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Three Lessons of Christmas

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I thank you. This is the day that we are celebrating the ultimate gift that you've given us of your Son. We are just so incredibly grateful and thankful for that gift. Once again we thank you for the gift of your word, the gift of your Holy Spirit. And Lord, we need all three to put together you, your Son, your word, and I pray that you would give us the ability as we open up your word that we would gain a newer and deeper love and respect for what it is you've given us. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, probably the most well known prayer in all the world is the one that's known as the hail, Mary. The prayer is a loose translation of the greeting that Mary received from the angel Gabriel. It's found in Luke 1:26. It says: *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"*

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." Well, loosely translating that passage, we have, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee! Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Now the prayer contains three very important lessons from the very first Christmas. There's lessons about the gift of God's grace, there's lessons about the gift of God's presence, and there's lessons about the true value of God's gift of the Lord Jesus Christ. The very first lesson is about the gift of God's grace and it's found in the statement, *"Hail, Mary, full of grace."* It's about what it means to be the recipient of that grace. You know the angel told Mary that she was the recipient of this great grace from God. But before we get to that, understanding just how the gift of God's Christmas grace arrived first involves a conflict that has existed for centuries now between Catholics and Protestants over Mary's fitness to be the vessel through which God entered flesh.

You see, the fruit of Mary's womb was the Lord Jesus, who was flawless in every way. I mean this was God himself in all of his

perfection entering into human flesh, and how he went about that was of great concern to the church. The very notion of Jesus' perfection is what gave rise to a doctrine that Protestants and Catholics vigorously disagree about, and that's the doctrine of the immaculate conception. Most Protestants and a great deal of Catholics think that the immaculate conception has to do with Jesus being conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary, but that's not what it's about at all. You see, the immaculate conception is the doctrinal belief that Mary herself was conceived without original sin. You see, the church reasoned that in order for Jesus to become flesh, he had to have entered into humanity only in a vessel fit for perfection. I mean if Mary was a daughter of Adam with a stain of original sin like you and me, how could she possibly be a fit vessel for a perfect Savior? God had said in *Leviticus 17*: *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.* So how could the blood of perfection mingle with the blood of a human being? I mean, as David put it in *Psalms 51*: *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.* Well thus the Catholic church reasoned that Mary had to also be conceived herself perfectly and without sin. And so in 1854, Pope Pius the IX infallibly declared ex cathedra: "The Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege

of Almighty God, and in view of the foreseen merits of Jesus Christ, the savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin." Well, the problem is this is not even hinted at in scripture. It's deduced by the Catholic church from what is seen as an absolute necessity. I mean, how could a God, how could a perfect God in the flesh issue forth from someone who's flesh was corrupted by the sin of Adam? The vessel herself had to be flawless, so they thought. But even Mary acknowledges that Jesus was not only her son but her Savior. In *Luke 1:46* it says: *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."* Well, if Mary was sinless, she had no need of a savior.

The problem is the church back then didn't really understand mammalian biology. You see, they didn't know that God had engineered the human body wonderfully so that the blood of a perfect savior could grow and develop independent of his mother without ever having had the two blood supplies connect. See, today we understand that baby's blood and mom's blood do not mix. Instead, nutrients and waste products migrate across a barrier separating a mother's blood from the baby's. I mean it's a fact that mothers today who are infected with AIDS can deliver perfectly healthy babies without any trace of AIDS provided the proper care is taken because the blood supply of mother and baby do not

co-mingle. Well, God's Holy Spirit could give life itself to the egg inside Mary knowing that the blood of Jesus would be wholly his own, having never commingled with another human. And it's almost as if God thought of everything, because he did. Jesus would leave heaven itself temporarily leaving his role as the greatest power in the universe to enter into what can only be described as the weakest expression in the universe of what it means to be human, to come as close as is humanly possible to absolute annihilation. I mean the weakest expression of human life there could possibly be is two cells clinging to the side of Mary's womb beginning the process of replication. That process would end with a squalling powerless baby lying in a manger. Apparently God knew what he was doing.

