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SERMON NOTES & TRANSCRIPT

A Better Tree

Why the Cross Brings a Peace Christmas Can't

A Christmas tree can bring a temporary truce, but the cross is a better tree. There Jesus bore our sins, and the peace He gives does not come down in January.

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MAIN TEXT
1 Peter 2:24

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Sermon Transcript

Amen. All right. I'm not going to read a primary passage this morning. I'm going to kind of throw a lot of scripture at you as I preach this morning. It's a little out of the norm for me. I like to anchor in a text, but I want to talk to you a little bit about Christmas this morning, because this is Christmas at Saraland, so it makes sense. Amen. Y'all are catching on good. Y'all have got it. But I want to talk to you about Christmas. Now, I personally, I love Christmas stuff. I do. I am into the Christmas stuff. I'm not this way all year long. I don't want to decorate for fall.

I don't want to decorate for Easter. But when we get to Christmas, son, I want the stuff out. I want to throw some. In fact, the Christmas trees in here, up here, and in the foyer, those are our Christmas trees, our personal Christmas trees. We said, no — I said, no, no, no, no. We need more Christmas. And that's just what we did at the last minute. Just wait. Give me a year, because in a couple of weeks, the stuff goes on sale. I'm going to hit Hobby Lobby like a ton of bricks, and we're going to decorate this church next year. Amen. I'm excited. But I love Christmas stuff, and particularly for me are Christmas trees.

I love Christmas trees. Is there anybody in here who's into — you like Christmas trees? Let me survey the room. Okay. Who's into fake trees? Okay. I'm into fake. Who's into real trees? Okay. And who believes I'm the devil, because I'm talking about Christmas trees right now? No, you cut — they comment on Facebook. They don't come to church. They just comment on the internet. "That's devil worship, having Christmas trees. That's why we put red on them." Amen. Lord, people on the internet, right? I love Christmas trees. I'm shocked.

So many of y'all like real trees. What do you do with them when you're done? You just throw them in the lake and let them float? Throw them in the fire? Okay. Yeah. So I like the fake ones. I like the fake ones. It's just — something about it. It's a little, it's got a little magic on it to put the tree up, and it's a little magic. I like it. And so for me, I think the tree also symbolizes something else. See, I grew up in a household that was very dysfunctional. I grew up in a household where both of my parents were very out of control.

Alcoholics. They were both super off the rails. There was drug abuse in the home, physical abuse in the home, adultery in the home. There was all kinds of stuff going on in my house growing up. On top of that, I was an only child. So we didn't have no team, bro. There wasn't no union. It was just me kind of dealing with this stuff. And I was kind of in this environment all the time. And it was a real — you know, like it was a real uneasy place to live. I kind of lived scared all the time. But for whatever reason — I couldn't give you the rhyme or reason for this — for whatever reason, when Christmas came, my whole family kind of pulled it together.

And I don't know if y'all are like me, but when I was growing up, we put the tree up the day after Thanksgiving. That's when the tree goes up, and it comes down within a couple of days of Christmas. So I know some of y'all be leaving it up till March and then put Easter eggs on it and just try to live with it. Amen. And so, year round tree, right? And so I found that whenever the tree went up, it was kind of a beacon that now we're all going to get along and there's going to be peace. But the problem is, when a tree came down and we moved into January, that temporary truce was broken.

And we went back into the upset and the uproar of normal life. And the older I got, once I started getting around 10, 11, 12, I found that the tree itself no longer had any power either, because everybody started to ignore it. I remember the

first Christmas where we got close. It was the 21st, 22nd, 23rd, when my dad had left the house, and I knew he was gone because him and my mother were having an argument on the phone. And I know, because if you're young, you don't know about this — I could go pick up the other phone in the house and know what was going on.

When they put the mute buttons on phones, you pick it up slow, hit that mute button and listen. And I remember my dad saying, "I'm not coming home, and I'm not coming back." And I remember feeling like this changes something. And the tree just had no power anymore. Well, around 12 years old, I discovered a tree that had endless power for peace. I discovered a tree that had year round, unending, time after time peace. And if you'll turn with me to 1 Peter chapter 2, I'm going to show you where that tree is. 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 24.

