

COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS**ROMANS 8:38-39**

I'm pretty sure that two things are true about you right at this very moment. One, you're probably distracted. You're trying hard not to think about the 101 things you have to get done before Christmas Day. Two, you're probably tired. There's a good word to describe the first three weeks of December: *madness!* We cram most of the parties we're going to have for the whole year into three weeks. Then, our culture has told us that in our spare time we need to redecorate our homes inside and out. Because we have such an enormous surplus of time, we add the task of buying stuff for family and friends, sending Christmas cards, or a Christmas letter describing the family's activities over the last year. Our culture also says, "Let's bake massive amounts of cookies!" We respond happily, "OK!" Then, we let all the kids out of school for two weeks which adds to the relaxation.

Imagine this scene with me. A woman was out Christmas shopping with her two children. After several hours of looking at row after row of toys and everything else imaginable and several hours of hearing both of her kids asking for everything they saw on those shelves, she finally lurched toward the elevator. This dear woman was feeling what so many of us feel during this time of the year – pressure, stress, impatience, and too little time with too much to do. Finally, the elevator door opened, but there was already a crowd jammed inside of it. Unwilling to wait, she pushed her way into the elevator dragging her two kids and those bags of stuff in with her. When the elevator door closed, she kind of had a mini-meltdown. She said loud enough for everyone in the elevator to hear, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up, and shot!" From the back of the elevator, a quiet, calm voice responded: "Don't worry, we already crucified Him." For the rest of the trip, everyone in that elevator was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

This Advent season we've been considering the idea of coming home spiritually. The concept of home often gets associated with Christmas in our culture – our songs, our movies, our books, and poetry. Home gets idealized and sentimentalized. There's at least two facts about home – any home, your home, my home – that tend to get overlooked, however. First, no home is perfect. There's some conflict, disappointment, and unfulfilled expectations in every home. Oddly enough, not all of your family members get along with each other! Not everybody will be wildly excited about what they get for Christmas. Did you hear about the guy who bought his wife a chain saw for Christmas? His defense? "Well, we needed it!" Fortunately, it wasn't operational when his wife opened it. Second, no home is permanent. Kids grow up. People move away. Divorce happens. Precious loved ones die. May I say this to you today? If all you have in this life is your home and your family, one day you're going to be very lonely. It takes more than a home and a family to make it in life. Now, family is a great thing. God created it. You need it. But you need God even more. Families and homes – they're not perfect and they're not permanent. God is both perfect and permanent.

That's why I'd like you to consider coming home this Christmas. I'm talking about a spiritual homecoming – coming home to God, coming home to your Creator, and

coming home to the One who made you. The Bible says, “Lord, through all the generations, you have been our home!” (Psalm 90:1 NLT) Home is a Person not a place according to the Bible. It’s human nature to forget God. I do it. So do you. We can go days, weeks, months, maybe even years without any sort of meaningful thought or interaction with God. How easy it is to get distracted by your career, raising your kids, your finances, your debts, or chasing your own dreams and desires. It’s very easy to shove God out of your life gently. There’s a need to come home to God in a conscious, deliberate way and there’s no better time to do it than Christmas. What can you expect if you come home to God this Christmas? Well, connecting with God means...

COMING HOME TO HIS LOVE AND FORGIVENESS.

If you understand this truth, you understand Christmas. Jesus, the Son of God, left His home in Heaven to come to your home on Earth so that you could know His Father who says, “I love you. I want to forgive you of your sins. I want to live with you forever.” That’s the Incarnation. God, who is called your Heavenly Father in the Bible, wants you to come home. It doesn’t matter who you are, what you’ve done, or how long you’ve done it. A lot of people want to clean themselves up before they come home to God. But it doesn’t happen that way. God’s message? “Come home and I’ll clean you up.”

Paul Richardson tells about the first time he and his wife went out and purchased a real Christmas tree. There it stood – the best tree in the whole lot. It was their second Christmas as husband and wife. They decided to dump the two foot high plastic tree that graced their coffee table the year before. Instead, Paul and his wife had found the perfect tree – wide at the base and a perfect point at the top. With blissful Christmas cheer, they paid \$25, somehow shoved into their Chevy, and drove back to their apartment. Paul cleared a spot next to the couch and set it up in the corner. At least, he tried to set it up in the corner. His perfect tree immediately fell over. Multiple attempts and all sorts of adjustments with the tree stand only brought about the same result. The Richardson’s’ perfect Christmas tree would not stand up! When Paul probed into the tree’s interior, he discovered his perfect tree had a huge flaw. Down at its base, the trunk of the tree was straight, but half way up it was as twisted and contorted as a pretzel, bending this way and that, before it emerged straight again at the top. It was a perfect tree on the outside, but hopelessly flawed on the inside. It could not and would not stand on its own. On the outside, we can sometimes act like we have it all together. “Tis the season to be jolly!” But inside, we know differently: hurts, anger, bitterness, and disappointments. Then there’s that twist and contortion in our souls the Bible calls sin. No matter how many ornaments Paul and his wife hung on their tree, they knew it could never stand on its own. No matter how many ornaments we might attach to our lives, we can never be right with God on our own.

