Waiting Here for You SERMON three

the wait is worth the weight

So, advent’s been beautiful. If you’re new to church, and maybe you just came because it’s Christmas, advent is the season we celebrate leading up to Christmas. Advent means expectation, and so we’re expecting the arrival of Christ and celebrating the fact that he came. But we’re also acknowledging the fact that we’re still expecting a lot of other things.

Everybody in the building today is waiting on something. And Christmas is beautiful, and glitzy, and glamorous. And in every way we do our best to make the table look great, to make the meal look great, to make the kids look great, to make the presents look great. But just under the surface of it all, and sometimes not even under the surface, there’s pain present in this season. And the reason is because the world is broken and everything’s not the way it’s supposed to be.

And I know that sounds over simplistic, but it’s just the reality of living in a world that has been broken by sin. Not just the sin of two people way back when, but our own choice day by day by day. And in this broken world, we have promises, and that’s what we want to end on today with this last *Waiting Here for You* advent message. We have promises in the waiting, and one of the promises we have in the waiting has been fulfilled. That is that Christmas, the long wait for the Savior, was finished, and Christ has appeared on earth. But in Christmas we also have a second promise and a second season of waiting, and that is waiting for the return of Christ to put everything back as it should be.

We talked a few weeks ago that in the old days when I was growing up in church, and maybe some of you guys that did grow up in church, you know it was more like the tent meeting. Anybody have a tent meeting or a week-long revival? Or the weekend revival or the summer revival? We had a bunch of revivals at the church I grew up in, and the evangelist came. Does anybody remember this guy who came and he was amazing? You liked this guy on fire, and he would just burn for an hour. And at the end of it, the buses would wait, then people would make decisions, and heaven would really come down to earth. And I mean, God somehow used all of that to change people’s lives.

And the message so often was “repent because Jesus is coming.” Anybody grow up back there somewhere? And now we’ve sort of shifted the deck slightly, and it is, “God loves you, and life is amazing, and we have a latte waiting for you in the oval.” You know, let’s have community. And it’s both true. You can have a latte in the oval, but Jesus is really coming. And the best way to get ready for Jesus to come is to put aside the foolishness of our lives and to place hope in the fact that there’s going to be a day for sure when everything that is shattered is going to be remade into the beauty that God intended for it to be. And we are stuck in between two promises.

The fact that Christ did come, and he ended 400 years of silence between the Old Testament promise and his arrival in Bethlehem. The waiting for the Savior is over, but yet the waiting for the coming Messiah to put the world back together—to put us back together, to put our families back together, to put the earth back together, to put everything broken back together—we are still waiting for Christ to come. And in between, there are trials in our lives. And in the waiting of the trials, what God wants to say to us today is the trials can produce something so amazing in our lives that at the end of the day . . .

Now, nobody’s going to clap for what I’m going to say. So don’t feel the pressure, okay? No one is going to amen for what I’m about to say. So don’t feel bad for me that I’m going to be up here on an island of silence by myself. Don’t I know how this is about to come out? But in the waiting, it’s possible that through the trials, that the end of the day when Christ appears, that we actually will thank God for the trials in our lives because of the weight that they have produced in us in heaven forever with him. It’s possible that God is bigger than your trials in my trials.

You know, **the Christmas story says a decree went out from Caesar Augustus**. Caesar was the most powerful, historical, political figure of the day. And he just decided unilaterally, we’re taxing the people. And by virtue of that, everybody has to go to the city of their origin to pay their bill. And once he signed it into law, it was fact, and it happened, and nobody argued. There was no disputing. Nobody said, “You know, it’s not convenient for us right now to go to the city of our origin.”

It’s just the way it came down from the Roman emperor on down to all the people throughout the Roman empire. You’re getting taxed, and you’re going to go wherever you came from. And when the notice arrived at Joseph’s house, he was like, “Well, that means for us we got to go to Bethlehem. And that means me and Mary, who I’m engaged to, are going to go. And she’s expecting the Son of God and she’s fairly well pregnant right now. So, guess what we get to do today? We get to saddle up a donkey and ride to Bethlehem with a really pregnant wife.” That’s not what anybody’s going to choose to do on that day. But when the decree came down, the options were then dictated for Mary and Joseph.

But here’s what I want you to know today. **Man made a decree, but God had a plan**. Man may have made a decision, but God had a purpose and a plan. And he took the most powerful political ruler of the day and said, “Guess what you’re going to do today? You’re going to tax the people today and send them back to where they came from. Because I got to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and I’m going to, I decided today, I’m going to use you to do it, Caesar.” And off they went to arrive in Bethlehem so that on the night that God had appointed from the beginning of the creation of the world, his Son could be born to fulfill all the promises that in the city of David a child would be born, his name would be called Emanuel, God with us. God was in charge that night, not Caesar. And God is in charge today.

