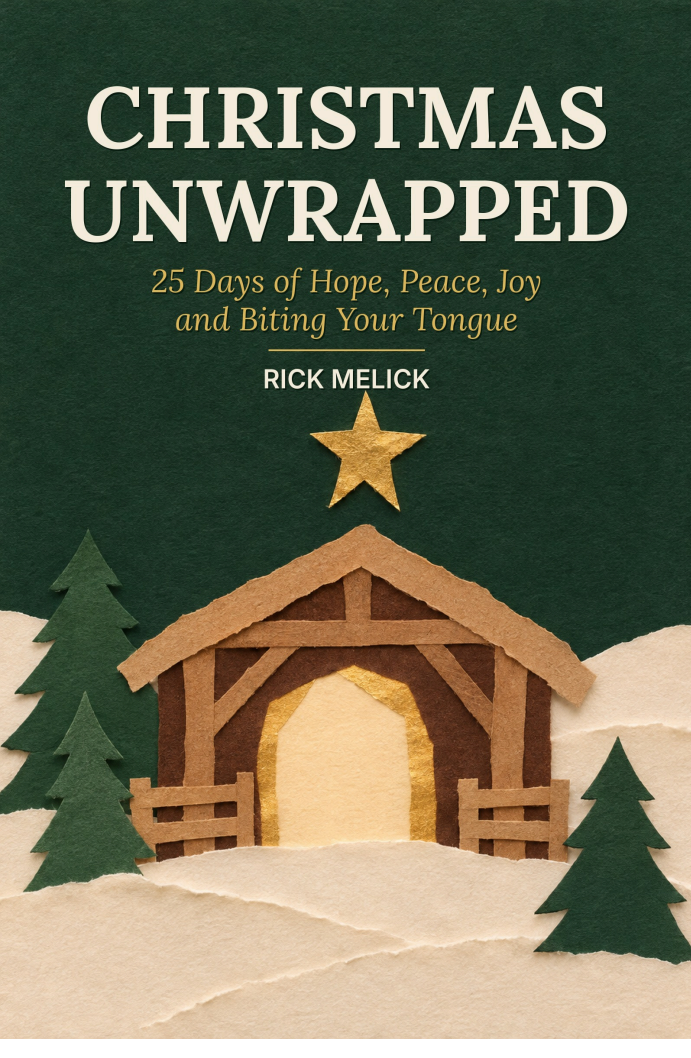
CHRISTMAS UNWRAPPED

25 Days of Hope, Peace, Joy and Biting Your Tongue

RICK MELICK



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Before You Start

I carry a small wallet.

A debit card. A credit card. A driver's license. That's about it. There's no room for anything else, so every card in there has to earn its spot. If something isn't important enough, it stays home.

One December, my wife sent me into a big warehouse store with her membership card, and the man at the door looked at the picture, looked at me and said, "This doesn't look like you." He was right. It was her card. I told him I didn't have room in my wallet for a membership card. That store just wasn't that important to me.

You have a small wallet too. Not the one in your pocket. The one in your heart. There are only so many compartments, and every December a hundred things try to squeeze in: the shopping, the travel, the food, the parties, the expectations, the people who push your buttons.

Christmas is about the One who deserves the best spot in that wallet. He's the gift. But a gift isn't

really yours until you unwrap it. And making room for him might mean taking something else out and leaving it at home.

That's what these twenty-five days are about.

How to Use This Book

Each day takes about ten minutes.

- **Read** the passage in your Bible. (I use the NIV.)
- **Read** the day's thoughts.
- **Do** the one small thing under *Today*.
- **Pray.** The prayer is a starting place. Keep going in your own words.

How the Days Fit Together

Christmas Unwrapped follows the order of the Christmas story itself, and it builds one day at a time. Each part sets up the next.

- **December 1–4 · Hope.** We start where Matthew starts: with Jesus' family tree. It's full of people with messy stories, and that's on purpose. Before we can do anything for

God this Christmas, we need to know that Jesus came for people like us.

- **December 5–16 · Untamed.** Once you know God came for you, it changes how you treat the people around you, starting with what comes out of your mouth. And December is when we're with family the most and our words get us into the most trouble. So for twelve days, we follow the words of the Christmas story, from Zechariah to the shepherds, and learn to give God our tongues.
- **December 17–21 · Peace.** The week before Christmas, the pressure peaks. Plans fall apart. Joseph knows the feeling. His plans fell apart too, and he shows us how to find peace when life doesn't go the way we planned.
- **December 22–25 · Joy.** Then Christmas comes. The shepherds, the manger and the gift. Joy doesn't come from what's under the tree. It comes from who's in the manger. And on Christmas morning, there's one gift left to open.

Hope says God came for you. Untamed asks what that changes in the way you talk. Peace holds you steady when your plans fall apart. And joy opens the gift.

If you miss a day, don't start over. Just pick up today. Christmas comes either way.

And if you want to do something with your family, here's what my wife and I do: from December 1 to December 24, we read one chapter of Luke each day. Luke has twenty-four chapters. You do the math. I schedule a text to the family group chat each morning with the chapter. No pressure. Just an invitation.

Let's unwrap it. He's worth it.

Pastor Rick

Part One · Hope

December 1–4

Jesus didn't just come for people with messy stories. He came through them.



Matthew could have started the Christmas story with angels and a star. He started with a family tree instead, and some of the names on it will surprise you. For four days, we'll meet them. Before we talk about anything we do for God this Christmas, we need to know what he did for us: he came for people like us.

December 1 · Skeletons in Jesus' Closet

Read: Matthew 1:1–17

> *This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matthew 1:1)*

If I were writing the story of Jesus, I'd start with verse 18: "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about." Right on. Let's go. Angels, a virgin, a baby, a star.

Matthew starts somewhere else. He starts with a list of names. Grandpas and great-great-great-grandpas. Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah. Are you getting tired yet? I am.

I'm not going to tell you my life story by starting with my great-great-great-grandpa and working

through all the who-had-whos. But Matthew did. And it wasn't an accident.

Look closer and that list isn't as squeaky clean as it sounds. Tucked into Jesus' family tree is Rahab, a prostitute from Jericho. Ruth, a foreigner from a nation that was supposed to be Israel's enemy. "Uriah's wife," which is Matthew's polite way of reminding everybody about King David's worst moment. And Judah. We'll get to Judah tomorrow. Buckle up.

