

## What If This Were Your Last Christmas?

Here's a simple but sobering exercise to help motivate you to make this your best holiday season ever. Think about this for a moment: What if this was your last holiday season? It may sound morbid, but try to view the question in a positive light: What if you had the benefit of knowing that this Christmas was the last one your children had to remember with you?

I know of several husbands and fathers who, a year ago, were going through life as normal. They had no idea then that they wouldn't be here a year later. But if they had known, what would they have done differently last year? The whole point of this exercise is to make changes this year that will help you and your family have more meaningful holidays.

Maybe like some of you, I would like to have a Christmas or two back and do it again. I remember the Christmas that my oldest son was still living on the streets with his friends. I remember hoping he would show up after he said he would come home Christmas morning. On Christmas morning we got up anxiously waiting for the door bell to ring wondering what he would look like or how he would act. He said he was coming but we had no reason to believe him but for one thing: Our family was all about traditions, even as messed up as our family had become. For us, special get-togethers seemed sacred or even holy.

That particular day was a bit different from most Christmas mornings. Traditionally, our two sons would wake up and run down the stairs with their dog, Darby, wondering what Santa Claus had brought them. The door bell did ring amidst the fear that he wouldn't show up because of his anger toward me. I remember after we opened up the gifts we went outside to play with his brother's new toy and his mom had a bit of hope that things had changed. As you might have guessed, he said he had to leave while his mom was busy in the kitchen preparing Christmas dinner. I guess I was stunned and shocked, but I remember telling him that he had to go inside and tell his mom he was leaving. Inside my heart, I thought he would never hurt or disappoint her especially on this day, but he went inside, told her, hugged her and left a mom who could hardly finish cooking the meal. It crushed our day and our hopes of a new beginning. Did it get better? No, the next Christmas he was in jail on charges of weapons and burglary of a habitation. Christmas Eve found us waiting in line to see him in jail and waking up the next morning to another disappointing Christmas day.

Do you not think our Christmas mornings have new meanings now? You bet and you better believe we value each and every moment, and every day for that matter. Although the past crushed my wife and younger son, and brought so much pain in my life that I thought I would never recover, I now sit on most Christmas mornings just crying when I see my two sons and daughter-in-law unwrapping packages – a recovered and restored family.

So, if you knew this holiday season was the last one your kids would have with you, how would you make the most of it? What gifts would you give? You don't have to go into debt buying expensive gifts; in fact, maybe this year you can spend less on gifts. This could be the year to put more time and effort into coming up with gifts that will be meaningful and memorable for your family members. Maybe gifts of time are part of the solution.

Which traditions would you observe—and which would you skip? Is it time to re-energize some existing traditions, or maybe try some new ones? Would you be more patient standing in line? Or more tolerant of the daily stresses at home? Would you be more forgiving when your kids are too loud or they get on each other's nerves? Would you simply rejoice that you have kids and you have a home and you are just together?

Maybe some better questions would be less about *what* you would and wouldn't do, and more about *how you would act* as you do them. Whatever your traditions may be—decorating the house together, baking cookies, going for a drive to see the lights, get-togethers with friends, having a traditional meal, traveling to see relatives, opening gifts, helping a family in need, making a family video, attending holiday programs and worship services, etc.—the secret is to be completely engaged in those activities and make them special for your whole family. Live like it's your last holiday season, and really make it count.

#### **ACTION POINTS FOR COMMITTED DADS:**

- What is the most unique tradition that your family celebrates? Be sure to make the most of that one. Consider starting a new tradition that emphasizes being active—like a family get-away, playing a board game, or having a front yard football game with family and friends.
- With young children, have an at-home Christmas pageant where your family does a costumed parade or acts out a story that demonstrates the meaning of the holidays.
- Another tradition idea: get everyone together to watch home videos of past celebrations or just dig out the old pictures of years past.
- Let your children contribute ideas for someone your family could help in some way during the holiday season.

The holidays remind us what special people we have for children, family members, and friends. Try to remember and cherish that special feeling every day. We only get one crack at being our children's dad while they still are children. So let's make the most of it!

In all ways and in all things you do, listen, listen and love, love.