

Series: CHRISTMAS...UNWRAPPED December 11, 2005

**...GIVING LIFE
Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-7**

INTRO

On October 31, I was in Canadian Tire doing my regular guy thing—you know, searching for the gadget I might potentially be missing—and that day was their massive Christmas makeover. Halloween—and they're bringing in cart after cart of Christmas decorations!

Now, I know one thing. When people see that, hear their first Christmas song, there is one of two predictable reactions. It's either, **Oh Boy!** or **Oh no!** How many **Oh boy!** people do we have here? How many **Oh no!** My guess is that each of you has a very specific reason for your spirit of anticipation—or your feelings of dread—or panic.

For some of you, Christmas brings a lot of really warm memories—and you are into re-creating those memories for people you love and enjoy being with. And even though the season means some extra work and a certain measure of exhaustion—for you it holds hope, fun—you look forward to the people you'll see and the memories you'll create.

But some of you can barely relate to that. It could be that you're just sick to death of the commercialization—and of the time demands that shopping, decorating, partying make.

My guess is that if Christmas makes you hurt inside, it's because of hopes or dreams that got broken. It's about profound disappointment you've experienced. And it just **hurts**.

Know what I'd like to do, if I could, for everyone? Do an **extreme makeover** on the Christmas season, a makeover that doesn't come from Sears or Wal-Mart or Canadian Tire or some TV show, a makeover that doesn't have to do with the stuff or decorations or parties or family traditions.

I'd like to unwrap Christmas in a different way that transcends all that—and makes the celebration of Christ's coming an event that's **life-giving**. Know why? Because that's what we need—and that's why Christ came. And what that day truly represents is, in itself--a reason to party—regardless of where you've been, what disappointments you've faced, or what December 25 holds for you.

Whatever date and time and year it actually was that Christ was born, God's gift came to us that night, born like every other baby; naked, tiny, squalling, covered with stuff. From darkness to light, from warmth to cold, from inside to outside. But as the most profound gift that could be given, not just to Joseph and Mary, not just to Palestine B.C., but to everyone--everywhere. That moment changed the history of the world.

That moment could change the history of your life—and it could change the history of anyone who comes close to you. It's that powerful.

The question is—will you allow that?

GOD HIMSELF...ALL WRAPPED UP

We don't really know a lot about Mary—the girl God chose to carry his Son. I say **girl**, because women in that culture were usually married by the time they were 14. The average marrying age in our culture right now for women is 26.9 years of age—and that's a 1990 stat. But the average life expectancy for a woman now is in the mid-80s. In Nazareth, at the time that Mary lived, the average life expectancy was mid-30s. That clues us in to why girls married that young.

Mary is apparently living a fairly normal life. She has a fiancé, Joseph, a local construction worker. And life would be fairly predictable. But one day an angel shows up and totally throws any predictability in Mary's life out the window.

Let's listen in on their conversation:

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

²⁹Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰"Don't be frightened, Mary," the angel told her, "for God has decided to bless you! ³¹You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. ³²He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

³⁴Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."

³⁵The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ³⁶What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age!

People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God."

³⁸Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." And then the angel left (Luke 1:26-38 NLT).

In this conversation, you realize that Mary was a very normal girl. She did not say, "Beholdeth—an angel hath appeared in mine roometh." She was scared to death. And confused by why an angel would be visiting *her*. And why he would be saying, **Greetings, favoured woman. The Lord is with you!** Most Jewish people understood that when an angel showed up, God usually had a mission in mind—a mission that was sometimes tough—and always goofed up plans.

Well, this angel didn't waste any time. He got right to the point: Mary would have a baby—and not just **any** baby. Long before sonograms, she was told what gender the baby would be; a boy. Very great, Son of the Most High, reign on David's throne, have a Kingdom that would never end. Mary was going to live out every Jewish girl's dream in that culture; she would raise the Messiah—God the Son--as her son. Get your head around **that** one. Changing God's diaper. Burping God. Teaching God not to spit his food. Actually, I don't think she realized Who He really was until much later.

