



SESSION FOUR



Good-Bye to the Bents

Key Verse

“I am the true vine; my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that does not bear fruit. And he trims and cleans every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit.”

John 15:1-2

LEADER PLANNING

Materials Needed:

- Copies of this lesson plan (1 per facilitator)
- Student Handouts and pens (1 per student)
- Read a Story Script (1 copy, optional)
- Bibles (1 per student)
- Glitter, sequins, stickers, markers, and glue (a supply for each group)
- Scissors (1 per group)
- 5-inch lengths of string (1 per student)

Preparation:

- **Read a Story:** Assign the reading of the story of the leaning Christmas tree from *Because of Bethlehem* to a person other than yourself, if you prefer.
- **Christmas Practice:**
 - Set out the decorating supplies, scissors, and string.

NOTE: The two readings in this lesson are different than the preceding lessons, in that the first reading is very short and can easily be done by the leader, but the second reading is very long, and includes humor, drama and teaching. It is important that the reading be done in a way that helps students focus on the meaning of the lesson without distractions. Make sure the reader you choose doesn't read in a monotone and doesn't stumble over words.

SESSION FOUR OUTLINE

Set the Stage: The First Christmas Tree (3 minutes)

Setting: Large Group

Tell Your Story: O Christmas Tree (5 minutes)

Setting: Pairs

Materials: Student Handouts (1 per student)

Read a Story: The Leaning Christmas Tree (10 minutes)

Setting: Large Group

Materials: Read a Story Script (1 copy, optional)

Preparation: Assign the reading to a person other than yourself, if you prefer

Study God's Story: Pruned, Decorated, Placed (20 minutes)

Setting: Small Group

Materials: Bibles and Student Handouts

Christmas Practice: Decorating the Tree (10 minutes)

Setting: Small Group, transition to large group

Materials: Student Handouts and pens, Christmas tree cutouts and decorations, scissors, string, and undecorated Christmas tree

Preparation: Set out decorating supplies and string

Christmas Challenge: Choose a verse that applies to God's action in your life and write it on your tree ornament

Christmas Focus: Read *Because of Bethlehem*, chapters 10–12

Christmas Carol: "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (2 minutes)

Setting: Large Group

Materials: Student Handouts

SET THE STAGE: THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE (3 MINUTES)

Preparation:

- As students enter, distribute Session Four Student Handouts.

Do you know how the Christmas tree was invented? According to legend, Martin Luther in 1536 was walking in the woods one Christmas night, and he looked up and saw thousands of stars glittering through the branches of the trees. This sight inspired him to set up a tree in his house and put lighted candles on the limbs to remind his children of the starry night when Jesus was born.

It's interesting that a tree has become one of the main symbols of Christmas. In the Bible, trees are important symbols. At the beginning of time there was a tree in the garden of Eden that symbolized the **entry of sin** into the world. At the end of time the Tree of Life in heaven symbolizes the healing we will all receive from the **effects of sin**. The tree between those two is the cross, which is the symbol of God's love for us by **paying for our sin**. Listen to what Max Lucado says about these trees in his book *Because of Bethlehem*:

We don't know why the cross of Christ is often called a tree. Perhaps the earliest crosses were actually trees. Or since crosses were formed from trees, maybe the name stuck. But whatever the reason, the Bible writers often called the cross a tree.

Somewhere between the Tree of Knowledge in the garden of Eden and the Tree of Life in heaven is the Tree of Sacrifice outside of Jerusalem. And if Christmas trees are known for beauty and gifts, then who would deny that the most wonderful Christmas tree was a rugged one on a hill called Calvary?¹

What do you think of that idea—that the first Christmas tree was actually the Easter tree, the cross! We are going to talk about more ways the Christmas tree is a symbol of God's love for us in today's lesson.



1 Adapted from Max Lucado, *Because of Bethlehem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016), page 124.

TELL YOUR STORY: O CHRISTMAS TREE (5 MINUTES)

Materials Needed:

- Student Handouts

*Have students pair up with someone next to them. Read aloud the instructions for the **Tell Your Story: O Christmas Tree** exercise on the Student Handout, and have students take turns choosing questions to answer in order to share their Christmas tree traditions with each other.*

Tell Your Story: Christmas Tree Traditions

Take turns choosing from the following questions to describe your Christmas tree traditions to your partner.

