights it rained and sure enough the flood came. All the people outside the boat drowned. Only Noah and his family were saved.

After the flood, God made a promise to Noah. He promised that he would never again destroy the earth by flood. Do you remember what God used to show Noah he would always keep His promises? (Rainbow) Whenever we see a rainbow we can remember that God loves us and He always keeps His promises.

Question:
Do you think it was hard for Noah to obey God? Why or why not? (It probably took a lot of courage to obey God. Think of all the people that must have made fun of Noah. He was making an ark to live in because of a flood and there wasn’t even any rain yet!)
The people who initially filled the earth after the flood celebrated the fact that God saved Noah and his family. After hundreds of years however, many people forgot about God. They became godless and self-centered.

God planned to develop a new nation; one that He could call His own. He chose a man named Abraham to be the “Father” of this great nation. Abraham was a descendent of Noah’s son Shem. The Lord asked Abraham to leave his country of Ur, his relatives and the comforts of his city to go to another country he had never been before. Can you imagine how much faith that must have taken Abraham? They lived in black goatskin tents as they crossed the hot, dry desert. It wasn’t like today where you can drive on the highway from one state to the next. In fact, all God told him was to: “Go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Abraham didn’t have a road map or specific directions. But he did have a promise from God. God told Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3 that if he obeyed, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Obedience was all that was required on Abraham’s part.

Abraham was faithful and traveled across the desert until he, his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot reached the promised land of Canaan (Canaan eventually became the land of Israel). God blessed Abraham in many ways. He became wealthy, owning livestock, silver and gold. His wife Sarah became pregnant when she was very old and had a son named Isaac. This was the desire of her heart.

God kept His promise to Abraham. Remember, He told Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. That became true when, 2,000 years later Jesus was born. Jesus was part of Abraham’s family tree! Little did Abraham know that he would be an ancestor of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

**Option** Retrieve several items that your family has received from extended family members. Talk about the influence these relatives have had on our family. Abraham is often considered a “father” to all Christians and Jews. He was first in line of people who were special to the Lord and it was through Abraham’s descendants that Jesus was born. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Do you remember yesterday we learned that Sarah had a boy named Isaac? She loved him with all of her heart. Abraham was a proud dad. They were very happy to be parents - especially after waiting for so many years to become parents. Did you know that Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old when they had Isaac?!

When Isaac was a boy, God tested Abraham’s obedience and love for Him in a way that is hard for us to understand. He asked Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. What exactly does that mean? All throughout Old Testament times, sacrifices were the way for people to ask God for forgiveness for their sins. By sacrificing or killing an animal, the people were allowed to restore their relationship with God. The animal symbolically paid the price of the person’s sin. It was a substitute for the person. This way the person did not have to pay the price for his sin. Although this may seem very strange to us, this was normal for that time and even continued past the time of Jesus.

It wasn’t normal however, to sacrifice a son. God was testing Abraham to see how much Abraham loved God. Know that God did not want Isaac to die. He just wanted to test Abraham to see if he loved God more than he loved Isaac.

Abraham loved God completely and was willing to do whatever God asked him. It must have been very difficult however, for Abraham. Genesis 22:9-12 says,

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

This lesson from history has a happy ending. God provided Abraham a ram and he sacrificed it on the altar in place of his son.

What can we learn from this? First, obedience and love for God should be the most important love in our lives. Secondly, God was giving us a glimpse of how much He loves us: God ultimately sacrificed His one and only Son on the cross for us, so that we could have our sins forgiven and have relationship with Him. Once Christ died on the cross, sacrifices like this were no longer necessary.

**Option** Place a small trashcan with a clean liner in a corner of the room. Tell your children to get a favorite toy, movie or video game, and then ask them to place it in the trashcan, if they protest, ask them whether they trust you and know that you love them. Explain that God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. (You can return the toys as you say this.) God was testing Abraham’s faith. He was also giving Abraham glimpse of His plan to save humanity. God’s only Son would be offered as the sacrifice for our sins. He would have thorns on His head, similar to the ram caught by his horns in the thicket. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 6-Jacob
Symbol—Ladder
Today’s Reading—Genesis 28:10-22

Isaac grew up and eventually married Rebekah. They had a son named Jacob. Jacob is one of the most significant people in the Old Testament. In fact, his name was eventually changed to “Israel”, the name of a nation and country he began.

Jacob was not a perfect man. In fact, when he was a young adult, he tricked his brother Esau in a terrible way (You can read the story in Genesis 27). Jacob ended up having to run away over 400 miles to protect himself. Genesis 28:10-15 tells us an interesting thing that happened to Jacob on his way out of town:

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: ‘I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

When Jacob woke up, he was filled with amazement. God had spoken to him in a dream! God told him that he would become the father of many people! And God was true to His Word. Jacob eventually had 12 sons and these sons formed 12 tribes making up the nation of Israel. Two thousand years later, Jesus would be born from this family tree.

God always keeps His promises. Even though there are times in our lives when we disobey God like Jacob did, He still has a plan for our lives and accomplishes it in spite of our weaknesses!
Day 7—Joseph
Symbol—Coat of many colors
Today’s Reading—Genesis 37:23-33 and 50:15-20

Do you remember from yesterday that Jacob had 12 sons? As you can imagine, there was a lot of competition and jealousy among 12 brothers. If you have a brother or sister, you know what I mean.

Joseph happened to be the favorite son of Jacob. He was the baby of the family and would get special treatment. Of course, this seemed very unfair to the rest of the brothers. In fact, one time Jacob made Joseph a very special coat. This was no ordinary coat. It was a very beautiful coat, the kind worn by kings and princes. The brothers were very jealous. On top of that, Joseph had a dream that he would one day rule over his brothers. Obviously, his brothers were not happy about this. They became furious that Joseph thought so highly of himself; they became so furious that they devised a plan to kill Joseph.