And Joseph, Joseph also received a greeting and a visitation from an angel. We have that in *Matthew 1*. It says this, it says:
Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

I want to spend some time this morning, I want to spend some time looking at how God's gifts of God's grace, God's presence and God's self were expressed towards Mary and Joseph, recognizing, recognizing that as Protestants we often downplay the astounding role that Mary played in bringing God himself to us and that Joseph also had a huge role to play in this. And we would do well to recognize that both Mary and Joseph were the most blessed son and daughter of Adam to have ever walked this planet. I mean how special, how special do you think they must have been? I mean, that God would select Mary as the person who would incarnate the living God, and Joseph as the man who would model and demonstrate what fatherhood is all about. You know, the BBC says that there have been 107 billion people born in the history of mankind. Of those 107 billion, I think it's safe to say that Mary and Joseph were as special as any two humans could ever be. As trusted, as cared for as, and as loved as by God himself as any son or daughter of Adam has ever been.

So let's go back to this most famous prayer of all time and examine how is it that God treated his two most beloved humans. Well, the prayer opens with, *"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with*

thee!" And so the angel tells Mary she is filled with grace, and we know that grace is God's freely given favor, God's riches at Christ's expense, G-R-A-C-E, that's how one author put it. The angel spells out the grace and the favor she is to receive from God. It says: *And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."*

Wonderful news. There's just one complication here and it's a very big one. Mary's a virgin. I mean our culture holds no shame whatsoever for an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and the good aspect of that is that there are babies that are no longer aborted due to the shame of the family at an unwanted pregnancy, and the bad news is that in the absence of any shame, there's no shame in aborting a baby simply because it's unwanted and untimely. Now the implication here in Mary's case was not premarital sex, it was adultery. Joseph at first thought Mary had been with another man. *Matthew 1* says: *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*

Well this tells you all you need to know about Joseph's character. I mean, his reaction and response to being what is known as the

cuckolded husband, so to speak, was not anger, it wasn't rage, it wasn't revenge, it was simply to try to find a quiet way to divorce Mary when he could have actually pursued her death by stoning. *Matthew 1* says: *But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* Now it's important to notice that God was very certain to make Joseph know that Mary had not been with any other man and that by the power of God's Holy Spirit was now carrying the God man Jesus Christ. Well, the problem for Joseph was there was only two people on the planet who knew that, one was Mary and the other was Joseph. And the others were left with a normal conclusion that people made when a baby arrived shortly after a wedding. Again, and it's hard for us to understand how difficult it would have been for both Mary and Joseph and their families. You know, folks celebrate pregnancies and births without the benefit of wedlock with no social sanctions whatsoever today. That's not the way it was in Mary's day. I mean in Mary's day it was common knowledge that Jesus was thought of as an illegitimate child born out of wedlock, someone who according to scripture was cursed until the tenth generation. *Deuteronomy 23* says: *"One of illegitimate birth shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD."* So even though there was no

truth at all to the rumor, it was still a bitter blow that stuck with Mary for the rest of her life. And we see that some thirty years after Jesus was born in the confrontation he has with the Pharisees. Jesus' superior logic and wisdom, it's trouncing their reasoning, and so they're resorting to the oldest trick in the book, the ad hominem attack. And you know, when you have no argument left, what do you do? You go after the person. Listen to what their ad hominem attack consisted of. This is *John 8:39*. It says: *They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."* Jesus said to them, *"If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father."* Then they said to Him, *"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father -- God."* We're not illegitimate like you, Jesus. I mean they were trying to throw in Jesus' face the rumors that had circulated around him for years. In their mind Jesus had no standing whatsoever and he'd not have any standing for at least ten generations. Well, that was Mary's legacy. The angel had said, *"Hail, Mary, full of grace."* And what he had said was physically and literally true, I mean, every day Mary was growing more and more full of the physical representation of grace itself of God in the flesh. It was the greatest privilege, the greatest expression of grace a human could ever experience. But as Mary would learn, God's grace and the

world's idea of grace are two very different things.

