Bob: Dave Wilson grew up in a church-going home, but he says it never really connected with him until later. Part of the reason for that was because he had a hard time believing in a good God.

Dave: I was dragged to church every Sunday by my mom, with this rule: “You live under my roof. You follow my rules. We’re going to church.” Anybody—same thing? Maybe, that’s why you’re here tonight. [Laughter]

I was dragged to Christmas Eve services just like this; and as I grew up into the teenage years, and we would light the candle at Christmas Eve like we were going to at the end of the service, my mom would be in tears. I’d be snickering: “You believe in a God. You think He really came?” You see, my dad walked out on us. My little brother died of leukemia, and I was seven. I just thought, “I cannot believe in a God who would let that happen to this family.”

Yet, I’m looking at my mom. She’s in tears because she loves that God, because she believes that God came for her and is the strength of her life.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Christmas Day, Wednesday, December 25th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You can find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Whatever your impression of God has been, Christmas was designed by God to give us a picture of His great love. We’ll hear more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Christmas Day edition, the Wednesday edition of FamilyLife Today. Merry Christmas.

Ann: Merry Christmas.

Bob: So, is this a stressful time of year? I mean, as a pastor—every Christmas—it comes around, and you’ve got to be ready. You do Christmas Eve services/Christmas Day services—what do you do at the church?
Dave: Yes; I mean it’s been 30 years now. We always have done Christmas Eve. You know, it started with one or two; and then it became twelve or fifteen. Now, at six campuses, we do like thirty services among us.

Bob: Oh, my goodness. We’re going to actually hear a portion of a message that you preached at a Christmas Eve service—this was years ago; right?

Dave: 2017—I think.

Bob: This was all about helping people think rightly about the significance of the incarnation/the significance of the fact that Jesus came to dwell among us.

Dave: We actually sit down, six months before Christmas, with a team and sort of ask God where to go this particular year. We really had this thought of: “What would it be like if Jesus was never born?”

Bob: Well, that’s the question you used to start—

Dave: Yes.

Bob: —the message. So, let’s listen. Here’s Dave Wilson reflecting on Christmas and on that question.

[Previous Message]

Dave: How would your life be different if Jesus was never born? I don’t know about your life, but I can talk about my life. I can give you a couple of thoughts. I think they are similar to, maybe, what you would think. Here is what I thought—I wrote this down: “If Jesus was never born, I would not know who I am,”—that’s identity. See, some of the most important questions you and I will ever answer in our life is: “Who are we?” and “What does God think of us?” I’m going to talk about both of those.

If Jesus was never born—this is just me—I wouldn’t know who I am. I wouldn’t know my identity, because here is my journey—and many of you have heard this—but my journey is this. I was dragged to church every Sunday by my mom, with this rule: “You live under my roof. You follow my rules. We’re going to church.” Anybody—same thing? Maybe, that’s why you’re here tonight. I was dragged to Christmas Eve services, just like this.

As I grew up into teenage years, and we would light the candle at Christmas Eve like we’re going to light here at the end of the service, my mom would be in tears. I’d be snickering under my breath, like: “You believe in a God. You think He really came”; because, see, my dad walked out on us. My little brother died of leukemia when I was seven. I just thought, “I cannot believe in a God who would let that happen to this family.”
Yet, I'm looking at my mom. She's in tears because she loves that God; because she believes that God came for her and is the strength of her life; but I'm too smart to believe something this unthinkable: “God became a man—C’mon. You’ve got to be kidding me!"

I would stay in there, on Christmas Eve, and I would hold the handle; but I did not believe. One of the biggest reasons I didn’t believe is, when it came to God, for 20 years of my life, I had two emotions. My two emotions were fear and shame. Fear because I believed God was a cosmic killjoy—just sort of like, up in the heavens, He didn’t like fun; He didn’t like music. The music [at church] was really boring; I think the woman that played the keys wore mittens; it was just bad. So, that was church.

