

Hey! Good evening! How are we? Are you guys nervous? Are you anxious? It's okay. I get anxious too. It's okay. Right? Here. I'll tell you something that makes me anxious. When I found out I was going to preach three weeks ago... Beau called and said, "Hey, can you preach on December 29?" I was like, "Yeah, I can do that. It's, like, when I do it every year."

This year we did something a little different with the stage for Advent. We set a pillar right here with candles on it, which isn't necessarily different, but I just remembered it differently. I was really anxious that it would still be here tonight, because I am a roamer, which means I walk all across the stage. I was really anxious that I would have to stand in one spot. We are all anxious about something, but know this.

When I say, "Hey, how is it going?" you don't have to be anxious. This is a safe place. You can be honest. You're like, "Hey, things are great," or, "Man, it's been a rough day." Whatever. So if I ask you a question, feel free to respond. I'm not going to yell at you. I'm not going to be upset or frustrated with you. I'm not going to be disappointed unless you say something that's really disappointing. But, I'm sure you wouldn't. You would never... I had a lot of sugar. I actually had a Mountain Dew and a bag of Skittles before I came up, so I don't know what's going to happen.

Did everybody have a Merry Christmas? Yeah? Yeah! Great. I have a guinea pig in my house. That's the thing now. It's another thing I have to keep alive. I'm not excited about that, but I am excited to be here with you guys tonight. It's always an honor and a privilege to be able to stand up and divide the Word of God to his people.

Here is what I want to do tonight if I can. I don't want to go long. I don't think I've earned the right to go 75 minutes or 80 minutes, but what I want to do... Somebody laughed like, "That's right!" What I want to do in a very short...or *relatively* short...amount of time is really just maybe lift our gaze a little bit. We've walked out of the season of Advent. Does anybody remember what the season of Advent means, what it is, what we celebrate?

Right. Jesus Christ came. God, wrapped in flesh, steps in to human history. That is a marvelous thing, because before that, here's where we were trapped: in sin and rebellion and darkness. God, knowing there was no way for us to clean ourselves up in order to come to him, makes a way where there is no way. He steps in to human history in the form of a baby. That's worth marveling.

What we know on this side of the incarnation is he didn't stay a baby, but he grew up into a man who lived the perfect life we should have lived but couldn't. He died a brutal death on the cross that should have been ours but wasn't. On the third day, he rose again, vindicating himself, proving that he is who he says he is and, by that, reconciling us to a holy, righteous, perfect, and just God. Where there was no way for us to do it on our own, he did it.

We didn't have to reach up to him. He came down. You hear it all the time. That's what makes Christianity distinctly different from every other world religion. We didn't have to clean ourselves up and come up to God, but God stepped down into the muck, into the mire, to rescue and to redeem. My fear walking out of 2013 and into 2014 is our gaze will be a little bit too low. We will think about the things that were difficult in 2013, and we'll start thinking about the things we want to do better and how we don't want to repeat the same mistakes.

We'll miss the gospel altogether because what we want is to not have things be so difficult in 2014. Does anybody in here do New Year's resolutions? Two. Three. Does anybody in here think about the year to come? Great. There are a few more. Actually, there's more in here than in any other service the rest of the day. Apparently, none of them think about the future at all. That's okay. That's okay!

As we think about the days ahead, here's what I want us to think about. Here's why I want us to raise our gaze. Because I want us to have big hopes and big dreams and big desires. I want those things to be couched in and wrapped in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The way we're going to start today is in Romans 12. If you have a Bible, go ahead and grab it. You can turn there. If you don't have a Bible, there should be a black, hardback one in the seatback in front of you. If you don't own one, Merry Christmas. That's our gift to you. If you just don't want to read it, we'll throw it up on the screen behind me here.