So the first lesson from the first Christmas of what the angel would actually mean when he said, "*Hail, Mary, full of grace*" is that grace included being ostracized, criticized and considered either morally deficient or crazy. The first lesson the Hail, Mary teaches us is that being full of God's grace guarantees you nothing of this world's blessings. In fact you can reasonably expect the opposite. Listen to how Peter put it in *1 Peter 4*. He said: *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.* The grace that God extended to Mary and Joseph was a grace that produced the exact same reproach Peter is talking about for the exact same reason. The Spirit of Glory and the Spirit of God clearly rested upon them, and to the extent that it rests upon you and me will be the extent that this world will blaspheme and resent it as well.

I recently came across a fascinating comment about the actor Chris Pratt. I mean, if any of you don't know who he is, if any of you

have seen the *Jurassic Park* movies or *Guardians of the Galaxy*, you know exactly who Chris Pratt is, he's a well-known Hollywood actor. He's become famous as an actor and hated by a lot of people because he's an outspoken Christian. And the comment was fascinating because the comment was made by Joe Rogan who also happens to be very famous. He's the number one podcast interview in the country, and he's a flat-out atheist who thinks that Christianity is ridiculous. He was just observing. Why is it that so many people hate Chris Pratt? And this is what this atheist said: "Chris Pratt gets so much hate because he's a Christian and an overall great guy." And then he went on to say: "He's a Christian and he's very open about it and because of that they attack him. It's something so simple, like he just believes in Jesus."

See, lesson one tells us if the Spirit of the living God rests on you, if you too are filled with grace, you can rest assured you too will be resented by this world. And Jesus told us exactly why this is. I mean, he was speaking to his disciples, they had just experienced the same kind of push back, and this is what he said, he said: "*If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*" Well, God's grace had been poured out on both Mary and Joseph and because of that grace,

they were hated.

You see, the world and the church of "name it and claim it" would love to have you think that God's grace is something that entitles you while you're here on earth. Well it does entitle us, but not the way folks think. I mean I've seen so many articles of late decrying the fact that so many people are walking away from the Christian faith and I just wonder what is it that they're walking away from? What have they been sold? I mean I can tell you this much, Jesus never sugar-coated the demands of his kingdom. In fact he went out of his way to state the cost of giving your life to his kingdom. *Matthew 16 says: Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

Well, now the second lesson, the second lesson was announced by the angel who also said, *"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!"* This was God's promise to accompany Mary and Joseph through the entire process. God himself would intervene in ensuring Jesus' entry into flesh, he would move people, he would move governments

to ensure that the baby would be born in Bethlehem as the prophets had foretold. *Micah 5:2* says: *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.* And this is where we meet problem number two. Problem was Mary and Joseph didn't live in Bethlehem. They lived in Nazareth of Galilee. *Luke 2* says this, it says: *And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.* We chafe under the constant edicts that we get from government issues about masks and lock downs and Covid-19. Just imagine, just imagine for a minute a far more hostile, far less forgiving government issuing an edict that's the equivalent of saying if you live in Port Jervis, you've got to go to Albany under very strict penalties, not because of some widespread disease but because a governor wants to do a census. This government couldn't care less that Mary was pregnant and that this journey of over a hundred miles would have to be by foot, maybe by donkey over roads filled with dangers from animals and

bandits and weather. I mean none of that made any difference to anyone.

God points us to Mary and Joseph to show us lesson two. And lesson two is the most beloved and the most extraordinarily graced humans who have ever lived were welcomed not into luxury and ease but into hard times, heartache, and struggle. So guess what? That's exactly what we've been welcomed into as well. God loves you and has a perfect plan for your life, it's true, and it's extremely misunderstood and misleading. People think that is a ticket to ease and blessing if you invite Jesus into your life. This is not an invitation to a party. It is a call to surrender and a welcome into an army that is at war with this world. And until you fully understand that, you run a great risk of misunderstanding and misrepresenting what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom. I mean, Mary and Joseph, they represent some of the very first conscripts into the New Testament army that we're all now a part of. And what follows next from the angel's prayer is the unfolding of that second lesson of the first Christmas, it's the promise from God, *"Hail, Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee!"* So it was, *that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

