

The Christmas Straw



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Bethann was clearing the straw off the table after putting away the last of the fall decorations. Thanksgiving was over and it was time to bring out the Christmas decorations. She could hear the kids at the other end of the house fighting again. This time of year, it was always worse; time away from schoolwork, excitement for the upcoming holiday activities, and an edginess that felt like a weight clinging to each of the kids.

“You stole it, give it back!” yelled James.

“No, I didn’t, I had it first,” Jenifer replied angrily.

The argument rang through the house, and not for the first time. Bethann had 4 beautiful children, but lately, all she could see and hear were their faults. James, the oldest, was smart and quick-witted, but he always had a chip on his shoulder. He was picking a fight with each of his siblings daily. His focus recently was on his little sister Kaylee calling her a lazy elephant because he perceived her ears to be too big for her head. Next was Jenifer, she was pretty and had a real talent for anything musical. She, however, was extremely jealous of all her siblings, needing to be first at everything and “borrowing” anything she wanted – even if she didn’t have permission. Third in line was Kaylee, parents aren’t supposed to have favorites, but if she had to choose one of her kids, Kaylee was the one. She was smart as a whip, laughed often, and had never met a stranger. She struggled with self-confidence, especially with Jenifer’s fixation on taking anything Kaylee loved or succeeded at. Her last bundle of joy was Kevin. This little boy was creative, imaginative, and feisty. And though he was learning to be a better human, he still struggled with his temper and using his words. He was quick to hit a person when he didn’t get his way. Which lately, was way too often.

Bethann sighed. They had just sat around the table sharing what they were thankful for this year, laughing, playing games, and enjoying family time. Christmas was right around the corner. This was supposed to be a season of sharing, love, compassion, forgiveness, warm hearts, and days filled with joy. But this house was sadly lacking in that abundant Christmas spirit.

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As she dropped the last of the straw into the trash can, she remembered a story her mother had shared with her and her siblings many years ago. It brought back wonderful memories of family bonding during the holidays. Maybe it would make a difference with her kids this year.

She called them all to the table and told them to get comfortable. A couple of them groaned knowing she was going to make them participate in something they probably wouldn't like, but they obliged. Bethann started by asking if they could share their versions of the story of baby Jesus. Each, in turn, shared how they thought the story went. James, Jenifer, and Kaylee were all strong in their understanding of the gift Jesus was to the world. Kevin, though, wove starships and dinosaurs creatively into the story but left out too many crucial facts. She decided to clarify a few points so this project would work properly.

"...the night Jesus was born is an important part of His sacrifice for us later in His life." She continued, her children were smiling and that warmed her heart. "And when He was born, His earthly father gathered straw to place in the manger so his baby, Jesus, would be warm and comfortable. That's what we're going to do for baby Jesus' visit to our house this year."

The kids' faces twisted into confusion.

"But Jesus already came to earth," James said. "How can He come back again as a baby?"

Bethann smiled. "We celebrate Christmas – the birth of Jesus – each year, just like we celebrate your birthday each year. You've seen me put out the Nativity set on the table with the other Christmas decorations, right?" They all nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, this year, we're going to fill a manger with straw so baby Jesus can have a warm, soft place to sleep in when Christmas day comes."

"I don't understand," groaned Jenifer.

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Bethann kept going. “We’re going to take a box, go to the field by the park, and fill that box with straw. When Daddy gets home from work, we’re going to put all our names on paper and those papers into a bowl. We’re going to pass around the bowl and each of us will draw a name. Then every day we’re going to find ways to be kind to the person we drew from the bowl. For each act of kindness, you will add a straw to the manger. The more kind acts we do for each other, the more straw will be in the manger on Christmas day. Here’s the best part – we’re going to keep *secret* the name we draw. We want the straw we put in to measure the kindness we’ve done for each other, so we won’t tell anyone what we’re doing for them.”

“Like Secret Santa!” James exclaimed.

“I want to be a secret spy,” Kevin said with a devious grin.

“What if we don’t like the person we draw?” The look of pain was evident on Kaylee’s face. The past few weeks, she had been the target of all three of her siblings and Bethann knew she didn’t want to be nice to any of them right now.