> **1 PETER 2:24** ESV
>
> 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

It says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

And by his wounds you have been healed." Today I want to talk to you a little bit about a better tree. A better tree. A better tree. When I became a Christian, when I was born again, when I gave my life to Jesus Christ at an early age of 12 — but keep in mind, I was a first generation convert. I didn't grow up in church. I didn't grow up around this stuff. I was aware of church. I'd been in church. I'd gone to Sunday service, but it certainly had not gone to my house. Sunday service wasn't coming home with us. Amen. But when I gave my life to the Lord, a peace took over me that began to shield me from my environment.

In fact, it's real interesting. When I got saved, things started getting worse and worse. And yet I started getting better and better. God did a great work in my life. In fact, I can kind of juxtapose. Now I'm old enough to tell you that at my age, I'm 39. I'll be 40 in February. Someone said something to me the other day. I said, "What are you, 43, 44?" I said, "Get behind me, Satan." I'll be 40 in February. And I know right now in my life that the trajectory that I was on, the destination that I had by default because of my DNA — okay, where I was headed because of my family — I know that I should be on my third marriage right now, because my dad was on his third marriage at my age.

If nothing else, I ought to be on my second marriage, because my mother was on her second marriage. That I know about, by the way, because I found out about the first marriage the day she died. I always thought my father was her first. Because I'm talking about dysfunction, folks. By now, I should be in my second bankruptcy, because my parents had gone through two bankruptcies by now. By now, I should be estranged from my children. At Jocelyn's age, I had already not been near my mother for two years, because she had been in a work release program — which is a vacation prison, if you're wondering what that is.

She had been in a work release program, and I had completely been cut off from her, because she chose the dog over me in the divorce settlement. That's where I ought to be. I ought to be going through all that. But the good news is — not all preachers can get up and say this — I'm not heading to prison right now. Amen. Some preachers can't preach that today. Amen. I don't know about what's going on with everybody else, but I should have been headed in that direction. But I'm thankful that the Bible gives us this promise, that when you find the better tree, when you find the better tree, that you will be made a new creation.

> **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17** ESV
>
> 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Second Corinthians chapter five says, "Therefore, if anyone's in Christ, he's a new creation. The old has passed away. The new has come." And because I found a better tree, I never experienced any of those things in my life. And if you're not excited about it, I certainly am, in Jesus' name. And my wife didn't have an experience growing up altogether different than that. We both come from very bizarre, dysfunctional backgrounds. And God has done such a great work that when we approach the ministry of the church, knowing what the power of God has done in our life, knowing how God has transformed us, we want to make sure that we build a ministry model where people, no matter what they're going through, no matter what they're facing, no matter where they've come from, where they're at, or where they might be headed, that we have a ministry model where people can encounter the life changing, course altering, trajectory changing power of God.

Amen. Hallelujah. So today I want to walk you through a little bit of how we're doing that. I want to talk you through how we're doing that as a church. If this is your first time here, maybe your first time in a long time, I'm going to give you a real good introduction this morning to what Saraland Church is all about. If you're ready, say amen. Amen. Well, what we're about here is very simple. We have a little statement that tells you all about it. It's that we're building a Jesus centered, Spirit filled church for all people. We're building a Jesus centered, Spirit filled church for all people.

And you see that highlight there says "we're building." There's a reason for that. It's because it looks like there's three statements in there, but there's actually four. And one of them is we are building. We're building. We're building here. Look at your neighbor and say, "This is a building church." This is a building church. This isn't a church building. This is a building church. Amen. That's an intentional phrase, because this church has a rich history. About 60 years ago, a man named [a former pastor] started this church. I don't know much about [a former pastor] other than he wants you to keep his wife's name out of his mouth.

Somebody ought to — somebody should have laughed on that right there. That was better than y'all were letting on in this religious church. Amen. But [a former pastor] started this church 60 years ago. About 40 years ago, a man named [a former pastor] took over the church and really led this organization into the most fruitful season of ministry that this church had ever walked through. In fact, he built this building. He built this building. And so when he's here next week, I'm going to tell him where I would have put things. "So why'd you put that there?

You should have put that over here." For instance, I don't know why the kitchen is the furthest thing from my office. I'm a little upset about that. Ms. Pam, I don't know how I feel about it. And so they're going to be here next week. We're excited about that. And for the last 20 years, since the early 2000s, the church has been fulfilling its mission, but there have been some struggles. And that's why we've come in and we are actively and aggressively deciding that we are building. We're building. We're not staying stagnant.