You just thought, “Well, God is this God that doesn’t like anything good on earth.” I always had this—I’ve said this here before—but I always viewed God sort of—growing up, like, have you ever played the game at Dave & Buster’s?—Whack-a-Mole?—where you have this big mallet; and little moles come up, and you whack them—that’s how I saw God! He’s like, up in heaven; and He looks down. It’s like somebody is enjoying something or even laughing in church—He’s like, “Stop that!”—that’s what I thought. I was scared of Him; He’s this big, just scary guy in heaven; and that was fear.

The other side was shame. What was shame? Shame was—especially, as I became a teenager, I knew I was disappointing Him. I knew God was disappointed with the choices I was making as a 16-/17-/18-year-old. I felt shame because—I didn’t just think, “I am making mistakes,”—“I am a mistake.”

I’ve said this here before, that my mom had a picture of Jesus hanging over our fireplace in the ’60s and the ’70s. To me, it was a little spooky—almost a little creepy—because I swear, when I was like 17 years old, I’d walk through the living room; there was Jesus like this. I knew His eyes were just like following me. He was not happy with me; I could feel His disappointment. I could feel the shame—like He would just look at me, like, “I’m going to get you for that,”—that’s what I felt. For me, as a 16-year-old: “I don’t want to know that guy. I’m going to stay as far away as I can.”

Some of you know this—when I graduated high school and went to college, I’m no longer living under my mom’s roof. Guess what? I’m not going to church, because I don’t have to; and I never did. I’m afraid of Him, and I know I’m disappointing Him.

I’ll never forget the day—it was my freshman year—at the greatest football school in the Midwest, Ball State University. I was there as their quarterback. I walked in a buddy’s dorm room, just down the hall. He was actually out of the room; and this guy was sort of a—one of those weirdo, Christian guys. I met weirdo because he was bold. I hadn’t met too many like that. I was sort of like, “I don’t know if I like this guy or not”; but I remember walking in his dorm room one day, and he wasn’t there. Hanging on his wall was a different image of Jesus. I had never in my life envisioned or seen an image of
Jesus smiling. I remember, thinking there—and I didn’t become a follower of Christ that day, because I looked at that picture—but I remember, now, looking back, like God planted a seed right there and said: “You don’t know who I really am. I am not a scary; you should not be afraid,”—even in the Christian story, it says, “Do not be afraid.” So that picture planted a seed that, “Maybe, I don’t know who God really is; and maybe, I don’t understand how He views me.”

Obviously, I went on a journey; and obviously, you can guess what I decided; because I am standing here before you on Christmas Eve, for the last 28 years, saying: “I want to tell you who this God really is. He is the God who came for you on Christmas morning—for YOU.” If you think He is disappointed in you, trust me—you don’t know God; and you better get to know Him, because the more I found out who He was, the more incredible I found out: “He loved me!”

What happened? I discovered for the first time who I am. I am not a mistake, and neither are you. You and I are desperately adored by God. Here’s the thing—some of you walk in here, and you hear me say that; you’re like, “I don’t even know if I buy that.” Guess what? That’s a lie from the pit of hell. You are a son of God; you are a daughter of the King; you are absolutely adored by Him. Zephaniah, in the Old Testament, says, “He sings over us with love.” He absolutely looks at you and applauds; you are the apple of His eye!

Some of you walked in here today and you are thinking, “No; God’s thinking, ‘About time, loser, you came to church—about time.’” That’s sort of what I thought. That is not what God thinks about you; God came for you! I know you’re thinking, “Yes; well, I don’t live a righteous life like you do; because you’re a pastor, and you’re perfect.” You’re right; I am perfect—no. [Laughter] I’m not perfect, and neither are you. Guess what? God came and didn’t stay in a manger; He died on a cross to forgive your and my sins forever. He looks at us now, in Christ, and says: “You are clean. You are pure. You are forgiven.” It’s the most amazing truth in the world. Christmas says, “I came for you so you would understand this.”