“Each week we will draw new names,” Bethann said with a smile. “We can say it’s a game and see how many straws we can secretly add to the manger. And Mommy and Daddy’s names will be in the bowl, so you could get to spoil one of us for a week!”

Kaylee hesitantly smiled and said, “Okay, I’ll pretend it’s a game.”

“Then let’s get started!” Bethann said gleefully. The kids all rushed to get their hats, coats, and boots. Bethann went to the garage for a box, and they all headed to the field by the park. When they got there, the kids happily headed into the tall grass to gather straw for the manger and this new game. The box was overflowing faster than Bethann could blink.

“That’s enough! Let’s go home and have some hot chocolate to warm up.”

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After the dinner dishes were cleared away, Bethann grabbed a bowl, some paper, and pens. She passed around the pens and strips of paper for everyone to write their name on. The papers were folded and added to the bowl.

“Remember to keep the name a secret.” Bethann reminded the family.

As the bowl was passed around, each family member took a name. James grinned as he read his name. Jenifer’s face was a mask. Kevin asked Daddy to read the name, then promptly ate the paper. Kaylee grimaced as she saw the name on the paper she drew. Bethann and her husband took the last two names from the bowl. She raised her eyebrows in curiosity as she imagined what the coming days would be like.

She didn’t have to wonder long, the shoebox she had set out slowly began to fill. It was as if the house had been invaded by angels. Toys were put away after playtime. The blobs of peanut butter and jelly were cleaned off the counter after lunch when she stepped out to get the mail one afternoon. Each day James’ bed was made, it was messy because that act of kindness was done by someone with very small arms, but it was made. Jenifer’s bed was turned down and her PJs were neatly laid out on the end of the bed. Daddy’s desk was tidied, and Bethann’s shoes had been straightened in the closet.

There was an obvious shift in the kids’ attitudes, as well. They weren’t fighting and teasing as much. Even though an argument would start, within minutes Bethann would hear the soft sound of giggles coming from the room. She smiled to herself as she quietly thanked the Lord for His presence in their home.

When it came time to draw names again, the room lit up with laughter and joy. Everyone was anxious to see who they would get to bless this week. The names were added to the bowl and the bowl passed from person to person. James snickered, Jenifer smiled this time, and Kevin closed his eyes as Daddy whispered the name in his ear, then greedily ate the paper.

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But Kaylee, Kaylee's face fell as her chosen name was revealed. As the last two names were pulled from the bowl, Bethann heard Kaylee's door slam.

Bethann quietly knocked on the door and heard Kaylee stifle a sob before saying, "Come in."

"What's wrong sweetheart?" She sat on the bed and gently rubbed Kaylee's back.

"I know I'm supposed to love my brothers and sister. But I really don't like them, Mom! Even though they are doing nice things, James won't stop calling me a lazy elephant, Jenifer keeps taking my coloring pencils and breaking them and Kevin just won't stop hitting me. I just can't be nice to them. Can I please stop playing this stupid game?"

"No, honey, you can't stop showing kindness. Jesus came to Earth to show the people of the world real love. He endured hatred, angry people, torture, and abuse during His time on Earth, but He never stopped loving. He showed compassion and forgiveness to everyone He met. He is the perfect example of loving those who don't love us. When we choose to love despite the pain others cause, we show them Jesus' love through our actions. Maybe next week you'll draw mine or Daddy's names and you can enjoy the game."

"Okay," defeat lacing Kaylee's small voice.

It broke Bethann's heart, but she knew this opportunity could change how Kaylee dealt with her siblings. She prayed for Kaylee's heart and her strength, and that the Lord would guide her through this experience.

The second week saw a vast improvement over the first. And the third was even better than the second. So much better, Bethann had to get a bigger box to hold all the straw that was being added to the manger. Smiles were seen on everyone's faces all day, and laughter could be heard throughout the house. Christmas joy was contagiously overflowing in the house and Bethann couldn't be happier.