We're not staying still. We're building. And the reason I tell you that this morning and why it's important is because you need the church. If this is your first time, first time in a long time, you need the church. But I declare to you this morning, this church also needs you. We need you. And listen, if you're a once a month or a twice a month, we need you. We need you here. And we take this serious. We take connecting with people serious. That's why this morning Ashleigh mentioned that we have a connect card. We have this disc that you can tap. These are both ways that you can let us know that you're here, ways

you can let us know how to pray for you. But let us have your information so we can follow up with you and get you connected into the household of faith. In fact, we want this so bad, we'll incentivize you. If you will share your information with us this morning, what we will do for the next 30 days is we will feed a hungry child somewhere in the world. So I'm not saying you're going to starve a child if you don't fill this out, but we're going to feed a hungry child. So we want to get your information. And in fact, when you share that information with us, we're going to send you a link where you can set up a private meeting with me and Ashleigh.

We'll just sit down and do coffee. And that way you could get to know us a little bit better. But you need the church and the church needs you, because we are building. Somebody say, "We're building." Now, we're building, but there's also in the mission statement — it says we're building a Jesus centered, Spirit filled church for all people. There is also in there an elephant, and that elephant is "all people." In fact, it's such an elephant, I had someone come up to me recently who's new to the church and asked, "Are you really building a church for all people? For all people?"

And they were impressed by that, that we would build a church for all people. But I know that I got some looks in here right now, that when I say all people, some of y'all have got a look on your face like, "What is all people?" And I can tell, because I can read minds too. I don't know if y'all know that's part of my magic act. But I know that some of y'all are going, "You talking about gay people? Gay people?" I'm talking about all people. I'm talking about all people. If you're gay, you're welcome in this church. You are welcome in this church. I want you to sit under the ministry of this church. I want you to sit under the ministry of this pulpit.

Now, I want you to know, if you come in here and you happen to be gay, I will let you know you're going to get what you expect from a conservative evangelical pastor. I'm going to preach the word. I'm going to stand on the word. But we want you here. We welcome you here. I'll shake your hand, show you exactly where to sit, and we want you to fill out a connect card. We want to connect with you. But I do want to let you know that there is a group that we do not allow here. There is a group of people we don't allow. And so I just said that so I can see in y'all's eyes a little bit.

Some of y'all are going, "Are you talking about transgender people?" I'm not talking about transgender people. If you're transgender, you're welcome to come to church here. If you're transgender, we want you to come and sit under the ministry of this pulpit, because I believe there's a greater identity than the identity you might be searching for right now. If you're transgender, you're welcome to come to church here, because this is a church where you can receive gospel ministry. And we want you to know — not who you're trying to figure out who you are — we want you to know who you can be in Jesus Christ.

Amen. So, transgender, you can come to church here. "Well, preach, are you talking about Democrats?" Listen to me right now, okay? I need y'all to hear me. Jesus is not a Republican. He's not a Democrat. He's not an independent. He's a king. He sits on the throne, and our little piddly political affairs are well beneath his feet. He's already been given to the church as the head over all things.

> **EPHESIANS 1:22** ESV
>
> 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,

I don't care what so-and-so says or so-and-so does. Let me just tell you right now, Jesus sits on the throne. Amen? And I'm less concerned about who you might vote for than I am the throne you're going to worship around.

So if you're a Democrat, you're welcome. But there is one group of people that we don't allow here. One group of people we don't allow on the campus. It's anybody who would endanger the safety of children. And the only reason I'm not saying the word is because they will yank my video off of YouTube real fast. So, but I want you to hear me. Anybody who endangers the welfare, the safety of children, they're not allowed here. I want you to know something. Every child here goes through a secure check-in process. We lock doors. We background check all of our workers.

And if you come into this church and we got an issue with you, I'll have security on you. I don't know how I'm going to know, but if I know, I'm going to take care of it. I'll have you listening on your phone in the parking lot. Amen? And so we don't allow those people into our church. And the only reason for that is because we got to protect kids. Now, I know some people will go, "Well, pastor, the gospel is for all people." Yes, it is. And after church, we will go through a painstaking process to take this message, put it on YouTube, Facebook, Apple Podcasts, and Spotify.

And the gospel is readily available in all four of those places. You can check it out right there. "Well, pastor, we're not supposed to forsake the gathering of the brethren."

> **HEBREWS 10:25** ESV
>
> 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Cool. Bye. You ain't coming in here, because we're going to protect kids. We take the protection of kids very serious at this church. If you are thankful for that, give the Lord a praise. Other than that — yeah, we're building a church for all people. I want everybody up in here. Red, yellow, black, white, I want everybody up in here. Chinese, Japanese, Cantonese, all of it, baby. I want everybody up in here.

Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican. I want everything. We'll even take Canadians in here. I'll be honest with you now. Y'all think I'm messing around. I'll take Alabama fans. I'll take Auburn fans. And we've even let a few LSU fans in the house here. So this is a church for all people. We're building a church for all people. Now, there's another elephant in the room in this mission statement that people aren't real sure about, but it's a little elephant. That's a big elephant. Here's a little elephant. It's that we're building a Jesus centered, Spirit filled church for all people.

So I know some of y'all are going, "Well, what do you mean by Spirit filled? Are you them people?" You probably — we probably them people. Yeah, we're — yeah, we're them. I want you to know, we believe in the active and present ministry of the Holy Spirit, for the gifts of the Spirit and the power of God to touch people and take their life to the next level. We believe in the present, active, Spirit filled ministry, not because we want to have good church services. Because a lot of Spirit filled people get real concerned about Spirit filled here. They want Spirit filled in this room.

They want Spirit filled on the external. They want Spirit filled — I'm talking about what Ephesians chapter three says, where it says you'll be strengthened in your inner being through his power.

> **EPHESIANS 3:16** ESV
>
> 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

You'll be strengthened in your inner being. Some of y'all need some power down on the inside, because you don't just need power to have good church, folks. You need power to go to Walmart. Lord, I have to pray in the Holy Ghost to

drive in the parking lot. I'm telling you, you need power. When you go on your job, you need power. When you deal with that person who irritates you regularly, you need power.

When you deal with that boss, you need power. When you're dealing with that family member at Christmas, you need power. You need power. There are moments where I've done some stuff and I've just sat there and been impressed with my own self that I responded that way, and walked away from it and went, "That must have been power." Because I need power. So, you know, I need power in this place. And the reason I need it is because there's so much happening on the outside that I need something on the inside working on that. That was an old spiritual we used to sing:

[worship] I need something to help me get through. The Bible says in First John chapter four, greater is he that is in me than he that's in the world.

> **1 JOHN 4:4** ESV
>
> 4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

Somebody shout yes. I feel like preaching all of a sudden. Hallelujah. And I still got time to do it, but we do have to get over there before Brother Kringle eats all the cookies. He got a little bit of a problem. We're trying to pray. He needs power on the inside too. Amen. I never seen a man eat cookies like that. And so we're building a Jesus centered, Spirit filled church.

And I want to be very clear. We believe in the active, present ministry of the Holy Spirit. And one of the things that I would really encourage you to do is be here on January 4th. On January 4th, I'm going to be anointing everybody in the church with oil. I'm going to be laying hands on everybody. It's not going to be long. It's going to be quick. But I believe that 2026 needs to be a year powered by the Holy Ghost. In fact, if 2026 was a NASCAR, I'd want to see "Holy Ghost" written on the hood — sponsored by the Holy Ghost. We need power in 2026. You need a Spirit filled 2026.

And so I'm going to anoint everybody with oil, because oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit, but it's a way that we're going to enter into the new year and just consecrate ourselves to the present, active ministry of the Holy Spirit. And right after that, I'm going to spend about two months teaching on the power of God. This is going to be good for people who don't know they need the power of God. So if you sit in here and you go, "I don't need none of that stuff," this is going to be a great series for you. If you've actively been involved in the power of God, this is going to be a great series for you.

And if you've ever seen the power of God and it felt like a mystery to you and it felt like it was veiled, and "I'm seeing stuff happen, but I don't know what to do with it" — I think this is going to be really helpful for you. Because sometimes we associate — I'm trying not to preach this this morning — but sometimes we associate the power of the Holy Ghost with stuff that only works in a church service. Because if you go into Walmart and start laying people out in the Holy Ghost, they're taking you to jail. It just ain't going to work. The manager's going to go, "Everybody in the cleaning aisle is down.

Do we have a leak?" So you need to be here, because we're going to help you get your hands around it. How many of you appreciated how you walked out of that series on being rooted in the Bible, with how you had your hands around what it looks like to spend time with the Lord? If that's you, just wave at me. I've heard from you. Get public with your friends here. I'm going to do the same thing in January with the Holy Ghost. Amen. I'm calling him the Holy Ghost. Now I'm about to take off. Y'all better watch out. So we're building a Jesus centered, Spirit filled church for all people.