This is where the life of Joseph gets fascinating because Joseph had many horrible things happen to him, yet God used all of the tragedies and turned them into something good! To begin with, Joseph was thrown into a well, or pit by his brothers and left to die. At the last minute his brothers felt guilty so they pulled him out and sold him as a slave to some people passing by. He was then taken to Egypt and bought by a man named Potiphar who was a palace guard for Pharaoh. Potiphar noticed that God blessed everything Joseph did and put Joseph in charge of his entire household. Things were looking good for Joseph until Potiphar’s wife came along. She tried to get Joseph to fall in love with her, but Joseph knew this would be wrong since she was married, so he stayed away from her. This made her so angry that she made up lies about Joseph to get him into trouble. He was sent to prison for something he didn’t even do!

It would seem like this would be awful, but God continued to work out His plan for Joseph’s life. Genesis 39:23 tells us that while in prison, “the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.”

Through a series of events that only God could arrange, Joseph was eventually released from prison and became the king’s Prime Minister! He coordinated building huge storage barns for food. Eventually a famine hit, but due to Joseph’s wise thinking of saving food, there was enough food for the people. Back in the land of Canaan however, where Jacob and his sons lived, they were running out of food. Jacob heard that there was food in Egypt and so he asked his sons to go and purchase some. Jacob and his sons had no idea that Joseph was alive, let alone the Prime Minister of Egypt and the one who would sell them the food!

It’s a long story. But a great one, and ultimately the whole family was reunited. What a happy day it was for them! Not only did they receive the food they needed, but their family was complete once again (You can read the whole story in Genesis chapters 37-47).

As you can imagine, the brothers felt terrible about what they did to Joseph so many years earlier. Joseph told them not to feel guilty. He realized that God had a plan for his life and that through him many people were given food and their lives were saved.

It’s that way with Jesus’ life too! Jesus would tell us not to feel badly about His cruel death on the cross, because through His death, many people’s eternal lives are saved!

**Option** Tell your kids that you want to see how much your family has in common. Then ask, “Who can curl their tongue?” Instruct everyone who can do this to stand together in one corner of the room. Then ask, “Who can hop on one foot?” Repeat with new questions to find other similarities between family members. Explain that the lives of Joseph and Jesus had remarkable similarities. Both men were betrayed by someone close to them. Both were also used by God to save His people. Joseph saved his father and brothers from a terrible famine, and Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross delivered mankind from sin. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 8-Moses
Symbol—Ten Commandments
Today’s Reading—Deuteronomy 5:1-22

Did you see the movie “Prince of Egypt”? It was all about the person we are going to learn about today, Moses. There is a lot to learn from Moses’ life, but one of the things he is most famous for is receiving the Ten Commandments. After Joseph died, the Israelites become slaves in Egypt for about 400 years. God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and back into the Promised Land. This journey all together took 40 years, but when they were only two months into it, they set up camp at the foot of Mount Sinai, God’s holy mountain. Moses climbed to the top of the mountain to be alone with God so that God could speak to him. The Israelites knew that the people needed some laws on how to live. The laws were not meant to punish the people; they were meant to protect the people. Because God made us, He knows what’s best for us.

God gave Moses many laws, but the best known laws are called the 10 Commandments. Exodus 20:2-17 tells us what they are:

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.
5. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When the Israelites obeyed these laws, they pleased God. When we live by these laws, we please God.
Day 9-Joshua and the Promised Land
Symbol—Grapes
Today’s Reading—Numbers 13: 21-25

We learned yesterday that Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Unfortunately Moses died before reaching the Promised Land, so the people needed a new leader. Joshua, a great man, became their new leader. The Promised Land was a country called Canaan. Do you remember, this is where God led Abraham hundreds of years earlier? It had rich fertile soil. The Bible often calls it the land flowing with “milk and honey.” Numbers 13:23 describes the land this way, “When they reached the Valley of Eshcol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs.”

God wanted His people, the Israelites to claim this wonderful land as their own. There was one problem, however. There were already people living in that area and they didn’t want to give up their territory. These were evil people, who did not love the Lord. God knew they needed to be destroyed. There were many battles between the Israelites and these people.

As long as the Israelites trusted and obeyed God, one evil nation after another fell in defeat. After seven years of battle, Israel gained control of the land. Joshua then divided the land amongst the 12 tribes of Israel. Do you remember that Jacob had 12 sons? These 12 tribes originated from Jacob’s 12 sons. After all the land had been divided out, each tribe took their share of the country and considered it as a special gift from God. The Israelites took a stand for God and were ready to experience God’s blessings - their new land being one of them.

God again proved faithful in keeping His promises to the people of Israel. Joshua 21:45 says, “Not one of all the LORD’S good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.” We too can trust the promises of God. The Israelites could look back over the past 500 years and see how God took care of them in spite of some very difficult circumstances; leading them to this wonderful country they could call their own.

Take a few minutes to look back on your life. Thank the Lord for all the good things He has blessed you with.
Day 10-Rahab
Symbol—Rope
Today’s Reading—Joshua 2:1-21

One city that Joshua had to defeat in order to enter the Promised Land was the city of Jericho. He sent spies into the city to look over the land. They just so happened to stay at a woman’s house named Rahab. Now Rahab lived in a land with a people that did not honor God. Her lifestyle may have been questionable, but her heart was open to the stirring of God. Rahab kept an inn and had welcomed many travelers and various people throughout the years. She had heard the great stories of the Israelite God for she said, ”I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.” She knew she wanted to be in the family of God even if it cost her her life, so she pleaded with the spies to save her life when they came to destroy Jericho. They agreed, on one condition—she must tie a scarlet cord in the window.

Scarlet is a color similar to red. It was a strong dye, not easily washed out. The same color of the lamb’s blood spread on the doorposts during the Passover, the same color of the final Lamb’s blood. This Lamb would be Jesus. It’s strange to think that Isaiah referred to our sins as scarlet. Our sins would not easily be cleansed with a simple wash; it would take the Perfect One to make us white as snow.

Their agreement would turn out as planned. Rahab would be taken into the family of Israelites and eventually would marry a prince named Salmon. Rahab would become the mother of Boaz (whom we learn of in a few days); which makes her a descendant of Jesus.

**Option** Tie a small piece of red yarn or ribbon around each of your children’s wrists. Ask them to think of one thing that the string might remind them of. Explain that Rahab was instructed to hang a red cord from her window so she would be saved from the destruction of her city. Rahab was an ancestor of Jesus. Her red cord reminds us of Christ’s blood, which was shed to save us from our sins. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 11- Judges
Symbol—Torch (like Gideon’s)
Today’s Reading—Judges 6:1-12; 7: 17-21

Before Joshua died, he challenged the people to “Be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.” (Joshua 22:5) But he also warned them that, “If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD’S anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you” (Joshua 23:16).