Now, Mary and her Mom had obviously had the birds and bees talk—she was not at all confused about the fact that it took a man and woman to produce a life. And, apparently, no date had been set for her marriage to Joseph. Mary says, "How am I going to have a baby? I'm a virgin?"

The angel didn't answer her question in a way that would satisfy her curiosity—only that the Spirit would overshadow her and the power of God would make this all happen.

And this is precisely where you see the kind of person Mary really is. **"I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true (Luke 1:38 NLT)."**

Anyone familiar with what happens to a woman in the Middle East when it becomes clear that she's not a virgin—and is carrying a child out of wedlock? It **could** be a death sentence. Mary's courage is unbelievable. She says, "I belong to God—so I accept his mission. All of it." That was the moment Christmas became a reality as God's gift was conceived—and Mary carried life for every person.

Now, we know God is God—He created everything—so the creation of a baby in a woman's womb without the help of a man was not all that difficult.

What **is** profound is an infinite God limiting himself to a few cells rapidly multiplying in Mary's womb. If you think about that for a while, it messes with your mind. Think of ultrasound images—God as this tiny, fragile being, receiving life through an umbilical cord as His eyes, nails, fingers and toes developed. Jesus, the ultimate life-giver, was receiving life.

We pretty much take life for granted. In fact, there are some life-forms we really don't like. Anyone here like mosquitoes? Anyone like weeds? Not **weed**—weed-zz!

This planet is **jammed** with life. When a fruit-fly is hovering around the bananas in your house, did you ever take a minute to think about how incredibly sophisticated it is—how brilliant **any** life-form is? Scientists theorize endlessly about how life began—about how it started in the primordial soup as protein molecules, got zapped by lightning, and then eventually crawled out of the pond and became human. But that's total speculation. We can **clone** life—but we can't create it. In any form. At all. Not one cell.

What I've realized is that humans are amazing mechanics—we can mess with things, change things around, morph things into new forms, transplant hearts—we're good at figuring things out, but we can't **create** life. And once life is gone, we can't bring it back.

Now, if that weren't amazing enough—think about your **spirit**. We can look at cell life through an electron microscope. You can't see someone's soul, someone's spirit. You know it's there--but you can't see it, touch it, hold it or restrain it - anything. The scientific answer to the spirit is, "if it ain't visible through a microscope, it **ain't there!**"

The problem, of course, is that we have absolutely no categories to explain the mystery of a soul that lives forever. We can understand how cells from a man and woman could become a fetus and develop into a human being. What we **can't** understand is how they become a living **soul**—a **spirit** that will live forever.

This is my point—and there **is** a point. The **soul** is the part of life that has been most profoundly touched by Jesus, the Son of God, showing up on this planet. That was the point of his coming. Listen to what He says: ***For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 NIV).***

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life...If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins (John 8:12, 24 NIV).

***The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10 NIV).
...I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6 NIV).***

In our world there is a lot of confusion surrounding the coming of Christ—what makes him different than all the other prophets. Why people can't just choose any religion to get them to heaven. Any of you heard this in your travels?

I'll tell you what the core issue is. The core issue is—"What's **wrong** with us?" Do we need to work harder at being better humans? Do we just need to find more inner peace? If you talk to five different religions—you'll get five different answers. So, what does **God** say? He says the problem is **death**. And the diagnosis of the root issue is sin. Rebellion against Him. And this is **precisely** the cause of all that is deteriorating, decaying and wreaking havoc in us, and on this planet.

The first chapters of the Bible explain the reason for the mess, the brokenness we see in our neighbors, in our back yard, in our home, and, if we're honest, at the core of our own lives.

Listen to this warning God gave the first two people He created: ***You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die (Genesis 2:16b-17 NIV).***

Now, what do you think Adam and Eve's first thought was after disobeying God? I think it was something like, "Wow! Still here! We didn't **die** after all." But something had changed. For the first time, they felt fear and shame and deceit. Death had started.

Lori and I were watching a medical show a couple of weeks ago, and they did a story on a Romanian woman who had a 160 pound tumor removed from her body. It weighed more than she did. Tumors always start as one cell that's off balance. But that's not where they end. And this thing was massive, unsightly. Everything she ate fed this tumor while she starved to death.

