

## Outline:

- Good morning, \*intro self\* Before we get into our message for today, \*moment of silence\*
- Over 4 years ago, my life changed after getting punched in the face in a bar in Knoxville. But we'll come back to that story later
- I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving, but now we've officially moved into the Christmas season.
- \*Pate Xmas Tree\*
- \*Mariah Carey & Michael Buble\*
- Black Friday passed over the weekend. I sincerely hope nobody has buyers remorse this soon, but we've all experienced that before. The regret that slowly sets in after having to ask yourself "was this really necessary? Did I need this or just impulse buy this?"
- I speak from experience. I didn't buy these on Black Friday but I did recently invest in my very own set of golf clubs.
- \*New Golf Club bit\* Hello Darkness my old friend
- Yes, it is the most wonderful time of the year, but there are also some more sobering aspects to the season.

- It's cold outside, the sun goes down at 4:30, and the fact of the matter is that the holidays can carry a lot of baggage with them.
- In this season we often try to combat the cold with hot cocoa, the lack of sunlight with enough Christmas lights to be seen from space, and we try to bandage up the wounds that get reopened with the all powerful dopamine rush of presents. Trust me, the world was lookin all sunshine and rainbows after I got my clubs.
- But as a society we have plenty of reasons to look back and be dismayed at the year that has been. On a personal level, for some, maybe family relationships are particularly volatile at this time of year or this is your first holiday season without a loved one.
- For society as a whole, we can look at the headlines from the past year and simultaneously we'll be distracted by what screens and media have to offer us so we don't think too hard about it.
- Political divisiveness got you down? Well your favorite football team is in the playoff hunt (unless you're a Titans or Vols fan). Don't think too much about the multiple public killings that shook the country, just look here at your spotify wrapped instead. I mean how many of us have already forgotten about the school shooting that happened in Antioch just this year? Or do we just scroll tiktok and buy things until we feel like things are ok again.
- This cycle only works for so long, and year by year we look to Christmas and the new year as a time for happiness and change until 2026 brings more of the same

old chaos and distraction that 2025, 2024, 2023, and every other year does.

Sometimes, it feels like all the craziness of the world is just the new normal, and that nothing can be done about it.

## **- Extra-ordinary Times and an Extraordinary message**

### **- How to Find Joy in Another Christmas Season**

- But one of the most beautiful things about the Gospel message is that it matches the chaos and confusion of any time period.
- When the chaos is loud, the Gospel brings peace and quiet. And even though the world may be messed up, the Gospel is a beacon of hope, love, and joy in the darkness.
- There is no expiration date on how powerful the Gospel is, and as we move from one year to the next, we need to remind ourselves about the control, power, and plan of salvation that God brings.
- Salvation is not found in a nice present with a bow on top, it's not found in your favorite christmas movie, it's not even found in aligning yourself with some influencer or politician and thinking you have the right answers to the world's problems.
- Salvation instead is found in the story of a baby boy with a teenage mother 2,000 years ago in Nazareth. This message of God incarnate meets humans right in the

middle of our messy world and brings light and hope when all seems scary or dark.

- Today we're gonna read that story in Luke 1. If you need a Bible, we'd love to give you one, \*tell them where\* Merry Christmas

\*Water\*

- Let's begin

**- 26 In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. 30 Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end." 34 Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?" 35 The angel replied to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 And consider your relative**

**Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 “See, I am the Lord’s servant,” said Mary. “May it happen to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.**

- \*Extraordinary & extra-ordinary bit\*
- For example, if you’re going out on a date and you tell your wife/husband “wow, you look extraordinary” that’s a good move.
- But if you’re going out and tell them “eh, you look extra-ordinary” that wouldn’t be something I recommend. Y’all might not make it out the door without a heated conversation.
- Here in Luke, we get a look at a situation which has both remarkable and very plain circumstances. An Extraordinary scenario in an extra-ordinary setting.
- On one hand, Mary could not be an any more extra-ordinary girl in her culture. The Bible makes no note of anything superb about Mary before this story. Like any other young Jewish girl, she’s engaged to be wed. And on top of that, she comes from Nazareth which is NOTHING to brag about in first century Israel.
  - Nazareth is the kind of place to have a lot of Dollar generals and maybe 1 Sonic if you’re lucky.