Before I read it, I do want to do a little work, because if I'm only reading two verses out of an entire book of the Bible, I would like to give you a little context. Here's the context. The first 11 chapters of the book of Romans is very simply theology. It's Paul weaving together a framework. This is who God is. This is what he has done through his Son Jesus Christ. This is his nature. This is his character. That's something to be celebrated. Right?

You see it in Romans 1 that God is good. He creates everything, but man did not worship God as the Creator. Man, they didn't give devotion to him. They didn't worship him. He gave them up to the passions of their flesh, to their worldly desires, to a debased mind, to do what ought not be done. Then this perfect, holy, righteous, and just God righteously judges those people. He righteously judges those who rebel against him. You have chapter 1 and chapter 2, that man is sinful and God is righteous.

Then we move into Jesus Christ comes. Jesus Christ comes, and he makes a way. He paves a way. You get into God's sovereignty. God is sovereign over everything. Is he really sovereign over everything? Yes, he is sovereign over everything! It's what we teach our children in Little Village, that God is in control of everything.

Then he moves into this is what life in the Spirit looks like and then in chapter 12 makes a hard turn to this. If this is who God is, if this is his nature, if this is his character, then this is how we live in light of that God. Chapters 1 through 11 are the theological framework. Chapter 12 to the end of the book is the practical outworkings in the life of the believer. That's what Paul is talking about in the book of Romans.

Now we need to know who he is talking to because I think so many times we think, "This was written a really, really long time ago. I don't know that the time he is writing really has a lot of implications for what we walk through and go through in 2014." As the name of the book indicates, Paul is writing to the church in Rome.

Here's what most people don't know about Rome. Rome was a very tolerant culture. You could believe what you wanted. You could worship how you wanted. You could pretty much do what you wanted to do as long as you didn't claim you had the one truth, you did not upset the government, you didn't say things that were offensive, and you didn't cause headaches. Does that sound familiar at all? There's one difference. Here's the difference.

In Rome, if you upset order, you caused headaches for the government, you said things that were offensive to a large group of people, they didn't call you mean names and take away your reality show. They'd dip you in oil and they'd use you as a street lamp. They sewed you in a bag with a lion. Paul is talking to a persecuted church.

In fact, Emperor Nero, who Paul was in prison under when he was writing this letter, was a real artsy guy, fancied himself an actor. He wanted to rebuild Rome with his vision, and so he burned it. Do you know on whom he blamed it? The Christians. Nobody in Rome liked Christians. The government didn't like them. The people didn't like them. Paul is writing to a group of people who, all they need to do to get by, all they need to survive, is to put their heads down and go along to get along. He says this, starting in verse 1:

**"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."**

All right. I want to draw our attention to verse 2 here. What does he say? What does he say to this group of Christians who all they need to do is put their heads down and go along to get along? What does he say to them? **"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by..."** What? **"...the renewal of your mind, that...you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and [right]."**

What we need for the Lord to do for us today in walking into 2014 is that...*exactly*that. A renewal of the mind. Here's what that does for us. Here's what it does for us! It gives us a new way to view everything. It gives us a new way to view our jobs, a new way to view our families, a new way to view our relationships, a new way to view our bodies. It changes the way...*should*change the way...*we* view everything.

My fear is walking into next year, based on everything that has happened in the last year and the years before, that our gaze is set way too low. Our hopes, our desires, and our dreams for our future are way too small. I think most of the time the things we're thinking about moving forward are based way more on cultural norms than they are on spiritual identity. Here's my example.

The top 10 New Year's resolutions for 2014 are... We're going to throw them up here.

1. Spend more time with friends and family. That's a good thing, right? *Right?* That is a good thing.
2. Fit in fitness. Okay.
3. Tame the bulge. Absolutely.
4. Quit smoking. Please!
5. Enjoy life more.
6. Quit drinking.
7. Get out of debt.
8. Learn something new.
9. Help others.
10. Get organized.