- Does your family usually have a Christmas tree every year or do you sometimes go without a tree?
- Does your family put up a fresh tree or an artificial tree? If you put up a fresh tree, where do you get it? Do you have any family traditions for finding your tree?
- How big is your tree? Too big for the room it goes in, just about right, or small enough to sit on a table? Where do you put your tree?
- What are your family traditions for decorating the tree?
- What is on the top of your tree? What is your favorite ornament on the tree? Why do you like it?
- When do you usually put up and take down your tree each year?
- What is your favorite part of having a Christmas tree?



READ A STORY: THE LEANING CHRISTMAS TREE (10 MINUTES)

Materials:

- Read a Story Script (1 copy, optional)

Preparation:

- Assign the reading of the story of the leaning Christmas tree from *Because of Bethlehem* to a person other than yourself, if you prefer

NOTE: This reading is very long and includes humor, drama, and teaching. It is important that the reading be done in a way that helps students focus on the meaning of the lesson without distractions. Make sure the reader you choose doesn't read in a monotone and doesn't stumble over words.

If appropriate, share a story about the Christmas tree traditions in your childhood.

How many of you have families who go get a live Christmas tree? Has anyone ever been like Charlie Brown and chosen a tree that looked so small and sad you took pity on it? I don't know if you know this, but one of the most difficult things about a live tree is getting it to stand up straight. Have any of your parents ever had that problem? Well, according to Max Lucado, getting the tree to stand up straight is one of the greatest problems to face the world! Although he's exaggerating just a bit, we are going to read his story from *Because of Bethlehem* about leaning trees. This is a longer reading today, so be sure to listen for the ways Christmas trees are a lot like people.

The Christmas tree hunt is on. Families are entering tents and patrolling sidewalks. They lift limbs and examine needles. They measure. They ponder. They consider. They barter.

The tree can't be too tall or too short. It needs to fit the room and the budget. It must be full yet not dense, mature but not dry. A noble fir for some. A Douglas fir or Virginia pine for others. The preferences are different, but the desire is the same. We want the perfect Christmas tree.

And, oh, the special moment when we find it. When we lash it to the car. Drag it into the house and set it in the tree stand.

We revel in this moment. Only a few people have won the Olympics,

completed an Ironman triathlon, or been awarded the Nobel Prize. Fewer still have positioned a Christmas tree so that it doesn't lean.

One year I barely escaped. Denalyn and I placed the tree in the stand, stood back . . . and sighed in disappointment at what we saw. The dreaded tilt. I crawled under the branches and began adjusting the screws until the tree stood as straight as a stalk of wheat. We stepped back and admired my engineering skills. Denalyn placed her arm in mine, and I choked back tears of joy. My children called me blessed. Angels began to sing. The blast of trumpets sounded in the front yard, where neighbors had gathered. The White House called to congratulate me. We strung the lights and hung the decorations. It was a wonderful night.

Then disaster struck. The tree started to lean again. Decorations shook, lights shifted, Denalyn shouted, and I ran to the rescue.

This time I placed the tree on its side, removed the stand, and saw the root of the problem. Just six inches above the cut line was a right turn. Our tree was crooked! Once upon a time in a forest, this tree had been a leaner! And now here it was, in our house, in broad daylight, in front of my own children—leaning again!

What's a person to do? As I was retrieving a saw from the garage, it occurred to me: I'm not the first father to deal with this issue. God faces this situation on a continual basis. Don't we have our share of unattractive bents?

I wish I stood as straight as a sequoia, but I don't. And since I don't, I find a kindred spirit in the Christmas tree. I think you will find the same. What you do for a tree, God does for you.

He **PICKED** you.

Do you purchase the first tree you see? Of course not. You search for the right one. You walk the rows. You lift several up and set them down. You examine them from all angles until you decide, *This one is perfect*. You have a place in mind where the tree will sit. Not just any tree will do.

God does the same. **He knows just the place where you'll be PLACED.** He has a barren living room in desperate need of warmth and joy. A corner of the world needs some color. He selected you with that place in mind.

God made you on purpose with a **PURPOSE**. He interwove calendar and character, circumstance and personality to create the right person for the right corner of the world, and then he paid the price to take you home.