The tumor of death started small as just a few cells, but it engulfed the planet. It feeds off the life that God originated. We don't see it because we're used to it, but has thrown the whole course of our world off balance. Everything is affected.

Please hear me and understand me on this friends. The answer to spiritual death is not that humans try harder; that we deal with our karma,

or obey more rules and dietary restrictions. Religion can't solve spiritual death.

The problem is a spiritual problem, it goes to the core of human existence; it's in our spiritual DNA. And only **God** can fix the problem. And God's solution to death—was **life**. Because humans couldn't solve the problem, **He** chose to come. Then His messenger, Gabriel announced very simple, a very common name in that day. **Jesus. Savior.**

And the only antidote to spiritual death was Jesus' death on a cross at our hands. Accused condemned and executed by us—in **our place**. I can tell you right now, though, that most people in this world really struggle with both the concept that sin = death, and the fact that they can't solve the problem themselves. I can think of two reasons.

First, we think we're better than we really are. No kidding. We tell blatant **lies** to ourselves about how good we are. We'll even rationalize the dark things we do. We don't compare ourselves to the best people on the planet—we compare ourselves to the worst. We just don't **get** it that **no one** is saved by good works. No one. Not me—by a **long** shot. Not Billy Graham. Not Mother Theresa. No one.

Secondly, we are so used to being sabotaged by sin, we are so used to the sight and smell and feel of it, that we grow accustomed to it. It would be like that woman with a 160 pound tumor thinking it's normal because **everyone** has one.

This is the simple truth that I am trying to tell you. Jesus came to **give life!** I thought about the part of this passage that says that Mary wrapped him in cloths—and thought, "God gave us the gift of life—all wrapped up!!" And, of course, the truth is that this baby was God incarnate—God with flesh on. God's gift of life disguised to look like every other baby.

And He brought life in the most profound sense.

Not only was Christ's death the answer to finding eternal life—it was the solution to finding **real** life on this planet. Our souls come alive as soon as we receive Christ as God's solution to the deepest need in us—our addiction to sin. The Spirit of God takes up residence in us—and He begins by removing the tumor lifting the weight and guilt of sin from our shoulders.

Then He begins to reverse the effects of death on our soul. He deals with insensitivity to God and others; He repairs the damage done to our **receiver**, the part of us that responds to God's voice; He begins to set us free from things that just lead to death, the habits that are killing us. The relational poison—grudges, selfishness, envy, jealousy,

impatience, hatred. He frees us to live—and helps us take the right paths. And then He does something *really* amazing. He makes us carriers of life, not death, in our world.

Jesus Christ started a transformation of the world. Did some of his followers get off course? You'd better believe it—and they tried to turn the life he died to give into another religion—and it was deadly. It morphed and twisted into this corrupt power structure that pretended to offer life in exchange for money or power. In some places, it still does. But Life has always been working its way through the death on this planet, sometimes in very unusual ways; usually in the form of justice, freedom, hope, peace-making, compassion and generosity. And one day this life will totally take over—and when *He's* done with it, death will be replaced by *life!*

But Jesus said that the life He came to give goes way beyond life here—in this body. He came so that we could have *eternal* life. Anyone besides me ever have the thought of living *forever* creep you out—or am I totally weird?

I've recently thought a lot about that—what it means. The Bible says that what this will be like is so totally amazing—that it's beyond us. It would be a little like explaining to a baby what the world is like while it's still in its mother's womb in the dark, floating naked in fluid.

Think about what it would be like, in the child's state of development, trying to tell him or her what it will be like to walk, run, snowboard and jump on those little legs all folded up; what it will be like to talk, laugh, play the piano, make love—and what the color green is like. What chocolate fudge tastes like—in a mouth where taste buds are there—but not used.

Everything I know about eternity in God's presence is phenomenal. Just in case you have the wrong idea, it's not a bunch of people sitting around on clouds listening to church music and eating cream cheese. Ever been in a place where you felt absolutely loved and treasured and safe? That's what it's like.