Nobody in here would say these are bad things, right? I didn't pull this out of *Christianity Today*. I got this from a newspaper in Pittsburgh. I didn't even know they had newspapers in Pittsburgh. I guess I could have assumed they did, but... Listen. This isn't a bunch of theologians and Bible scholars sitting around and saying, "What would be pleasing and right and good to the Lord? What would seem honoring to him? Let's base these New Year's resolutions on that."

No. This is a secular culture who does not know or worship the creator God of the universe and who doesn't want to know or worship the creator God of the universe. How different are these top 10 New Year's resolutions from the things we say we would desire in the upcoming year? I know for me, they are not a lot. Do you know what my wife and I are giving up for New Year's? Gluten and sugar. My two favorite things in the world.

It's not that these things are bad or wicked or sinful. It's not that they are not even valid or valuable. The truth is, these things in and of themselves don't transform us. They do not change us. If we're walking into the next year hoping for a better, happier life, we have missed something. We've missed something! What we need is for God to renew our minds. What does that look like? How do we get there?

Turn to Colossians 3. The format of Colossians is the same as that of Romans. Paul lays out a theology in the first couple of chapters and then in chapter 3 makes the hard turn to, "This is practically how you live this out." Colossians 3, starting in verse 1. He says, "**If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are...**" Where? "**...above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**"

Here it is. If you are in Christ, you have died. Listen. The old Jeremy is dead. That means my thoughts and my desires and my pursuits before that death should have died with that man. I've been raised to a new life, a new life in Christ, a transformed life, a renewed life, which means the way I view my life now isn't in the same pattern it was before, which means my family says something about God, and I want what it says about God to be true.

The way I work at my job says something about God, and I want what it says about God to be true. The way I handle my money says something about God, and I want what it says about God to be true. The way I steward my body, the things I eat, the way I keep fit...those things say something about God. I want those things to be true.

Listen. Verse 4. Let's read it again. **"When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."** If glory and eternity and a face-to-face relationship with God are my end, if those things are my destiny, if those things are what have been purchased for me through the cross of Christ, then listen. My desire to lose weight so I'll look better and feel better about myself and maybe be more attractive to other people or even to be healthier is too small.

My desire to spend more time with my family so my marriage won't be so rocky and my kids will be more obedient is too small, because I have died. My old way of thinking, my old life, is gone. My old desires are dead, and my new desire is to have him and more of him. More and more of him. I want to get that any way I can, but that's difficult. It's difficult to desire God more than I desire money, because in the here and now, it seems like my bill collectors don't care about if I have more God. They want their money.

There are particular moments when it doesn't seem like my family cares I want God more. They want more time. They want more energy. They want more. It's difficult. Why? Well, I think Ecclesiastes 3:11 speaks to it well. This is what it says. **"[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart..."** Here's the thing about eternity. The weight of it is crushing. Do you get that? Have you felt that?

Maybe you didn't have the words to put to it, or maybe you didn't know exactly what it is, but here's the thing. The weight of eternity is crushing. We look for things...*anything*...that can bear up under that weight. We'll put it on our achievement. We'll work really hard, right? We'll work really hard. We'll do everything we can to be seen in a particular way, to be viewed as a hard worker. Then at the end of the day, what happens? Someone comes along who does it better...always, inevitably.

In that moment, what happens to our hopes of achievement? They come crashing down, right? We become angry, and we become frustrated. We even get angry at God for not keeping promises he never made us. Here's where I'm guilty most. I put it on my wife. Man, I love that girl. She is beautiful, and she is godly. I take that weight, and I lay it on her. I want her to encourage me, and I want her to affirm me. I want her to serve me. I want her to take care of my kids and to train them up in the way they should go. I want her to cook. I want her to clean. I want her to make our house a home.

At the end of the day when she is tired of being my savior, it leaves her hurt and broken and frustrated and wondering why I don't care for our home and wondering why I don't care for her soul. I lay it on my children. We take that weight, and we put it on the ones we love the most, and we end up crushing them. Do you know why? Because they were never meant to bear up under that weight. They can never bear up under that weight. My wife is strong...stronger than she knows. She loves me well, better than I deserve.