Not a doctor, not a prognosis, not a regimen of treatment, not an employer who’s waiting to decide whether your job stays or your job goes. Not a judge who’s waiting to decide the fate of your family, whether this decision’s going to be made or this reconciliation’s going to be happening or your company’s lawsuit’s going to end up this way or that way. No, those people may be in the story, but God is still in charge of our lives. And in the waiting, there’s going to be some bumps along the road. There’s going to be some trials in the waiting between the promise of God come in Christ and the promise of God that’s coming in Christ. It’s going to be a rocky road, but God is saying, “I am with you, and I’m in charge of your life.” And I want to give you hope in the waiting that when you look back at the end of the day, you might actually be more grateful for the trials than for the absence of the trials in your life.

I want you to see this in what’s one of the most beloved Christmas passages of all of Scripture shared around the world: **2 Corinthians chapter 4,** beginning in verse 6. And that’s a joke, so you can just chuckle a little bit right there. That’s not really a big well-known Christmas passage, but it’s an amazing advent passage as we’re on our way to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. And this is what it says in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. We’re going to read the whole second half of the chapter beginning in verse six.

It says, “For God, the same God who said, ‘let light shine out of darkness,’ that God made his light to shine in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Now, that’s a big phrase, I know, and it sounds like a run-on sentence. And at some point, you kind of lose the plot. But can we just pause one second in this verse? Because this is so beautiful. It says the same God who on the beginning of creation said, let there be light, and there was light, that same God has shined his light—not just the light of a planet that’s been illuminated by a star, not just the light of the heavens that are above—but he shined his light in our hearts. So God now has come through Christ.

Remember that the angels came, the glory of the Lord shown around them. A bright light appeared in the dark Bethlehem night and Jesus arrived, the light of Christ, the light of the world, God’s light coming into the world. So God, the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light. He’s giving us light so that we don’t have to live in darkness in this waiting.

Even though it could be bleak in the waiting, we’re going to have light in the waiting, to shine his light in our hearts. So “to give us the light”—and here’s what he wants to give us—“of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” So, where do you know, where do you learn, who God is in the face of Jesus? Where do you discover the glory of God, the radiance of God, the majesty, the beauty, the wonder of God? Where do you really discover that fully?

You discover that and I discover that in the face of Jesus Christ. So in the manger, when the baby was born—imagine that 400 years of silence, then all of a sudden, a baby’s crying. It’s God in a human body. It’s God, seven pounds eight ounces, 21 inches. It’s God in your hands. Talk about a miracle. Talk about a miracle of God that the Creator of the universe is in seven-pound some ounces, 20-something inches long, and in human hands laid down now in a manger. And in the manger is the place that we see the glory of God in the face of Christ. But he goes on to talk about the trials beginning in verse seven.

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power . . .” What power? The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. This gift God has given us of Christ in our lives. “We have the treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. For we are hard pressed on every side, but we’re not crushed, we’re perplexed ever been there. But we’re not in despair. We’re persecuted but not abandoned. Struck down but not destroyed.

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” Now, what, what, what does that have to do with Christmas? And why is Paul writing all this? What Paul is saying is that we’ve come to be the carriers of the person of Christ by the power of the Spirit on earth.

That’s because of the first miracle. The first miracle is that God came down to earth to dwell with men for a season and to dwell with us by the power of Emmanuel God with us. So can we say an amen for the first miracle? Can we say an amen to let us all know that we haven’t gotten over Christmas yet? The first miracle is that God, the God of the heavens, came down to earth to dwell with mankind for a season. And that by the Spirit of God through the work of Christ, Emmanuel now lives in us by the power of the indwelling spirit of the living God. We have the treasure of God in a manger.

And then we have the wonder of the manger in our hearts today by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit of God. We have this treasure in jars of clay so that our lives then can get moving toward the mission of making Jesus known on a broken planet, so that our lives can join into the eternal purpose of making sure that the light of God is known to all men on a darkened earth. And he says, and to that end, we continually die to our own strength, to our own ability, to our own plans, to our own thinking. And we continually live in the power of God using us, flowing through us, and doing in and through us more than we could ever do. So our goal isn’t just to live up life, our goal is to give away our life.

Our goal is not just to get more out of life. Our goal is to give more of our lives away in life so that death keeps working in us and life keeps working in you. We keep saying no to our strength and yes to his power so that his power shows you that you can also have his power. Death works in us, life works in you. And then he talks about that in a little middle paragraph. And then he comes to this conclusion in verse 16. And this is what he says. He says, “Therefore we do not lose heart.”

Now, in the waiting you can lose heart. Anybody come to a place in life where you’re thinking, “I’m just going to lose heart right here. I’m just going to lose heart. I mean, it’s just too difficult. There’s too much coming, there’s too much weight, there’s too much hardship, there’s too much death, there’s too much strife, there’s too much pain in this world.” And he says, but somehow even in the midst of it, in the midst of all of it, we’re not going to lose heart. Even though it looks like at times we should lose heart, he says we’re not going to. And here’s why.