- But on the other hand, the extraordinary parts of this story are abundant. An angel speaking to a human woman and telling her she'll give a virgin birth doesn't happen on any given Tuesday.

**- 1. God does extraordinary things with extra-ordinary people (repeat)**

- I don't think there is anything more ordinary than a Saltine Cracker. They barely count as food- more of a nutrition block than something to be enjoyed. Saltine crackers are what you eat when your stomach is upset and you have to eat something that is plain enough that your body will not fight against it.
  - I was talking to the youth volunteers about this a couple weeks ago, and they laughed at me for calling an upset stomach a "tummy ache"
- Saltine crackers are also always the second-choice, always sort of disappointing because if you are eatin' em with soup or cheese or chili- and you know that somewhere out there is a sleeve of Ritz or a bag of Fritos that would just add so much more to the meal. But if a Saltine is all you got..you just sigh...as you settle in for dry disappointment.
- This is the way I feel sometimes about myself. I feel like I'm an ordinary Saltine Cracker- and there are just much, much more skilled, attractive, funny, charismatic people that God would be much happier to use than me.

- Do you ever feel like that? Playin the comparison game?
- But, if you look at the Bible, over and over again God LOVES him some saltine crackers! He uses people that really don't seem like much of anything and breaks out the meat, cheese, and fruits that makes them seem like an entire charcuterie board.
- This happens all the time starting with the OT. In fact- its a MAJOR theme of the whole story of what God is doing in human history!
- In the first book of the Bible there's a guy named Abraham. Father Abraham had many sons. Yes, he was the father of the nations that would be blessed by God.
  - But he also lied about his marriage, TWICE and offered up his wife to the pharaoh/king to save his own life - TWICE!
- What about Moses in the book of Exodus, arguably the most pivotal character of the Old Testament, leading the Hebrews out of Egypt through the Red Sea.
  - Well before that, he also murdered a man, tried to hide the body, and fled the country.
- Or the great King David. Far and away the best King Israel ever had.
  - He also murdered one of his faithful soldiers to cover up the affair he had with that soldier's wife.

- God is calling- not just ordinary people- people with MAJOR MAJOR AGGREGIOUS character issues- to work out his plan to save the world.
- I mean...these aren't saltine crackers, they're much worse. They're like inedible! Liars, cheaters, murderers. An extra-ordinary human isn't just plain...we're full of selfishness, greed, lust, and sin.
- The people God keeps putting up to bat in the 9th inning with the bases loaded down by 3 runs...with 2 outs. It's not the one who hits the homers. It's never someone who's got it all figured out and just naturally predisposed to hit a grand slam. He's calling up alotta people who have been striking out.
  - But somehow, God takes these terrible, messed up, extra- ordinary people and uses them for a glorious and perfect purpose.
- The Biblical pattern of God using small and flawed people in his perfect plan continues with Mary.

**- 28 And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. - Luke 1:28-29**

- Mary is surprised. I HAVE FAVOR- GOD IS WITH ME?
- Why would she be troubled? Because- just like you and me- Mary knows she doesn't really deserve God's favor. If anything, Mary might assume being this close to an angel will destroy her because of her sinfulness.

- I know we don't often think of Mary as flawed and sinful, but she is. Sure- she doesn't have the rep that Abraham, Moses, or David do, but she is just as affected by sin and temptation as any fallen human being is.
- God is working through people, CHANGING them from the inside out, for the betterment of themselves and others. He enters into ordinary, messy lives to save ordinary, messy people.
- As Jesus would go on to say in **Luke 5:32 "I haven't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"** because that's all of us. Not one of us is righteous, we're sinners in need of saving.
- Thank God that he didn't turn his nose up at us and abandon us. He doesn't see our sin and run away. He made us in his image. He is the transcendent made imminent, meaning He directly involves himself in our lives and our world because he loves us so much.
- I read once in a book that described how many people view God as a distant watchmaker. In this point of view, he is the Creator but after he was done creating, he put all the pieces together, and then just let the watch run until it'll finally be out of battery. He is God, but he's distant. Detached and cold. But that couldn't be further from the truth.
- This false idea of God stuck with me because my Dad is literally a watchmaker. He makes watches, jewelry, and whatnot but the best thing he ever made... is my brothers, but I'm a close 3rd place.