And of course, that leaves us with the last one. And that is that we are a Jesus centered church. We're a Jesus centered church, and we're a Jesus centered church for two reasons. I think the first obvious reason is because he's Jesus. He's high. He's holy. He's lifted up. He's the Alpha, the Omega, the beginning, the end, the first and the last.

> **REVELATION 22:13** ESV
>
> 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

He's the one who was and is and is to come. He's the author and perfecter of my faith and yours.

> **HEBREWS 12:2** ESV
>
> 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

He is a high priest better than any priest who has ever walked the earth, according to the order of Melchizedek.

> **HEBREWS 7:17** ESV
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> 17 For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

He is God in the flesh.

That's why we're Jesus centered, because he is worthy of our praise. Hallelujah. But the other reason that we're Jesus centered is because we're a ministry to people. And one thing I have realized is that people need Jesus. Some of y'all said that this week. You were checking out at Rouses going, "Oh, this lady needs Jesus." So you know it. But people need Jesus. The problem is, there are a lot of people in the South — and I found this by and large, but really in the South — there's a lot of people that have a theology that says, "If I just believe in God and I do my best, then I'm born again, I'm a Christian, and God's pleased with me."

In fact, I call it a Stuart Smalley theology. Does anybody know world renowned motivational speaker Stuart Smalley? Anybody? Maybe you need to see a picture. Show me Stuart Smalley here. I've got a picture of him. Pop him up on the screen for me. Stuart Smalley. For those of you who are too young or too old for this, this is an SNL character from, I think, the early nineties, late eighties. Stuart Smalley. And Stuart Smalley used to say this. He used to say, "I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And doggone it, people like me." That's what he said.

And some of you believe that if you'll just be good enough and smart enough and doggone it, people like you enough, and you just believe in God, that you're good. You're going to go to heaven, that you're fine. But I'm here to tell you that that could not be further from the truth. You need a savior. You need a savior. Isaiah chapter 64 says this about all people.

> **ISAIAH 64:6** ESV
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> 6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Isaiah chapter 64: "We have all become like one who is unclean, all of us, and all of our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" — meaning at your best, you're still not doing that great. "We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities,

like the wind, take us away."

> **ROMANS 3:23** ESV
>
> 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Romans chapter three, verse 23, you'll probably be familiar with this, is, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

> **PSALM 14:2-3** ESV
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> 2 The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. 3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

Psalm 14 says, "The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. But they have all turned aside together. They have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one." And I know that you sit there this morning. And as I say that — because let me be clear, you will never live up to the righteous standard of a holy God. Not you, not your neighbors. And I know you can sit there this morning and you can look at me and let that fly over your head, because that's easy to say from a pulpit.

You probably think, "You're somebody in here preaching." No, we have a Jesus centered ministry because I know this to be true of myself. There are days I get up and I have to look in the mirror and go, "No matter how bad you might feel about yourself, you are the righteousness of God in Christ." Because I need a savior.

> **ISAIAH 53:5-6** ESV
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> 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah chapter 53 says this: "But he was pierced for our transgressions" — he went to the cross — "he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray.

We've turned every one to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him" — Jesus Christ — "the iniquity of us all." The verse we opened up with talked about a better tree than a temporary tree. First Peter chapter two, I'm going to read it to you again, says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." Paul said in Corinthians, he said that he made him who knew no sin to be sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ.

> **2 CORINTHIANS 5:21** ESV
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> 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

There is only one hope for this church.

There is only one hope for this city. There is only one hope for this county, state, country, this world. In fact, if we ever get there and Elon Musk makes it happen and we go to Mars, you're going to get there and you're going to find out that

whatever microbe you can find floating around, it needs a savior. It needs Jesus. You need Jesus Christ today. So, with every head bowed and every eye closed — if you happen to come in here today, maybe grandma asked you to come, maybe mama asked you to come, maybe you just wanted to have an easy moment to go see Santa.

That's fine. You're here now. So if you're in this place today and you say, "Preacher, I think I need to get my life right with God. I don't think I want to go into another year sacrificing the peace that I could have in my home. I don't want to go into another year with other people determining how I'm doing. I don't want to go into another year not knowing if I were to die today where I would spend eternity" — if that's you, I want you to say this prayer with me this morning. But first I want you to take a step, because I want to know who you are, because I want to be praying for you.