“Because we know that outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day by day. For our light in momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far out ways them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, for what is seen as temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” In other words, what Paul is saying is that Christmas gives us the opportunity to pause in the middle of the fact that one miracle has already happened. God came down to dwell with mankind for a season. The second miracle is going to happen. And come on, the second miracle, because of the first miracle, is that man is going to dwell in heaven with God forever.

It’s amazing that God came down to dwell on earth with man, but how much more amazing that man is going to dwell with God in heaven. And he said in the between time, “I want to lift your purpose up to a higher purpose than just having the easiest journey possible. I want you to see that your life and the brevity of it and all the trials can produce for you a greater weight of glory in the end. And I want you to set your eyes on what’s coming, not just on what is here now.”

Look what he says again in verse 17: “For our light and momentary troubles.” Now, you may be going, “Louie, my troubles aren’t light, man. So I can’t relate to that. And they’re not momentary, because I’ve been in this season for a month or a year. I’ve been without this person in my life for five years, or we’ve been struggling with this deal now for three and a half years. It’s not momentary and it’s not light. And that feels like you’re not really feeling and understanding the pain that I’m carrying.” He doesn’t say it’s light compared to other things on earth. He’s saying it’s light and momentary compared to the eternal promise that God has for our lives. And I just want to push us as far as I can today into the future.

You know, sometimes we’re afraid if we get too heavenly minded, we’re going to lose touch with what’s going on around us. But I don’t think that’s our problem. I think our problem is we’re so in touch with what’s going on around us that we have lost the hope that Christ is coming. And then the second miracle is this, that in an instant we are going to be with God in heaven forever. Everything restored, everything perfect, everything made brand new again. And if that’s where we’re headed and that’s where we’re going, that has got to inform the waiting and the hurting and the pain and the tears that we’re pressing through right now. It’s got to make a difference right now. And he says it can, because this light and momentary trouble achieves for us—see that phrase—it is working, it’s producing, it’s achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs all the trouble we’re going to go through.

And so, here’s what we do in the middle of it. We fix our eyes on Jesus. We fix our eyes on not what is seen but what is unseen, for what is seen as temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. So what’s the payoff? Why should we be faithful in the waiting? The payoffs? A couple of things, and I want you to see them with me. Four things today. **Number one**, the payoff of trusting God in the waiting is we will get proven character, and that proven character will produce faithfulness in our lives.

Can I say that again? In the waiting, the trials will produce proven character, and proven character produces faithfulness in our lives, and faithfulness in our lives is the greatest gift of our lives because it is what God wants most from our lives. Look, if you will, in James chapter 1. I love the way that he says this. He says in verse 2, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” Now, we want to go like, “No, I don’t really think so. I’m not really understanding that or buying into that.” “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” Oh yay, that sounds so wonderful. I can’t wait for another trial, another phone call, another hardship for the bottom to fall out again and I can go, “Oh man, this is just pure joy.”

What is a payoff that is so great that we would look back on or into our trials and say, “I hate this, I did not choose this, I do not want this, but I can find joy in it”? Here’s what. “Because I know you know that the testing of your faith”—see, there’s the key word—“produces perseverance. So let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” And then skip down to verse 12. “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

Another passage, if I can share just one more, from 1 Peter chapter 1, verse 3, a fuller context of the same idea. It says, “Praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” So that’s what we already have because of Christmas. So we’ve already got something, and then he is talking about what we’re going to get. Verse four: “And into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”

So we have life in Christ because of the resurrection, and we have an inheritance in Christ that can’t be taken away from us. No one in no circumstance can rob us of what God has promised to us in Christ. “This inheritance,” it goes on to say, “is kept in heaven for you.” So there’s something stored up for us in heaven with God. I just want you to know that all the good stuff isn’t under the Christmas tree, okay? All the good stuff is not at the mall. All the good stuff is not online.

There’s some really good stuff stored up for you and me in heaven with God right now. We are headed to Christmas, we are headed to the celebration, to the feast. We’re headed to the place where, with God, we’re going to go. Oh, if we knew we had that, we wouldn’t have been so stressed about what we didn’t have along the way, because what we’re getting is so amazing, so amazing. It’s as if you already knew the best gifts you were going to get this year and it was exactly what you wanted. Even the model upscale two levels from what you thought you could get, and you found out by little—some little, you know—investigative tactic on your part or slip up on somebody else’s that you got it coming, and you’re good right now. You don’t care if it’s Sunday, Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday.