Here's why Matthew starts there, and I don't want to bury the lead: **Jesus didn't just come *for* people with messy pasts, messy families and messy lives. He came *through* them.**

Have you ever been judged by your worst mistake? Do you have things in your past you'd leave off a job application? A family situation that isn't what you wish it was and doesn't seem to be getting better? Something you'd do over if you could, but you can't, because you can't go back?

Matthew was full of Christmas hope. So he started his story in the weirdest place possible, to tell you

that whatever you've been through, and whatever you're going through, Jesus came for you.

Today: Read Matthew 1:1–17 out loud, names and all. Every time you hit a name you don't know, remember: God knew them.

Pray: *Lord, thank you that your family tree has room for people like me. I bring you the parts of my story I'm not proud of. Open my heart this Christmas to the hope only you can give. Amen.*

December 2 · Jesus' Ancestor Sold His Brother

Read: Genesis 37:23–28

> *Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites." (Genesis 37:26–27)*

You may know the story of Joseph. Jacob's favorite son. The coat of many colors. A good man who honored God at every turn, even when life fell apart.

But Joseph isn't the brother named in Jesus' family tree. Judah is.

And Judah was the brother who came up with the idea of selling Joseph into slavery.

Remember the story? Joseph went out to check on his brothers. They beat him up, took his coat,

threw him into a dry well and left him for dead. And Judah spoke up: *Why kill him? Let's sell him. Surely he's worth something.* And the other brothers thought, *Great idea. We're a little short on change.* They flagged down some traders and shipped their little brother off to Egypt. As far as we know, Judah didn't give him another thought for years.

That's who's in Jesus' family tree. Not the brother with the coat. The brother who sold him.

And it gets worse before it gets better. Right after Joseph is hauled off to Egypt, Genesis does something strange. It hits pause on Joseph's story and spends an entire chapter on Judah (Genesis 38). It's almost an ADD moment. *Wait, stay on track!* But the Bible wants you to see this.

We'll read it tomorrow. For today, sit with this: God put the worst brother in the line of the Savior. Not because Judah deserved it. Because grace doesn't work by deserving.

Maybe you're the Judah in your story. Maybe you said the thing, made the call or walked away from the person, and you've carried it ever since.

There's hope for Judahs. That's the point of Christmas.

Today: Is there a "Judah moment" in your past you've never brought to God? Tell God about it right now, even in a whisper, and leave it with him.

Pray: *God, I've done things I'm ashamed of. Thank you that you didn't skip over Judah, and you won't skip over me. Amen.*

December 3 · The Story Grandma Skipped

Read: Genesis 38

> *Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I." (Genesis 38:26)*

This is one of those Bible stories they skip when they teach kids. If somebody made a movie of it, you'd think twice about going. I'll keep it PG-13-ish, but read it for yourself.

Judah got married and had three sons. He arranged for his oldest son to marry a woman named Tamar. The Bible says the oldest son was wicked in God's sight, and the Lord put him to death. That's it. No details. You want to stop and ask *how? why?* We don't get anything.

The custom then was that a widow would pass to the next brother. (Ladies, imagine being handed down to your brother-in-law. Not great.) The

second son didn't want children who wouldn't legally count as his, so he made sure Tamar wouldn't get pregnant. That was wicked too, and God put him to death.

Two sons down. Judah told Tamar to wait for the youngest to grow up. Then he never kept his promise.

Women had almost no power then. Tamar couldn't get a job or make a dating profile. She was stuck. But she was smart. Maybe she lacked a little moral judgment, but she was in a hard place and she did *something*.

When Judah went to the sheep-shearing, Tamar got there first, veiled like a prostitute, and waited by the road. Judah didn't recognize her. He didn't make small talk. When she asked for payment, he said he'd send her a goat. She said, *Sure you will.* So he left collateral: his seal, its cord and his staff. Basically, his ID, his credit card and his car keys.

Three months later, word came that Tamar was pregnant. And Judah, in full self-righteous indignation, said, *Bring her out and burn her.*

On the day of the sentence, Tamar sent his seal, cord and staff to him with a message: *The man who owns these is the father.*

Can you imagine that moment?

And here's the turn. Judah said, *She is more righteous than I.* For the first time, Judah saw himself honestly.

Today: Where are you quick to judge others for the same things you excuse in yourself?

Pray: *Lord, show me myself the way you see me, and give me the courage to say, "I was wrong." Amen.*

December 4 · The Baby Who Cut in Line

Read: Genesis 38:27–30; Genesis 49:8–10; Matthew 9:9–13

> *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick… For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:12–13)*

Tamar had twins. As they were born, one baby stuck his hand out first, and the midwife tied a scarlet thread around his wrist to mark the firstborn. Then he pulled his hand back, and his brother came out first. They named him Perez. It means *breakthrough*.

And Perez is in the family tree of Jesus. "Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar" (Matthew 1:3).

Buried in the genealogy of Jesus is the story of the kind of people Jesus came *from*. If that's not good

news for you, you're missing the point.

Was there hope for Judah? He'd done too much and gone too far. But years later, when Jacob blessed his sons before he died, Judah didn't get a curse. He got a promise: the scepter would never depart from Judah (Genesis 49:10). Kings would come through him. *The* King would come through him.

He wasn't known by his worst moment.

Now, why would Matthew care so much? Because Matthew had a past too. He was a tax collector, a man who worked for Rome and got rich off his own people. Tax collectors were despised. They were lumped in with the worst sinners.

And one day Jesus walked by his booth and *saw* him. Not the man who'd made all the wrong choices. The man God created him to be. Jesus said, "Follow me," and Matthew got up and followed him (Matthew 9:9). Then he threw a party, and people like Matthew came to hang out with Jesus. The religious people peeked in the window and complained. And Jesus said, *These are the people I came for. The ones who know they need me.*

I think when Matthew sat down to write, his first thought was, *Why me?* And somewhere along the way, he got to, *Why not me?*

Because you, my friend, are exactly Jesus' kind of person. That's Christmas hope.

Today: What's crowding your heart this Christmas that needs to go, so there's room for hope?

