

ON THE ROAD WITH PASTOR RICK...

By the time you're reading this it'll be Christmas and I'll be home. One way or another we all come home for Christmas...if only in our dreams.

I dream, a lot, and often those dreams are of home. In the past month I've been in Texas, Florida, and all across Alabama. I love the opportunities the Lord allows me to share His wonderful, wondrous Word of redemption. It's all I've done for most of my life. It's what I dream of doing when I am at home. Then the dream comes true and I'm back on the road.

I was thinking, dreaming just a day or so ago about Christmastime, about home and about you (my friends). The Lord reminded me of a few special memories. The drag of the road blended into a dream of home, and Christmas, and you....

Here it is...

It's Christmastime, and I so wanted to get each of you something special. Really I did. In fact the thought of getting something for all my friends who receive this newsletter (all 4,120 of you) has so perplexed me, I'm late even sending it to you.

You've probably all read, or at least heard of Gary Chapman's book, "The Five Love Languages." In it Gary Chapman asserts there are five primary means of giving and receiving love: "words of affirmation", "quality time", "physical touch", "acts of service", and "giving". My "love language" is most definitely "giving".

I love to stop by a store and pick up something for Miss Kim. I always take Dreamer shopping when she needs a pair of shoes and end up buying her an outfit to go with it (usually two or three). It brings me great satisfaction and joy to see something I think my boys would want and get it for them. "Giving" is my way of saying, "I love you".

Lest some misconstrue my acts as materialistic, I can assure you that most of my gifts don't cost much. Some of my favorites haven't cost anything at all, picking a bouquet of flowers on my way home, finding an interesting rock for my boys while I'm supposed to be deer hunting or giving a friend my own copy of a good book. I once gave my own Bible, filled with years of jots and journal to a young girl who had lost her mom during a hurricane. It was an old Bible, but a costly gift.

When your "love language" is giving, you don't do it to manipulate or coerce people. That wouldn't be very loving at all. In fact, when you give as a token of love, it's best when the recipient of your giving doesn't even know it.

One of our family's favorite Christmas traditions is an act of giving we named, "Christmas Commando". In Christmas Commando you find someone in need, or even with a wish you're pretty sure won't be coming true for Christmas— then you make it come true.

We would often fill boxes with toys for families we knew were struggling. We would put all the wrapped gifts on their porch and knock on their door. Then we'd run like the wind and hide. I never knew whose face beamed brighter, all those kids tearing into those presents or our's as we hid in the dark and watched.

One year we got an electronic game system, whatever was new at the time. We heard of a young boy who was not only very poor, but terminally ill as well. He wasn't looking at a very merry Christmas. We couldn't undo the poverty he lived in, and we couldn't heal the disease that was slowly killing him (though we did pray). What we could do at the time was buy the best electronic game system, the one every kid was wishing for that year. We got all the games and gear that went with it. Boxed it with candies and fruit and warm, fuzzy pajamas. We wrote, "To Bradley From Jesus" on all the labels. Then at dusk hauled it all up by his front door, knocked like crazy and ran. There wasn't anywhere much to hide nearby so we jumped in some bushes. Prior reconnaissance would've told us those bushes had thorns in them. As it was, our 'ouches' were drowned out by little Bradley's shouts. He didn't wait to take the boxes inside, but rather tore into them on the spot. When he saw the entire game system, his cries of delight were deafening. His mother, a poor, bedraggled soul of a woman came out to join the celebration. We were close enough to see her face. She looked at the load with the warmest smile coming over her face. For a second she forgot they were poor. For a second, her son wasn't sick. There was glory in that moment.

The mom did what most parents would do when a bunch of boxes end up at your door, she sorted through the ripped wrappings to look for a nametag. You could see the question in her complexion. "Who was all this from?"

There were several boxes, all torn open now, but each had a nametag on it, "To Bradley From Jesus." The mother was weeping now. "Bradley", she said, "All these presents are for you. They're from Jesus — Jesus sent them to you."

Getting a Christmas gift from the Christ Child was enough of a mystery to turn the little boy's heart from his presents to the nametags in his mother's hands. The little boy looked at them. He was probably 7,8, maybe 9 years old. Old enough to read. He read the nametags for himself, then walked down the steps into the darkness. We were hiding a few feet away. The little fella looked up into the sky for a second, then more carefully, into the shadows all around. He was little, not dumb.

**"And thanks
to whoever
out there
who thinks
they're
Jesus"**





Then he shouted, “Jesus, I don’t think those presents were really from you, but thank You anyways! And thanks to whoever is out there who thinks they’re Jesus!” With that he went back up the stairs and hauled all his presents inside.