You know it’s coming. You don’t know when, but you know you’re going to get it. And you’re like, “Yep, I’m good.” And what he’s saying is, “I’ve stored up for you in inheritance in heaven.” Verse 5, “who through faith”—that’s you—“are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this . . .” In all this, what? The fact that you’ve got something stored up for you in the future, and until you get there you’re shielded by God’s power on the way, “that in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while. . .”

So, we had “light and momentary” and now we have “a little while.” Well, 35 years isn’t a little while. Forty years isn’t a little while. Seventeen months isn’t a little while. No, it’s not a little while unless you see it in the context of what God has stored up for you. And then it becomes just a little while. “Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—which is of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire that your faith—may result in praise, glory, and honor when Christ is revealed.

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Can I offer an idea that’s not really a big clapper, either? God’s primary objective, or his number one priority today, is not to make our lives easier. God is not primarily interested today in making our lives easier. He’s primarily interested today in making our lives matter.

It’s not to say that he isn’t interested in making our lives easier. He does work miraculously. He does heal the sick. He does provide financial miracles for us. He does put families back together. He does open doors that have been closed. He does make a way in the wilderness for us. And he does come into the present right here and right now and open up his beauty before us. He does it all the time. But his primary objective when we wake up in the morning isn’t to look down on us and go, “How can I make your day easier today?” His primary objective is to say, “How can I make your life meaningful today?”

Because the tragedy of life is not to have a hard life. The tragedy of life is to have a meaningless life. That is a sad life. And so while we wake up typically and say, “Okay, God, here’s the seven ways you can make my life easier today,” our prayer somehow has got to shift to say, “God, you know what I would like, easier if I’m honest, I would like easier. So let me just put that on the record, okay? Because I don’t want to be fake. I’m real. I would like easier in here, in here, in here, in here. But here’s the thing, God, I really want my life to count. I want my life to matter. I want my heart to mature. I want to become the person that you always dreamed I would be. I don’t want to stunt my growth. I don’t want to end up at a level seven floors down from what you were dreaming about when you came for me in the first place.

“I want a meaningful, significant life on planet earth. And here’s what I know about me. If I don’t have trials in my life, I miss the meaning in my life, because in the trial is where I find what really matters. I find that God matters and I find my faith in the trials.” Amen. And walking out of the trials is where I find that Christ is. He really is someone who means something to me. And on an easy road, I don’t really know. I don’t know who my friends are on an easy road, and you don’t either. I don’t really know who loves me for me on an easy road, and who loves me because the road is easy, and you don’t either. And you don’t know who’s going to stick closer to you than a brother when the times are good.

But when the times are bad, you find out who your friends are, and you find out whether God is real. And you find that your faith, this faith that you’ve professed, actually exists. And there is no greater gift on earth than that. And there’s no greater gift for God than to say, “Through the trial you have shaped my heart so that I can become mature and complete.”

Because there is a bigger goal in life than just getting all my tension resolved. The biggest goal in life is to get my heart shaped into the likeness of Christ, because I’m going to meet him. And when I get there, I don’t want to be half baked because I took the easy road out. I want to walk into the fire and say, “Just use it to shape me to be what you want me to be, because my faith is what matters at the end of the day.” And it is more precious and of greater worth than gold which perishes, even though refined in the fire, that’s the payoff of going through the trials. That’s what you get when you follow Jesus through the fire. You get proven character that results in faithfulness in your heart.

The **second** thing we get is true confidence in the supreme provision of God. That’s what you get in the trials. You say, “Well, I’m very confident in God’s provision, Louie. I don’t really need any hardship in my life. I am so confident that he is able.” No, you are not as confident that he is able as you will be when there’s nothing else but God. And then you find out that he actually was able. And at the end of the day, you do have a heaven-on-earth moment. And the heaven-on-earth moment was when earth wasn’t enough. God was when circumstances collapsed. God was when everything crashed and burned, God didn’t crash and burn. And I’ve discovered that he really is everything he’s promised me to be.

I don’t know how we all ended up on a broken world in the redemptive plan of God. It is a little bit mysterious when you look at it from the long, long, long way, way back view. But somehow, we’re here and here on this earth in this moment. I know that trials for us are the thing that pushes us into the understanding that God is enough for us. And that’s the joy of coming through the trial.

Can I give you a little, a little freedom moment today? The trial isn’t for you to prove that you’re enough. The trial is for God to prove that he’s enough. So we could just take a load off our shoulders right now today that when you’re going through the fire, it’s not for you to prove to God who you are. It’s for God to prove to you who he is. Amen. And sometimes we get this fake religion going like, “Oh man, I’m going through this really hard time. Well, I’m going to give the right answer to everybody, and I’m going to say the right thing in every situation, and I’m going to prove to God that he can count on me.”