Pray: *Jesus, thank you for seeing me. Not my worst moment. Me. I'm getting up to follow you. Amen.*

Coming up: Now that you know Jesus came for you, tomorrow we start twelve days on the words we say this Christmas season. Knowing you are loved by Jesus changes how you talk to the people around you.

Part Two · Untamed

December 5–16

The words of Christmas. The best gift you can give God this year might be your tongue.



If Jesus came for people like us, that changes how we treat each other. And nothing shows it faster than what comes out of our mouths, especially in December, when we're around family the most. The Christmas story is full of words: an angel's announcement, a priest who couldn't talk,

shepherds who couldn't stop. For twelve days, we'll walk through those words and learn to give God ours. We'll start with listening and holding our tongue, then look at the damage words can do and how gossip spreads, and finish with words that build people up.

December 5 · Your Mouth Can Ruin Christmas

Read: Luke 1:18–20; James 1:19–20

> *And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words… (Luke 1:20)*

The first Christmas started with a man who couldn't talk. Zechariah was a priest, in the temple, face to face with an angel, and he argued. So God closed his mouth for nine months. When he finally got his voice back, the first thing out of it was praise (Luke 1:64). Sometimes the best thing God can do for us at Christmas is to quiet us down long enough to hear him.

> *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the*

> *righteousness that God desires. (James 1:19–20)*

A friend asked me once, "Why in the world would you talk about the tongue at Christmas? December is for the manger and the wise men."

Here's why. An untamed tongue can ruin your holiday.

You're about to be around people you don't see very often. Some of them irritate you. There's somebody in your family you're already dreading, because you know you'll end up sitting next to them and they'll say something that sets you off. You'll bite your tongue. You'll get elbowed under the table. And then you'll say something that feels *so good* in the moment, and all the way home you'll think, *Why did I have to open my big mouth?*

Everything we say reflects on Jesus. If we call ourselves his followers, his Spirit lives in us, and people decide what they think about him by what comes out of us.

James knew this. He was Jesus' half brother. He didn't believe Jesus was who he said he was until after the resurrection (John 7:5; 1 Corinthians 15:7). Then he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and he talked about the resurrection so boldly that, according to the historian Josephus, the religious leaders finally had him stoned to death around AD 62. Before he died, he wrote a letter. And in every chapter, he has something to say about the tongue.

It's that important.

So for the next twelve days, we're going to wrap up our mouths, put a bow on them and give them to Jesus.

Today: Think of the gathering you're most nervous about this season. Who will be there? Pray for them by name.

Pray: *Lord, this Christmas I want to give you my words. Help me start today. Amen.*

December 6 · Who's Shoveling the Snow?

Read: Luke 1:26–38; James 1:19–27

> *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." (Luke 1:38)*

When the angel Gabriel showed up, Mary was a teenager with every right to argue. She asked one honest question, "How will this be?" Then she listened. The entire Christmas story turns on a young woman who was quick to listen and slow to speak.

> *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak… (James 1:19)*

One Sunday morning, I was getting ready to preach on this very verse. My wife looked out the

window, saw a little snow on the ground and said, "Are we going to have to shovel snow this afternoon?"

Now, my wife has never shoveled snow at our house. That's my job. And I don't like shoveling snow. So when she said *we*, those were fighting words. She was baiting me. I needed to set the record straight. I needed to be right.

I'm not going to tell you whether I did or didn't. It's none of your business. But I knew it was important, because I was about to stand up and tell a room full of people to keep their mouths shut.

James says to be quick to listen and slow to speak. I could stop right there and say, "Church dismissed. Let's go to lunch." If we just did that, it would be worth the price of admission.

Here's a little thing that's helped me. Say it with hand motions, like you're in elementary school. *Quick to listen:* hands cupped to your ears. *Slow to speak:* hand over your mouth. I've done this in the middle of conversations. My wife thought I'd lost

my marbles, because I hadn't shared the motions with her.

Simple to say. Easy to remember. Hard to do.

Being quick to listen isn't just waiting for your turn to talk. It's actually trying to understand. Everybody believes they're right. Everybody does what makes sense to them. So understanding is the starting point for any relationship worth having.

Today: In every conversation, let the other person finish completely before you respond. Every single one.

Pray: *God, make me quick to listen and slow to speak. Start with the person closest to me. Amen.*

December 7 · One Finger Out the Window

Read: Luke 2:8–14; James 1:19–20; Proverbs 15:1

> *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10)*

The shepherds were terrified. Notice what the angel's first words were: "Do not be afraid." Heaven's first announcement of Christmas was a gentle answer to frightened people. The words of Christmas calm things down. Ours should too.

> *…because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. (James 1:20)*

One Saturday afternoon, I was driving "in the Spirit." (That's my joke for Christian driving: patient, smiling, waving people through.) That

isn't always the case for me, but it was that day. I was making a left turn at a four-way stop, minding my own business, going slow, my wife next to me.

A guy blew through his stop sign and laid on the horn. At *me*. I was in the middle of the intersection, so I looked over and smiled at him. That may have been provoking, because then all I saw was his face and one finger out the window. And his hand stayed on the horn for what felt like fifteen seconds.

I can't remember the last time I'd been flipped off. I went from zero to a hundred. My wife said, "Calm down. We're not going to the mall. We're going home. You're out of control."

There was no limit to what I wanted to say in that moment.

Other people are irritating. They provoke us. That's real. But James says human anger doesn't produce the righteousness God desires. *Righteousness* is a churchy word that just means being right with God and right with each other.

And here's the thing: **God isn't nearly as concerned with us proving that we're right as he is with us being right with each other.**

Believing the truth is important. Living the truth is important. But just because something is true doesn't mean you have to say it, and it doesn't mean you have to say it now. Saying it is about timing. It's about relationship. It's about listening to the Holy Spirit.

Today: The next time you feel your temperature rising, count to five before you say anything. Out loud is fine.

Pray: *Lord, I'd rather be right with people than prove I'm right. Cool my temper and soften my heart. Amen.*

December 8 · Not Next to Cousin Eddie

Read: Philippians 2:1–8; Luke 2:7

> *Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:7)*

This passage is Christmas. The Son of God didn't demand the best seat. He took the worst one: a feeding trough in a stable, because there was no room. If Jesus could make himself nothing in a manger, I can sit next to Cousin Eddie.