He **PURCHASED** you.

We don't ask the tree-lot owner to give us the tree for free. The kid who loads the tree in the trunk doesn't shell out the cash; we do. We make the necessary payment.

God did the same. On the original Christmas tree, Calvary's cross, he paid the price to save you by dying for you.

In the manger God loves you; through the cross God saves you. But has he taken you to his home? Not yet. He has work for you to do.

So . . . he **PRUNES** you.

He takes an ax to your back-talking and clippers to your self-pity, and when there is a tilt in your character that needs to be removed, he's been known to pull out the old Black & Decker.

Once he gets us cleaned up and standing straight, the **DECORATING** begins. He festoons us with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He crowns us. Most people crown their Christmas trees with either an angel or a star. God uses both. He sends his angels to protect us and his Word as a star to guide us.

Our task is to stand tall in his love, secure in our place, sparkling in kindness, surrounded by his goodness, freely giving to all who come our way.

You, me, and the Christmas tree. Picked, placed, purchased, pruned and crowned.¹



¹ Adapted from Max Lucado, *Because of Bethlehem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2016), chapter 11.

STUDY GOD'S STORY: PRUNED, DECORATED, PLACED (20 MINUTES)

Materials Needed:

- Bibles
- Student Handouts

At this time, if your group is larger than 10 students, break up into discussion groups of 4 to 6, with an adult facilitator or student leader.

First, discuss last week's experience.

Think back to last week's session, "God Guides the Wise." Our challenge was to work on the practice of the Rest Stop that meant the most to you.

- How did your Rest Stop practice work for you? Did it shine God's light on your path a little clearer? Did you follow his light a little better? Did you get closer to Jesus?
- Did anyone find something meaningful in your reading of *Because of Bethlehem* you'd like to share with the group?

*Next, transition to a discussion of **Set the Stage and Read a Story.***

At the beginning of our lesson we heard a short reading from *Because of Bethlehem* that described the significance of trees in the Bible.

- Do you agree with the idea that the cross was the first Christmas tree? Why or why not?

In the longer story from *Because of Bethlehem*, Max tied two things together in our minds: the way we treat Christmas trees and the ways God loves us.

- What are some of the ways Max said the Christmas tree symbolizes the ways God loves us? [*God picks us, places us, purchases us, prunes us, and crowns us*] Can you think of any other ways a Christmas tree can remind us of God's love for us? [*God gives Christmas trees water, sun, nourishment to grow. He makes them green all year round, no matter the season. They have a special purpose to give joy. Etc.*]

Using the image of a Christmas tree, Max explained how God prunes us, decorates us, and then places us to make a difference in the world. Let's look at how God does this in our lives.

God Prunes Us

Have the students look up our Key Verses, John 15:1–2, in their Bibles. Choose a student to read the verse out loud to the group. The scripture is provided on the Student Handout in case the students don't have Bibles.

"I am the true vine; my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that does not bear fruit. And he trims and cleans every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit."

John 15:1–2

- According to these verses, what is the purpose of pruning (trimming and cleaning) a branch? *[so it will produce more fruit]*
- What is the branch doing that causes it to have to be cut off? *[it is not producing fruit]*
- What are the kinds of things God uses in our lives to prune us? *[problems, pain]*
- What is it that God needs to cut out of our lives? *[sin, pride, selfishness]* What do you think God is trying to accomplish by pruning us? *[make us look more like Jesus]*
- When your life is being pruned, does it feel like God is being loving, or something else? *[it might feel like punishment, abandonment, judgment]* Why is God's pruning evidence of his love for us? *[it shows he knows us, pays attention to us, is involved in our lives, and is doing what we need to help us become our best selves]*

God Decorates Us

Have the students look up Galatians 5:22–23 in their Bibles. Choose a student to read the verse out loud to the group. The scripture is provided on the Student Handout in case the students don't have Bibles.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

Galatians 5:22–23 NKJV

- When we think of ourselves in a symbolic way as trees, why are these characteristics called our "fruit"? Why do you suppose they are called "fruit of the Spirit"?