I'm going to count to three, and if that's you, I want you to lift your hands high in the air. One — you already know it's you. Two — lift your hand high so I can see it. Three — if that's you, lift your hand this morning. One, two. Hallelujah. Anybody else? Going once, going twice. I want everybody in this room to pray this prayer with me this morning. And I believe at the end of it, you're going to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you have been born again. Say: "Dear Jesus, I know I'm a sinner and I need a savior. Today I put my faith in you. I believe you are the Son of God, God in the flesh.

I believe you lived a sinless life, died for my sins, and rose to give me new life. I receive your forgiveness, and I confess you are Lord of my life. Thank you for saving me. In Jesus' name." And everybody said, amen. Come on, let's put our hands together this morning. God bless you. We're so proud of you. Listen, if you said that prayer, I want you to do one more step for me, because we want to make sure that you start on your journey well. The first thing I'd like you to do is either take this connect card, the same one that you filled out where we had first time guests fill out.

If you turn it over, there's a box on here to check: "I gave my life to Jesus today." If you will fill this out feverishly and drop it in the offering that we're about to receive, someone will follow up with you this week. It'll probably be me or Ashleigh, and follow up with you and make sure that you are starting your faith journey well. If you are of the digital persuasion, you can tap the dot in front of you, or you can scan the QR code on it, and you can fill that information out digitally. And we're going to follow up with you this week, because we want you to start in the faith

well. Church family, if you're excited for these people, give God another hand clap of praise. Hallelujah.

02

Preaching Notes

Before You Preach

This is a Christmas Sunday message for a room full of guests. It does two jobs: it tells the gospel through a personal testimony built on one verse, 1 Peter 2:24, and it gives first-time guests a warm, plain introduction to who the church is. It does not anchor in one long passage. Say so up front, then throw a lot of Scripture at them.

The testimony is the engine. Pastor Jason preached his own story of a chaotic childhood home where the Christmas tree was the only sign of peace. Another preacher should tell his or her own story here, or tell this one as an illustration, and keep it honest without dwelling on details.

The middle of the message walks through the church's mission statement as it read in December 2025, one phrase at a time. The church's language today is "Building Lives on Jesus": an incredible life is built on the finished work of Jesus Christ. Use your own church's mission and keep the same movement: we are building, we are for all people, we need power on the inside, and everything centers on Jesus. Pastor Jason preached the four parts in reverse order from his notes, ending on Jesus so the message lands on the invitation. These notes follow the order he preached.

The "all people" section names gay and transgender people, political party, and one group the church does not allow on campus. Say it with a smile and with conviction: everyone is welcome to sit under the preaching of the Word, and the safety of children is not negotiable.

Introduction

I am not going to read one primary passage this morning. I like to anchor in a text, but this is Christmas, and I want to talk to you about Christmas.

I love Christmas stuff. I do not want to decorate for fall or for Easter, but when we get to Christmas, I want the stuff out. And for me, it is the Christmas trees.

Illustration: real or fake? Survey the room. Who likes fake trees? Who likes real trees? (What do you do with them when you're done, throw them in the lake?) And who thinks I'm the devil for talking about Christmas trees? They don't come to church; they comment on Facebook. I like the fake ones. There is a little magic in putting the tree up.

THE TEMPORARY TREE

For me, the tree symbolizes something else. I grew up in a very dysfunctional home. Both of my parents were alcoholics. There was drug abuse, physical abuse and adultery in the home. I was an only child, so there was no team. I lived scared most of the time.

But for whatever reason, when Christmas came, my whole family pulled it together. The tree went up the day after Thanksgiving, and **whenever the tree went up, it was a beacon that now we're all going to get along and there's going to be peace.** The problem was that when the tree came down and we moved into January, that temporary truce was broken, and we went back into the uproar of normal life.

By the time I was 10, 11, 12, the tree had lost even that power. I remember the Christmas my dad left. I picked up the other phone in the house, hit the mute button, and heard him tell my mother, "I'm not coming home, and I'm not coming back." The tree had no power anymore.

1. The Cross Is a Better Tree

Around 12 years old, I discovered a tree that had endless power for peace: year-round, unending, time after time peace.

> **1 PETER 2:24** ESV
>
> 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

The tree in this verse is the cross on which Jesus gave His life. Today I want to talk to you about **a better tree.**

I gave my life to Jesus Christ at 12. I was a first-generation convert. I had been to church, but church did not come home with us. When I gave my life to the Lord, a peace took over me that began to shield me from my environment. **When I got saved, things started getting worse and worse at home. And yet I started getting better and better.**

2. The Better Tree Makes a New Creation

Now I am old enough to see the trajectory I was on by default, the destination my family history had set:

- My dad was on his third marriage at my age. My mother was on her second.
- My parents had been through two bankruptcies by my age.
- At my children's ages, I had been cut off from my mother for two years while she was in a work release program.