> *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)*

My dad wrote a commentary on Philippians, and here's my paraphrase of how he describes the

book: Paul loved that church, the church loved Paul and he was trying to help them succeed with the Lord. And to do that, they needed humility.

Selfish ambition is a word for rivalry. It's the attitude that turns everything into a fight, where every conversation has a winner and a loser. Think of a porcupine. Prickly. Combative. Ready to poke anybody who gets too close.

Paul knew all about that. Before he was Paul, he was Saul, and Saul was the prickliest porcupine of them all. He persecuted Christians. His opinion was the only one that mattered. Everything was win-lose.

Vain conceit means it's all about me. My experience. My way. That shows up at Christmas. *I want what I want to eat, where I want to eat it, when I want to eat it. I want to sit by the fire, not by Cousin Eddie.* (Every family has a Cousin Eddie. The one who shows up uninvited and says the wrong thing. You know who yours is.)

Parents of grown kids, this one's for us. Sometimes we put so much pressure on our kids to give us the holiday *we* want that we make their young

families miserable, torn over where to be and who to be with. What if we gave experiences instead of demanding them?

And humility isn't thinking less *of* yourself. *I'm terrible, I'm unlovable* is just another form of being preoccupied with yourself. **Humility is thinking about yourself less often.** Not *God, how can I get a blessing today?* but *God, how can I be one?*

Today: Give someone the experience you'd usually insist on: the seat, the restaurant, the TV, the last word.

Pray: *Jesus, give me your mind. Make me less prickly and more humble. Amen.*

December 9 · A Bouncer for Your Mouth

Read: Luke 2:15–19; Psalm 141:1–4

> *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:19)*

Shepherds burst in with a wild story about angels. Everyone was amazed and talking. And Mary? She treasured it and pondered it in her heart. Before she said a word, she took it in and thought it through. That's a good order for all of us: ponder first, talk second.

> *Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)*

I can't do this. Neither can you. I couldn't make it through one morning without being tempted to pop off, and I was preparing a sermon about it.

You probably can't make it through the drive home.

James says no human being can tame the tongue (James 3:8). So we need help.

Here's a prayer I pray often. It starts with King David's words in Psalm 141, and I just kept going:

Set a guard over my mouth, Lord. Over my gestures. Over my facial expressions. Over my phone. Over my keyboard. Keep watch over the door of my lips, because if you don't keep watch, nobody is.

God, please keep me from being critical, judgmental or from saying things I'll regret today. Fill me with kindness and grace. Help me be quick to listen and to sincerely try to understand. I accept that my words are a reflection on Jesus.

And I need your help.

That last line is my favorite part. Because that's the truth.

Notice I added the phone and the keyboard. Some of us are perfectly pleasant in person, and then we get behind a screen and turn into lions. It still

counts. Every word we type, every emoji, every comment on somebody's post.

Today: Pray Psalm 141:3 every time you get in the car today: *Set a guard over my mouth, LORD.*

Pray: Pray the prayer above, out loud, slowly. Then pray it again tomorrow.

December 10 · Want to See How Fast It'll Go?

Read: Matthew 2:1–2, 9–10; James 3:1–5

> *…the star they had seen when they were in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. (Matthew 2:9)*

The wise men crossed hundreds of miles following one small light in a very big sky. Something small steered the entire journey, and it led them to Jesus. That's what James says about the tongue: a small thing that steers a big life. The question this Christmas is where your words are steering.

> *Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. (James 3:5)*

My youngest son should be a race car driver. He can drive anything, fast and in control. It amazes me and scares me at the same time.

A while back, he had a truck with way too much horsepower, and he took me for a ride. We were on a long straightaway by a river. He looked over and said, "Want to see how fast this will go?"

"No. I do not want to see."

"Well, I'm fixing to show you."

And he dropped the hammer, and I grabbed the side. We lived. No big deal. He scared me to death.

That's what James does in chapter 3. He says, *Want to see how fast this can go?* And we say, *No!* And he says, *Well, I'm going to show you anyway.*

A bit in a horse's mouth turns the entire animal. A small rudder steers a huge ship in a strong wind. And the tongue is a small part of the body, but it writes big checks. You probably had a friend in junior high who was always popping off and expecting you to back him up when somebody

came to shut his mouth. The tongue writes the checks. Everybody else has to cash them.

And James says the person who can control what comes out of their mouth can control everything else (James 3:2). Your words are a spiritual barometer. They show how much the Holy Spirit is really steering.

Today: Notice where your words are steering things today: toward peace or toward a fight?

Pray: *Holy Spirit, take the rudder. Steer my words toward life. Amen.*

December 11 · The Hamster in the Wall

Read: Matthew 2:7–8, 16; James 3:5–8

> *As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. (Matthew 2:8)*

King Herod's words sounded worshipful. They were a lie. And those few words became a fire that burned through an entire town (Matthew 2:16). The darkest part of the Christmas story started with a mouth.

> *Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. (James 3:5)*

James isn't talking about a lighter. He's talking about a spark that starts a forest fire, and once it's out, you can't get it back. The tongue can burn marriages, families, friendships and churches to

the ground, and it takes an excruciatingly long time for anything to grow back.

Think back. Can you remember something somebody said to you that went deep? Maybe it was a lie about who you were that became part of how you saw yourself for years. Maybe it was somebody who claimed to speak for God and drove you away from faith. Words do that.

James also compares the tongue to a stink. When I was a kid, we had hamsters, and sometimes a hamster didn't stay in the cage. Ever lose one in the walls of your house? You knew it had died, because you could smell it. And the only way it stopped smelling was when it was done smelling. That takes forever.

Words are like that. Or like cutting open a feather pillow and throwing the feathers into the wind. You can be full of regret and wish you could gather up every feather. But they're gone.

We excuse it. *I didn't mean it. You made me mad. I was tired. I'd just been fired.* But we're responsible for every word, and the damage is real either way.

Today: Is there a word you sent out that you need to try to gather back up? Apologize, specifically, to one person.