God already knows he can’t count on you, okay? Thank you very much. He already knows he can’t count on you. Come on, you clap for that. Come on. God already knows he can’t count on you. God is not sitting on the edge of the throne going, “We’re going to put him in a trial. This time, let’s see how he does.” Oh man, why’d you do that? He knows our frame, the psalmist said. And he knows that we are made out of dust, for crying out loud. God isn’t looking at you going, “I’m about to put you through the ringer, and I want you to show me what you got.” No, God knows that when we go through the trials, it’s his time to show us what he’s got. Amen. Because he already knows what you’ve got.

And some of you are buckling under the weight of having to carry the responsibility of proving to God how great you are under the weight of the trial. And I just want to let you know today you can just set that down because God isn’t looking you to prove anything. God leads us into the desert so that he can prove who he is. So that we can come out on the other side of it and go, “I’ll tell you one thing. I have confidence in the supreme provision of God for my life.”

I’ll give you another freedom. It’s okay to be real while you’re waiting. We don’t need any more spiritual platitudes while we’re waiting. “How are you feeling today? Oh, praise the Lord. I feel great. I’m so excited about this. I’m counting it all joy today. What am else am I supposed to say? And, um, I know I’m being refined, but that’s all right. And I know God’s working. I can’t see it, but that’s all right. And what can I do for you today? Can I pray for you today? I know I’m really in a bad spot, but how about you today?” We don’t have to try to put on whatever the facade is that we think is going to impress people and impress God.

I love the way Paul said this. He’s talking about all the stuff coming in their life in verse 8. He said, we’re hard pressed on every side, but make note we have not been crushed. He said, we are perplexed, but we’ve not given up. Meaning we’re not in despair. We we’re perplexed, but we haven’t given up yet. He said, we’re persecuted, but while we were being persecuted, Emmanuel was with us. We were never abandoned while we were being persecuted. And God was always with us the whole time.

And then the last thing he says, we’ve been struck down but we’re not destroyed. We’ve been knocked down a few times. I’m telling you, in the waiting, you can actually get knocked down. I mean, sometimes we don’t want to admit it. “How are you doing? I’m doing good. I’m doing good. I didn’t get knocked down. I didn’t get knocked down. I didn’t get knocked down. I didn’t get knocked down. I’m good. I’m good. You good? I’m good. I’m good. Pray.”

Now, sometimes you get knocked down, but you never get destroyed, and you get back up. Sometimes the blow knocks you down, and then God says, “Don’t you worry I won’t pick you back up, because you’re not going to be destroyed. You might have got knocked down, but you’re not going to be destroyed. You can count on me. I came one time, and I’m coming another time, and I’m good in the middle. I’m good in the middle.” In this one phrase he says, we’re perplexed but we’re not in despair. I got so encouraged by that. That must mean that you can say out loud, “I’m perplexed.” Vecause trust me, when troubles and storms roll in, and then we pray like crazy and hope in God, and the storm turns into a super storm, and we’re like, “Oh, now I’m sorry I prayed.”

Have you ever felt that feeling before? Because now we gave all God all this great faith and I’m not—this isn’t joking, this is real. We said, “Okay God, we’re going to believe you. We’re going to trust you. We’re going to stand with you. We’re going to call the name of Jesus. We’re going to pray in faith and hope.” And then everything just turns ten times worse than it was before your life.

Oh great. I wish we hadn’t done that now. I wish we hadn’t driven out with such faith and such hope and such confidence, because maybe we got more attention called to the situation than necessary, and now it’s going to be a bigger opportunity to trust God. There’ve been times in our lives where I thought, “Man, I wish I just hadn’t prayed and I just dealt with problem number one.” Because problem number one turned into problem number eight. And I’m telling you, if you’ve ever been there, you are perplexed and you wanted to say, “I don’t get it.” And that’s exactly what Paul said right there.

He said, we’re perplexed. We don’t get it. And I don’t think it’s wrong to be real. I think you can be real in the waiting because the goal of the waiting is for God to be real to you. And you can say to him, “I’m perplexed.” What he’s going to want to say is just don’t give up. Admitting our weakness, last one of these, is not failure. It’s not failure to say you’re weak. He said the treasure is in jars of clay, clay pots. So it’s okay to say, “This is crazy and I can’t handle it, I can’t take it.” That’s okay.

That’s not failure to say we’re weak. You know what failure is? I think failure for me is simply not letting God be strong in my weakness. Failure is saying I’m weak and then putting a period at the end of the sentence instead of saying, “I’m weak, so God, I’m just going to believe again that you’re going to come through in some miraculous way. I’m perplexed, but I’m not going to say you’re not God. Because I already knew before I got into this deal that your ways are higher than my ways and your thoughts are higher than my thoughts. Who else would send the baby into Bethlehem to save the world? Who else would put God incarnate in a manger to save man from their sins? Who else would work like that?