Think about fear for a minute. Why would you be afraid of God? He came; the way He came says this: “You don’t have to be afraid of Me.” Why?—He came as a baby; who is afraid of a baby?—nobody! I mean, think of this—God could come into the planet any way He wants, and what does He do?—He comes into Bethlehem—a little nothing city—in a stable. You know, we like to call it a manger; we’re just cleaning up the story. It’s a feeding trough for animals; imagine that.

I don’t know if you went and saw the animated movie, The Star—anybody see it? It’s awesome. I’ll go see it again. I love kids’ movies. It’s the story of the nativity through the eyes of a donkey. You’re like, “Man, they got it pretty good.” It’s amazing. When you look at it, you’re just like, “This is how God entered our planet.” Yes; what’s He saying?—humility is a virtue, and our God is humble.
You know, it's interesting—when I was in high school—again, living with a single mom in the little town of Findlay, Ohio, making a lot of bad decisions—had a very bad reputation in high school. It followed me into college—with women/with partying—you name it. I was just pretty wild.

I don't think I've ever told this story, but I was 17 years old. I was driving with a bunch of guys on I-75 about 30 miles south of Findlay, around the Lima, Ohio, area. I got this crazy idea. It was like 11 o'clock at night; and I just thought, "We should do something on the highway and freak out some other cars." I'm not going to tell you what we did; but I convinced the guys—I'll just say, that night, there was a full moon; okay? Anyway, you get the idea; right? That just went right over the kids, which is great; you know? Parents got it, but nobody else did.

Next thing I know, the police are chasing us; and I'm avoiding arrest now, got caught, and thrown in jail for the night with all my buddies—handcuffed—the whole thing. Spending the night in jail—this is your pastor, right here, in jail—I'm thinking, "I am such a letdown to my incredible mom, who has loved me, and loved me, and loved me; and look at the decisions I'm making." In that jail cell, that's what I'm thinking.

At about 2/2:30 in the morning, the policeman comes over with a key. He opens the jail cell. He says, "Dave Wilson, you get to go home." I'm like, "Why?" He’s like, "Your mom is here." I’m like: "Oh, no. Am I going to get killed?!" I'll never forget—as I walked out, there she was. I just sort of looked at her; I was so ashamed. What is that shame?—I was afraid. Same things I felt about God, I'm now feeling about my mom. I'll never forget—she rushes over—I mean, rushes over, throws her arms around me. Her face is right here, kisses me, and says: "You are great. I love you, and there is greatness in you." I didn't know it at the moment; but you know what she whispered to me?—the same things God thinks about me and thinks about you.

I now believe that that was a moment, where God said: "You want to know what My heart is—there it is. You just saw it in your mom. I love you just like that. I'm not disappointed in you; I'm not going to shame you. I'm not going to punish you for that. I punished my Son for that. You can be forgiven if you choose to believe that’s who I am and that’s who you are."

I tell you what. If I could give you a Christmas present this year, that’s what I’d give you—a new identity! If you could walk out of here, this Christmas, understanding who you are—how special you are; how you don't need to get that from anybody else—you have already gotten it from the Creator of the universe, who looks at you and says, “I love you.” You'll never get that in any present under the tree. You'll never get that from any family member who is there. It can’t come from anything on earth; it comes from the Creator of your life. He absolutely loves you.
I think Christmas screams at us this year, “That’s your identity.” I’ll tell you something—identity is so important to us; because every decision we make, every single day, comes out of what we believe about ourselves. It really does. God *absolutely* adores you.

Second thought is very simple. It’s this one: “If Jesus was never born, I not only wouldn’t know who I am; I wouldn’t know why I am here.” The two most important questions in life are: “Who are you?” and “What are you doing here?” Let me ask you: “Do you know why you are here?”—I don’t mean this service tonight. “On this planet, do you know why you were born?” Mark Twain said it; he was right: “The two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you know why.”

Most people—I’ve been in ministry over 30 years—most people I talk to really don’t know why they are here. Jesus coming on Christmas morning tells us why we’re here. They ask Jesus, “Rabbi, what’s the most important commandment? How do I please God?” What did He say?—two things: “Love God; love others,”—that simple. “Love God; love others,”—that’s it.

