

An interview with Melissa Spoelstra, Author of *Total Christmas Makeover*



In the bustle of the Christmas season, it can be easy to get swept up in all of the things to do: decorating, cooking, socializing, and shopping. However, it is important to pause and remember the priority should be to spend time celebrating Christ's birth and not forgetting to invite Jesus to His own party. In *Total Christmas Makeover: 31 Devotions to Celebrate with Purpose* (Abingdon Press/October 3, 2017), Melissa Spoelstra provides a practical approach to helping families learn what it means to truly celebrate the Savior.

Q: Some people thrive on the holiday season while others dread it. What factors differentiate the enthusiasts from those who would rather skip the holidays?

It really is our attitude that differentiates us. Those who want to skip it may have significant factors contributing to their posture. Perhaps they lost a loved one this year, and Christmas marks a time of loss flooded with memories of an absent person at their celebrations. Others may have complicated family or friend situations or might be battling cancer or a serious illness. However, many want to skip Christmas because their lists of things to do are overwhelming. The hype of Christmas requires a lot of work and sometimes isn't very nourishing to the soul. Rediscovering enthusiasm for the season means stripping away the excess and getting back to Christ. Waning enthusiasm can return when we begin to ask good questions about how and why we celebrate. These devotions are designed to do just that. When we redirect our focus, we can celebrate Christ even through rough seasons of life.

Q: What is a total Christmas makeover?

A total Christmas makeover doesn't mean scrapping all your holiday traditions or adding ten more to your list. Instead, it is a personal time of reflection to evaluate how your Christmas practices align with some biblical concepts of celebration. The Old Testament is filled with instructions to celebrate and remember with marked days and times. Passover, festivals and feasts were instituted by God to help His people remember who He is and what He has done.

While we have no such specifics given for our celebration of Christ's birth because it comes from church history rather than biblical mandate, we can glean some important principles about celebration from Scripture. In studying the holy days God instructed the Israelites to observe in the Old Testament, we notice three key elements consistent in their practices. Rituals, including special gatherings, particular foods and specific actions, helped God's people remember His faithfulness. Relationships were a key part of everything. Rest was mandated, and stopping ordinary work helped people savor God's goodness. As we think about our Christmas rituals, relationships and time for rest, we can make simple Spirit-led changes that will help us celebrate Jesus and bring realignment to His mission. That is a total Christmas makeover.



Q: How do you approach the Christmas season differently now than you did five or ten years ago?

I'm less concerned about doing what I think I "should" do and more focused on spending time with the Savior I celebrate. I still love many of the rituals of Christmas and continue to decorate, attend parties, incorporate family devotions and prepare for special church services. I'm just more OK with saying no to some things. I don't have to attend every party we are invited to. With teenagers, we now do weekly family devotions in December where they take turns leading. I spend more moments savoring, singing and praying and less time fretting, shopping and trying to make everything "just right."

Q: Since the Bible doesn't expressly instruct us to celebrate Christ's birth, is it OK to mix the more secular elements of Christmas in with the religious aspects of the holiday?

In light of the many holy days set aside in Scripture for the purpose of celebration, I have to believe God loves a good party. Jesus spent a significant time at parties during His ministry on earth. I don't think every aspect of Christmas has to be hyper-spiritual. Of course, we want to focus on Christ's humble birth, God's extravagant

love and the sacrifice He made to redeem us. That doesn't mean we can't have some rituals that are just for fun. My husband hides our children's stockings every year since we never had a good place to hang them. They wake up before us on Christmas morning and find a handwritten poem with clues and parameters to start hunting. As they got older he went a little crazy, burying one in a bin underground and another year placing one of them on the roof (clearly without permission from me!). This has no spiritual significance, but it will be one of my children's favorite memories. Later in the day we will read from Luke and share what Christ has done in our lives, but the morning stocking hunt is just for fun. I'm sure many of you have traditions that aren't inherently spiritual, but if they aren't contrary to God's Word or offensive to Christ's message, I believe we have a lot of freedom in Christ worth exercising!

Q: As long as you make sure everything you do is Christ-honoring in some way, is there anything wrong with going "all out" for Christmas? Looking at the opposite end of the spectrum, is it OK if you don't do anything special to observe or celebrate Christmas?

Let's remember that Christmas isn't a commanded holy day in the Bible. God did issue consequences for those who refused to celebrate Passover without a good reason (Numbers 9:13), but Christmas is a tradition, not a commanded holiday. I have friends who really go all out. My friend Elizabeth loves Christmas. She has the gift of wonder, and her excitement is contagious. God loves extravagantly. He went all out with an angel song for shepherds. There is nothing wrong with going all out. The danger comes when we lose our focus on Christ and exhaust ourselves with an overwhelmed attitude. Those who choose not to celebrate Christmas citing the commercialization, pagan roots of some traditions or personal reasons aren't breaking any biblical command either. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. What we need is balance and Holy Spirit leading to manage our time, talents and treasures in a way that honors the God we celebrate at Christmas.

Q: For those who feel like Scrooge or the Grinch (most definitely secular characters) around Christmas, what kind of self-examination should they do?