That is where I ought to be. But the Bible promises that when you find the better tree, you are made a new creation.

> **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17** ESV
>
> 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Because I found a better tree, I never experienced any of those things. My wife's story is not altogether different; in many ways it is worse. We both come from very dysfunctional backgrounds, and God brought us out of where

our lives were headed.

Because we know what the power of God has done in our lives, we want to build a ministry where people, no matter what they are going through, where they have come from or where they might be headed, can encounter the life-changing, course-altering, trajectory-changing power of God.

Transition: If this is your first time here, or your first time in a long time, let me give you a real introduction to who we are and what we are building.

3. We Are Building

That word is intentional. Have the room look at a neighbor and say, **"This isn't a church building. This is a building church."**

You walked into a great story. This church has been in the community for more than 60 years. It was founded about 60 years ago, and about 40 years ago a new pastor led it into its most fruitful season of ministry and built the building we meet in. For the last 20 years the church has kept fulfilling its mission, but there have been struggles. That is why we are actively and aggressively building. We are not staying stagnant.

You need the church, and the church needs you. If you are here once or twice a month, we need you.

We take connecting with people seriously. (Adapt to your church: Pastor Jason pointed to the connect card and the tap disc, told guests the church would feed a hungry child for 30 days for every card filled out, and offered a coffee meeting with him and Ashleigh.) Don't slip in and out of a Christmas service. God has more for you than that.

Have the room say it: **"We're building."**

4. A Church for All People

There is an elephant in the mission statement: "all people." Someone new to the church asked me recently, "Do you really mean all people?"

I know some of you are wondering what I mean. So let me say there is one group of people we do not allow here. Then walk through who it is not.

"Is it gay people?" No. If you are gay, you are welcome here, and I want you to sit under the ministry of this pulpit. You will get what you expect from a conservative evangelical pastor: I am going to preach the Word and stand on the Word. But we want you here, and we want to connect with you.

"Is it transgender people?" No. If you are transgender, you are welcome here, because this is a place to receive gospel ministry, and there is a greater identity than the one you may be searching for. We want you to know who you can be in Jesus Christ.

”Is it Democrats?” No. **Jesus is not a Republican. He’s not a Democrat. He’s not an independent. He’s a King.** He sits on the throne, and our political affairs are well beneath His feet. He has already been given to the church as head over all things (Ephesians 1:22). I am less concerned about who you vote for than about the throne you worship around.

Who is it? Anyone who would endanger the safety of children. Every child goes through a secure check-in. We lock doors. We background check every worker. If we know there is a problem, you will be listening to the service on your phone in the parking lot.

Answer the objections with a smile:

- “The gospel is for all people.” Yes, and that is why the message goes up on YouTube, Facebook, Apple Podcasts and Spotify.
- “We’re not supposed to forsake the gathering of the brethren.” Cool. Bye. We protect kids. (The objection leans on Hebrews 10:25.)

Other than that, we want everybody in here: every color, every nationality, every generation and income level. Alabama fans, Auburn fans, and even a few LSU fans.

5. We Need Power on the Inside

The next part of the mission is a little elephant: we are a Spirit-filled church. “Are you them people?” Yes, we’re them people. We believe in the active, present ministry of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit and the power of God to touch people and take their lives to the next level.

But not so we can have good church services. Many Spirit-filled people want the power in the room and on the outside. Paul prays that believers would be “strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Ephesians 3:16).

You don’t just need power to have good church. You need power to go to Walmart. You need power on the job, with the person who irritates you, with that boss, with that family member at Christmas. There are moments I have responded in a way that surprised me and thought, “That must have been power.”

There is so much happening on the outside that I need something on the inside working on it. As an old song says, “I got something on the inside working on the outside.” “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

My wife and I were rescued from the destiny of a dysfunctional life, but God has also done things in us well above simply breaking the cycle. That took more than motivation. We needed the power of the Holy Spirit in our bones.

Look ahead (adapt to your calendar). Pastor Jason invited everyone back for January 4, 2026, when he would anoint everyone present with oil, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, to consecrate the new year to the Spirit’s ministry, followed by about two months of teaching on the power of God. **2026 needs to be a year powered by the Holy Ghost.**

Illustration: Walmart. Some of us associate the power of God only with church services. If you go into Walmart and start laying people out in the Holy Ghost, they are taking you to jail. The manager comes on the intercom: "Everybody in the cleaning aisle is down. Do we have a leak?" We want to help you get your hands around what the Spirit's power looks like in everyday life.

