

CHRISTMAS STOCKINGS

Christmas Stockings may be one of the most recognizable Christmas customs in our culture. But where did this rather odd practice of hanging sock-like decorations above a fireplace in expectation of them being filled with all sorts of goodies start? The story of Christmas stockings begins with another familiar Christmas icon, Saint Nicholas! A.k.a, Santa Clause.



Nicholas was born in 280 AD in Patara, a city of Lycia, which is in modern-day Turkey. Now, unlike the North Pole, Patara was not known so much for reindeer games and talking snowmen, but instead for beautiful beaches! Patara was a coastal city that thrived as a fishing and sea-trading post in the Mediterranean.



While still a young boy, Nicholas' wealthy parents tragically died in an epidemic sweeping the region, but not before they had imparted to him an abiding faith in Jesus. As a faithful follower of Jesus Christ's teachings and way of life, Nicholas became a Christian priest and used all his riches to help the poor, the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to the service of God and was made Bishop of Myra at a young age. Bishop Nicholas became known throughout the land for his kindness and generosity. Though never married, he loved children greatly and often gave gifts to the children of his hometown. Nicholas' generosity towards the littlest and least led to him becoming known as *the gift giver of Myra*.

As a wealthy man, he traveled across the country, helping people, giving gifts of money and other presents. However, Nicholas always gave his gifts late at night, so that his identity would remain a secret. He took to heart Jesus' exhortation to not give to be noticed! He did not like to be seen when he gave away presents, so the children of the day were told to go to sleep quickly or he would not come! Nicholas was eventually named the patron saint of children and sailors (it is believed his family's wealth came from shipping, and so he had an affinity for those under his care) and therefore: Saint Nicholas.



THE STORY

One of Saint Nick's most generous exploits was towards a single father and his three daughters. The story goes that the father was a poor but kind peasant in the village. The sudden death of his wife and subsequent responsibility of raising three daughters on his own, coupled with his loving character, meant he was known by most of the villagers. Years went by as he and his daughters worked tirelessly to eke out a life together, and they did so with as much joy and satisfaction as any noble family.

However, as the daughters began to approach an age for marriage, the content hearted father began to grow anxious. At this time in history, a woman could not marry a man, especially one worth marrying, without payment called a dowry. The girls' future depended on their father paying for it. What *wouldn't* this broke father give for the happiness and future of his daughters? Nothing! He would hold nothing back. But what *could* he give? Nothing. He had nothing to hold on to.

Word of the father's dilemma and prayers of despair made its way to Bishop Nicholas, and the Christ-like compassion and generosity that marked his life once more was set in motion.

One night, after a long day of mending nets near the shore, the father and his daughters returned to their home. Soaked down to their knickers, the girls hung their soiled stockings on a line of fishing string above the fire. Wearing by the day's labor they climbed into their humble bed and were soon asleep.



Under the light of the full moon and a curtain of stars, Nicholas made his way stealthily through the village to the home of the father and his three daughters. The night was cool, but not cold, so the father had left the small window above the fire fully open to allow the evening to filter out smoke and keep their tiny home fresh. Nicholas noticed the stockings hanging, and in three of them slipped three bags of gold.

With his gift deposited, Nicholas slipped away back into the dark. The next morning the father was the first to wake. Walking over to the fire, which was now but a pile of white-hot cinders, he brushed aside the dried stockings. As his hand swiped the legging, it collided with a solid mass, and the stocking crashed down, spilling its miraculous contents across the dusty floor! The father, shocked at the sound of clanking coins and shine of gold reflecting in the morning's glory, jumped backward into the fishing line that held the surprising treasure. Down came all the stockings, and out came the abundance of riches within.



His daughters awoke to the racket of their one-room dwelling falling in on itself and their father falling over himself with inarticulate joy! Had the stress of life and the weight of their future finally snapped the old man's mind? Why was he on the floor, rolling, laughing, crying?

The oldest daughter stood and went to help her troubled parent. As her foot pressed down on the floor, she felt an unfamiliar texture. Looking down, she saw a golden coin protruding from under her big toe. Then she noticed another coin next to it, and another near the bedpost, and more over by the fire, and then gold coins littered all around the pauper's sprawling body.

In a moment, those who had no future were given all they needed, graciously, freely, abundantly, to live, to really live. And they were filled with joy!

TODAY

An early tradition that began from this story was for people to put oranges in hung stockings on Christmas Eve night.



The oranges represented the gold given to the daughters for their dowry and is a reminder that what was given by one who modeled his life after Jesus is but a shadow of what we receive from Christ himself—all that we need for life, real life. It is the surprise which ignites the joy of the poor father, and each of us on Christmas morning. It was Joy which filled the heavens with song and the hearts of the shepherds with worship that night in which they too were surprised by the unexpected nature of salvation, and the unexpected means of life, abundant life now and forever.