The Christmas story isn’t about God seeing how nice we were and coming down to spend time with perfect, well put together people. Instead, it’s the story of God seeing twisted, hurting, sinful people and coming down to die for us. It’s a story about amazing love. Sure, it involves the joyful story of a new baby being born to a delightful couple –

Mary and Joseph - but it ended with Jesus taking our sins upon Himself and dying as our substitute on the cross. That's ultimately what Christmas is all about.

What keeps people – maybe even you – from coming home to God's love and forgiveness this Christmas? Some people are afraid of rejection by God. You might think, "God doesn't want me. I'm too far away from God. I've been gone too long. I've done too many things God doesn't approve of." You're wrong, my friend. The Bible says, "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:38-39 NLT) That's wonderful news, isn't it?

Yes, sin does indeed separate us from God, but God has addressed sin in and through His Son, Jesus. Christmas is the proof of God's desire to show us His love and forgiveness. The Bible also says, "God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 Jo 4:9-10 NLT) The cradle made the cross possible. Christmas gets us to Easter. And the cross and empty tomb of Jesus is God's timeless, eternal declaration of how much He loves you. He wants you to come home to Him. That's the first thing you can expect when you come home to God at Christmas. You will find His love and forgiveness. What else can you expect if you come home to God this Christmas? Well, connecting with God means...

COMING HOME TO HIS STRENGTH AND PEACE.

You need His peace because life can get chaotic and turbulent. You need God's strength because life demands a certain kind of energy from you just to keep moving in a positive direction. What can you really count on in life? No job is secure. No financial portfolio is beyond possible, extensive loss. The economy lurches up and down. The government can't protect you from every evil out there in the world today. Your health could change tomorrow for the worse. Family and friends move away, get absorbed in their own lives, get offended by something we do, or – worst of all – pass away leaving an enormous hole in our lives. The future is uncertain in so many ways. How do you handle life's uncertainty? When you go through really tough periods in your life – and you will more than once – where do you go for strength? Where do you get the power, the peace, and the energy to keep on going in the middle of crisis or tragedy?

I'm sure you still remember the courageous story of Todd Beamer and the other passengers aboard Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. A few years ago, Cheryl and I visited the site in Pennsylvania where that airplane crash landed. That was a sobering experience. We know from Todd Beamer's last conversation with an air phone operator that he was calling on Jesus in those final minutes of his life. He recited the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 with the operator. He and several others on that plane saved the

lives of many other people by taking on the hijackers themselves at the cost of their own lives. It was Todd Beamer's personal connection to God that gave Him the peace and strength to do what He did on that awful day.

Where will you get the strength to face life's biggest tests if you're not connected to God? You might say, "I just depend on myself." Human strength always runs out. But God's strength never does, because His strength is like Him – eternal, limitless, and inexhaustible. Where do you go for peace when trouble of some kind rushes into your life and you feel anxiety wrapping its fingers around your throat? Here again what Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matt 11:28-29 NLT) Many people think that God says, "Come home to Me and I'll give you a list of rules. Come home to Me and I'll give you do's and don'ts. Come home to Me and I'll give you religion and rituals." But, instead, God says, "Come home to Me and I'll give you rest."

What did Jesus mean by rest? It points to several important kinds of rest. One, it means getting out from under the heavy load of guilt and condemnation that your sins create in your heart and conscience. Rest. Two, it means giving up the pressure to impress God enough somehow so He'll permit you to enter Heaven when you die. Rest. Three, it means putting your trust in Jesus and what He did for you on the cross to make you right with God instead of anything you do. Rest. Four, it means living every day depending on God's energy and power rather than your own. Rest. God never intended for you to live out your life in your own power and strength. Not when He offers you His limitless, inexhaustible power and strength instead.

The Bible says this about God, "He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless." (Is 40:29 NLT) It also says, "...you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need..." (Col 1:11 NLT) I would guess most of us here have had times we just wanted to give up on some aspect of our lives. You've felt like giving up on your career... giving up on your marriage... giving up on your kids... giving up on trying to improve your financial situation... giving up on getting rid of some sinful habit in your life. You might even have given up on life in general and maybe even God as well. Discouragement has a 1,000 faces and every last one of them is ugly. God's message to you and me is, "Don't give up. Look up. Look up to Me. Come home to Me." God wants to help you, empower you, and strengthen you all along life's journey. If you will seek Him with your whole heart and ask the Holy Spirit to help you start to live life His way, God will help you.

