

## I. Introduction

- A. Well, it's here—the last weekend before Christmas. Are you ready? Are you pumped?
- B. I'm excited. I love Christmas. I'm excited about it. I know that the message is often commercialized and that's a problem, but the cool thing is that our culture still has a memory of Christmas as a super-special day and there are some who even know what makes it special.
- C. It is the day Jesus was born—the Savior of the World.
- D. Some people remember that. That's awesome.
- E. You know what else is awesome? Presents—I love them. I love to give them. I love to receive them. I am a grown up kid. I love presents.
- F. Now, I know that some people need guidance on what makes a good present. So, in the spirit of the season, and as a service to our community, let me help you tell the difference between a good present and the kind of present you should think twice before you give it.
  - 1. Good present: a day at the spa.  
Think twice present: hair dye.
  - 2. Good present: diamond earrings  
Think twice present: teeth whitener
  - 3. Good present: coffee of the month membership  
Think twice present: Weight Watchers membership
  - 4. Good present: a gift card for ice cream  
Think twice present: a tube of acne cream
  - 5. Good present: basketball shoes  
Think twice present: odor eaters
  - 6. Good present: a US savings bond  
Think twice present: denture bond
  - 7. Good present: the classic children's book, *A Wrinkle in Time*  
Think twice present: wrinkle cream
  - 8. Good present: golf clubs for the men  
Think twice present: the hair club for men
  - 9. Good present: gift certificates  
Think twice present: liposuction certificates.
    - a) And the all-time top think twice present and this one came from a mother-in-law to her son-in-law.
  - 10. A gift subscription to Match.com.

## II. Welcome

- A. Merry Christmas. Welcome to Neighborhood Church. We've come today in honor of Jesus. We celebrate His birth. We celebrate the day God became man without ceasing to be God.
- B. On Christmas, God gave the gift of Jesus to us.
- C. So we give the gift of worship, and honor, and recognition to Him.
- D. During this season we have been talking about the theme Pursued. First, we talked about God, the pursuer. Then we talked about us, the pursued. And today I want to wrap it up by talking about the pursuit.
- E. God is a seeking God. The birth of Jesus means that God was not content to sit in heaven with His hands folded and wait for us to come to Him.
- F. No.
- G. He came to us. He pursues us because that's how great His love for us is. And Christmas is the day in history when God shifted His pursuit of us into high gear.
- H. So, on this last weekend before Christmas, please let's consider together four qualities of God's pursuit of us.

## III. Four Qualities

- A. Self-initiated
  - 1. *18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. 20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins. 22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 23 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us.'" 24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS (Matthew 1:18-25, NKJV).*
  - 2. The story of Christmas predates the story of Christmas.
  - 3. I mean that it wasn't an afterthought. It wasn't God scrambling at the last minute.
  - 4. Eight centuries before Jesus was born of a virgin, the prophet Isaiah predicted He would be born of a virgin.
  - 5. And God was planning Christmas even long before that. The Bible calls Jesus "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8). Even before there was a single human on planet earth, God knew that He would send His son to be the Savior of the world.
  - 6. God loves and God wants you. Have you ever wondered why?
    - a) Is it because you're such a good person? No.
    - b) Is it because you have obeyed God's commands and kept God's laws? No.
    - c) Is it because you are so good looking and have a sparkling personality? No.

7. So why does God love you so much He pursues you?
8. All the reasons that God loves you are wrapped up in the heart of God. God's pursuit of you is self-initiated.
9. You don't earn it. You don't draw it out from Him. You don't make God love you. He loves you because of who and what He is, and not because of who and what you are.
10. He pursued you before you were born. He pursued you before you had performed even one good deed. He pursued you when you avoided Him, or ran from Him, or hated Him.
11. Because the love of God does not depend on your character, it depends on God's character. He is a God of love, a God who is eternally moved to self-communication.
12. I love this definition of grace from a Bible dictionary:
  - a) "Grace is the sheer, self-giving love of God toward suffering and sinful humanity. It has no cause outside the love of God Himself; it is not dependent on any merit or worth in the recipient."
13. (*Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*)  
I think this is so incredible, because it lets me off the hook. I don't have to work to make God want me. I don't have to improve myself. I don't have to do something to impress Him.
14. And that goes exactly OPPOSITE of all the religious instincts most of us share.
15. He was planning the virgin birth, He was mapping out Bethlehem, He was orchestrating the music of the angels, and He was getting everything READY for that first Christmas—long before any human being ever gave him a thought. He loved me before I knew Him, and He was hunting me down when I still ignored Him. That's how good God is.
16. The fact that God takes the first step doesn't erase your need to take a second step. He initiates; you respond. And the question I have for you a week before Christmas day is this:
  - a) Have you ever responded to God's initiative? Have you ever stopped avoiding Him long enough to open your arms to Jesus and embrace Him? To receive Him, and to give Him the key to your heart?
17. I want to give you the chance to do that in just a few minutes, when I'm done, I'd like to lead you in a prayer to receive Jesus as your Savior. I won't embarrass you, but I will ask you to boldly take this step called faith.
18. And it doesn't matter what you've done, or what kind of mess you've made of your relationships, or the moral failings that haunt you. He never loved you because of your performance anyway. Don't let your failures keep you from meeting God today.
19. You can make this Christmas your first Christmas as a forgiven, redeemed member of the family of God.
20. God's pursuit is self-initiated.