You know, sometimes I just stand amazed at the simplicity of scripture. Just the facts, ma'am. No embellishment, no hint of what's going on behind those words, "*there was no room for them in the inn.*" I mean understand where Mary and Joseph are right now. I mean they've taken a journey that normally takes four to six days averaging ten to twenty miles a day of walking and it also includes sleeping probably outside in temperatures anything not even approaching comfortable. And by the way, Mary, this one who is filled with grace, the very one that God has promised to be with is nine months pregnant and about to be delivering the most precious child in history. Just put yourself in Mary's place. I mean, there's no restaurants, there's no food, there's no hotels, there's no showers, no comfort, there's just fear and hunger and cold, along with a quite normal fear of undergoing childbirth for the first time. At some point you have to wonder is this any way to treat the mother of God? I mean understand, we're talking about the two most blessed individuals in the history of mankind. They had been visited by an angel himself to tell them how filled with grace they are and how blessed they are. They've received a promise from God himself that he's with them. And what follows if it were to take place in your life or my life, we would probably think this is absolute abandonment. This isn't blessing. I mean, how could God be with us in the dark in the cold in this journey that doesn't even seem necessary? I mean why in the world would

God put us through this? I mean who knows what Mary and Joseph were thinking as they journeyed a hundred miles by foot just to satisfy an emperor's desire for a census. But worse than that, worse than that is what happens when they finally get to their destination. Just picture Joseph desperately looking for some kind of lodging only to find out the city of Bethlehem is packed to the gills with people who had been traveling because of these emperor's demands and there's no rooms to be found anywhere. And so in absolute desperation they take up an offer to deliver their baby inside of a barn or a cage, something carved out the side of a hill, it's cold and it smells and it's filthy, but that's all there is.

Meanwhile, Luke 2 says: *Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."* And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: *"Glory to God in the*

highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

Now you can look at this, you can look at this in either of two ways. I mean, there are two parallel tracks that are occurring simultaneously here. One consists of Mary and Joseph, the most privileged humans to ever walk the earth delivering God himself in squalor and filth. The other track consists of the heavens erupting in praise over what might appear to Mary and Joseph to be some kind of cosmic oversight. Heaven is celebrating, and these folks are homeless, freezing and destitute. I mean a multitude of the heavenly host has erupted in praise over the most audacious thing the Creator has ever done and when they sing out "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace good will toward men," it gives us a hint of why heaven could see Mary and Joseph as profoundly blessed while the world looks on them as cursed. I mean, if Mary and Joseph represent the height of God's blessedness, well then the world's going to see those blessings as something you might not want at all, I mean, might even look at their circumstances and conclude, with friends like that who needs enemies? I mean according to the Hail, Mary, the angel told Mary: "*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*" And what he actually said was this, he said: "*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call*

His name JESUS."

That, folks, is the third lesson of Christmas. But before we look at that, let's just review the other two. I mean the first lesson that Mary and Joseph have taught us is that being full of God's grace guarantees you nothing of this world's blessing, that in fact you'd be wise to expect the opposite. And the more you associate with Jesus, the more you can expect this world to treat you as an outcast. Just ask Mary or Joseph or Chris Pratt. And lesson number two is the gift of God's presence most often welcomes you not into luxury, not into ease, but into hard times, heartache and struggle. There was no room in the inn, literally and figuratively, for the one bringing God's presence into the world and this is still a world that resents anyone's attempts at bringing that presence as well. So we've looked at the gift of God's grace and at the gift of God's presence and looking at Mary's and Joseph's life, you just might conclude these are gifts you might want to leave on a shelf unopened.

What about gift number three? The true value of the gift of God's Son is lesson three, and it is critical, it is the key to everything. And lesson three is that lesson one and lesson two are strictly temporary. See, the first half of the angel's prophesy was: *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS." The second half of the angel's prophesy says this about that baby in the manger: *"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."* See, the first half of Jesus' earthly life, the part that he spent with us here on planet earth, the part where he emptied himself of his equality with God and took on the form of a servant, that part was no picnic at all. I mean Isaiah summed up Jesus' time spent on earth with these words, he said: *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* Understand this, that we're not talking about Mary, we're not talking about Joseph, we're not talking about Chris Pratt, we're talking about the reigning king and creator of the universe who started out on our planet so powerless he couldn't even lift up his head. He couldn't articulate his needs. Just like any baby, he had no choice, he had to wail. He lived out his childhood bearing the reputation of illegitimacy, living in a blue collar family learning his father's trade when he was by light years the richest human that has ever lived. And yet he spent his time on earth with no trace whatsoever of that wealth. *Luke 9:57* says: *As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow*