For many years, the people followed these words. They remembered all that God had done for them. But as the years went on, they started living as they wanted. Unfortunately, instead of them obeying and enjoying their wonderful land and all the blessing God wanted to give them, the people chose to sin and disobey God. This led them into a very dark and difficult time that lasted about 325 years. The Israelites fell into a pattern of sin. They would disobey God, and then out of desperation, they would call upon the Lord to save them. Once God provided a way out for them they returned to their wicked ways. This occurred time and time again. There were some heroes of the faith however, that lived during this time. They were judges who were God-fearing people. They tried and succeeded with God’s help to rescue the nation of Israel from destroying itself. You may have heard of some of the judges: Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Eli and Samuel. These people depended on God and obeyed His commands regardless of what the people around them were doing.

It is amazing to see how time and time again, God showed His mercy and delivered His people from their sins. Isn’t that encouraging for us? Is there any sin in an area of your life you need to confess to God right now? If so, take the time to pray and ask God for His forgiveness and thank Him for His mercy towards us.
Do you know why Ruth was a famous woman in the Bible? Did you know she has something to do with Christmas?

Ruth lived during the time Israel was ruled by judges. Ruth was not an Israelite. She lived in Moab, a country outside of Israel. People from her country did not worship God. Her husband was originally from Bethlehem, but moved to Moab because there was a famine going on in his country. There he met Ruth, fell in love and got married. Unfortunately, he died after they had been married only 10 years. Ruth had a close relationship with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi’s husband also died. As the women thought about what to do and how to care for themselves, Naomi thought the best situation for her would be to return to Bethlehem (in Israel), her hometown. Ruth loved Naomi so much that she was willing to leave her own friends and family and follow Naomi to her hometown. In the process, Ruth learned to love God and serve Him.

When they first arrived in Bethlehem, they were very poor. In order to take care of Naomi, Ruth went to work in a neighbor’s field. She gathered the grain that the workers dropped while they were harvesting. People who were very poor were allowed to get food this way. Boaz, a man who owned this field, was a kind man and he had compassion for Ruth and Naomi. He told his workers not to bother Ruth and to leave some grain for her to gather. In fact, Boaz was so touched by Ruth’s unselfishness and the way she cared for Naomi that he fell in love with her and married her.

Ruth and Boaz eventually had a son named Obed. Now you may wonder why that is important. Many people have never heard of Obed. Obed grew up and eventually had a son named Jesse. Jesse had a son named King David and it was from this family tree that Jesus was born some 1,100 years later! Little did Ruth realize that she would one day be the great-grandma of the famous King David and ancestor of Jesus.
Day 13—Samuel anoints David
Symbol—Horn of oil
Today’s Reading—I Samuel 15:26-29, 16:1-13

The people of Israel were tired of judges ruling over them. They wanted a king like the other nations. God wanted to be their King, but that wasn’t good enough for them. God warned the people that a king would bring trouble, but they didn’t care. They felt they knew better than God and they demanded a king. So, about 1,050 years before Christ was born, the period of the judges came to an end. Israel would now be ruled by kings.

God did as the people wanted and He picked a man named Saul to be their first king. On the outside, you would have thought that Saul would have made a wonderful king. 1 Samuel 9:2 tells us Saul was “an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others.” But there is more to a man than looks. And even though Saul started out as a good king, he did not have reverence for God. The older he got, the more he refused to respond to God’s Word. He did whatever he wanted. God ended up rejecting Saul because he was disloyal to Him. 1 Samuel 15:26-28 reads,

But Samuel said to him, “I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!” As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you.”

Do you know who God had planned to take over as king of Israel? It didn’t happen until after Saul died. He is a person very familiar in the Old Testament. Any guesses? If not, you will find out tomorrow!

How many times do we judge a person by the way he or she looks? Unfortunately, we do this often. It is easier for us to love beautiful and rich people than ugly and poor. God, however, does not judge us by our outward appearance. I Samuel 16:7 tells us that God looks at a person’s heart, his or her thoughts and intentions. God cares more about what we are like on the inside. Do we love him? Do we love others? Do we obey God? This is what God sees when He looks at our heart. The next time you are tempted to judge someone by the way he looks or what she wears, remember that God cares more what that person is like on the inside.

**Option** Wrap your wedding ring in gift wrap. Then put a Christmas bow on a large empty box. Put both packages in different corners of the room. Tell your kids that you’d like to show them one of the best gifts you’ve ever received, and ask them to “open the present.” After they open the empty box, show them the smaller package. Explain that appearances don’t always tell the complete story.

As the prophet Samuel was looking for the future king of Israel, he was impressed with one individual. But God told him not to be impressed by outward appearance because God looks at the heart. Centuries later, God once again showed that appearance was unimportant when the long-awaited Savior came as an ordinary-looking man. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 14- King David
Symbol—Crown
Today’s Reading—1 Samuel 17:1-50; 2 Samuel 5:1-5

During the time Saul was king, the country of Israel was at war against the Philistines. Goliath was a Philistine and an enemy of the Israelites. He was a giant man. 1 Samuel 17:4-5 tells us that he measured over 9 feet tall and the coat of arms he wore weighed 125 pounds. Goliath put a challenge out to the Israelites. He suggested that the Israelites choose one warrior to fight against him. If the Israelites killed Goliath, then the Philistines would be their slaves. If Goliath killed the Israelites, the Israelites would become the slaves of the Philistines. As you can imagine, Saul and the Israelites were terrified when they heard of this. Each day for 40 days, Goliath confronted the Israelites with this challenge.

David’s three older brothers were on the front lines of this war. Jesse (Remember this man? He is the great-grandson of Ruth whom we talked about a couple days ago), their father, was getting concerned about them. He asked David, who was a shepherd boy at the time, to take some bread and cheese to the captain of the war and to find out how his brothers were doing. When David arrived, the two sides stood facing each other and were ready for battle. All at once, Goliath stepped forward shouting his challenge again. As soon as the Israelite army saw him, they ran!