It's amazing how many other places people look for peace of mind other than in God. Just this week I typed the phrase "peace of mind" into the Google search engine just to see what came up. On page one there was a Wikipedia article about peace of mind. It was mostly about different songs that had those words in the title. There was information about the Peace of Mind Foundation which took me to a website about obsessive compulsive disorder where I could make a donation. On page two there were links to Peace of Mind Preschool, Peace of Mind Dog Rescue Home, and Peace

of Mind Funeral and Cremation Services. There was an intriguing link entitled “How to Have Peace of Mind: Nine Steps with Pictures.”

May I suggest a better place to find peace of mind? Come home to God. God made you. He created and formed you in your mother’s womb. He’s watched over you every moment of your life. He knows every last thing about you and still loves you anyway. The Bible says, “You can go to bed without fear; you will lie down and sleep soundly. You need not be afraid of sudden disaster or the destruction that comes upon the wicked, for the LORD is your security. He will keep your foot from being caught in a trap.” (Pro 3:24-26 NLT) What else can you expect if you come home to God this Christmas? Well, connecting with God means...

COMING HOME TO HIS HOPE AND JOY.

When you come home to God He meets the needs of your past, your present, and your future. Everyone here has a past. There’s stuff back there we’re ashamed of – that we wish we could forget or change. We’ve already mentioned God’s forgiveness today. When you come home to Him, that’s how He deals with your past: forgiveness. Peace and strength is what you and I need for the present. But God is also big enough to handle your future and mine. That’s why I mention hope today because hope is about what happens tomorrow. Here’s a marvelous promise from God’s Word, “I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 15:13 NLT) Just look at that verse with me for a moment. Hope, joy, and peace are all a product of something else according to that verse. What is it? Trust. The more you trust God, the more your life will be filled with joy. The more you trust God, the more your life will be filled with peace. And the more you trust God, the more your life will be filled with hope. When you lack joy, peace, or hope, it’s because you’re not trusting God. He’s the source of all of them, so if you are lacking in the joy, peace and hope department today, you should check your connection to the One who gives them!

2014 may well have been a difficult year for you. If it wasn’t a difficult year, just realize a year is coming that will be difficult! All of us go through times when hope is hard to come by. One of my favorite Bible verses says, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the LORD. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’” (Jer 29:11 NLT) The presence of adversity in your life today is not a sign of God’s absence. I may not know what you’re going through today, but I do know God is not finished with you. God has a loving, gracious plan and purpose for every person here today. And much of the joy of living is finding out God’s plan and then living it out. Some of the pain in life can be avoided by avoiding attitudes, actions, and decisions that take you away from God’s plan for your life. Learn to live life God’s way and you’ll have more joy than sorrow, more peace than turmoil, more laughter than tears, more shouts of joy than sighs of dismay, and more hope than despair. Come home to God and what He wants to do in and through your life. As important as a literal family might be, it can’t meet your deepest needs. Money can’t. Things can’t. Careers can’t. Education can’t. Relationships can’t. Having fun can’t. Retirement can’t. Only God can!

Just before Beatles guitarist George Harrison died, he was interviewed by *Rolling Stone* magazine. He said something quite profound. "The most important thing in life is to figure out why we're here and what we're here for. Everything else in life can wait, but the search for God cannot wait." There's a whole lot of stuff I probably disagreed with Mr. Harrison about, but I 100% agree with that observation! Why did God send His Son, Jesus, into this world? What's the point of Christmas Day? God wasn't content to live without you. He knew the only way you could get the message is if He left His home and came down to your home. God is waiting for you to come home to Him. The Bible says, "...We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory...." (Rom 5:2 MSG) Isn't that a great image? And it's true – all of it is true!

OK, so I'll date myself yet again! How many of you remember the pop group Tony Orlando and Dawn? How many of you remember their biggest hit? That's right – "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree." The song depicts a man who's in prison. He's served his time and is now coming home on the bus. But he admits that the woman who once loved him has every right to reject him now. He's to blame. He's written a letter to her asking her to forgive him and - if she can find it in her heart to forgive him - to tie a ribbon around the old oak tree. Now, if there's no ribbon there, he'll just stay on the bus and ride right on out of town and out of her life forever. As the miles roll by, all the man thinks about is that oak tree. When he gets home, will there be a yellow ribbon tied around it? The song ends triumphantly with the entire busload of people cheering as the man sees not one but one hundred yellow ribbons 'round the old oak tree! She not only forgives him, but she welcomes him back home exuberantly. Like the man on the bus, we can wonder what kind of reaction we'll get if and when we come home to God. We know our own hearts. We wonder if God will really forgive us, let alone celebrate our homecoming. But the Bible assures us of God's welcome when we come home to Him. The yellow ribbons will be there and a whole lot more!

Christmas is about coming home to the One who left His home and came down to your home. Come home to God this Christmas. Get connected to Him. Get reconnected. Don't come home just to a house, or the place where you grew up, or even to your family. Don't come home to religion. Don't just come home to attending church. I invite you to come home to a Person, a relationship, a lifelong and then an eternal connection with the One who made you, loves you and sent His Son to die and rise again for you. Come home to God this Christmas. Merry Christmas indeed!