His mom breathed a nice contented sigh, went inside and shut the door. It was dark and quiet once more.

“Silent night, holy night.” O yes it was...

I don’t know what to get you. Probably wouldn’t have the money to buy it if I knew what you wanted. But I still wanted to get something for you. I’ve been praying and thinking and fretting about what I could get for all my mailing list friends. I thought about finding each of you a nice rock. But finding 4,120 honestly nice rocks ain’t easy. Getting them to you would be a chore. There are folks on this mailing list from New York and Texas and almost every other state. I would need Rudolph and all those reindeer to fly my rocks to you. The reindeer would get tired hauling rocks.

And it just ain’t safe for deer to be hanging out in Alabama ‘round this time of year. Some ole redneck, probably one of my cousins, would end up shooting Dancer and Prancer. So, I scrapped the whole idea of finding you a nice rock. But I didn’t give up on the desire to do something for you. I kept fretting and thinking about what I could give 4,120 friends. Then I remembered to pray (oops, a preacher should’ve prayed first). When I did pray, God answered. He gave me the most beautiful message and told me emphatically “Share this with your friends.” A word from God is the gift that keeps on giving. Sure beats a rock...

“You Can’t Stop Christmas From Coming”

“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” (Luke 1:26-28)

What a word that was, “You are highly favored.” And from an angel no less.

I don’t think Mary would’ve thought herself, “highly favored”. She was the teenage daughter of some simple peasant. She’s engaged to a carpenter. Their “Blue Christmas” is blue collar. Nothing special about her, her fiancé, her future. She’s just a kid. There’s no bright star in her future at the moment. All she can see of life in front of her is some small shack, probably sharing it with her husband’s family. When Mary looks ahead, all she can see is a life of want interrupted by brief periods of lack. Mary looks into her future through the lens of her family’s life, all she’s known up until this point. And up until now all she can see looks pretty dark, dim at best. The only Christmas lights in her life are the candles she does her chores by and a small oil lamp she puts out every night as she goes to bed. Little did this little girl realize, she was about to see real Christmas lights, a star in the East and The Light of the World in her lap. She is about to find out what it means to be “highly favored.”

You can take your guilt to the Christmas manger just as sure as you take it to the revival altar.

Christmas is a beautiful season. For most, it is the most wonderful time of the year. But not for all. Unfortunately, sadly, Christmas can also be lonely, sad, dark, even depressing. If that’s you, it’s especially for you I bring this message. It is God’s gift to you. I’ve written it, but there’s no doubt it is from God. And I have no doubt it is for you, any of my friends who are struggling with some sense of darkness in the midst of all the Christmas lights.

FIRST of all, you need to take a deep breath, preferably to the smell of cookies baking (even if you have to buy one of those candles that smells like cookies baking). Take a deep breath and exhale all the condemnation that says the sad, dark, empty thoughts you’re battling are of your own doing. They may say it’s all your fault, but it’s not your fault. The Bible says, “There is therefore NOW (Christmas season “now”) no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit. (Romans 8:1) Did you get that? Open this present first, for it is a gift from God. *“There is therefore NOW no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus.”* The Bible says the time to let go of any condemning feelings is now. So, now, let it go. Give the broken peices back to the one who knows how to “assemble according to instructions.

You can lift your hands in praise to God. Scripture says we should lift our hands to God. Do it. Do it now. But as you lift your hands up to God, think back, way back. REMEMBER...you’re a little boy or just a bit of a girl. You’ve broken your dad’s favorite coffee cup or perhaps your grandpa’s pipe. You feel so bad, ashamed, condemned. You don’t know what’s going to happen to you, but finally your guilt can bear it no longer so you go on in to face him. At first your eyes won’t look up to meet his, but finally you raise the broken object up to him in your chubby little cherub hands. There you stand, before your “father” with your hands raised up before him. With tears running down a pie-stained face, you tell him, “Papa,” (or whatever term of endearment you call him by), “Pops..I broke your _____ (you fill in the blank). Remember...

Now REMEMBER, what did your paw-paw or daddy or pops do when he looked down at you with your tiny hands raised up? If he was a true “father-figure” I bet he scooped you up in a hug and kissed you. Aren’t scruffy face hugs always the best? You gave your dad what you’d broken. What he took was your guilt and shame.

So, go ahead, do it. Do it NOW. Lift up your hands toward Heaven, to the Father. Tell Him, “Father, I broke my marriage, my business, my promise to You, my _____ (fill in the blank).” Go ahead and tell Him, He knows





anyway. “Father...I broke my life.” He knows. In your “breaking: He was the one who was ultimately bruised and broken. (Read Isaiah 53). Yet as you stand, or kneel before Him guilty, guilty as sin, when you lift your broken things before Him I know what He will do. He’s going to sweep you up into His big ole Fatherly arms and love your brokenness whole. Ho-ho-whole. That’s what Christmas is all about.