You want to know what your purpose is in life? It’s that simple: relish in the love God—that’s your identity; realize you are loved by God and love Him back—then, out of that love, don’t just keep it for yourself. Take that love and love others. It’s that simple. It’s like I wake up every day—ever since I’ve been a follower of Christ—it’s like: “I know why I’m here. I’m supposed to love God, and I’m supposed to love others.” I’m not supposed to keep that love to myself; I’m supposed to love others.

I would challenge you: “How about 2018 [2020]?—you make that the year you find out who God really is. What does that mean?—open His Bible/open His Word and say: “Who are You? Do You really love me?” Say, “I want to get to know You.” What’s going to happen?—you’re going to fall, and I’m going to fall deeper in love with God. Here’s what happens—as we understand who we are and how much He loves us, He says, “Don’t keep that. Now, go spread that.”

We’re going to light a candle in a few moments. The candle is a perfect picture of what?—Jesus, who said: “I am the Light of the world,” says: “I will give you light. You walk into darkness; you don’t know what to do. You live in a world of darkness; He says, “Here’s light,”—“I am the light.” Then He says to His disciples—and they want to hear, as a follower of Christ/He’s saying this to you and me—“Now, you are the light.” What does that mean?—take the light that He planted in us and spread it to others!

It’s not about: “Just love God.” The church is known for: “We love God, but we don’t love others.” “Love God and *show* My love to others by how you treat them!” If the people that don’t ever come to church were loved by the people from church, they’d start showing up at church—why?—they want that light. They want that: “Where do you get that love from?”
It’s interesting—my wife, back in, I think, August/September, she was driving home, down Tienken Road, over here; right? She’s talking to her dad on the phone. Some of you know, her dad is 89 years old, has bone cancer, has all kinds of struggles going on in his life. He’s like my best friend, and Ann talks to him every day. She’s talking to her dad; and as she’s driving by, in her periphery, she sees an older woman sitting on the side of Tienken Road—didn’t really see her—but saw her on the side.

As she saw this, she senses—because she is a Christ-follower, and God can communicate with us—she senses God nudges her and says, “Go pick up My daughter.” She doesn’t know if it’s God or what; but she says to her dad—she goes: “Dad, there is this woman on the side of road; I’ve got to hang up. I think I need to go pick her up.” Her dad, Dick—he’s the greatest guy in the world—he goes, “What are you doing?!” “I’m going to help this Is lady. I don’t know what’s going on, but she’s there.” “Keep me on the line; I want to hear about this.”

He stays on the line; she drives back, and this woman is sitting. She’s like 90 years old. She pulls up, opens the door, and says, “Hey, are you lost?” She goes: “Yes; I don’t know where I am. I’m trying to get back home.” Ann says, “Well, get in the car. I’ll take you home.” She gets in the car. She has her purse; her name is Toni. She is like 90 years old.

Here is what Ann says: “She has a purse. She has a wig in the purse and a crossword puzzle.” Immediately, Ann thought, “She might have Alzheimer’s or dementia,” because Ann’s mom has had dementia for 12 years; and she does crosswords all day. Ann says, “So, where do you live?” “Oh, I live right around the corner.” She [Ann] goes, “What do you have in your purse?” She pulls out a wig. She realizes, as they turn the corner—she’s totally confused and doesn’t live anywhere near this corner.

She [Ann]catches her name. Ann googles her name and finds out that she lives in Hazel Park; but her daughter’s name comes up that lives in the subdivision they are in. Ann puts two and two together and thinks, “I bet she’s now living with her daughter, and that’s”—she just thought, “She must have gone for a walk, and she is lost.”