But she does not make a good God, and neither do I and neither do you, neither do your spouses or your boyfriends or your girlfriends or your friends. They make horrible Gods because they cannot carry the crushing weight of eternity. They were never meant to. That's why we just spent the last month and a half celebrating the fact that God intervened. He stepped into human history in the form of a man, and he even tells us. Right?

He even tells us, "All you who are weary and heavy-laden, come to me, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. It's easy. My burden is light. I can carry the weight, because I was meant to. I'm the only one who can do it. You need not place it on other things. I am here, and I am waiting for you to come to me." We need God to renew our minds. The way we view all things...*everything*...even the weight of eternity, changes.

What has gone wrong in me? Where am I worshipping other things? Where am I hoping in other things to bear up under the weight of eternity? Second Corinthians 4 offers us hope. This is what it says. **"So we [Christians] do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction..."**

Do you know what Paul's "light and momentary affliction" is? Has anybody ever studied it? Have you ever looked at it? Here's what it is. Paul has been shipwrecked. He has been snake-bit. He has been beaten with rods. He has been stoned until people thought he was dead. He has been in prison. In fact, he is writing this from prison waiting to be beheaded. This is Paul's "light and momentary affliction." Spit on. Mocked.

This is his "light and momentary affliction." Here's what he says about it. **"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."** The things that are unseen are eternal.

Jamie Hipp, another pastor on staff, and I go camping in the Ozarks every year, which I guess is what you do if you live in the city and there's no country around you. We pack up. We head out. We hike the Eagle Rock Loop there. Two years ago before we went, I developed a little bit of pain in my hip and in my back. It was weird. It never happened before. It was fine during the week, but on the weekend when I would get home, I would just be laid up in bed.

Finally, I said, "I have to go to the doctor. I don't want to miss the trip," because I'm prideful and I wouldn't want to say, "I have pain in my hip and in my back, so I can't go." I went to the doctor. The doctor comes in, and he says, "Hey, Jeremy. It seems you're in relatively good health."

"Thanks."

"I can't see any kind of trauma or anything that would be causing this pain to happen. It seems like you're just getting older and your body is decommissioning." *Am I a tank? Am I a fighter plane or something?* "As you get older, there are particular muscles that, when you're younger, you don't even know you're working them but you're working them. As you get older, you stop doing the things that actually work those muscles. This is just something that happens. I'm going to prescribe you some pain medications, and I'm going to tell you to go to the chiropractor."

I was like, "Great. How long do I do that?" He was like, "Whenever you need to." So this is my life now. Every once in a while, I'll get a pain in my hip and a pain in my back, and I'll need to take some pain medication. I'll need to go to the chiropractor. There's not really anything I can do about it because I'm getting old. Even today, I stood up here for two services, and I went home, and my feet were killing me. I could barely stand on them.

This is what Paul is talking about. The outer self is wasting away. All of us are wasting away. Some are doing it at a faster rate than others, but every single one of us, the moment we drew our first breath, we started wasting away. The beauty of the life in the Spirit is, though our outer self is wasting away, though our bodies are wasting away, though we are dying...every single one of us, no one escapes it...the inward man is being renewed day by day.

In light of that fact, we are to set our minds on...what? Things that are above and not on the things that are on the earth, because the things that are above are eternal. The things that are below are transient. For many of us, our light... Here's what my counselor told me one time. "Jeremy, you don't have to worry because these things that are going on in your heart, these things that are going on in your life, will only last a lifetime."

I mean, we laugh, because it's my hip and my back. That's not really a big deal, but for some of us, our light and momentary affliction, our wasting away, doesn't seem funny at all. It seems like terminal illness. It seems like the loss of loved ones. It seems like severe financial crisis. It seems like the loss of a job. It seems like not being able to take care of your family. It seems like not being able to live up to expectations.