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The family was now just days away from Christmas, and Bethann realized this was the last time names would be drawn. There was still time to fill the manger to overflowing as long as everyone continued with their kind deeds. The bowl was passed one more time around the table. With smiles, giggles, and happy applause each child drew a name. Right on cue, Kevin ate his paper after squealing when Daddy whispered the name. Bethann watched carefully as the bowl was handed to Kaylee. Last week's outburst was a repeat of the second week. Bethann prayed as Kaylee drew her name. As she gingerly unfolded her piece of paper, her eyes filled with tears. Without a word, she jumped up and ran from the room.

Everyone turned and stared, then started talking all at once curious as to what was going on.

"Quiet down and stay here. I'll talk to her."

When Bethann walked through the door, Kaylee was busy shoving clothes, colored pencils, and notebooks into her backpack. She reached for her coat, turned, and stopped when she saw Mom standing in the doorway.

"I have to leave," Kaylee said quietly through tears. "If I stay, I'll end up ruining Christmas for everyone. Please let me go and leave me alone."

Bethann wanted to warn her about the snow and cold but decided to honor her request and let her leave. Kaylee needed some space to think and process the new development. Besides, she couldn't go far, the storm outside had dumped several feet of snow in the last 24 hours. Bethann heard the front door close as she walked back into the dining room. The other kids had all disappeared into their bedrooms. Only her husband sat at the table, a look of concern on his face. She smiled weakly as he came to stand beside her at the window. Together they watched Kaylee trudge across the street through the otherwise beautiful landscape.

"Should we do something?" He asked.

"In a minute, she needs some time alone. I'll get my coat. Will you pray?"

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“Of course!”

Bethann stepped outside and started to walk towards the snow-covered bundle on the other side of the street. She brushed the snow off the bench and sat down next to the shivering Kaylee.

“Want to talk about it?” Bethann asked.

“Ah, Mom... I tried so hard; I really did,” Kaylee whimpered. “I just can’t do it anymore and now I’m going to ruin Christmas for everyone.” As she finished, she burst into tears and threw herself into her mother’s arms. Bethann let her cry as she held her tight.

“I got Jenifer’s name every time,” Kaylee choked, “I can’t stand her. She is so mean and selfish and hurtful and... mean! Every night I snuck into her room, fixed her bed, and set out her pajamas. I was nice to her every day. When she would pick on me, I would let her, then pray for her. When she took my coloring pencils without asking, I never said anything. She broke every one of them and never said she was sorry. I had to hide the last set you bought me. But mom! I can’t do this anymore. She doesn’t deserve kindness. Every week, I prayed I would get somebody else’s name. And tonight, I thought for sure I would get a different name, but no. I drew her name. AGAIN!! I’m done.”

Bethann and Kaylee sat quietly for a few minutes as they huddled together.

Then Bethann spoke softly, “Kaylee, I need you to know how so, very proud I am of you. Every act of kindness you showed your sister should count double. I know how hard it was for you to be nice to Jenifer for so long, especially when she has been unkind to you. You showed kindness anyway, one straw at a time. You gave your love when it wasn’t easy to give. Loving others is the message of Jesus and it’s what Christmas is all about. People need kindness, even though they don’t show kindness to others. Everyone needs forgiveness, even though most of them will never show regret or repentance. Love grows with each loving act and kind word. It’s the hard acts of kindness and the difficult straws that make that little manger special. Your kind acts have added the most important straws to the manger this year.”

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Bethann stroked Kaylee's now wet hair and asked, "How about we trade? I still have my paper in my pocket, and I haven't looked at it yet. Why don't we switch names this last week? It'll be our secret."

Kaylee lifted her head and looked at Bethann, her eyes filled with curious hope, "isn't that cheating?"

"Nope," Bethann smiled as she handed over her folded piece of paper. She gently wiped the tears from Kaylee's face as Kaylee looked at the name on the paper. They were both shaking from the cold now, but the love and joy that radiated from their hearts warmed them from the inside out.

Christmas Eve brought with it the hustle and chaos of cooking, cleaning, wrapping, and everyone trying not to explode with excitement. As the day went on, Bethann watched as the straw in the manger continued to pile up. When they settled in for dinner, the box was spilling onto the table.