- “You’re Daddy’s not a glassmaker, he’s a watchmaker”
- My dad is a literal watchmaker, but he’s also a father. And God is the all-powerful God, but he’s also my heavenly father. What my Dad and God both have in common is that I was not just made and then just left alone to figure it out. They loved and cared for me. He’s here for the relationships, not just the creation.
- Unfortunately that’s not the story about all earthly fathers, but understand that our heavenly father ain’t just a watchmaker. He’s also the caretaker, provider, and lover of all things He made. He WANTS to be intimately involved in your life. In all the details. He’s not asking you to clean yourself up...get your life right before you come to him...but to TRUST him with all the dirty, grimy, extra-ordinary- Saltine Crackerness of your life.
- The proof of this is in the life and death of Jesus Christ. No matter what you may be predisposed to think about God, you have to reconcile that with him sending his son to die on the cross for you. No one does that unless they care for you.
- There’s no better way for God to show that he wants to be with us than stoop down to our level to live, suffer, and die for us. Like any good Dad, he was willing to get down on our level and be with us so that he could raise us up into something greater.

- But here's the problem with that for some people. Just because God enters our world does not mean that he plays by our rules. He is the maker of our world and so many times, his plan will be confusing, uncomfortable, and not make sense to us. And this brings us to a place of doubt.

- **2. God uses people who doubt honestly.** (repeat)

- Gabriel tells Mary

- **Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.” 34 Mary asked the angel, “How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?” [c] 35 The angel replied to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.**

**37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” - Luke 1:31-37**

- This is one of the big hangups with Christianity. “It’s a nice story but what about the miracles?” And maybe it’s not even the miraculous aspects of the story as much as the “why”. “Why did God decide to do it that way?”
- The virgin birth is one of the moments where those who may not believe go “TIMEOUT. Ya lost me there”

- Even the virgin in question is herself asking “how can that be?” Any reasonable person probably asks the questions as well.

- I haven’t heard or met anyone recently saying like “oh virgin birth? Yeah that happened to my friend not too long ago”

- But questions of “why” or “how” are inevitable when it comes to God, faith, and religion. These questions bring all of us into a place that is either incredibly beneficial or dangerous for us to stay in. A place of doubt.

- Tim Keller, a much smarter man than me, had two classifications for doubt.

#### **- Honest Doubt and Dishonest Doubt**

- What’s the difference? Well honest doubt seeks understanding. (repeat)
- Think of Mary here, she is expressing her doubt by responding to the angel “How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?”
- Basically she’s saying “hey Gabriel, love the plan, being the mother of the messiah would be such an honor. But as far as I know, there’s some prerequisites to childbirth that I think we’re missing here.”
- Mary is approaching this like “I’m willing to be a part of this, I’m just confused and looking for answers.” That is honest doubt. Humble enough to admit a lack of understanding and willing to trust God’s got it figured out.

- So what does dishonest doubt look like? Dishonest doubt doesn't seek understanding, it seeks to be right. Dishonest doubt is uncompromising and inflexible in its beliefs, because it is filled with pride. If we actually go back earlier in Luke 1, we can see an example of this.
- Going back in Luke, we can see a story about Mary's relatives, Zechariah and Elizabeth about how they too received a miracle child months before Mary even did.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth were "well along in years" according to the bible, which feels similar to how I call my parents "middle aged".
- They were childless and beyond the years of expecting to have children. But Zechariah, a priest, is working in the sanctuary one day when he comes face to face with the same angel Mary did: Gabriel.
- Gabriel promises that they will also have a son, not the messiah but rather a prophet who would be crucial to the messiah's ministry. Upon hearing this Zechariah responds as so
- **18 "How can I know this?" Zechariah asked the angel. "For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years." - Luke 1:18** (Good cover to not call your wife an old woman)
- Seems very similar to the question Mary asked. But Gabriel responds differently.