Feelings are fickle at times. They can change from day to day when we take into account our fatigue, workload, relational issues, etc. If we are consistently feeling like Scrooge or Grinch throughout a longer period of time, then we need to do some digging to get to the root of a pattern of feelings that isn't Christ-like. God is generous. We can never out-give Him. At Christmas, generosity is highlighted and contagious. If we aren't joining in that Holy Spirit-led desire to give and serve, then we need to do a heart check. These could be symptoms of something we can take action to reverse, such as lack of prayer or study in God's Word. Maybe we have isolated ourselves from a community of believers and need to re-engage. Sometimes the issues run much deeper to past abuse, grief or secret sin. A good counselor might be needed in those cases to help us walk through our pain in a healthy way.

Q: What are some of your family's favorite traditions? How have they changed throughout the years?

When our children were little, someone shared with me the Jesse Tree project. It includes 25 short devotions with references to pages in the Beginner Bible. The stories begin with creation and end with the cross. The booklet also gave instructions for corresponding ornaments to place on a miniature Christmas tree. We made or bought these ornaments and wrapped them with Christmas paper. Our children enjoyed making many of them since we couldn't find a fiery furnace or Ten Commandments scroll in stores! We used shrinky dinks, construction paper, pipe cleaners and a variety of craft materials. Each year I would wrap them all individually and put the corresponding number of the day it was to be placed on the tree on the package. Each night before bed we would do the reading, and the kids would take turns opening the ornament and hanging it on a small tree.

Once our children got into middle school, our bedtime routines changed with sports and youth group activities, and we found ourselves needing to catch up doing two or three ornaments every few days. Eventually we stopped doing the Jesse Tree devotions and ornaments and assigned each child an evening to share their own devotion on a Christmas topic of their choosing (star, angels, wise man, shepherds, etc.). They had to include a fun activity (game or craft) as well as a reading from Scripture and discussion questions. While I love to reminisce our sweet nightly December times when they were little with the Jesse Tree, I also enjoy our new traditions with college- and high-school-aged kids.

Q: Is *Total Christmas Makeover* intended to be used as a family devotional or for the adults read and apply to their family time each day?

It could be used either way. For adults whose small groups or Bible studies break for December, it provides a daily reading to keep them in Scripture and reflecting on the reason for the season. It includes Scripture, a devotion, a prayer prompt and practical application ideas. These could be read and discussed as a family or on an individual basis.

Q: So much of the Christmas season is centered around the giving and receiving of gifts. How can we make over our approach to gift-giving to be more Christ-focused and meaningful?

The wise men brought gifts. Jesus is the greatest gift to us. Giving gifts is a tradition to remind us of our generous God. However, anything God intends for good, the enemy tries to twist. This has certainly happened with holiday shopping. Marketing targets us and our children to desire bigger, better, faster and more. Dialoguing about the tradition of gifts and taking time to include our families in being generous to others help realign us in remembering the greatest gifts usually aren't bought in a store. People are gifts. Peace, contentment and forgiveness are gifts. When kids catch a vision and a taste of giving to others, it is the best medicine to quell their natural desires to receive. Shopping for a needy family, reading about missionaries and starting traditions of gratitude help us rediscover the joy of giving and receiving.

Q: During the busyness of the holiday season, in what ways can we focus on relationships and valuing others?

If we aren't careful, people can become scenery and machinery. The waitress who brings our coffee. The postal worker who brings the mail. These are real people with real stories. When we break through the reverie of our own to-do lists and start to see them, we can ask questions. We can begin to pray for them. We might even get the opportunity to share about Christ with words or show them Christ with generosity. We want to become "there you are" kind of people rather than "here I am" Christians. This will require us to be intentional in focusing on people rather than tasks during a busy time of year.

Q: The third section of *Total Christmas Makeover* focuses on rest. How are we supposed to work rest into December? Isn't rest what January is for?

Rest requires preparation. It means we must leave some margin in our schedules and finances. We must block off chunks of time and guard them as an important commitment. Biblical celebration always required Sabbath. No regular work was to be done. This has never been as challenging as it is now with email on our phone and notifications galore. To take a true break from ordinary work, it might mean locking up devices or just checking them a little less frequently. Rest isn't watching more television. It means giving our minds, bodies and souls a chance to stop and leave space to hear from God. True rest produces no work, but it does leave us refreshed and reflective.

Q: In what ways can rest mean different things for different people?

Introverts and extroverts often find different types of things restful. As an introvert, I like to rest alone. I enjoy reading, napping, sitting outside or going for a stroll. My extroverted husband still likes a good nap and some of these activities as well, but he feels rested talking with friends or family. He enjoys a family game or a walk with others. Being with people replenishes him while being alone recharges me. Each person must discover the type of things that help them feel rested and connected to God. At Christmas, I enjoy sitting on my couch each evening just looking at the lights on my Christmas tree. I think about my day and my God and take a few minutes to savor what Jesus has done in my life.

Q: The 31 devotionals go beyond Christmas day. How do you transition readers into preparing for the new year ahead?

The last 10 devotionals revolve around rest and preparation for a new year. It is during times of rest when we can reflect on what we want to do differently in the future. These devotionals cover topics such as balance, finding new strength and preparing to remember God's gift of Christ throughout the year ahead.

For more about Melissa Spoelstra and *Total Family Makeover*, visit melissaspoelstra.com. You can also follow her on [Facebook \(AuthorMelissaSpoelstra\)](#) and [Twitter \(@MelSpoelstra\)](#).