Pray: *God, forgive the fires I've started. Heal the people I've burned. And put a guard on my mouth. Amen.*

December 12 · Grandma's Cookies and Other People's Business

Read: Matthew 1:18–19; Proverbs 18:8; 26:20–22

> *Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19)*

In a small town like Nazareth, a pregnant fiancée was the juiciest gossip there was. Joseph had every reason to tell his side of the story. He chose not to. Before the angel ever spoke to him, Joseph decided he wouldn't feed the talk.

> *The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts. (Proverbs 18:8)*

Gossip is like Grandma's Christmas cookies. She pulls a tray of sugar cookies out of the oven, the ones with sprinkles in your favorite color, hands you one and says, "This one's just for you." You've got to eat it.

That's what gossip feels like. There's something so human and so tempting about it. And something so sinful.

Gossip is information that doesn't belong to us, shared with somebody who doesn't need it, usually bad news, usually behind someone's back. Someone once told me, "It's not gossip if it's true." Yes, it is. It's not your information to share.

It wears different outfits: - **Slander:** spreading lies to damage someone. - **Dishing the dirt:** sharing the juicy thing you heard. - **Rumors:** *I'm sure it's not true, but did you hear…?* - **Innuendo:** *Isn't it interesting that he was out of town that night?* - **The "prayer request":** *We really need to pray for her, because…* and then all the details. The prayer chain can be one of the most gossipy places in the world.

And it often gets worse when we're around people we haven't seen in a while.

Now think about this. You can talk bad about me. I'll get over it. But talk bad about my wife or my kids, and we're going to war. Now imagine how Jesus feels when he hears us tearing down people he loves, people he stood up for and died for, people he's interceding for right now.

He takes it personally.

Today: Fast from gossip. Not one word about anyone who isn't in the room, unless it's something good.

Pray: *Lord, I don't want to feed on other people's failures. Make me hungry for what builds up. Amen.*

December 13 · Bring a Bucket

Read: Luke 2:15–20; Proverbs 26:20; Proverbs 17:4

> *When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. (Luke 2:17)*

The shepherds left the manger and couldn't stop talking. But what they spread wasn't gossip about Mary and Joseph's situation. They spread good news about Jesus. Same mouths, same town, completely different fire. You get to choose what you spread this Christmas.

> *Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. (Proverbs 26:20)*

Let's assume you're not the one starting the gossip. Good. But somebody is going to bring it to you this

season. Your mom. Your brother. The cousin you haven't seen in six years. Your best friend. The lady from work.

When they do, you're holding three things: a bucket of gasoline, an armful of kindling and a bucket of water.

Gasoline: You spread it. *Oh, I can't wait to tell so-and-so.* Have you ever heard something about someone and immediately thought of who you need to tell? That's gasoline.

Kindling: You don't spread it, but you listen. You smile and nod. You don't stop it. And the fire keeps burning, because you gave it a little wood.

Water: You put it out.

How? Somebody has to break the chain. Say something good about the person. *You know, I really like her. Did you know she helped someone move last week?* Or ask, *Have you talked to him about it? Want me to go with you?* Point it back to the source.

As Christians, we don't just get to stand by. We get to protect people, the way we'd protect our own family. Jesus isn't here in bodily form to throw a bucket of water on the fire. But you are.

Today: Have one line ready for the next time someone starts gossiping, like *"Have you talked to her about it?"* or *"I really like him."* Then use it.

Pray: *God, make me a firefighter, not a fire starter. Give me the courage to put it out. Amen.*

December 14 · I Hated That Car in 400 Miles

Read: John 1:1, 14; Ephesians 4:17–24

> *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:14)*

At Christmas, God became a real human being, born as a baby in Bethlehem. He came so that we could become new people. Jesus didn't come to make us nicer versions of our old selves. He came to make us new. The baby in the manger is why the old you doesn't get the last word.

> *…put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires… and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22, 24)*

When I was young and newly married with small kids, I bought a brand-new vehicle. Zero percent financing. Nothing down. Captain's chairs in the back and a DVD player for the boys. My wife deserved to ride in luxury. I had myself all worked up. This purchase was going to make me happy.

We left on a cross-country trip. Somewhere in Nevada, I did the math. A payment in thirty days. Then another one, for six years. On what I was making.

I hadn't driven four hundred miles before I hated that car.

Paul calls that a *deceitful desire*. A desire that lies to you. It promises something and never delivers. And after it disappoints you, it whispers, *Next time. The next thing. The next person. The next job.*

Paul says your old life was full of desires like that: to win, to come out on top, to exploit, to have power. And then he says, *Take it off.* Like taking off an old set of clothes and putting on a brand-new set. You're a different person now, so you think a different way. And you talk a different way.

If you're a Christian, remember who you were before Jesus. If you came to faith as a six-year-old, imagine who you might have been. That old self is still hanging in the closet. Don't put it back on.

Today: What "old clothes" do you keep putting back on, especially with your words?

Pray: *Lord, I'm taking off the old me. Clothe me in the new self, created to be like you. Amen.*

December 15 · Stinky Shoes and Rotten Words

Read: Luke 2:25–38; Ephesians 4:25–32

> *Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)*

When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, two people who had loved God for a very long time were waiting. Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God. Anna gave thanks and spoke about him to everyone. Their words were the opposite of rotten. Everything they said built people up and pointed them to Jesus.

> *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs,*

> *that it may benefit those who listen.*
> *(Ephesians 4:29)*

When I was a kid, people used this verse to keep us from saying naughty words. And, kids, I'm not giving you permission to go home and drop a four-letter word. But that's not what Paul was talking about. Not even a little bit.

Unwholesome means rotten. Stinky. Like a fourth-grade boy's wet sneakers left in the closet. (I had two boys who shared a room. We had to leave their shoes outside.) Like the river at low water on a hot summer day, when you get close and think, *Something just ain't right.*

That's what unwholesome words smell like. And they come in three flavors:

Demeaning words. Insults, to someone's face or behind their back. Online, we get so brave. Their looks, where they came from, how they talk, how much money they have.

Degrading words. *You don't make the grade.* I set the scale, and you need to measure up before I'll

accept you. Jesus didn't wait for us to make the grade before he gave his life for us.