- **19 The angel answered him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. 20 Now listen. You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.” - Luke 1:19**

- HOLD UP GABRIEL. Why's Zeke here gettin the silent treatment and Mary's off scott free? No cup of coffee before talking to Zechariah? Wrong side of the heavenly bed this morning?
- What's with that? Zechariah was doubting just like Mary right? Not exactly.
- Zechariah's response is one of dishonest doubt. If you're reading out of a CSB Bible, his response is translated “How can I know this?” but a more literal translation from the Greek is “By what sign shall I know this?”
- Basically, where Zechariah enters into dishonest doubt territory is by saying “oh yeah? Prove it!”
- Zechariah is coming at God, of all people, with a “yeah right” attitude. We've seen this before in the Bible with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. Another old couple and Sarah also tell God “yeah right” to the idea of a child. (Additional reason that Zechariah, a priest, should've known better)
- There's two kinds of “yeah right” attitude that dishonest doubt brings to God

- “Yeah right” I know better than that. That’s impossible, I’m not falling for it.
- “Yeah right” God would never do something like that for me. I’m too messed up.
- One of those, more of the Abraham and Sarah variety, are quick to discount God’s miraculous power. Assuming that they know better. This kind of dishonest doubt is filled with the pride that it must know everything and anything that works outside of its understanding must be wrong.
- The other, more of the Zechariah variety, isn’t as arrogant, but it is still self-centered and prideful. You ever see a little kid try to fish for attention by doin a big sigh?
  - That’s the same attitude as this version of dishonest doubt. I was the king of this growing up.
  - Playing the self-pity game of “well I’m just messed up, nobody likes me” meanwhile friends are saying “dude, I’m literally right here and I love you”
  - That’s what it's like when saying “God would never do something extraordinary with me” and then God’s angel says “Hey, God’s gonna do exactly that” and still living in doubt and unbelief.
- Both kinds of “yeah right” are self-centered, and when God meets them and gives an answer, they run to the defense of “Well prove it”

- Abraham, Sarah, Zechariah are saying “I’ll believe God and his plan whenever he proves himself to me.” As outrageous and prideful as that is, many of still adopt that same response
- “I’ll believe God when he gives me a sign. I’ll believe when I’m shown some real evidence. I’ll believe when he answers my prayer request. I’ll believe when he proves he loves me”
- God does not need to prove himself to you. The pharisees also asked Jesus for a sign and he said **Matthew 12:39-40 “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.**
- The only sign you need is the one that’s already been given to you, the resurrection of Jesus. If that’s not enough for you, nothing will be. Not to mention the Bible and the witnesses that reinforce the resurrection.
- And I don’t expect you to just accept that Jesus resurrected as a dogmatic, face-value fact, you should have some honest doubt about that and investigate for yourself.
- But understand that coming to God or any part of his plan with a “yeah right” attitude is self-centered and prideful, it doesn’t prevent God’s plan from taking place, but it can prevent you from getting to be a part of it.

- To live in dishonest doubt is easy, it lets you as a human stay in control of your life and you get to be the decision maker at every turn. But it comes at an eternal cost.
- Rod Dreher is an author, I'm not gonna lie to you, he can be a little out there, but I'm currently reading a book of his that talks about why many of us living in the western world can be so closed off to powerful spiritual experiences. Why so many of us can dishonestly doubt and try to wiggle our way out of God's revelation to us.

**- Rod Dreher: Living In Wonder**

- **A mind that is able to be changed has to first be receptive to facts that falsify what it once thought to be true. An open mind requires a heart humble enough to admit error and brave enough to act on the new information, even if it requires sacrifice.**
- What Dreher is saying here is that if you're going to actually experience the life-changing power of God's revelation, you're going to have to accept that God's truth may break apart your pre-conceived notions.
- Like for Mary, when you come face-to-face with God's angel, you're gonna have to be open minded to something like the virgin birth.

- Because God's plan is oftentimes upside-down in our understanding. And it also requires something that most products and promises the world makes you aren't going to ask for: sacrifice.
- For many, this is the final barrier to accepting Christ, but it is the most joyful and rewarding part of trusting God's plan.

### - **3. Extraordinary, Extra-ordinary Sacrifice**

- Our passage today ends with Mary's response to Gabriel's message, and it's almost shockingly simple.

- **38 "See, I am the Lord's servant," said Mary. "May it happen to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. - Luke 1:38**

- I wonder if before answering there was a slight pause in the conversation here. I'd assume Mary was thinking a lot of things, all centered around the life-changing revelation that she'll be a mom to the savior of the world.
- To accept that calling on your life is not a simple "of course". Think about the implications this message will have on Mary's ordinary day-to-day life.
- First of all, motherhood is already a sacrificial act. Incredibly rewarding, but not without difficulty.