Don’t blame yourself. Even if you’ve messed something up, you can take your guilt to the Christmas manger just as sure as you take it to a revival altar. Lay your sin and the guilt that has come with it at the Babe’s feet. He lay amongst the stable’s manure. Your mistakes can’t stink any more than that.

Let me tell you a secret. “If you give Him your failures and floundering’s here at Christmas, it’ll be the one gift He loves the most.” What does a King want with tinsel? He dwells with the all the stars of the Milky Way as His tinsel. Your honest, humble confession is His favorite Christmas song. Even the Little Drummer Boy’s “Rum-pa-pa-pum” has to get old, but a sinner’s cry never ceases to warm His heart. I know I’m giving Him a whole sleigh load of “I’m sorrys” and “I’ve messed ups” this year. Bet He opens mine before He gets around to more Pharisee’s frankincense and myrrh.

If you’ll give Him your failures for Christmas, He’ll give you FORGIVENESS as His first gift. Enjoy it! Hold the gift in your hands. Look at how He’s wrapped it in eternity’s colors; sunset oranges, the finest greenery, all the blues of a new day’s sky and the red of His own blood.

He doesn’t just pass out forgiveness like a department store Santa handing out cheap candy canes, He presents it to you as a present, a gift from God. Shake the box and listen to what’s inside. The laughter of children and the rustle of the wind in Alabama pines (in Colorado, aspens or Minnesota, elms). Even the wind whistling down New York City streets is God’s way of saying, “Listen...I like you. I love you enough to send My gift with cattle lowing, angels singing and a baby crying.” If you’re crying at Christmas, let your tears mingle with the first sounds of Christmas, His cry. God’s first words as a man were the cries, then coos of a baby. If you’ll give Him your cry there will come yet a contented coo.

But forgiveness isn’t His only gift to you at Christmas. Look under “the tree.” There’s

Forgiveness wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Like Mary, I know some of you are in a dark and difficult place. Life can seem confusing. Listening to preachers can make it worse. I don’t dare trivialize your pain. I can’t imagine the dark place some of you are in this Christmas. There is no way I would be so arrogant or insensitive as to flippantly claim to have a pat answer for all your deep questions. But it is still Christmas. I asked the Lord for a gift for you and He answered. When He did it almost startled me in the power of His promise. I’ve heard His voice a time or two before, and I can tell you, “This word came from on High, and it came for you.”

“Hello, you are highly favored! The Lord is with you!” I certainly don’t want to plagiarize any angel. This word first came from Gabriel, for Mary. Yet remember this, “*All scripture is God-breathed.*” (II Timothy 3:16) God bent down and breathed (aka “whispered”) this word to Mary through the unlikely medium of an angel, Gabriel the trumpet player. Now, 2,000 some odd years later, at Christmas nonetheless, the Lord whispers it to you, “Hey there — wake up — look up — listen to me. You are My favorite!”

He is no “respector of persons”. Yes, He loved Mary, but He loves you too. Her world changed one Christmas. Your world can change this Christmas too.

So you forgot to get your wife the necklace she wanted last year. So what! So you bought your kids Atari instead of X-Box. So what. So you’ve messed the holidays up so many times you can’t remember a Merry Christmas. SO WHAT! Get over it. Move on to the merry, “*NOW there is therefore No condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.*” Hold that thought in mind. Take that gift and hold it up to the light. No jewels ever shone as bright as a clear conscious. Appreciate the lightness of what is gone; guilt, fear, regret, condemnation. Enjoy the weightiness of this thought, “*God in you, the Hope of Glory*”. Good gifts always feel heavy in their box. What could weigh more that eternity’s love “*pressed down, shaken together, running over*” in a present just for you? Jesus might’ve weighed 7.4lbs or 5.2lbs or whatever at birth, but the gift of His giving weighs more in the confident conclusion that He has forgiven you and come into your life with eternal life. No condemnation, rather confidence!

FORGIVENESS wrapped in swaddling clothes, CONFIDENCE bundled up in a “Baby’s bunting”. This is going to be a Merry Christmas after all.

And there’s more. Keep looking under the “tree”. Go ahead and peek. It’s Christmas. He expects you to explore. Christmas is for children and in a Father’s eyes, we’re all kids. Unless you “become as a child” you’ll miss all the wonderful, wondrous beauty of His having become a babe.