#### B. Total

1. Remember that on Christmas, it was a baby lying in the manger—a fragile, tiny, helpless infant.
2. When He entered this world, He laid aside the use of His divine powers—He didn't lay aside His deity, He remained God. He did not, however uses those powers during His time on earth. Here's a different kind of Christmas verse.
  - a) *14 Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form. For only as a human being could He die, and only by dying could He break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death (Hebrews 2:14, NLT).*
3. Bible experts call this the Incarnation. God became man without ceasing to be God—a flesh and blood total human, just like us.
4. And why?
5. He had to be human so He could die the death mankind deserved.
6. I started by talking about presents that were good, and presents that you should think twice about. All those think twice gifts had the same problem: they were implied insults.
7. If you give somebody deodorant, or you sign up your son-in-law to match.com, that's an implied insult.
8. Well God gave you a Savior.
  - a) What does that say about you?
9. Jesus became human so He could die, and break the power of the devil for your sake.
  - a) What does that say about you?
10. When you think about it, there is a built-in insult in the message of Christmas. Christmas says we needed saving, we needed rescuing; we needed delivering from the powers of darkness—an implied insult.
11. It's humbling to admit that you can't reach God, and you don't deserve God, and you're not good enough for God. It's humbling to admit you are a sinner, and you need a Savior.
  - a) Do you know that Jesus died the death you should have died?
  - b) Do you know when He hung on the Cross that God took your sins from you and put them on Christ?
  - c) Do you know that His suffering and death were inflicted on Him by God because it's what YOU deserved?
12. Yeah, there's an implied insult in the whole Christmas story. We were that far from God, that there was NO HOPE for us apart from a divinely initiated rescue operation wrapped up in the person Joseph called Jesus. His pursuit was a total pursuit.
13. He didn't just sacrifice His comforts, He sacrificed His life.
14. He didn't just give you some good teaching and a few miracles; He shed blood for you and gave up His life.
15. He didn't just lob truth bombs from heaven—He walked on dusty streets in your shoes, and took on total human nature, with all our limitations and weaknesses.
  - a) Jesus became a total human that He might die a total death, offering a total sacrifice to obtain your total salvation.
  - b) Just before Jesus died on the Cross, He said, "It is finished," total salvation.

16. And today, I want you to step into that salvation. Please don't be too proud, please don't paint yourself too GOOD to need a Savior. Please, open your life to Jesus.

17. God's pursuit of you is self-initiated and total.

#### C. Abundant

1. I have a pet peeve at Christmas time when it comes to churches. I think a lot of churches mess up the Christmas story, in a really blatant way, but we're all so religious and proud we hardly notice it.
2. When you read the story of the birth of Christ, who is the primary giver, God or us? God is.
3. And who is the primary receiver, God or us? We are.
4. God is the giver, and we are the receiver.
5. Some years ago, before I moved to Redding, I attended a church's special Christmas service. Do you know what the whole theme of that service was about?
6. It was about what are you going to give to Jesus. They had a video about that. All the comments were about that and the sermon was about that.
7. Listen, there's no doubt that the Bible invites us to present our lives to God as our offering to Him.
8. But honestly, is that the take-away from the Christmas story?
9. No way.
10. If you get nothing else from this story, or from our church, please get this.
11. When you picture God chasing you, do NOT picture Him coming after you to get your wallet. YOU DON'T HAVE ANYTHING HE NEEDS. You are broke, and He loves you anyway.
12. And the only reason God is chasing you today, is so that He can lavish upon you a pile of presents deeper and wider and more beautiful than words can describe.
13. Abundance
14. He gave you Jesus.
15. And now, the Bible says, He wants to give you all things. Like what?
  - a) How about total forgiveness? Your nastiest, most heinous crimes and your sneakiest, tiniest infractions all erased from the books of heaven, because you've been washed in the blood of Christ.
  - b) Or His own presence to be with you and in you and near you forever.
  - c) He wants to give you redemption: to set you free from addictions and habits and everything that owns you.
  - d) He wants to give you reconciliation; so you are no longer a stranger to God, but a friend.
  - e) He wants to give you adoption, so you become a member of His royal family, a member of the family of God.
  - f) He wants to set you on the Rock, Jesus, so no matter how shaky our world is, and how messed up the headlines are, you have an anchor planted in heaven, and tied to your heart.
  - g) He wants to give you the gift of acceptance; in one instantaneous moment, to make you acceptable to God forever.
  - h) He wants to make you a joint-heir with Jesus, so whatever Jesus receives you will receive as well.
  - i) And He gives you a new nature, and a new power, and a new status, and a new name, and a new set of blessings so that you are complete in Him, and blessed with every spiritual blessing, and living now and forever within the care of God.
  - j) And He gives you all this and heaven too.
16. What are you running from?
17. If you are running from God, you are running from the one person in all the universe who has nothing to take from you and everything to give.
18. Are you ready to stop running today? Are you ready to let Jesus catch you?
19. Just one more quality of God's pursuit—it is self-initiated; it is total, it is abundant, and one more...
20. God's pursuit of you is:

#### D. Relentless

1. He won't quit on you. You will quit on Him ten thousand times. But God won't quit on you.
2. Jesus was born into a world that didn't want Him.
3. The Romans didn't want Him. They thought He was a religious fanatic who would stir up insurrection against their government.
4. The Jews didn't want Him. They thought He was a false prophet, leading the people astray from their religious system.
5. And when they wanted Him least, that is when the time and the place of our Savior's birth was chosen.
6. God is the hound of heaven.
7. You can't dodge Him forever. Look, you're in church today. How do you think that happened? It is the relentless pursuit of God.
8. God may even be tugging at your heart right now, and you feel that. You know He is true. You know Jesus died for you. Your heart is pounding, because this is your day, and deep inside you know it.
9. His pursuit is relentless. You can't dodge Him. You can't evade Him. You can't hide from the Hound of Heaven.
10. Do you really have a good reason to keep running from him even one more hour?

#### IV. The Russian Pursuit

- A. In the 1930's Stalin ordered a purge of all Bibles and all believers. In Stavropol, Russia, this order was carried out with vengeance. Thousands of Bibles were confiscated, and multitudes of believers were sent to the gulags-prison camps-where most died, unjustly condemned as "enemies of the state."
- B. A missionary group, 60 years later, sent a team to Stavropol. The city's history wasn't known at that time. But when the team was having difficulty getting Bibles shipped from Moscow, someone mentioned the existence of a warehouse outside of town where these confiscated Bibles had been stored since Stalin's day.

- C. After the team had prayed extensively, one member finally mustered up the courage to go to the warehouse and ask the officials if the Bibles were still there. Sure enough, they were. Then the missionaries asked if the Bibles could be removed and distributed again to the people of Stavropol. The answer was "Yes!"
- D. The next day the team returned with a truck and several Russian people to help load the Bibles. One helper was a young man—a skeptical, hostile agnostic collegian who had come only for the day's wages. As they were loading Bibles, one team member noticed that the young man had disappeared. Eventually they found him in a corner of the warehouse, weeping.
- E. He had slipped away hoping to take a Bible for himself. What he did not know was that he was being pursued by the "Hound of Heaven." What he found shook him to the core.
- F. The inside page of the Bible he happened to steal was the handwritten signature of his own grandmother. It had been her personal Bible. Out of the thousands of Bibles still left in that warehouse, he stole the very one belonging to his grandmother—a woman, who throughout her entire life, was persecuted for her faith.
- G. No wonder he was weeping—God had powerfully and yet tenderly made Himself known to this young man.
- H. *An Old Testament prophet asks. "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see Him?" declares the Lord. "Do not I fill both heaven and earth?" declares the Lord (Jeremiah 23:24).*

V. Response

- A. The Bible says the wise men followed a star.
- B. And today, there's another star for you.
  - 1. God's pursuit is self-initiated—S.
  - 2. His pursuit is total—He gave his all. There's the T.
  - 3. And now He wants to give you abundance in every part of your life—the A.
  - 4. As long as you're breathing, He'll never give up on you. He's relentless. There's the R.
- C. Next time you think of the Christmas star, remember a God whose loving pursuit is self-initiated, total, abundant, and relentless.
- D. Jesus is truly all-seeing hound of heaven. He can track us down wherever we're hiding, all the way to northern California. And once He's on your trail, He sets His heart on you with a relentless zeal and undivided focus.
- E. And if following your trail brought Him down from heaven, it was a price He was willing to pay.
- F. And if it led to an old rugged cross, and the agony of death for sin, it was a price He was willing to pay.
- G. Through His brutal death and resurrection, Jesus secured a once for all victory over all the powers of darkness in this age and the age to come. And now, He advocates for us in heaven, pouring into our hearts the power of an indestructible life.
- H. And He continues to seek and to save the lost.
- I. That young Russian man knows what this means.
- J. His grandmother did too.
- K. Do you?