Disrespectful words. *You don't matter.* When I was in eighth grade, I moved to a new school where everybody had known each other forever. I still remember standing next to a group of kids, waiting to see if I'd be included. Nobody said I didn't belong. They just showed it. That's bad in junior high. It's shameful in church.

And Paul says, *Don't grieve the Holy Spirit* (Ephesians 4:30). When we tear down people God loves, he takes it personally.

Today: Use Paul's test before you speak: Is it helpful? Does it build up? Will it benefit the person listening?

Pray: *Holy Spirit, I don't want to grieve you. Let only life-giving words come out of my mouth today. Amen.*

December 16 · Wrap a Blessing Ahead of Time

Read: Isaiah 9:6; Luke 1:28; Ephesians 4:31–32

> *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given… And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)*

God wrapped the best words ever spoken seven hundred years ahead of time. Isaiah wrote them long before Bethlehem, and they landed right on time. When the angel finally came to Mary, his first words were a blessing: “Greetings, you who are highly favored!” (Luke 1:28). God plans his blessings ahead. So can we.

> *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one*

> *another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31–32)*

My wife and I went on a purging spree one Saturday. I filled six big bags of clothes to donate. And I know what happens to donation bags. Somebody puts them in the back of the car and leaves them there for four months. (Not me. I'm good at throwing stuff away.) As long as those bags are in your car, you haven't really gotten rid of anything. Any day you want, you can carry them back into the house and hang those clothes right back in the closet.

So I drove to the donation center, carried the bags in, put them in a bin and pushed it to the guy. Gone.

That's what Paul means by *get rid of*. Bitterness. Rage. Brawling. Slander. Malice. Put it in a bag, the heavy-duty kind, cinch it up, tie the knot and hand it over. A bitter person can't be a builder.

And then here's the challenge. I've done this, and I'm asking you to do it too.

Pick three people you'll see this season. Two who are easy to encourage, because some of us never say the good things we think. And one who's the hardest person you can think of. You know who. The first person you talk about when you get in the car.

Prepare a blessing in advance. Something genuine that builds them up and is for their benefit. Not a backhanded compliment. Prepare it ahead of time, because when you see them, you'll see the irritating stuff first.

Pray for the right moment. Timing is everything.

Say it with sincerity. It might change them. It will change you.

We're going to be builders, not bitter. When people hear what comes out of our mouths and it draws them toward Jesus, we're finally getting it.

Today: Pick your three people. Decide one kind, true thing you'll say to each one. Then say the first one today.

Pray: *God, give me words for these three people, and the right moment to say them. Amen.*

Coming up: The week before Christmas, the pressure peaks and plans fall apart. Tomorrow we meet Joseph, a man whose plans fell apart too, and start five days on peace.

Part Three · Peace

December 17–21

Somewhere between your plans and God's purpose, you'll find peace.



This is the week everything piles up: the travel, the money, the family, the to-do list. Some of us are carrying a hard year on top of it. Joseph knew what it was like to have his plans fall apart. For five days, he'll show us how to find peace anyway, one letter at a time.

December 17 · Wrong Boots, Icy Driveway

Read: Philippians 4:4–7; Proverbs 19:21

> *Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. (Proverbs 19:21)*

My driveway is short, but it's steep. It runs from the garage down to an alley. One December morning, my wife and I pulled out, and I pushed the button to close the garage door. The light flashed. Something had fallen in front of the sensor.

So I jumped out of the truck to fix it.

I didn't know the driveway was icy. And I had on the wrong boots, the ones with no traction. That's a rookie mistake. The moment my feet hit the ground, I started to slide. I didn't fall. I have catlike reflexes. But I was sliding down the driveway, and

the truck was going farther and farther away from me toward the alley, and all I could do was grab whatever I could reach.

Do you feel like that this Christmas? Like you're trying to plant your feet, but the world keeps moving under you?

For some of us, it's just the stress of the season: travel, family, money, the pressure of trying to make the perfect Christmas for your kids. That's a real thing. For others, it's been a hard year. Something with your health. Your finances. A relationship that's falling apart and you don't know why. A family you've worked so hard to hold together, unraveling in front of you.

When the Jews greeted each other, they said *shalom*. It's more than "peace." It means everything is right between God and me. Not that everything is right in the world. It isn't. But when everything is right between God and me, I can be at peace in the middle of it.

Paul says that if we present our requests to God with thanksgiving, the peace of God, which is beyond anything we can understand, will guard

our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6–7).

We have plans. God has a purpose. And somewhere between our plans and his purpose, we find peace.

Today: Name the thing that's at war with your peace right now. Tell God about it, and thank him for one thing in the middle of it.

Pray: *Lord, I'm sliding. I give you my plans. Give me your purpose, and your peace. Amen.*

December 18 · P: Are You Standing in the Right Place?

Read: Matthew 1:18–19

> *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph… (Matthew 1:18)*

When I was in high school, I could have given you a pretty good prediction of the next ten years of my life. And do you know what those years looked like? Nothing like my prediction.

Joseph and Mary had a plan too. They were engaged, which back then was a legally binding contract. The wedding was being planned. And in one supernatural moment, everything turned upside down.

Years ago, I was helping train a room full of church planters, about seventy men trying their best to start something from nothing. I sat in the back,

praying, *God, what do they need? What do we need when we're looking for peace and it feels like you're silent?* And I believe God gave me a simple acronym. I've leaned on it ever since: **P-R-I-D-E.**

Because I believe the enemy of our peace is our pride, our focus on *me* and *mine*. And Joseph walks right through all five letters.

P is for Position. Are you in the right place?

Joseph was. He was doing everything right. He had a job, probably his dad's trade. He was engaged. He was moving forward responsibly.

A lot of life comes down to being in the right place. I say it about church all the time: if you get your hind end in church, your heart will follow. Not always the place you *want* to be. If we follow our hearts on that, they'll take us for a long walk in the woods and leave us for dead. The place where *God* wants you.

Are you in a job that lets you invest in your family? A lifestyle that lets you save and give? A place where God can use you? Or have you trapped yourself? If so, it might be time for a change.

But notice: Joseph was in the right place, and his life still got turned upside down. Being in the right place doesn't mean nothing will go wrong. It means you're standing where God can meet you when it does.

Today: Ask yourself honestly: Am I where God wants me? If not, what's one step toward it?