Our affliction doesn't seem light, and it doesn't seem momentary. If all we have to do is live it out for a lifetime, that seems crushing. It seems like there's no hope in that. Here's the truth, and it's a difficult one. It's because our frame of mind is too low. We live like all we have is *now* when, in truth, that old man is

dead...died a long time ago. The life I live now I live by faith in the Son of God. I said earlier that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ purchased some things for us and not just in the *future* but in the *now*.

What we tend to forget a lot is it actually did purchase some things for us now but also in the future. The promise of Scripture is there is coming a day when we won't hurt, when we won't suffer, when we won't struggle, when he will wipe away every tear from every eye, and we will see him face-to-face forever. We will live eternity in ever-increasing joy.

I'm not a Platonist. I don't think all flesh is bad and only spirit is good. Man, I think you need to love your family well. I think you need to work hard at your job. I think you need to be a good friend. I think you need to be a good steward of your body. I think you need to be a good steward of your money. But I think you need to be those things for a reason.

I think we need to know with a renewed mind and an understanding that our inner man is being renewed day by day by day, the reason those things are happening, because they are changing the way we think. We understand this light and momentary affliction, this suffering we're in now, is meant to get us more of God, to make us more dependent on him, to make us more trusting in him. We need God to do a work in us. We need God to do a work in our hearts.

Exodus 37. You see God come to Moses, and he says, "Hey, I made a promise to Abraham that I would give him this land. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to send the people into the Promised Land. I'll send an angel before you to drive out the inhabitants. It's yours. You can have it. I'm a faithful God who keeps my promises, but here's the thing. I'm not coming with you. I cannot abide with this people. They are a stiff-necked people. They don't love me. They don't worship me.

They bicker and fight all the time. They spit in my face. They spit in my mercy. They spit in my grace and my face all the time. I cannot go with you. You can have it because I promised it, but I'm not going to go," which makes me wonder... This was the most convicting thing for me as I studied for this. If you could have it all (the comfortable life, beautiful house, great spouse, awesome education, great friends) and you knew God wouldn't be in it, would you take it?

Our really quick answer is *no*, right? "No, absolutely not," because that's the right answer. But do we live like that? Functionally on a day-in and day-out basis, do we live like we would not go if God is not going with us? I know for me most of the time that's not true. If he would make me more comfortable now and there are things I could do to make myself happy right now, I'm going to chase those things, because I have a mind that is set on things that are too low, that are too small.

Mark Galli says, "If you're a Christian mainly because you want to be changed, that's a problem. If you've given your life to God mostly because you are tired of yourself and want to be a different person—well, that may suggest you're merely using God to fix you. That's not faith. That's not love of God. That's love of self."

Here's my hope for us in here tonight: More than we want to be healed, we would want him. More than we want a marriage that's smooth and without trouble, we want him. More than we want kids who are obedient, healthy and wealthy and smart, we want him. More than we want a large bank account, we want him. More than we want nice things, we want him.

*Mostly* none of us in this room (I don't know everybody in this room) would say we desire those things more than we desire him, but if we really sit and think about it and we really wrestle through it and we really wrestle through the way we live our lives, isn't that true about us most of the time, that we just want to be happy? We just don't want to be sick? We don't want things to be rough or difficult. We just want things to run smoothly. We just want to be able to put our heads down and go along to get along.

That's not what we've been called to. The Scriptures are really clear that the call to follow Christ is a call to suffering. We will suffer. If we don't have good lenses and a good framework by which to view that suffering (this is what we say in Steps), we're going to be irritable. We're going to be restless. We're going to be discontent. So we're going to seek relief. We'll place that weight of eternity on things that were never meant to bear it up.