“I don’t know anybody that would come up with that plan. So apparently, your ways are higher than my ways and your thoughts are higher than my thoughts. They’re beyond my finding them out, or reasoning them out, or figuring them out. So I’m just going to tell you, I’m a little perplexed right now and I don’t really know what you’re doing, but I do believe in you and I do believe you are doing.” And I believe that God loves that faith because it’s real faith. It’s not fake faith, it’s real faith. I don’t get it. But I do believe you do get it. And I believe that you’ve got us and somehow, you’re working in us. And in those moments, that’s where our confidence in the supreme provision of God is found.

The **third** payoff is at the end of it we have a powerful personal ministry to a broken world. And that’s one of the reasons we’re going to thank God for our trials. And I know you’re saying, “Louie, I don’t want a powerful personal ministry to the world. I just want my life to be easier and to work out. I really don’t care if anybody else comes to know Jesus, especially if I have to go through the fire for them to come to know Jesus.” I know. But on the last day when the light and momentary affliction has passed, we will be like, “Oh, thank you so much, God, for putting me under pressure in that day. Because without that pressure on my life, they would’ve never seen Jesus. And so now I’m actually celebrating the pressure because of the eternal payoff was worth the journey.”

Most of you saw in the news a few weeks ago, a young man was killed in Benghazi, Libya. Did you see this in the news? A chemistry teacher at the international school there was gunned down during a morning jog outside of his house. He went there because he loved Jesus and because he felt like God had put it in his heart, his wife’s heart, to take their little boy and to move to Benghazi and to live in a climate of incredible violence among the people who in some quarters don’t really love Americans.

And he said, for the sake of Jesus, we want to go and be with those people. And so, on December 5th—his wife and his little boy had already come home to the states for the holidays—but Ronnie Smith was still there, finishing out the term with his students, when his life came to an end. And immediately that news began to spread. Some people in our church knew Ronnie from their former church in Austin, Texas. And then the news began to percolate. And not only through social media, but CNN, NBC, CBS.

And the story ended up on this main website of CBS this morning, a picture of Ronnie and his wife Anita and their little boy Jose. And you know, you kind of rewind the story, and you can hear all the conversations of their friends and family, probably a lot of people around them trying to give them every reason why it’s not a good idea to move to Benghazi. But for them at some point—and I’m just speaking for them, I don’t know them—at some point for them, having an easy life got trumped by having a meaningful life. At some point, just having an easier life got trumped by having a life that mattered. And in their context, mattered meant God’s putting on our hearts the people of Libya.

And in the meantime, between the fact that Christ did come and he’s coming again, we’re going to Benghazi. She wrote a letter to the people of Libya, and it appeared on CBS this morning and on most major media outlets. You can find it. You can find it on their website in English and in Arabic. And she writes these words, an open letter from the widow of Ronnie Smith to the Libyan people.

“My husband and best friend, Ronnie Smith, loved the Libyan people for more than a year. Ronnie served as a chemistry teacher in a school in Benghazi. And he would gladly have given more years to Libya if unknown gunmen had not cut his life short. On December 5th, 2013, Ronnie and I came to Libya because we saw the suffering of the Libyan people. But we also saw your hope and we wanted to partner with you to build a better future. Libya was very different from what we had experienced before, but we were excited to learn about Libyan culture.

“Ronnie grew to love you and your way of life, as did I. Ronnie really was Libya’s best friend. Friends and family from home were concerned about our safety, as were some of you. We talked about this more times than I can count, but we stayed because we believed the Libyan people were worth the risk. Even knowing what I know now, I have no doubt that we would’ve both made the same decision all over again. Ronnie loved you all so much, especially his students. He loved to joke with you, tell stories about you, help you with your lives and challenge you to be all that you could be. He did his best to live out his faith humbly and respectfully within a community of people with a different faith.

“To his attackers, I love you and I forgive you. How could I not? For Jesus taught us to love our enemies, not to kill them or seek revenge. Jesus sacrificed his life out of love for the very people who killed him as well as for us today. His death and resurrection opened the door for us to walk on the straight path to God in peace and forgiveness because of what Jesus did. Ronnie is with Jesus in paradise. Now, Jesus did not come only to take us to paradise when we die, but also to bring peace and healing on this earth.

“Ronnie loved you because God loves you. Ronnie loved you because God loved him, not because Ronnie was so great but because God is so great to the Libyan people. I’ve always expected that God would give us a heart to love you. But I never expected to love you so much. We came to bless you, but you have blessed us much more. Thank you. Thank you for the support and love for Ronnie and our son Jose and me. Since Ronnie’s death, my love for you has increased in ways that I never imagined. I feel closer to you than ever before. I hear people speaking with hate and anger and blame over Ronnie’s death. But that’s not what Ronnie would want. Ronnie would want his death to be an opportunity for us to show one another love and forgiveness because that’s what God has shown us. I want all of you, all of the people of Libya to know, I’m praying for the peace and the prosperity of Libya. May Ronnie’s blood shed on Libyan soil encourage peace and reconciliation between the Libyan people and God.”