*you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Mind you, Jesus wasn't complaining, he was simply remarking how ironic it was that the very creatures that he had created all enjoyed something that he had denied for himself. The apostle Paul observed: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.**

See, this humble king of the universe, he lived with his parents in complete obscurity until it became time to go public and then he marched out into the desert, starved himself for forty days and nights then he went one-on-one with the devil himself utterly defeating him, only to come back and preach his very first sermon to a hometown crowd that not only rejected his message, who not only hated what he had to say, they found him so repulsive they tried to throw him off a cliff. *Luke 4 says: When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.*

Now I just picture Jesus dusting himself off after his -- quote --

"first sermon" just wondering what's next after such an inauspicious debut. Well actually we don't need to wonder what comes next because the scripture tells us. Peter was explaining Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles in Acts, and this is what he said. He said: *He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.* Then he adds this important detail: *They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.*

So why am I speaking this way? I mean this actually sounds more like an Easter talk than it does Christmas. But you see, Christmas is about the true value of God's ultimate gift. And there's a scripture that defines what drove Jesus from start to finish. It's really the secret to lesson three, and it's found in Hebrews. It says this in *Hebrews 12:2*: *Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* See, this scripture tells us two things about Jesus. First of all it tells us flat-out he despised the shame of the cross. More than anything it was the culmination of the emptying process that brought him from king of the universe to a broken, stripped, bloody prisoner nailed to a cross. God's perfect justice demanded the ultimate penalty for our sin and God's

perfect mercy provided that just penalty in the form of God himself taking on our sin at the cross. As Isaiah puts it: *But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*

The second thing it tells us though is that he endured it for the joy set before him. That's the gift of Christmas. I mean the ultimate gift that God could ever give us is a love for us so great that we were the joy set before him. I mean so what does Jesus' death have to do with lesson one and lesson two, that being full of God's grace guarantees you nothing of this world's blessings and that the gift of God's presence most often welcomes you not into luxury and ease but into hard times, heartache and struggle. Well his death tells us this life is not supposed to be easy. I don't think this life was ever easy for Joseph or for Mary. I mean we know for a fact that the prophet Simeon told Mary at the presentation of the baby Jesus, he said: *"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."* I mean what he's saying is that Mary, Mary full of grace, blessed among women, had her own heart pierced with a sword. I think chances are pretty good that you and I have had or will have our hearts pierced

as well. Folks, it goes with the territory. As I said before, the gospel is not an invitation to a party. It's a call to surrender and a welcome into an army that is at war with this world. And again, the apostle Peter said it best. This is what he said, he said: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.* I can sum all of that up in two sentences that really sum up Christmas. The two sentences are: Life is hard, but God is good. I mean one is obvious; one requires entrusting yourself to him who judges justly. That's not easy.

I had a conversation with Fred awhile back. He said something that I don't know if he knows it, it was absolutely profound. Fred had been struggling with a lot of physical issues dealing with his headaches and the arthritis in his neck and an awful lot of things that were not going well. And I asked him, I said, "How are you doing?" Well he looked at me and he said, "If I can just get through this hundred-year loop, I will be fine." That's the essence of lesson three. This is the way Paul put it. He said: *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light*

momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

And as the song says, "Only when life so soon it will pass, only what's done for Christ will last." God left heaven for a 33-year journey that was filled with heartache and struggle so he could prepare for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, and to this we have been called. Life is hard, but God is good. And Christmas is just the down payment that Jesus has paid for every one of his children. So let's pray.

Father, I just, it's hard to comprehend the height, the width, the breadth and depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus encapsulated in the gift of your Son at Christmas. Lord, I just, I can't really grasp it and we will take all of eternity to begin to grasp it. But I pray this day, Lord, that you would give us the insight and the grace that we need to understand just what a gift we've been given and just what a gift you want us to share. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.