David however, wasn’t afraid of Goliath. He knew that God had rescued him from death before, and that He could and would do it again. Goliath was not stronger than God! David asked king Saul if he could be the one to fight Goliath. Of course, Saul thought this was a ridiculous idea, but somehow David convinced him. David told Saul that “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:37).

David did not want to wear any protective armor. Remember, Goliath’s armor coat weighed 125 pounds - probably more than David himself weighed! Instead he chose five smooth stones and his leather sling. David ran towards Goliath, took a pebble from his bag and put it in his sling. He hurled the stone and hit Goliath right in the forehead. The stone sank in and Goliath fell face first to the ground! David was a hero!

After Saul died, David became Israel’s second king. David was a godly king. He is described as a man after God’s own heart. God made a promise to David that, “If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:4). So, not only was David one of the greatest kings of Israel, but he was also an ancestor of Christ.

**Option** Cut a few crowns from thick paper, and cover them with tin foil. Encourage your children to wear the crowns, and discuss what decisions they would make if they were “king” of the household, or of the country. Ask them if these jobs would be difficult. Would they need God’s wisdom, and if so, how would they seek it?

Explain that King David often prayed to God for help in doing his job. Tell your kids that it was through the line of David that the Savior of the world was born. In fact, Jesus was called “the Son of David.” (ThrivingFamily.com)
As the years went by, King David became very old. Before he died, he made Solomon, his son, the new king. Solomon was a wise king. He had control of all of the land of Israel. This was a high point in the history of Israel. There was peace in the land. One thing David wanted to do before he died was build a temple where the Israelites could worship God. God, however, didn’t want David in the construction business. He wanted David to be a warrior. God used Solomon, his son, to organize the building of the temple in the capital city of Jerusalem. David made the plans and Solomon built it. Solomon used expensive materials and employed the best builders. He used gold, silver, iron, wood and expensive cloth. In honor of God, the temple was built without the sound of a hammer or any other tool at the building site. This meant the stone had to be cut and shaped miles away. It took seven years to complete the temple and when it was finished, all Israel was proud to have a place they could worship God.

Solomon became famous for the temple. Today, thousands of years later, he is still remembered for it. As he dedicated the temple, he praised God saying “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way” (I Kings 8:23).

Before the temple was built, the Israelites did not have a central place to worship the Lord. The temple helped fill the gap. It reminded the people of God’s holiness and presence. It reminded them of God’s love and forgiveness. It was a place where people could spend time in prayer. As you can see, it was important to the Israelites to have a place like this. It was their central place of worship for over 350 years. Today we worship in churches. It is important to go to church so that we can learn more about God and praise Him with other people who love Him too.

Unfortunately, as the years went by, Solomon tried to keep peace with the surrounding nations by marrying their kings’ daughters! These women did not worship God; they had their own religion and built shrines to worship their gods. They encouraged the Israelites to worship these gods too. By the end of his reign, Solomon had turned from God and loved his life of luxury more than God.
Day 16—Prophecy
Symbol—Key
Today’s Reading—Isaiah 9:1-7

After Solomon died, Israel was split into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. There was often war between them. Over the years, both countries drifted farther and farther away from God’s standards. Israel was much larger than Judah. They chose their own kings and had only evil kings. The country was eventually destroyed by the people from Assyria in 772 BC. Judah, however, was ruled by Solomon’s ancestors and they occasionally chose a God-fearing man as king. He would encourage the people to return to worshipping the one and only true God. Because of these few godly kings, the country of Judah survived for another 136 years.

At this point in history, God sent prophets, or messengers to remind the people how to live and to remind them of God’s continuing love for them. They also told what was going to happen in the days and years ahead. These people spoke only what God told them to say. Often times, they were unpopular because they had to reprimand people for their behavior. People did not like being told they were disobedient, so they treated the prophets very badly. These prophets, however, continued to bring God’s message to the people.

One of the prophets was named Isaiah. He lived 750 years before Christ was born. Isaiah belonged to a wealthy family in Judah. He was married and his wife was a prophet. Isaiah’s messages can be found in one of the longest books of the Bible called Isaiah. He knew that the people in Judah were in trouble because they ignored the laws of God.

Here is some information that Isaiah told the people BEFORE it ever happened: Isaiah 7:14 foretold that Jesus would be born to a woman who was a virgin. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” And Isaiah 9:6 says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah also foretold that Jesus would be rejected by His own people (Isa. 53:1, 3), tried and condemned (Isa. 53:8), silent before the people who accused Him (Isa. 53:7), struck and spat on by His enemies (Isa. 50:6), and would die as a sacrifice for our sin (Isa. 53:5-12). These thoughts were all told 750 years before Christ was born! Isn’t that incredible?!

**Option** The prophet Isaiah predicted that Jesus would take the punishment for our sin. With this in mind, imagine or role-play a courtroom setting. Pretend your child is the defendant accused of a crime. The judge glares down from the bench, pounds the gavel and declares, “Guilty as charged!”

As your child is being “sentenced” to life in prison, Jesus stands up and says, “Take Me instead.” The judge demands to know why Jesus should be punished. After all, He’s done nothing wrong. Jesus replies, “I love her, and I want to take her place.” Discuss Jesus’ willingness to suffer our punishment in order to set us free. (ThrivingFamily.com)

Day 17- Josiah
Can you imagine becoming a king when you are only 8 years old? That’s exactly what happened to Josiah about 100 years after Isaiah was alive. His father was a wicked king and neglected God’s laws. In fact, his dad was so evil he had Isaiah sawn in half. His father allowed people to worship foreign gods in the same temple that Solomon built 350 years earlier. He died when Josiah was only eight, making Josiah king and making him the last of Judah’s godly kings.