That sounds like somebody who’s not looking at the things that are temporary but at the things that last forever and who sang like Jesus did when he entered into that manger. This isn’t going to be great for 33 years, and it’s going to end in a grueling death. But Jesus, saying, but this light and momentary affliction is going to work and produce a weight of glory that far surpasses it all. That is what it sounds like when you trust God in the waiting, that while we are waiting, God is working and there’s something greater to be had than an easy life. And that is a life that matters for Jesus in the end.

And when you walk through the fire, you gain the prize of a powerful personal ministry to a broken world. Ronnie’s widow Anita said, “I want to return to Benghazi because I want to mourn with our friends there. And I want to celebrate Ronnie’s life among the people we lived with.” And when she sets foot on Benghazi soil, she will be mobbed by the media. She will be mobbed in the streets and everyone will look at her and say, “She’s the woman who forgave the murderers. She’s the woman who spoke love and not hate. She’s the woman who somehow wants this to serve to be redemption for the people of our nation. Who is this woman? And where did she come from?”

Because the world has violence against violence and she is coming with love against hate. Who is this woman? And when we come through the storm, we come through the fire, not in our own strength. We don’t come through the fire and go, “Man, I did really good, God. Didn’t I do really good?” No. We come through the fire and we say to our friends, “Man, I was so weak, but God was so strong. I almost went under but God wouldn’t let me. I got knocked down but God picked me back up. I am not the strong one here, but I have a strong one. And he is so powerful in my life and the watching world.”

They come listening now and they’re like, “Tell me the story. I’ve heard all the little cliches about faith, but tell me the story of the God who brought you through the fire. Because I’m in a fire right now and I need to know if somebody can bring me through.” And that’s the prize. That’s the weight we get on the other side of trusting God in the storm.

And then **one last thing** and we’ll close. Not only do we get proven character and faithfulness, true confidence in the supreme provision of God, a powerful personal ministry to a broken world, but we get heavy worship to lay at the feet of Jesus. That’s what James said. “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” So here’s the thing, we’re going to meet Jesus face to face. Right? Are you ready for that? Are you ready to meet Jesus face-to-face? The answer is probably no because at the end of today we’re going, “No, I thought I was, but I’d like a little more time because I’d like a little more meaning when I get there. I thought I was, but I’d like a little more time because I’d like to matter a little bit more before I get there.” Anybody on the same page with me?

It’s like, “I’d love him to come by 4:30, but if he could wait maybe until 4:30 next year, I would really like the opportunity to make my life matter a little bit more before I see him.” But we’re going to see him and that’s great news. We’re going to be with him and that’s great news. Here’s the last thing I just want to ask you before we close. What are you going to give him when you see him? Well, I’m going to give him a high five. Okay. You do that, that’ll be awesome. I’m going to just give him a hug. Okay, that’s great. He’ll love that too. I’m going to bring him all the ties I never gave him. I’ve got them ready and I’m just going to take them to him personally. That’ll be cool. I’m sure those will come in handy for him in heaven. He will be. Thank you so much. I love this. $4,788. This is amazing.

You’re walking on gold bro. What are you going to give him? Well, I’m going to sing. How great is our God. Are we singing this morning? I’m going to sing it then. I think it’s his favorite song from what I’ve heard. Hello, God. How great is our God. I’m singing now. How great. He’s like, “that’s awesome. I’ve heard that a million times. I love it though. I love it every time.” What are you going to give him? What do you get him? I mean, the magi came bearing gifts because that’s the way you come to Jesus.

Just a little footnote. I don’t want to wreck your nativity scene, but they didn’t get there the night he was born, all right? That’s just a little footnote for some people just to understand. We all know how history works, right? You don’t get on a camel in China and get there in Bethlehem the night the baby was born, okay? It doesn’t work that way. There weren’t three of them. More than likely they were rolling. Heavy magi would come in dozens. Typically there could have been 10, 20, or a hundred magi show up. And they didn’t come to the cave where Jesus was born. They came to a house where the boy was living. Did that wreck anybody’s nativity? That’s okay. Keep them on the counter. They’re fine.

Keep them in there. I know you paid extra for the 29-piece set, so that’s fine. Keep them in there. They’re good. But they did not make it on night one. They followed the star, took them a while. They came from India, they came from Persia. They came from Arabia, they came from the Orient, and they came all the way to Bethlehem. And on a camel that takes a while. So when they arrived, Jesus no longer a baby. Jesus is a boy. That didn’t matter to them because they came to worship the king.