6. Everything Centers on Jesus

We center everything on Jesus for two reasons.

First, because He is Jesus. He is high, holy and lifted up. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last (Revelation 22:13). He is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He is a high priest better than any priest who ever walked the earth, after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:17). He is God in the flesh, and He is worthy of our praise.

Second, because people need Jesus. And people, inside and outside the church, underestimate how much they need Him. Many people, especially in the South, believe that if they believe in God and do their best, they are fine with God.

Illustration: Stuart Smalley theology. (Put a photo on screen.) Stuart Smalley was a Saturday Night Live character from the early 1990s, a parody self-help host who looked in the mirror and said, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me." Many people believe that if they are good enough and smart enough and people like them, and they believe in God, they are going to heaven.

That could not be further from the truth. You need a Savior.

- "All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6). At your best, you are still not doing that well.
- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).
- "There is none who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3).

Bottom line: no one is good enough to meet the righteous standard of an absolutely holy God. Not you, not your neighbors, and not the preacher. There are days I look in the mirror and remind myself that no matter how I feel, I am the righteousness of God in Christ, because I need a Savior.

But God, rich in mercy, gave us Jesus.

> ISAIAH 53:5-6 ESV
>
> 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement
> that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have
> turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Go back to the verse we opened with, the better tree:

> **1 PETER 2:24** ESV
>
> 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

You don't have to be good enough for God, because you can't be good enough for God. Jesus has paid the price for you to be saved and rescued from the punishment of your sin. There is one hope for this church, this city, this state, this country and this world. Even if we make it to Mars, whatever microbe we find there will need a Savior.

Conclusion

With every head bowed and every eye closed: maybe Grandma asked you to come, or you came to see Santa. That's fine. You're here now.

Maybe you are saying, "I don't want to go into another year sacrificing the peace I could have in my home. I don't want to go into another year with other people determining how I'm doing. I don't want to go into another year not knowing where I would spend eternity."

Ask them to raise a hand on the count of three, then lead the whole room in prayer:

> Dear Jesus, I know I'm a sinner and I need a Savior. Today I put my faith in You. I believe You are the Son of God, God in the flesh. I believe You lived a sinless life, died for my sins, and rose to give me new life. I receive Your forgiveness, and I confess You are Lord of my life. Thank You for saving me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Ask everyone who prayed to check "I gave my life to Jesus today" on the connect card (or fill it out digitally) so someone can follow up this week and help them start their faith journey well.

The Christmas tree comes down in January. The better tree never does.

03

Scripture List

Every passage read, cited or alluded to in the message, in the order it comes up.

Read

Read aloud in the message.

1 PETER 2:24	24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Cited

Named or quoted along the way.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17	17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.
EPHESIANS 3:16	16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,
1 JOHN 4:4	4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.
ISAIAH 64:6	6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
ROMANS 3:23	23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
PSALM 14:2-3	2 The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. 3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.
ISAIAH 53:5-6	5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21	[21] For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Alluded to

Drawn on without naming the reference.

EPHESIANS 1:22	[22] And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,
HEBREWS 10:25	[25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.
REVELATION 22:13	[13] I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."
HEBREWS 12:2	[2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
HEBREWS 7:17	[17] For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

Pastor Jason Mayfield

SENIOR PASTOR, CITYLIGHT CHURCH

Pastor Jason Mayfield is the Senior Pastor of Citylight Church in Saraland, Alabama, where he and his wife, Ashleigh, lead a church devoted to Building Lives on Jesus. His preaching is rooted in the Bible, full of hope, and grounded in one conviction: an incredible life is built on the finished work of Jesus Christ.

For more than 20 years, Pastor Jason has given his life to the local church. He has been credentialed with the Assemblies of God for 21 years and ordained for 14, and he has led revitalization in churches that went on to rank among the Top 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America. He carries a deep conviction that the church can be both excellent and supernatural, and a passion for revival.

He is an author and the creator of Tear Up Your Bible and POWER 27, a daily rhythm of Bible reading, prayer and worship. His resources have helped more than 100,000 people go deeper in the Scriptures. Above every title, his greatest joy is seeing people meet Jesus, be filled with the Spirit, and grow into everything God has called them to be.

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