Know how we struggle with relationships here—wondering who's safe and who's not. Being in situations where we feel so relationally unintelligent? In eternity—it will be as easy as being with your best friends on their best days—all the time.

Ever have a day at work when you're absolutely at your best and things just flow...effortlessly? That's it! It's all the beauty you've seen all your life.

All the best concerts you've ever been too. All captured in one spot. It's never being bored, never being depressed, never feeling unloved,

never looking at your body and hating it, never feeling stupid or awkward again.

Add all that together—and it's way beyond that. That's the gift of life Jesus died to give me—and you—and everyone who will receive it; that, friends, is why we were worth dying for. And that was all wrapped up and laid in a manger as God's gift to us. Just for the asking.

PAY IT FORWARD

Twenty some years ago, I **almost** made it home on the tank of gas I had in my car. But, as you know, **close** only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. So here I was—stuck, out of gas. A kind stranger stopped to find out what was wrong, drove me to a gas station, and then drove me back to my car. When I tried to pay him for his time and effort, his comment simply was, “Just pass on the favour to someone else.” Then he left, and I never saw him again. I rarely see someone alongside the road that I don't think of him. I can't always stop—but I do remember what he said.

This notion was captured in a movie several years ago called **Pay It Forward**. It's about a boy who was challenged to think of a social science project that would change the world. He came up with the idea of doing a good deed for three people—and then asking them to not pay *him* back—but pay it *forward* to three people. This simple idea begins to change his whole city. Pay it forward.

That idea, friends, didn't come from movie makers and story writers. It came from God.

While we were still uninterested in God—He sent his only Son, wrapped in that filthy manger, as the ultimate gift for us—to give us life. We can't **ever** repay Him. How could we? Jesus plan for the redemption, the reclaiming, the changing of this broken, spiritually lifeless world that we live in is, simply, for us to take the life we've received and **pay it forward**. To follow His example in humbling ourselves, giving our lives away—and bringing life wherever we go. Doing for others...**first**...what we would want others to do for us.

If you've found what it's like to be loved unconditionally, accepted as you are without being judged, criticized, devalued, **Pay it forward**. Love others just like that. You've experienced compassion—Someone who came searching for **you**—helped you put your life back together, find out who you were created to be, helped you find the right path again? **Pay it forward** to people around you who've lost their way.

You've found healing? Found forgiveness? Found joy again? Found what it's like to have the God of the Universe know **you**, not treat you

as if you're part of the furniture, part of the store—but care about you as a person? Pay it forward! Notice others, love them. Don't judge or criticize them--give life! Bring life wherever you go!

Many of you know personally what it's like to have Jesus Christ bring life to your heart—that part of you that was dead, guilt-ridden, in pain, without purpose—stuck. Someone—maybe a good friend or co-worker or parent reached out to you in a very simple way. Maybe they invited you here, or into their small group, or into their lives. And in the process—you found **life!** And now you understand what Christmas is all about. You understand what it meant for this world when Jesus died and rose from the dead. You **get it!**

Know what the temptation always is? To hold onto this truth. To conserve. To circle the wagons—to see yourself as a reservoir of truth and life and hope and joy—instead of a stream. To just use all this knowledge to polish up your own life. Know what happens to life when you try to just hang onto it and bank it, vault it for yourself? You find out that in the darkness of that vault, it becomes legalistic. It gets codified and ritualized and dry. The little bank vault becomes a coffin. Know why? Because **life is LIFE!** Jesus gave life to be **paid forward**. It **has** to be given away to others.

What does that mean? How do you pay it forward? By just spending the rest of your life doing good deeds for others and neglecting yourself? Of course not. It's doing what Jesus said—"Love others as you love yourself." It's what his mother as this little teenage girl had the presence of mind to do in front of an angel when she knew all her dreams might be blown all over the countryside. She said, "I belong to God. May it happen **just as you've said it would.**"

She fully embraced the life God offered. I think the first thing you have to do if you're going to bring life to the places where you live and play and work—you have to **fully embrace** life yourself. This doesn't mean you have to be perfect. It just means that you need to believe with all your heart that Jesus is the **only** bringer of life, Real life.