The people, once again, did what they wanted and neglected God and His laws. Josiah knew how important it was for his people to return to God and His ways. 2 Kings 22:2 says, “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.” Josiah knew the awful condition the temple was in. After he was king for 18 years, he ordered it to be restored. He had workmen fix and replace the broken cornerstones. While they were working, someone discovered a scroll, or book of God’s laws in one of the cornerstones. This was very exciting. These were the same laws Moses had written down hundreds of years earlier! When the Book of the Law was found it was the only “Bible” in the entire land of Judah. Most people at that time could not read it, so it was read out loud by a scribe at the temple or the public square. As soon as Josiah heard the laws read, he was filled with grief because he realized how disobedient his country had been. He realized that drastic changes needed to be made. Josiah had the temple cleared of all the things that did not have anything to do with worshipping God. 2 Kings 23:3 tells us that, “The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul.” All of the people also pledged themselves to obeying God’s laws. God blessed Josiah and the country of Judah for their obedience.

Can you see why it is important to read the Bible? How would we know if we were doing something wrong if we didn’t know what God’s Word says? This is why God wants us to read His Word.

** Do you know what a scribe is? Scribes were writers. Only a few select people knew how to read and write in Old Testament times. A scribe usually had to train for 15-20 years before he could become one. They were in great demand because they would write letters for the kings and keep records for the kingdom. There were very strict laws for scribes when it came time to making a copy of the Law of God. They had to write each letter perfectly, and if they made a mistake, they had to throw the whole scroll away and start over. If a mistake was found in a scroll, the scribe could be put to death.
Day 18-Jeremiah
Symbol—Forgiveness
Today’s Reading—Jeremiah 25: 8-13; Jeremiah 33: 14-17

Have you ever been asked to do a job you really didn’t want to do? Better yet, have you ever felt God nudge you to do something you really didn’t want to do? Maybe it was not to laugh when all your friends around you were laughing at an inappropriate joke. Or maybe your friends were laughing at someone. Or maybe God was asking you to tell a specific person about your relationship with Him and you were scared. If you can relate to any of these, you will be able to totally relate to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived at the same time as King Josiah, although he lived longer than Josiah. When he was very young, he felt God had a special purpose for him to be a prophet. A prophet is someone who speaks God’s Words, or is a messenger for God. Jeremiah was probably about 21 when he felt this call on his life. He cried out to God, “O Sovereign Lord, I can’t speak for you! I’m too young!” Can you think of anyone else from Bible history who felt this same way? If you can’t, look up Exodus 4:10-12.

Do you know how God responded to him? He didn’t say, “Oh that’s OK Jeremiah, I will find someone to do the job.” He said,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 1:6-8)

Jeremiah could easily have been thinking, “What if I offend someone or make them mad? I would rather not hurt anyone’s feelings.” Jeremiah goes on to say,

“Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:9-10)

So, that is exactly what Jeremiah did. He spoke God’s Words to the people in Judah. Often times they hated him for what he said. He prophesied for over 40 years and his message was never a popular one. One time he almost died after he spoke God’s Words and another time he was beaten and thrown into prison. Yet Jeremiah was obedient to God and did as he was asked, even though it was very difficult. He warned the people in Judah that they would be captured by another nation if they refused to follow and listen to God. Yet the people continued to sin. These were the words God gave him to tell the people:

Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: “Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the LORD, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

“But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,” declares the LORD, “and will make it desolate forever. I will bring upon that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations.” Jeremiah 25:8-13

And this is exactly what happened to the people in Judah. In 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked the kingdom of Judah and took all of the important people back to Babylon. A
few years later in 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar returned and this time he tore down the walls and burned the temple. Just as Jeremiah predicted, the people of God were held captive for 70 years. Their homeland was destroyed. Some of the people from Judah (now called Jews) were living in Babylon and some were living in Egypt.

You may wonder what all of this history has to do with Christmas and Jesus being born. Well… In Jeremiah 33:14-17 he spoke of a coming Messiah. God did not want His children to remain scattered throughout the nations forever. He wanted to give them their homeland back.

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. “In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.’ For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.’

Do you know who that “righteous Branch sprout from David’s line” is? That’s right! It’s Jesus!
Day 19—Daniel
Symbol—Dream
Today’s Reading—Daniel 9: 20-24

Do you remember how King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah two times? King Nebuchadnezzar was from Babylon. When Abraham was alive, that area was called Ur. Today that area is called Iraq. It might be helpful for you to take out a map of Bible times and find it.

When King Nebuchadnezzar attacked the first time, he brought back to Babylon the best of the best and the cream of the crop, as far as the people of Judah were concerned. One person was named Daniel. There are several famous historical stories about Daniel. Perhaps you’ve heard about Daniel and the Lion’s den. Or maybe you’ve heard about Daniel and his ability to interpret writing that was on the wall. If you don’t know these, I would encourage you to read Daniel chapters 1-6. His life was fascinating!

Today, we are going to learn about Daniel’s visions, because they relate to Jesus and Christmas!

Daniel outlived many of his friends. When he was an old man he had a dream or vision. He was shown what would happen in the future. At this time, the Israelites had been held captive in Babylon for about 68 or 69 years. Remember how God told Jeremiah that they would be captives for 70 years? So Daniel knew their captivity was about to end. With that knowledge, he fell on his knees and prayed asking God to bring conviction and repentance, and restoration to His people, and to allow them to return to their land. As he was praying, the angel Gabriel came to him and told Daniel he would give him insight to understand what was going to happen in the future. He was told Jerusalem would be rebuilt, that Jesus the Messiah would be born, and He would be crucified. He was also given the inside scoop about what will happen in the end times of the earth. But for today, our focus is on the fact that over 400 years before Jesus was born, Daniel was given a vision that told Jesus’ birth and death. Is that amazing or what?!
Day 20-The Pieces Come Together
Symbol—Puzzle Piece
Today’s Reading—Ezra 1:1-4; Nehemiah 2:1-5; 6:15-16

Have you ever had to move? Have you ever been homesick? The Israelites experienced both. They moved several times. Let’s retrace their steps beginning with Abraham. Abraham lived in Ur and was told to go to the land of Canaan. There, the nation of Israel was eventually established. Due to a famine, many of God’s people moved to Egypt. Unfortunately they became slaves. In time, Moses led them out of Egypt and through Joshua’s leadership they ended up back in their promised land. They remained in this land for hundreds of years before King Nebuchadnezzar came and kicked most of the people out and forced them to live in Babylon. Jeremiah was told that after 70 years the people would be able to return to their homeland. And that is exactly what happened.