- Second, in her culture, it's going to be assumed that she committed adultery and not only would you expect Joseph to leave her and effectively leave her destitute, but the law of that time called for the death sentence on Mary.
  - Plus who knows what the rebellious teenage years of someone with the title "Savior of the World" is gonna be like.
- Mary as a poor first century Israelite girl doesn't have much. But she could have chosen the small comforts and privileges of not rocking the boat and continuing in extra-ordinary saltine cracker life.
- Instead, Mary sacrifices the few privileges she has in order to respond to God. That's a faithful and sacrificial choice.
- None of us are ever gonna be in Mary's shoes as the mother of Jesus. But all of us should respond to the call of the gospel in the same way. We need to respond with faith and sacrifice.
- Paul says in **Romans 12:1-2**, presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice is the true and proper way of worshiping God. A living sacrifice means that every single day, at all opportunities, in all of the extra-ordinary stuff, your mind is being transformed to following God's will and not conformed to the patterns of the world. The extraordinary transcendent God shines brightly through followers doing normal things faithfully.

- The patterns of the world are often temptations into comfort, distraction, or self-righteousness. And to indulge in those things is often the immediate and easy choice. But answering God's call will, most times, not be the easy choice.
- When we're called to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, there's some crazy high commitments that come with that. Some examples of what following Jesus requires:
  - When Jesus says he will give you rest, He also tells you that you'll have to take up your own cross daily.
  - When Jesus tells you that you'll have your treasure in heaven, he also says to give away your treasures here on earth.
  - When Jesus says that death, mourning, and tears will be no more, he also promises that the world will hate you and that you will be persecuted.
- So why do it? Why believe the Gospel and live the Christian life? Is it just going to make my life hard and difficult?
- Look at Paul's instruction in **Philippians 2:5-11**

- **5 Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,** (Paul's call to be like Jesus and live a life of sacrifice.) **6 who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. 7 Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity.** (again, God chose to join us here in the brokenness) **And when he had come as a man, 8 he humbled himself by becoming**

**obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. 9 For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—11 and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

- The Gospel is the fact that this baby promised to Mary would grow up, live a perfect sinless life, die on the cross for our sins, and resurrect. He made the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, that's why we believe, and we are to adopt that same selfless attitude and live sacrificially.
- You have to believe this because what we need is something transcendent. Something outside of yourself, outside of humanity, that brings joy, peace, and love. That's what the Gospel is telling you. The transcendent God who is bigger than us has chosen to dwell among us and work with us. That is an everlasting unshakeable well to draw from.
- When the evil, chaos, and injustice that has just become ordinary in our daily lives seems to not have an answer. All that sin is hung up on the cross and answered in Jesus' death & resurrection
- The eternal burden of sin is set on someone who can actually handle it and do something about it: Jesus Christ
- And to have your faith in that gives us what we all yearn for, but it does it in the characteristically upside down, extra-ordinary way that God likes to do things.

It's a daily commitment to him and sacrificial love that builds up an extraordinary life of meaning, purpose, hope, and love.

- And honestly, especially as we get closer to the new year, a lot of us are gonna be on fire for a new resolution or commitment or habit that is some form of sacrifice.
  - I go to Gold's just down the road there, and that parking lot is PACKED on January 1st.
- Many people choose a lifestyle of sacrifice in some form or another. New workout routine, new diet, saving money and choosing to live on a tight budget. All these are ways of sacrifice that we can default to when we realize we need a change.
- I do it too. You know how many influencer routines I've fallen for and been like "wow, maybe cold showers and waking up earlier will change everything in my life"
- But when sacrificial living is rooted in just self-improvement, we're missing the main point: Jesus. Self improvement may help you, but Jesus can save all.
- Without him, we're again thinking that we can save ourselves or maybe even others if we just try a little harder or try to control a few more things. It's a trap to try and take God's place on the throne.