Pray: *Lord, put me where you want me, and keep me there. Amen.*

December 19 · R and I: Do What You Can (It's Not About You)

Read: Matthew 1:20–21

> *"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:20)*

Think about Joseph's dream. An angel tells him his fiancée is pregnant, and it's a miracle. Sure. But come on. You'd have questions. You'd want details. At least I would. I'd want a vacation. *Going to Florida. See you later.*

Joseph was standing still while the world moved around him. And he had to choose.

R is for Responsible. Are you being responsible with what you *can* do, instead of focusing on what you can't?

Joseph couldn't change the circumstances. But he could choose to obey. He could be the best husband he could be, the best father he could be. He could stand with his wife when the community whispered. Instead of shaking his fist at God over everything he couldn't control, he said, *Okay. If this is my next step, this is the man I'm going to be, because it's right.*

When there's a war for your peace, are you focused on the people who are actually in your life and the opportunities you actually have? Or on the way you wish things were? That road leads to bitterness. And bitterness leads to the wrong kind of brokenness, which separates you from the people around you.

I is for It's not about me. My life isn't *for* me, and it isn't *about* me. Neither is yours.

Joseph had to decide what his life was about. His reputation? His comfort? The way he'd planned it? And he came to the conclusion that it wasn't about what he wanted. He was living for a greater purpose.

Today: Name, out loud, one thing you can't control right now, and hand it to God. Then pick one thing you *can* do today, and do it.

Pray: *God, my life isn't about me. Help me be faithful with what's in front of me. Amen.*

December 20 · D: Stick It Out

Read: Matthew 1:24–25; Luke 2:34–35

> *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. (Matthew 1:24)*

So Joseph decided. Now he had to follow through.

D is for Determine. I'm going to stick it out, as long as it takes, no matter what it takes.

Imagine how hard that was. Day one, Joseph goes to his parents: *I need to tell you something. Mary and I haven't been together. She's a virgin. But she's pregnant.* Right off the bat, you've got problems. Your parents have questions. They might suspect you aren't telling the entire truth.

And it didn't get easier. A census and a long trip while she was pregnant. No room. A baby in a feed

trough. A flight to Egypt. And for Mary, an old man in the temple would tell her that a sword would pierce her own soul (Luke 2:35). She'd stand at the foot of a cross one day and watch her son die.

But they determined to stick it out.

Here are some questions we don't like to ask. *What if I'm not happy?* Is there more to life than always being happy? *What if I'm not always fulfilled?* Could there be more to life than feeling fulfilled? *What if I'm not reaching my goals?* What if your goals aren't God's goals, and the very things you've been chasing are taking you further from who God wants you to be?

As you discover God's purpose, sometimes your own plans have to die. That's a real loss. But peace comes when you start to embrace his purpose and leave your plans behind.

How badly do you want peace this Christmas?

Today: Where are you tempted to quit? Tell God you're staying. Then tell someone you trust.

Pray: *Lord, I'm determined to stick it out, as long as it takes. Give me strength for today. Amen.*

December 21 · E: Everything Can Change in a Moment

Read: Matthew 1:22–23; Psalm 5:1–3

> *In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. (Psalm 5:3)*

I think the E is the best part of the story.

E is for Expect. This is the reality of being a child of God: we can expect a miracle. Everything can change in one supernatural moment.

The shepherds experienced it. The angels sang about it. Joseph heard about it in a dream. Mary heard it from Gabriel. “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

Whatever you're facing, you're one moment away from God changing it. Your prayers can be answered. His peace can flood you. His love can be known and shown in one supernatural moment. We just don't know when that moment is coming.

But isn't that the Christian life? We live each day knowing God gives us all the faith and all the grace we need for *today*, and we can trust that tomorrow we'll have everything we need for tomorrow. David said, *Morning by morning, I lay my requests before you, and I wait with eager expectation.*

And do you know how much we mess up by trying to force it? *I've waited long enough. I'm tired of this. It's my plan today, God, not yours.* In one moment, we can wreck our lives.

So here are three things to take with you:

1. You don't have to understand God's plan to believe God has a purpose.

2. A restless, questioning heart is never truly at peace. If that's you, maybe you're demanding to see the plan in advance instead of living by faith.

3. Your biggest problem might be God's purpose in disguise. Mary and Joseph's biggest problem turned out to be God's plan for the entire human race.

Today: Pick one request. Lay it before God this morning, and live today expecting him to respond.

Pray: *Father, I offer you my plans in exchange for your purpose, even though I don't know yet what it looks like. Give me the peace that stands guard over my heart. I'm waiting with expectation. Amen.*

Coming up: Christmas is almost here. For the last four days, we go to the manger, where joy comes from a Who.

Part Four · Joy

December 22–25

Joy doesn't come from a what. It comes from a Who.



We've seen that Jesus came for people like us. We've learned to give him our words and our plans. Now we focus on Bethlehem. For the last four days, we'll stand with the shepherds at the manger and find the joy that doesn't get packed away with the decorations. And on Christmas morning, there's one gift left to open.

December 22 · Jesus' Birthday in July?

Read: Luke 2:1–7

> *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:6–7)*

Nobody knows the exact day Jesus was born. Historians can narrow it down to within a few years, but not the day or even the month. By the 300s, the church in Rome was celebrating his birth on December 25. A lot of people think it was chosen to give Christians something to celebrate during the pagan winter festivals, when everybody else was having way too much of the wrong kind of fun. Others think it came from early Christians'

calculations. Either way, it's a date we picked, not one the Bible gave us.

And over the centuries, all kinds of things got piled on top of it. A bishop named Nicholas who cared about kids. Stockings by the chimney. Evergreen trees with lights.

Here's where I land, and your family can land somewhere else. I love all of it: the lights, the presents, the tree, the decorating, the smells, the family, the excitement. What I don't love is how easily all of that crowds out the reason we celebrate in the first place. Half joking, I've said maybe we should celebrate Jesus' birthday in July, when nothing else is competing for our attention, and let December 25 be about family. I'm not changing the calendar. But I am going to make sure Jesus doesn't get lost in the wrapping paper.

So for the next four days, give Jesus the first few minutes of your day, before the lights, the shopping and the travel stress. All of that will still be there when you're done. Right now, let's ground ourselves in the Word.