Cyrus, the King of Persia took over the land of Babylon. The Babylon Empire no longer existed. Cyrus made an announcement that whatever Jews wanted to return to their homeland could. Not only could they return, but they would be allowed to rebuild their temple as well! Many people were thrilled to be able to return. In fact the number of men who returned was about 42,360!! Now that’s a lot of people who were homesick! This time Ezra was their leader. He was a godly man. King Cyrus gave the people all of the temple materials and valuables that King Nebuchadnezzar had stolen years earlier.

When the people arrived in Jerusalem, traveling over 700 miles, the first thing they did was to lay the foundation for the temple. But soon their enthusiasm died away from building. The Jews became discouraged by those who had remained in Jerusalem while they were in Babylon. These people were not happy they had returned and there was hostility between the two groups. Because of this, it took over 10 years to rebuild the temple. It was exciting to have it finished, but some people were disappointed because it looked nothing like the temple Solomon built. In fact this temple looked very plain and simple, and some of the men who had seen Solomon’s temple, wept when they saw this finished product. But, overall, the Jews were so thankful to have a place to worship and thankful for the brave and courageous men who built it. This temple lasted 500 years.

Do you understand why it was so important for the Jews to be able to return to their homeland? It was prophesied that the Messiah would be born from the line of David. He would be born in Bethlehem, in Judea. God was busy at work, putting all of the puzzle pieces in place, getting the scene ready for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to be born at just the right place and just the right time.
Day 21—Bethlehem
Symbol—Town of Bethlehem
Today’s Reading: Micah 5:2-5

“Yes in the dark streets shineth
The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in Thee tonight.”
--words from O Little Town of Bethlehem, Phillips Brooks, circa. 1867

Long before (700 years before!) Jesus was born, a prophet named Micah foretold that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Now that seems rather common information to us, but long ago Bethlehem seemed an unlikely place. It was a rather insignificant town resting in the shadow of Jerusalem just five miles away. God’s children had been scattered among the lands because of their disobedience. So no one from David’s family was living there and the Savior had to come from the line of David. Yet God knew that this was the perfect town to make His entrance as a tiny baby. This town called “House of Bread” would be the place that the “Bread of Life” would come to satisfy the hunger of men.

There would come a time when Caesar Augustus would demand that people return to their homeland for a census. (What he really wanted was more money.) Yet God used this man to bring Joseph and Mary to their hometown of Bethlehem. It just so happened that both Mary and Joseph were from the family line of David. As they traveled along from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Mary’s due date neared. There must have been many fears traveling along the rugged road, yet they made it just in time, to just the right place, just as God designed. The little donkey got her there on schedule.

But this big new world was nothing new to Him. For Jesus is God and God had designed this story from the very beginning. He knew that man would make a mess of things and need a Savior in their darkness, an everlasting light. Jesus would calm the fears and fulfill the hopes of His people.

**Option** What do your children want to be when they grow up? Ask each child to share a clue that represents his or her dream job. The clue can be a word, a picture or an object. See who can guess the profession? Remind your children that God wants to use them in ways they can’t yet imagine. Even though they’re small, God has great plans for them. God also had big plans for the tiny town of Bethlehem. Point out that He chose Bethlehem to be the birthplace of Jesus. And to make sure everyone knew what a big deal this was, He talked about it in the book of Micah, hundreds of years before it happened. God uses ordinary people and places in big ways! (ThrivingFamily.com)
Have you ever been around someone who was always encouraging others? Zechariah was this kind of person. He was a young prophet who lived during the time of the rebuilding of the Temple. He warned the people not to disappoint God as their fathers had done. He told of God’s love and care for His people.

The Jewish people were once a powerful nation, but now they were just a small remnant of people, allowed to live in the Promised Land only because of the kindness of King Cyrus and the kings that followed him. During this time, Zechariah tried to encourage the people that one day their Messiah would come and God’s chosen people would rise to power.

Zechariah predicted things about Jesus more than any other prophet except Isaiah. Here are a few things he foretold:

Christ would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. Zech 9:9
Christ would be the Good Shepherd. Zech 9:16; 11:11
Christ would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver. Zech 11:12-13
Christ’s hands would be pierced. Zech 12:10

Zechariah also had visions. He told the people that he saw the Messiah coming in humiliation and suffering, and again in majesty and great glory. As you know, Christ came at Christmas in humiliation; he was born in a manger in a stable. He will come again one day, but it will be a grand and glorious entrance at that time. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord! (Philippians 2:10)
The book of Malachi sums up much of the history of the Old Testament. It is the bridge between the Old and the New Testaments.

Have you noticed any kind of pattern with the Jewish people over the years? It seemed they loved God and wanted to obey Him. They did it for a long time, but then new people were born, and they didn’t think it was quite as important to obey God anymore so they turned from Him. Then they suffered the consequences for it and eventually turned back to God, only to start the pattern, or cycle, all over. Again and again this happened.

Well, guess what? It happened again about a hundred years after the Jewish people returned to their homeland and rebuilt their temple. They had become cold to God and His ways. It was at this time, God sent the prophet Malachi, to speak on His behalf.

The Jewish people were disobeying God in several ways. First of all, they were bringing sick and defective animals to sacrifice at the altar of God. This may not seem like a big deal to us, but it is a big deal to God. Throughout Jewish history, God commanded them to bring a spotless lamb as a sacrifice; one without blemish. This was partly to show that God was not to be given anything but the best, and partly to symbolize holiness. God specifically told His people not to offer an animal that has a blemish: “If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the LORD your God” (Deut. 15:21). Yet Malachi tells us in 1:8 that this is exactly the kind of animals people were sacrificing. This made God angry. It was an unacceptable sacrifice. How else had the people disobeyed God? They began to marry women who were not Jewish: women who worshipped foreign gods. Throughout history, God had told His people not to marry people who worshipped idols. Yet again, they did what they wanted and therefore disobeyed God. In addition, they were robbing from God. How can a person rob from God? Malachi tells us we can do it by withholding our tithe from Him. God told His people through Malachi that if they were going to withhold their tithe from Him, He would withhold blessing from them. BUT, if they would obey Him, He would “open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need” (Malachi 3:10). And Malachi 3:7 says, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” As evil as the people had become, God still told the people that He loved them and wanted them to return to Him.