- Self-serving sacrifice and life change normally fizzles out when hardship comes along. Like if I bust out the clubs and truly got way better at golf, sure I'll be happy when I hit a good shot. And that happiness may even carry over into other areas of life.
- But no swing is powerful enough to cheer me up if a loved one dies. No club is so good that it can heal societal injustices. No drive is hit so well it can end war and hunger. We all have some kind of golf clubs that we set our foundation on that can serve us but do little to nothing about the big issues in life.
- But when your foundation for a sacrificial life is set on Jesus' example here's what you can do in the face of hardship **Hebrews 12:2**

**2 keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

- Keep your eyes on the man who fixed it all on that cross, and did it joyfully. He was not focused on the suffering he would endure but the joy that he knew the result of the suffering would bring.
- The joy of connection with the imminent God is what overcomes all difficulties. Christians should be experts in joy, cause joy is one of the loudest witnesses to the power of the Gospel that we have. It's easy to put on a joyful face on Christmas day, but the gospel allows you to keep it for all 365.

- Jesus not only answers the needs of your own life, but on the cross took on sin and death in its totality, so I can confidently say something has been done about all the evil I can point out in the world. That's how I can live with hope and joy.

**- 12 Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us... - Hebrews 12:1**

- We are called to a life of sacrifice, because our savior lived a life of ultimate sacrifice. So let's put down and lay aside all these hindrances and sins that are slowing us down in this race.
- You gotta cut out the distraction, the shiny things that are trying to take your eyes away from Jesus. And you have to repent from the sins that are gonna try to drag you down and prevent you from choosing Jesus instead.
- You gotta believe this, because the life advertised and delivered to you most often is the life of either distraction or numbness, both of which lead to a hard, unfulfilling life and an even worse afterlife.
- The way of distraction: newsfeeds, doom scrolls, algorithms, and consumer products are all shiny objects that quickly fade, they don't fix anything on a grand

or eternal scale. They lead us into a snowballing cycle of looking for your next dopamine hit. I fall into that cycle far more than I'd like to admit.

- And if you feel numb to this pattern and life, like "Yeah, I've tried every trick and nothing seems to work", I've been there too. Numb is the only way I really know how to describe my life after losing an MMA fight in a bar in Knoxville. Sorry if I misled you into believing I got into a bar fight. This was regulated which is better I guess.
- Every basket I put my eggs into up till that point fell apart, academic pride, a significant other, trying to fit into the mainstream cool-person cloud, those all failed to give me meaning and joy. Eventually culminating in that last basket literally getting punched in the face. And I spent a long time after that just numb and searching for answers, going back to some of the same false gods and shaky foundations to try and find something that gave me hope.
- The only thing that drew me out of that, was understanding the importance of Jesus sacrificing himself for me and I've found so much joy in the life he's called me to.
- We live this sacrificial life joyfully. Just as he did, we gladly take up our own crosses, give ourselves and our possession generously, and endure hardship.
- I'd like to invite you in one immediate tangible way you can live sacrificially. Some additional good news is that we don't have to die on a cross like Jesus did. We can sacrifice faithfully and powerfully in regular everyday ways.

- **Our Hold The Rope Mission.** You can sacrifice your money and give to those on mission, you sacrifice your time by choosing to pray, you even sacrifice some luxuries like food and entertainment through fasting to remind ourselves of dependence on God.
- All of these may seem small in comparison to a cross, but money, time, luxury, all of these things can be idols in our lives that tempt us with their comfort.
- Comfort and ease is a fool's game and when you choose it, you're choosing the finite over the infinite. You can either sacrifice the now for the eternal or the eternal for the now. One of those is a much smarter option.
- The Christmas season is a joyful season indeed. But you can look for joy in politics, social media, or whatever is on your wishlist. But you'll just be setting yourself up for another year of the same old same old, and you'll find yourself back at square one next year.
- Or you can find joy in a God who loved you enough to die on a cross for you, and was raised to prove sin and death are defeated. There you will find hope in the future, peace in the chaos, and purpose in sacrifice. The choice is yours.
- Yes, you are an extra-ordinary flawed person (hate to break it to you. I think you're great!), but an extraordinary God wants a personal relationship with you.

- Yes, you probably have doubts about how it works. But are you honestly doubting? Are you looking for understanding or are you trying to force God to prove himself more than he already has?
- And yes, the gospel is an extraordinary sacrificial calling, but it gives much needed hope, joy, and love to the extra-ordinary day-to-day we live as we wait on Jesus' return.
- I hope you'll make that decision today, we'll have prayer counselors here at the front and the back that you can pray with about that as we worship. But this Christmas season, let's find joy in the true source of our glorious and loving God.
- Let me pray for you