Paul tells Timothy, a young leader, to challenge people who are wealthy to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. He then says, ***In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they make take hold of the LIFE THAT IS TRULY LIFE (1 Timothy 6:19 NIV).***

What does **really living** mean to you? When people in our culture say, "***I'm gonna really live it up!***" they usually mean that they're going to spend a transcendent amount of money on themselves—or

party. Jesus defined it differently--as giving your life away. Which definition are you gonna go for?

I honestly believe that you and I have the chance, much more than we think, to be people who are life-bringers. Anyone have an idea how to bring life?

I don't think it's real complicated. I think we bring life by noticing the good in others, by complimenting and encouraging, by looking for the positive, by accepting others just like Jesus would, by stopping the gossip fest that seems to be starting up. See, when it comes to how we handle others, we have a choice. We can bring death, bring nothing, or bring **life**. So, **bring life!**

Let me mention something else. One of the curses of living in a metropolitan area like Toronto is de-personalization. Have you ever noticed that a lot of people won't look you in the eye--or even acknowledge that you're a human—especially if you're trying to catch their eye so they'll let you into a line of traffic?

You and I can bring life—we can **make someone's day**—by just noticing them, by smiling. By showing an interest that says, “I recognize that you're a person with a soul that will live for ever. And I need to notice you because someday we might live next door to each other in heaven.”

Think of how we measure life. It's usually in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years. We also measure life in terms of the money we make with our time.

That's exactly why it's a struggle to give our time and money. It feels a little like we're giving our life away—and life is precious. And that's exactly why Jesus said that we need to learn to give. It's not like wasting money or time; it's investing it in the only thing that will make it off this planet; People.

With our time and our money—we have the chance to give life, to bring life. To bring life to people who don't have it, bring joy, bring hope, bring basic necessities, bring friendship. Or we can withhold it and use it all up for ourselves. Our Day-Timer—our bank account tells the story. It either says, **I am a GIVER OF LIFE!** Or, **I care mostly about me!**

There's one other way that we can bring life. And that's by helping people who are undecided, and far from Home to find eternal life through Jesus Christ. Remember what Jesus said to His followers? “I am the way and the truth and the **life**, and no one comes to the Father, except through me.”

The Bible teaches sin brings death—and Jesus blood is the only antidote. The reason God chose such a radical solution to the sin problem is because spiritual death—separation from Him for eternity—was unthinkable for the people He loved so dearly. And that’s what Christmas is all about. This tiny baby, so sweet, so cute, so vulnerable—would grow up to be the source of tremendous controversy and die on a cross. And Jesus’ death and resurrection would be God’s way to life.

Before Jesus ascended to the Father, He said, “Now I’m sending **you** to tell others the amazing news that they can have life. Everybody needs to know. You will be the light in your world—and sometimes, you may be the only light. So, make sure the light’s on.”

And so the light—and life—spreads. One changed life at a time. Somebody told me about the life that Jesus brings; how He brings forgiveness. How He accepts me just as I am—and changes me from there. How He can bring peace to my troubled heart—how He can use me to make a difference. And I was changed—forever.

And someone told you, too. All we do is pass on—pay it forward—from what we’ve been given. And Jesus’ life gets passed on day after day, life after life. And it just keeps spreading further and further.

So, how’s it going in your world? Are you a **life giver**? Or are you sucking the life out of it? What happens in a room when you walk into it? How would the people who know you best describe you? As someone who gives or consumes?

TO GIVE, YOU MUST FIRST RECEIVE

On a fairly regular basis now, I get an email from a third world country—usually Nigeria—giving me great news. It’s always the same. Someone wants to give a church a bunch of money—but they need \$20,000 up front to cover legal fees. So, I file those emails under spam. Know why? Because, see, I know you can’t give someone else what you yourself don’t have.

And the same is true about life. You can’t give life if you don’t have it. And if you’ve never received the life this little baby came to bring, you could do that right now. All you have to do is ask. Admit, “Jesus, right now I don’t have life—because I can’t do it myself. So, I turn away from the ways that have been bringing me death—and I want to ask you to give me life. Right now. Right here.