Notice how much Luke packs into two short sentences: “The time came for the baby to be born… She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger.” Hundreds of years of silence since God’s last prophet, and then God speaks like *that*. The news that changed the world, in a feed trough.

Have you noticed? There was no room for him then. And every December, we have to decide whether there’s room for him now.

Today: Sit for ten minutes with no phone, no music and no list. Just read the Christmas story slowly, Luke 2:1–20.

Pray: *Jesus, I’m pushing the noise away. I’m unwrapping you. Amen.*

December 23 · Every Mary Needs an Elizabeth

Read: Luke 1:39–56

> *Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1:56)*

When I'm working on a message, I talk to my wife about it. A lot. She's the recipient of more of my sermons than anybody. One week I asked her, "Have you ever thought about why Mary went to stay with Elizabeth for three months after the angel told her she was having God's baby?"

And she said, "Well, yeah. Of course I've thought about it."

Which concerned me a little, because I was just getting around to thinking about it.

"Why do you think?"

"It's simple," she said. Elizabeth was an older relative, further along in her faith. She was carrying a miracle baby of her own. She was somebody who would *believe* Mary. Somebody who would encourage her and say, *You're not crazy.* A safe place. Because the angel didn't come to Mary's mom or her dad or the people in town. He came to Mary.

I thought that was great insight. Mary was likely a teenager. Can you imagine how overwhelmed she was? She needed somebody.

And later, why did Joseph take Mary with him to Bethlehem for the census? Rome didn't count women. They wanted men: heads of households, men of fighting age. She didn't need to be there. (Jesus changed all of that, by the way. Women counted to Jesus, big time, and he proved it over and over.)

But I don't think Joseph was going to leave her. He wasn't going to miss the birth, and he wasn't going to leave her alone to face the ridicule and the whispers. The two of them shared a secret only

they knew. I can't imagine the times of worship they must have had together.

Who's your Elizabeth? For Mary it was a woman, but for you it could be a man or a woman: somebody further along in faith who will believe you and stand by you. And who needs you to be that person for them?

Today: Reach out to someone who's carrying something heavy this Christmas. Be their safe place.

Pray: *Lord, thank you for the people who have believed me and stood by me. Make me that kind of person for someone else. Amen.*

December 24 · Nobody Asks to See the Truck

Read: Luke 2:8–14

> *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:10–11)*

Do not be afraid. An angel showing up in the middle of the night would freak anybody out. But I think the message was bigger than that. You don't have to be afraid of your past catching up with you. You don't have to be afraid of what's happening right now. You don't have to be afraid of tomorrow, or of what you can't control.

Good news that will cause great joy.

Most of us spend a lot of our lives chasing happiness. And a lot of the time, when we finally

catch it, it doesn't last. Sometimes we want our kids to be happy so badly that we let them choose what's good but not what's best. We tell them they can have happiness, and in the process we rob them of joy.

Here's the difference. **Happiness comes and goes. Joy is here to stay.**

Joy isn't about getting what you want. If I believe God exists to make me happy, and I don't have the money or the health or the life I want, then God isn't doing his job. I live at odds with him, and I never experience joy.

Joy isn't an emotion. Joy is a choice. And joy doesn't come from a *what*. It comes from a *Who*.

As a pastor, I've been with a lot of people at the end of their lives. And I've never once had a man on his deathbed ask me to drive his truck past the window one more time so he could gaze at it before he meets his Maker. I've never had a woman ask to see pictures of her vacation home one last time before she goes to glory. Never once.

The regrets we have at the end, and the blessings, always come from relationships. And the greatest relationship is the one the angel announced: *a Savior has been born to you.*

Today: Go to a Christmas Eve service. Sit in the candlelight. Let the joy come from the Who: the One who chose you and loves you.

Pray: *Jesus, you're the good news. You're my joy. Thank you for coming. Amen.*

December 25 · Can I Open It Now?

Read: Luke 2:15–20; Romans 6:23

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)*

One Christmas, our granddaughter Emery arrived late on the Saturday night before I preached. She was three. It had been months since she'd been to our house, so I walked her in and showed her around. "Here's the living room."

She stopped. "Oh! You have a Christmas tree!"

Then she looked down and saw the mountain of presents underneath. You remember being a kid. What's the first question? *Which ones are for me?*

So I pointed. "This one's for you. And this one. And this one." My wife had been going a little crazy

online, and Emery had a lot of presents. She just stood there, three years old, taking it all in.

And then she asked the next question: "Can I open them?"

"Not yet," I said. "You have to wait until Christmas morning."

Because for a gift to really be a gift, it has to be received. Opened.

God gave us the gift of Jesus, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And he left it for us and said, *Are you going to open it?*

And here's the thing. It's a gift *exchange*. You know the kind, where you can swap your gift for a better one? When you receive Jesus as your Savior and your Lord, you hand him your old life, the good and the bad, and he hands you a brand-new one.

Jesus didn't stay a baby. He lived a perfect life, a hundred percent God and a hundred percent man. He took my sin and your sin on himself and died on a cross. And he didn't stay dead. Three days

later he rose again and defeated sin, Satan and death once and for all.

You can't be born into this gift, and you can't be good enough to earn it. All of us have sinned (Romans 3:23). It's a free gift. You just open it.

And you don't need fancy words. Prayer is just a thought you think toward God, or speak out loud. *God, I want to receive your free gift through Jesus. I'm sorry for my sin. I give you my old life in exchange for a new one. I believe in you, and I'm going to follow you.*

If you've never opened the gift, why wait? There's no better Christmas morning than this one. And if you do, tell someone. Tell a pastor. There are very few things we love more.

Today: If you've opened the gift, thank God for it out loud with your family. If you haven't, open it.

Pray: *Father, thank you for the gift of Jesus. I receive him. I give you my old life and take the new one you offer. Merry Christmas, Lord. Amen.*

After Christmas

The decorations will come down. The wrapping paper will go out to the curb. But hope, peace and joy aren't seasonal.

Keep the guard on your mouth. Keep your three blessings coming. Keep laying your requests before God every morning and waiting with expectation.

And keep the best gift in the best spot in your heart.

Pastor Rick