Because God had revealed to them that a Savior had been born. They’ve watched stars for a living. And when the stars they worshiped aligned in a certain way, they knew something special was happening. And just like today, if you’re into the whole star thing, they will lead you to Jesus if you follow them because he made them. And he is the maker of the heavens. And the heavens eventually tell the glory of God. And they led the kings to Jesus, the little boy. And when they came in and saw Jesus, immediately the magi bowed down and worshiped Jesus. And they put their gifts at his feet.

They brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Not things you pick up at the cash register on the way out with that last-gift-anxiety thought you had. “Ah, did we get them something last year? I don’t know. Did they give us something last year? What did they give us last year? We should get them something equal measure this year. Because last year, remember we got them that and then they got us this and we felt weird because we got that and they got that. Now we got to get this.” You get gift anxiety going on.

You know, trying to remember, “Do we owe these people a gift or not? Or do they owe us a gift? Or we gave them one and they didn’t. We’re not giving them twenty this year. We’ll have one in the back of the room in the closet. And if they don’t have one, we won’t give them one. But if they do, oh, we, we’ve got yours in the other room. Just one moment, we’ll go get that rummage rum and drumming. Here’s a good one for you. All right, great. There you go. What do you bring?” They brought real gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And they offered him Jesus. Cause you don’t come empty handed when you come to the king of kings. So what are you going to give him?

You’re like, “Well I haven’t thought that through all the way.” We should think that through. Because here’s what I think we give him. I think we give him our crown because you’re not going to have anything else. I brought this with me from Broken Earth. Isn’t it awesome? Got it in Nordstrom without an S on the end. It’s a personal pet peeve thing. What are you going to bring him?

Well, here’s the way it’s going to go down. I’ll close. When you arrive, Jesus is going to give you a gift and it’s going to be based not on your amazing talents. It’s not going to be based on your profound ability to be perfect. It’s going to be based on your faithfulness to trust him in your life as sufficient loving God and to keep moving in the plan no matter what. And based on that, he is going to say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” And he’s going to give us a crown. James calls it the crown of life other places in Scripture. Call it and reference it in other ways. Imagine that. And he’s going to hand you a crown, and when he hands you a crown, you’re going to want it to be a good crown. You’re going to want it to be a good crown. And you’re going to put it on. It goes on your head, it’s a crown.

You get it, and you put it on, and you put the crown on. And then, what’s heaven? Heaven’s just us walking around with our crowns on. It’s so awesome. We’re like, jump that out. I know I was given more, under the radar, than you thought I was. You know, we’re looking at everybody else’s crown. We’re counting jewels, you know, out this corner of our eye. You know, like looking at everybody else’s, seeing what they got. We’re sporting these things around heaven. No, no.

The picture of Revelation at the end of our story says this—that in the center was the one who sits on the throne. Our God in the lamb, Jesus, is on the throne, and surrounding that throne were the thrones of the 24 elders and the living creatures. And it says the 24 elders had crowns that they had been given and received. And the 24 elders, it says, fell down and cast their crowns down before the throne of God. In other words, when you get to heaven, and Jesus says, “Thank you for being faithful. Thank you for not giving up. Thank you for believing in me even against the odds. Thank you for continuing to surrender your life day by day by day so that I could be strong and I could come through and I could use you to touch other people’s lives. Thank you for speaking up for faith, even when your husband was martyr.

“Thank you for believing that heaven is better. Thank you for believing that what I had stored up for you would dwarf everything that you would clinging to on earth. And thank you for getting it. That it wasn’t about an easy life in between the two promises. It was about me being magnified and me being magnified in you. Thank you for understanding that it wasn’t your home; it was just a place you were passing through. It was your manger in your 33 years. And then there was going to be a promise that was going to outshine it all. Thank you for never losing sight of both sides of the advent promise and never giving up on me. Well done. Here’s a crown. I saw it all. I reward all. I applaud it all. I didn’t miss a moment or a tear or a prayer. I never missed your faithfulness. Here’s your crown.”

Can we say this is not my crown, because I would’ve never breathed my first breath without you? In all that I have in all that I am is because of you. And this is my gift. This is really all I’ve got in this moment to put it your feet. Are you with me? Dear Holy Spirit of God, please open our eyes to see this in all of the trials. Produce the weight of our faithfulness that resulted in the crown of life that we could lay at the feet of Jesus. And when you get there and I get there, I do not want to lay down a Burger King crown at the feet of Jesus and say, “Man, Jesus, thank you for such an easy, carefree, me centered life. I dodged every bullet. No chance I was going to Benghazi or even to Brooklyn. I was going to take the easy way out every time and make it all about me. And when it wasn’t about me, you were going to hear from me a lot. I’d love you to have this because this is about all I got to show for my advent.”

Nobody wants trials. Who am I kidding? Nobody wants death. No, none of us do. But in the trials, fire refines our faith. And our faith is worth more than gold so that when we arrive at the feet of Jesus, we have something to lay down that’s heavy.