As she finished the last of the dishes, Bethann realized with a start during the busyness of the day she had forgotten her act of kindness. One more piece of straw wouldn't really matter, but it was the act and the state of her heart that mattered. She tiptoed through the house to Jenifer's room. She stopped, her hand flying to her mouth as tears sprang to her eyes.

An angel had already visited the room. Jenifer's pajamas were neatly laid out and a new box of colored pencils sitting on top. On the box was a beautifully decorated card. She gently lifted it to read the note lovingly written inside. "To the best sister ever. Love, Kaylee"

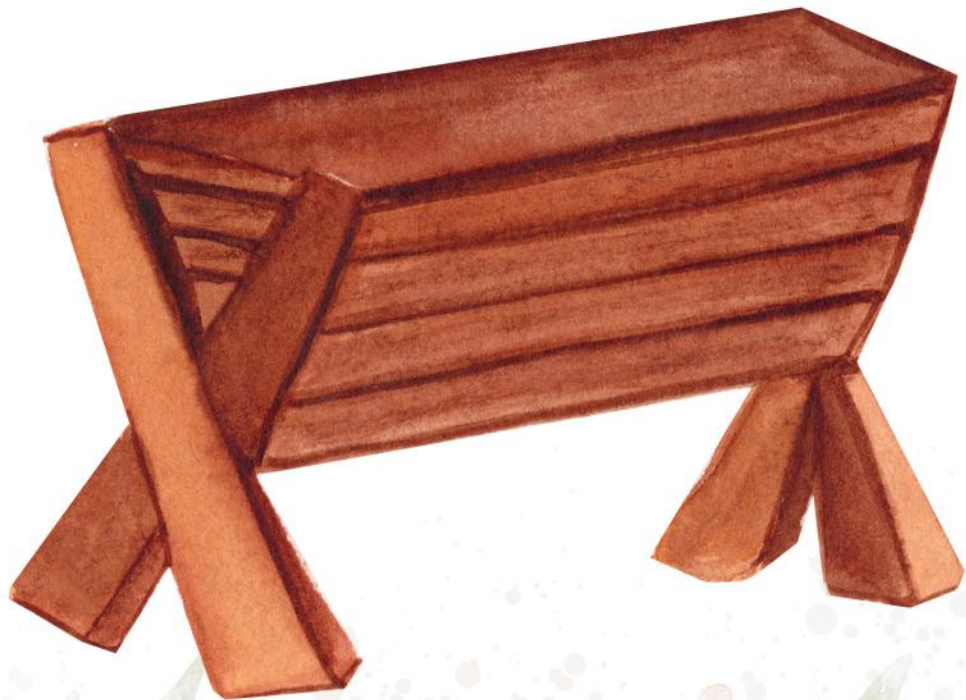
At the table, Kaylee placed the last straw in the manger, tears in her eyes. She had thought about and prayed over her mother's explanation of love on that cold night in the snow. God had softened her heart, showing her the truth behind Jesus' life on Earth. Serving others is the greatest gift. Even when it breaks us in the process. It's in giving that we find grace. In forgiveness we find healing.

*Christmas had a whole new meaning for Kaylee.
Love doesn't happen just once a year - it happens every day.*

The Christmas Straw For Your Family

If you'd like to share the Christmas Straw with your family, here are the items you'll need:

- a box or container to serve as the manger
- straw to fill the manger (there are pages below to print and cut out if you don't have access to real straw)
- Paper strips for names
- a bowl, hat, or container to draw names from
- a list of kindness ideas for family members





RANDOM ACTS OF Kindness

Set the table	Write a thank you note	Clean a family member's room	Take out the trash	Empty the dishwasher
Pick up toys	Clean the kitchen	Share a toy	Draw a picture	Vacuum a room
Make a family member a snack	Make a handmade gift	Make a family member's bed	Load the dishwasher	Share a snack with a family member
Clean up a mess	Put clothes away	Take the dog for a walk	Leave a note with a compliment	Bake cookies for a family member
Refill the pet's water bowl	Do a family member's chore	Collect the trash	Let a family member choose	Make lunch for a family member