- When God “decorates” us with the fruit of the Spirit, how does he do it? What does God use to build love, joy, peace, etc., into our lives? *[he uses circumstances that force us to develop that quality, such as learning to be patient because of a person who irritates us, or having to practice faithfulness even though we're tired]*
- When God is building the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, does it feel like he is being loving, or something else? Why is his “decorating” of us evidence of his love for us?

God Places Us

Have the students look up Psalm 139:13–14, 16 in their Bibles. Choose a student to read the passage out loud to the group. The scripture is provided on the Student Handout in case the students don't have Bibles.

You made my whole being;
you formed me in my mother's body.
I praise you because you made me in an amazing and wonderful way.
What you have done is wonderful. . . .
All the days planned for me
were written in your book
before I was one day old.

Psalm 139:13–14, 16 NCV

- Pretend this passage was written about a Christmas tree. List the aspects of the tree's life that were planned out in advance by God. *[when the seed sprouted, where the tree would grow, what storms it would endure, that it would be cut down and used as a Christmas tree, which family would choose it, what room they would place it in]*
- According to the psalmist, at what point in the life of the tree did God decide it was going to become a Christmas tree?

As the tree sprouted and grew and endured the cycle of the seasons, it didn't know it was destined to bring joy to a family as their Christmas tree, but everything about where it was planted and what type of tree it was and how tall it grew worked together to help it serve a beautiful purpose.

- Think about your life. Are you getting any ideas about why God made you the way he did? Where do you think he might be placing you and using you to bless others?

CHRISTMAS PRACTICE: DECORATING THE TREE (10 MINUTES)

Materials Needed:

- Student Handouts and pens
- Bibles (1 per student)
- Glitter, sequins, stickers, markers, and glue (a supply for each group)
- Scissors (1 per group)
- 5-inch lengths of string (1 per student)

Preparation:

- Set out the decorating supplies, scissors, and string

As you think about yourself right now, what is the main way you are experiencing God's work in your life? On your Student Handout, place a check mark next to the statement that best describes your response, and fill in the blank to describe what kind of work God is doing in your life.

- ☐ I am being **PRUNED**. God is working on my character, helping me get rid of bad habits and behaviors. I notice him working on _____ *(describe what God is working on cutting out of your life)*.
- ☐ I am being **DECORATED**. God is helping me grow in the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (circle the one he's growing in you currently)—by _____ *(describe the circumstance God is using to help you grow fruit)*.
- ☐ I am being **PLACED**. God has a purpose for me right where I am. He has placed me here to love people and make a difference by _____ *(describe how God is using who you are to bless others)*.

Would anyone like to share how you responded to this exercise? *[allow time for sharing]*

CHRISTMAS CHALLENGE: Based on the option you chose, find a Bible verse from one of these passages that applies to what God is doing in your life:

- I am being pruned: Choose one verse from Ephesians 4:25–32
- I am being decorated: Choose one verse from James 1:2–5
- I am being placed: Choose one verse from 1 Corinthians 13

Now, turn to the next page and write your verse on the tree. You could give your verse a title, such as “God is pruning my bad language,” or “I am being decorated with self-control.” Then, add decorations to your tree, cut it out, and loop a string through the hole at the top. Hang your tree ornament at home to remind you of God’s purpose for you, and your willingness to have him work on you in this area.

PRAY TOGETHER: We are going to pray together now. This is a time for you to pray and commit yourself to God’s purpose for you, and tell him you are willing to have him work on you in this area. Thank him for loving you and helping you become more like Jesus and ask him to use you to love your world.

CHRISTMAS FOCUS: Finish reading the last 3 chapters in *Because of Bethlehem*, and discover how very loved you are by God.



NOTE: *The Student Handout includes a Christmas tree ornament for students to write on, decorate and cut out.*

CHRISTMAS CAROL: "O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL" (2 MINUTES)

Materials Needed:

- Student Handouts

Gather the students near the Christmas tree and close your time by singing a Christmas carol of worship and commitment. You may wish to circle up and join hands to sing your closing song.

"O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL"

O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold Him,
Born the King of Angels!

O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation
Sing, all ye citizens of Heav'n above.
Glory to God
Glory in the highest!

O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord.

We'll praise your name forever
We'll praise your name forever
We'll praise your name forever
Christ the Lord.

For you alone are worthy
For you alone are worthy
For you alone are worthy
Christ the Lord.