When those things crumble, we'll become irritable, frustrated, and discontent. We'll start searching for relief. So we'll place that weight of eternity on things that were never meant to bear up under it. They might for a little while, but inevitably they crumble under the weight, when the one who said he would carry it is waiting. He is waiting for us. He is waiting for us!

When Moses comes to the people of God and says, "Hey, he is going to give us the land, but he said he is not going to come with us," do you know what they did? They repented and said, "If you are not going with us, then we're not going. We will stay in the desert with you. It's difficult, and it's hard, but you're here. You're with us. Even the best life without you in it is a life that's not worth living."

The good news of the gospel isn't that we get heaven. The good news of the gospel is that we get God, and more and more and more of him. He uses everything to do it. He has promised us he would. Romans 8. All things work together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes. He will be faithful to complete the good work he started in you. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you.

He has not abandoned you to your suffering. He has not abandoned you to your circumstances. This is the same sermon I preach every time I stand up here.

Listen. Suffering in the presence of God is better than not suffering *not* in his presence. Man, if we could get this, if we could get it and really start to believe it... I think we believe it but we don't *believe* it (if that makes sense). If we could get this, this would totally transform everything. God has called me as a husband to love my wife in a particular way. I look at that calling like, "Man, that's hard."

He has called me to love my children in a particular way. Do you know what happens when I love my wife and I love my children the way he has called me to? Do you know what happens in my family? Things actually start to run smoother. They are encouraged, and they are edified. They are fed, and they are loved well. It encourages my heart; it encourages their hearts.

Do you know what happens when I handle my money the way God has called me to handle my money? Man, it frees me up from wanting and desiring everything I see like my 7-year-old does. I can be open-handed with it, because I know he is my portion. He is my provider. I don't have to close my hand around my things. I can live open-handed with them.

Do you know what happens when I treat my body the way God has called me to treat my body? I'm healthier. I eat better. I exercise. It's crazy that the Creator of the universe knows how my body functions and should work. We could run down that whole top 10 list. Everything! If I live the way God has called me to live, those things change for the better, not for the worst. Listen. Even if they don't change for the better, my view of myself doesn't change in that moment because my view of myself is based on who he says I am because of what Christ has accomplished on the cross, not the way others look at me and think I should be.

When we get this, when it drops finally and we're able to view things in a new way with a renewed mind, with an understanding that the new man is being renewed day by day by day and the things that are below are too small now, when we lift our gaze just a little bit, it changes us. He gives us more of himself. As he calls us to difficult things and we take those small steps of obedience, he changes us. As we walk into those difficult circumstances and those difficult conversations, he changes us.

As we think through the next year or 10 or 20, however many years the Lord gives us, our prayer should be, "Lord, give me more of you. If it's suffering that gets it, then give me more suffering. If it's difficulty that gets it, then give me more difficulty. If it's doing the hard work of living the way you've called me to live as a believer, then give me the strength and the desire and the perseverance to do the hard work of living the way you've called me to live."

Oh that the God who is able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine would do something unimaginable in our hearts this year. If we're asking for anything else, then our desires are too small. Let me pray for us to that end.

Father, you're good, and we thank you for that. We thank you that, in the midst of our struggle, in the midst of our disobedience, in the midst of our failures, and in the midst of our doubts, you are with us. You haven't left us. You haven't abandoned us. You never will. Spirit, we need you to move and to work in this place tonight in the hearts of your people.

I do pray, God, the men and women in this place would hear a far better sermon than I preached, and that is you. We can stand up here, we can sing songs, and I can speak from the Word, but it's not enough to change a heart. We need you to move. We need you to work. We need you to do what only you can do. I pray you would magnify Jesus in this place tonight, that you would lift him high and you would lift our gaze where we can see him, where we will desire him above all things, where we see him as our treasure.

Our desire would very simply be to have more of him. We love you. We praise you. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for his sacrifice. We thank you for the blood that covers a multitude of sin. We thank you that in him, we have life and breath and all things. We pray these things in his powerful name, amen.