What does the prophet Malachi have to do with Jesus’ birth? As discouraged as the Jewish people had become, Malachi encouraged them in their faith. He told them that better days would be coming. In fact, Malachi told them of a person who would prepare the way for the Savior. He would prepare the way for Jesus by telling people to be sorry for their sins, to turn away from their sins and to turn to God. Do you know what this persons name was? If not, we will read about this man in two days, but for now, think how amazing it is that Malachi predicted this man would come to prepare the way for Christ, 400 years before it actually happened!!
Day 24-Intermission
Symbol—Sword

Have you ever wondered how much time is between the Old and the New Testaments? Or, what happened in that time? It was a long, long time from the time Malachi spoke until Jesus was born. It was over 400 years! During that time, no prophet spoke or wrote. It was almost as if God was silent, so these years are often called the “years of silence.” But there was a lot going on in that time. Some of it was really bad for the Jewish people.

As different kings captured and ruled the land where the Jews lived, different rulers were in charge. One of the rulers, Antiochus (an-tee-OK-us) Epiphanes was really bad and mean to the Jews. He was even worst to the Jewish people than Hitler was many years later. He tried to stop them from worshipping God. He tried to get rid of all of the copies of the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). He even commanded the Jews to worship Zeus, who was a Greek god. Antiochus went so far as to set up a statue of Zeus in the Temple at Jerusalem. Can you imagine how awful this had to be for the Jews to see an idol, or false god, in their temple? Many of them were brave and refused to do as Antiochus commanded. They loved and feared God more than man. Many of those people were martyred, or killed for their faith and commitment to God.

Because of the terrible things Antiochus was doing, the Jews started a revolt, or a mini war against him. It was led by the Maccabee family. They were not trained fighters in any way, but with God’s help, they were able to defeat Antiochus and become independent. Their independence, however, didn’t last long. Not long after the Maccabee family became the new rulers, the Romans conquered their land and took over. The Romans killed the Jewish priest while they were in the Temple. This made the Jews hate the Romans. With all they had gone through, it made the Jewish people hope their Messiah would come soon and let them go free from the Roman rule.

So, finally, all the pieces of the puzzle were coming together for the perfect timing of Christ’s arrival. Because of all the different groups who had been in power, roads were established that could now take the Good News of Christ to many places. A common language, Greek, had been created so God’s Word could be understood by lots of people.

Throughout the years, God gave many clues about His coming Son - He told them that Jesus would come from David’s family tree, that He would be born in Bethlehem, that He would do many things, but the ONE thing He didn’t tell them was WHEN He would be born. But now, 400 years later, the pieces were in place, the time had come! Jesus was about to leave His home in heaven to be born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. He was about to come to earth as our Savior, as God had promised over and over throughout the years!
Two days ago we learned that Malachi told the Jewish people that someone was coming who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. In Roman days, a herald was sent ahead to cities and provinces where the King or Emperor, was to arrive. His job was to tell the people how to prepare for the King’s arrival. The herald also announced any areas of displeasure that the King had discovered and any ways that needed to be changed. In a sense, John the Baptist was a herald for Jesus Christ. He showed the people their sin and called them to repent.

If you and I were to choose this person, we might pick out the most handsome, intelligent, athletic person we could find. But as usual, God’s ways are not our ways (His are always better). He chose a man described in Mark 1:6, as a man whose “clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” Not exactly the most popular looking or acting kind of guy! You can read all about his story in Luke chapter one.

The main thing we want to focus on today is that John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus; to pave the way for His coming. His main purpose in life was to tell the world that Jesus was truly the Messiah, the One they had waited on for years. He was to prepare the people to receive Jesus. He called them to repent and confess their sins. Matthew 3:1-3 tells us:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ”

What about you? Are you prepared for the coming of Christ? It’s almost the big day to celebrate His birthday! Do you have any sin you need to confess? Any ways you need to change to prepare yourself? Take some time to think and pray about it.

**Option** Tell your kids that you’re going to see who can get ready first. Then ask, “What do you need to get ready for swimming?” Have them find something needed for swimming (swimsuit, goggles, etc.) and bring it to you as fast as they can. Then repeat the game with items needed to get ready for school, soccer practice so on.

Explain that it’s important to be prepared. That’s why God sent John the Baptist to help people get ready for the coming Savior. Many people came to John to be baptized, confessing their sins and preparing their hearts for Jesus. (ThrivingFamily.com)

**Option** Explain the importance of seeing and obeying the traffic signs and signals as a driver. If we don’t pay attention to these signs, then we can miss our way to the destination we have in mind. We will also likely cause harm to ourselves, and others along the way. It’s so important to follow the signals God has written for us in His word, so that we prepare our hearts for His return, and help others do the same.

You might take a family drive and have the kids keep a look out for the traffic signs. Then you can discuss the importance of obedience along the way. (not from Thriving Family.com)
Day 26—Mary
Symbol—Heart
Today’s Reading—Luke 1:26-38

We can learn of Mary in the book of Luke. Luke was a doctor and must have been fascinated with Jesus’ birth, because it was a miraculous birth. Very few people have had the experience of an angel visit, but Mary was one of those people. She had not begun her relationship with Joseph when an angel appeared to her telling her she would have a baby. She must have had many emotions at that moment, but the angel calmed them by his message. He told her she was “highly favored” yet this didn’t mean that she was greater than all women that we should pray to her. It meant that God knew the heart of Mary and could see that she had a servant’s heart. Although she was a little afraid to begin with, in the end she accepted God’s plan. She said, “May it be to me as you have said.”

There is something else about Mary that is interesting. She comes from the line of David. We have learned that the Messiah must come from a particular family to fulfill the prophecy foretold about Him. David was a great king and so Mary’s little baby had royal blood running through his veins. He would not be just any king though. He is the King of kings. And as this little baby grew to become a boy and then a man, Mary watched and waited for the time when He would reveal who He was. There must have been many moments she “treasured in her heart” like the time when she found Him in the temple (Luke 2:41-52).