He has lots of gifts for you. Ephesians 4:8 told us, “*when He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to man.*” He came into this world as a gift, and He went out of this world “giving gifts unto men.”

I’d have to say our God likes presents. It’s Christmas, who doesn’t like gifts at Christmas. So, go ahead, let visions of sugarplums dance in your head. And if sugarplums aren’t enough to brighten your dreams tonight, dream on. It’s ok. Sugar plums don’t do anything for me either. He dwells in our dreams. Dare to dream of other gifts. Need some “peace” this Christmas? It’s on His list. “Hope”? Is it “hope” you’re really hoping for? Check it covered. Do you need to know you’re loved this Christmas? He’s got all of it checked on His list.





He's making His list, checking it twice and yep, He remembered what you like. You're on Heaven's gift list (and you don't even have to be good boys and girls). You're not just some random afterthought to God, you're His first thought. He's not forgotten you. As much as any child dreams of Christmas, does not their father dream even the more? Pay attention this Christmas. When the presents are opened, the children may giggle, but it's the parents who laugh the longest. And if we as parents know how to give good gifts, does not the Heavenly Father know how to do more?

You haven't stopped Christmas. You can't. You can't stop Christmas anymore than the Grinch could stop it. You can't stop it even if you act like a Grinch.

*"He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming!
It came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same."
And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!"*

*"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store,"
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"*

(Dr Seuss, "How The Grinch Stole Christmas")



Your own personal demons and darkness can't stop Christmas from coming. It will come nonetheless or whatever will be. Christmas will come. Mary's own doubt couldn't stop Christmas from coming. Her, "*How can this be?*" (Luke 1:34) somehow became part of Christmas' first carol. When her "*days were completed*" (Luke 2:7) the Baby was born. Christmas came despite the cold and darkness. Christmas came with politicians (like Herod) trying to stop It. The economy couldn't stop It (Luke 2:1-3). Confused shepherds couldn't stop It. Wise Men stopping to ask directions couldn't stop It. They couldn't stop Christmas from coming. It came. Somehow or another, It came just the same."

You know the story. You know it well. From God's promise to Eve in the beginning, "*He (a son) shall bruise you (satan) on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel.*" (Genesis 3:15) Christmas fulfilled this prophecy thousands of years later. Eve's apple couldn't stop Christmas' fruits, not just oranges and grapefruits, but the fruit of a virgin's womb. Christmas came. On and on and on through scripture God promised a Christmas. And on and on and on throughout scripture God's own people did all they could do to spoil the party. They wandered in deserts and built towers to the sky. They chased strange women and ran from puny enemies. They hid idols in their homes and hid themselves from His coming to them. But...He came just the same. He came as a baby and surprised them.

Don't worry about a culture that tries to replace Christmas. You can't undo what Heaven has done. Christmas happened. It's real. You know that it's real or you wouldn't be reading a religious newsletter in the midst of a hectic holiday. Of course you believe in Christmas, but did you know, "Christmas believes in you."

We've been taught all our lives that only the good boys and girls get Christmas gifts. "You better watch out, you better not cry. You better be good, I'm telling you why—Santa Clause is coming to town." I always faced Christmas with a well-deserved dread. If I had been watched, I was in trouble. I knew. I had been told to expect a bag of switches or a lump of coal. Yet somehow the Santas in my life always seemed to see things different in me. Instead of switches I got hugs and a bike. Someone forgot to give me the coal, but rather saw me as a diamond in the rough (all the diamond is anyway is coal under pressure, over time.) Christmas came to me when I was a child, not as some great event to even out my mistakes. It came as grace always does, in a gift.

Gifts I know. I've received my share. I've given a few. So I can say with some degree of absolute certainty that any "gift" you have to earn by what you do or don't do isn't much of a gift after all. It's payment at best or behavioral blackmail. That's not how God gives.

We couldn't do it as kids. How much more do we know of our failures now that we're grown. If I were a bookie I'd take odds against us getting anything at Christmas.

Then walks in Grace. Our Heavenly Father gives us gifts, not because we're good, but because He's good.

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." (James 1:17)

That's when Grace walks in, with arms full of gifts. Whatever you need this Christmas our Father has on His list. So sing a Christmas carol. Drink a cup of Christmas cheer (a cup of coffee or communion works best). Look up and enjoy the real Christmas lights. Dream of good Christmases past. Dream of what you want this year. Christmas is for dreamers.

Then lift your hands. Give the Father all He's ever wanted for Christmas, your heart. But wait, don't take your hands down just yet. He has presents for you.

I can't wait to see what you got for Christmas.

Always at Christmas,

Ricky