As you hang the heart ornament on the tree, reflect on what kind of heart you have this Christmas season. Do you have a servant’s heart, one open and ready to do the will of God no matter how impossible the task might seem?

**Option**

Our names are a special part of who we are. Do your children realize that God knew their names even before they were born? Using a book of baby names or the Internet, look up the meaning of each family member’s name. Now share why you chose that name for your child. When Mary was pregnant, an angel told her to name the child Jesus, which means “God saves.” Discuss why Jesus is an especially fitting name for the Christ child. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 27—Joseph
Symbols—Tools
Today’s Reading—Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph was engaged to Mary. (In Bible times an engagement was an arranged relationship in which the two participants didn’t have much contact as their parents settled their arrangement and prepared for the wedding. It could last a year before the couple actually married.) But then Mary found that she was expecting a baby. Because of this news, Joseph decided that this woman was not the right girl for him, so he thought it best to get a divorce. But God had bigger plans with that baby and sent an angel in a dream to tell Joseph the story so that he might understand Who that baby was and what that baby was going to do. That baby was Jesus! The name Jesus means “God saves.” And that is why Jesus came—to save his people. The angel also describes Jesus in another way. He calls him Immanuel; which means, “God with us.” This is important because the only way for Jesus to save us was to come in human form and “be with us” that he might ultimately be the final sacrifice for our sins. After Joseph awoke, he took Mary as his official wife.

Joseph was a carpenter in Nazareth. A carpenter would have been a lowly position. He might have been found whittling down in the dirt in the doorway of his home where the light was best. They didn’t make much money, but their services were definitely needed. We don’t know for sure, but Joseph might have taught Jesus to craft a yoke; which is a curved piece of wood fitted on the necks of oxen to help plow. While the yokes he might have crafted were for earthly purposes, Jesus ultimately came to craft a “yoke” that would alleviate our burden of sin. He said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Matthew 11:29.

God chose Joseph to help raise and protect Jesus even though Joseph was not his true father. God knew Joseph’s heart and knew that his gentle and humble spirit would allow Mary and ultimately Jesus to fulfill His plan. When God chooses people he doesn’t make any mistakes.

**Option** Joseph was chosen to be Jesus’ earthly father. God showed confidence in Joseph’s character when He entrusted the humble carpenter with the raising of His Son. One of the ways Joseph nurtured Jesus was by teaching Him how to make things out of wood. Jesus probably worked as a carpenter until He was 30. Give each child a small hammer, nails and some lightweight pieces of wood. Show them how to hammer a nail and, depending on their ability, nail pieces of wood together. Imagine Jesus and Joseph working side by side. What are some things Joseph might have taught Jesus to make? (ThrivingFamily.com)
Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house…
Well, not really a house, more like a barn…
For some it was more like a shepherd’s field…

It must have been a warm, spring night for those shepherds to be out in the fields. I wonder what they might have been doing when that “angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them.” What better way to announce the birth of Jesus than with flashy lights and singing? And the news the angels brought was “for all people” even these poor, simple little shepherds. It was news that brought hope. And an everlasting peace would come to those who would call this little babe Savior. How could these shepherds resist the urge to go and kneel at the tiny feet of a King? They couldn’t and so off they went, not to a palace with fine linens, but to a manager. May we remember this Christmas season that Jesus is for all people who call on His name.

**Option** Encourage your children to dress up like shepherds. Help them put on a bathrobe or large towel secured with a belt. Place a smaller towel on their heads, and hold it in place with a bandana or headband. Explain that shepherds were considered unimportant men. So it was a surprise that God chose them to be the very first to hear the message of Jesus’ birth. This surprise announcement showed that baby Jesus was a gift for all people, not just for the rich and famous. (ThrivingFamily.com)
Day 29—JESUS
Symbol—Manger

The time had come! The baby had finally arrived! Joseph and Mary were registering in Bethlehem according to Caesar Augustus’ decree when “the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” It must have been scary to be born in a barn, and not a hospital. Think of it – there were no doctors to help, no nurses to make Mary comfortable or to give assistance to Joseph. But, God was good (as He is still) and safely delivered Jesus; so He might, one day, deliver us.

This new family did not stay in the barn, though. They ended up living in Bethlehem for a little while. We know this because, a couple years later Magi showed up on the scene.

The Magi were men from the east watching and waiting for certain events to transpire. These men saw a particular star they knew belonged to the king of the Jews and so they began a journey to find him. They made a stop in Jerusalem to inquire of this king and confirmed that Bethlehem was indeed the place to go.

“After they had heard the king (King Herod), they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”

What about you? What gift will you give Jesus this year? Can you think of something you want to do for Him? Or maybe something you know you do that is displeasing to Him and you want to stop doing? Why not write it down on a piece of paper, wrap it in a box and place it under your tree for Him? Then later, once Christmas is over, place your box somewhere you will see often which will help you remember the gift you are giving Jesus this year.

Merry CHRISTmas!

**Option** The Magi were distinguished men from the East who traveled a great distance to honor Jesus after His birth. They followed a star that eventually led them to the Christ child. Take your children on a journey throughout your home, searching for the hidden star in each room. These could be star ornaments, stickers or simply stars drawn on paper. Conclude your search in front of your Christmas tree, and consider allowing each child to place the star of his or her choice on the tree as a symbol of your (and the Magi’s) journey. (ThrivingFamily.com)

**Option** Jesus was born in a stable and was laid in an animal’s feeding trough. While this isn’t the place you would expect a king to sleep, it was all Joseph and Mary had available on this miraculous night. Using bed sheets, create a “stable” big enough for the family to huddle in. Use flashlight for a lantern, and put out stuffed animals that may have been present when Jesus was born. Talk with your children about the sights, sounds and smells of the stable. This humble dwelling was the birthplace of our Savior and King. (ThrivingFamily.com)

**Option** On Christmas Eve, after your children are asleep, place the Jesus figurine from your Nativity scene in a beautifully wrapped box. Put this box in front of all the other presents under the tree. On Christmas morning, have your kids open this present first. Thank God for His perfect gift—His one and only Son—as you lay the figurine in the manger. Discuss the amazing truth that this gift is not for just a few select families, but for every family in the world—past, present and future. (ThrivingFamily.com)