Ann pulls into the driveway; and as she pulls in—she didn’t notice who this was at the time—but the son-in-law comes running out and says, “Mom’s home, and Ann Wilson brought her!” [Laughter] Ann’s like, “Do I know you?” “I go to Kensington. We’ve been praying for the last hour that God would send an angel to bring Mom home. You’re the angel.” Now, Ann wants me to call her “Angel,” but anyway. [Laughter]

Isn’t that an amazing story? What was Ann doing that day?—loving God; loving others. She knows who she is in Christ, and she feels this sense; and God said, “I need you to go love somebody today”; and Ann came because Christmas comes when you’re in need. In fact, just a few weeks ago, they called Ann and said, “Would you speak at her funeral?” Ann spoke at Toni’s funeral; I thought, “What a perfect picture of what Christmas is all about.”
Let me tell you something: “This Christmas, I believe with all my heart, God is screaming to you and me, ‘I love you! I don’t just say this; I came for you. I am a good Father. I have put you on mission to love the world as I have loved you.’” Christmas isn’t just a day; it is a life—right?—to go live for the King.

As we light these candles in a second, what I’m going to do, as they are setting up to light these candles, is I’m going to read you the Christmas story. Guys, this story is about a God who came for us to say, “I love you,” and to say: “I have a purpose for your life. I know you can know who you are and why you are here.”

Every year, since my little brother died, my mom and I would sit on our little green velvet carpet and watch the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Have you ever watched it? It’s still a great movie. Charlie Brown says: “I don’t understand the meaning of Christmas. What’s the meaning of Christmas?” Linus, with his little blanket, would quote Luke, Chapter 2—the very verses I’m going to read—verses 6-14.

And now, you know what this story really means. It says this:

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

In the same region, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were”—here it is—“They were filled with great fear. The angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born, this day, in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’

Suddenly, there was, with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace among those with whom is pleased.’

You and I are in this story. He is pleased with you. If there is anything you hear this Christmas, I hope you hear that God came for you; He loves you; He’s pleased with you; and now He sends us on mission. As we light this candle—they are going to bring this out; I’m going to light it—we’re going to pass it around the room; but as we light this candle, it’s nothing more than this. It’s a symbol of the light of God came to us to give us light; but not just for us, but through us to pass this light all the way through here. We become one big community of the light of God. Let’s light this thing.
Bob: Well, we’ve been listening to a portion of a message that Dave Wilson preached Christmas Eve at Kensington Church a few years back. I’m getting the picture in my head of that being lit up, and there is something about the visual and just about the experience. People get drawn into the significance of that season, just in that time of reflection; and for a lot of people, that’s the time when the spiritual lights come on in their lives.

Dave: Yes; and that’s, you know, why we do light the candle. It is, like you said, Bob, a very tender moment. Even standing on stage, I get this unique view to look out at really thousands of people. What I love seeing is families—you can see a mom, a dad; or maybe, a single mom/single dad; and a blended family. In some ways, you think this might be one of the only times of the year they are that together.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: They are lighting a candle to say: “There is a light in our valley. There is light in our darkness.” That’s what Christmas brings to us—Jesus.

Ann: I think that’s really significant because, sometimes, at Christmas, you can be really lonely. You don’t have your whole family around you, and you can feel a sense of, “I’m in this all alone.” Yet, I love Christmas; because Jesus—it’s a reminder—He came to earth for us, and we are never alone. He’s always with us, and He’s always with you. He loves you, and He’s right beside you, speaking life into you even today.

Isn’t it good that we have Him as our Savior? Because, when the lights are all lit and the candles are lit at Christmas, it’s just that reminder: “He came into the world to bring light to our lives.”

Bob: Dave, why don’t you pray for our listeners today as they celebrate?—maybe, alone/maybe, with family. Just pray for them that this would be a meaningful celebration of Jesus’s birth.

Dave:

Father, thanks for Your Son. Christmas morning/the Christmas event: the incarnation/the birth of Jesus is the moment where You shouted to the world: “I love you! I see you; I know you. I’m with you, and I will not leave you abandoned. I have come for you. I’ve come to say, ‘I love you.’ I want to live, not only with you, but in you.”

So, Lord, I pray that this Christmas we would be able to know, and feel, and experience Your love this day. For those that are lonely, those that are hopeless, those who feel powerless or joyless, Lord,
I pray that Your joy, Your power, Your presence would fill their hearts, fill their homes, fill their souls this Christmas—that they would know that they are loved and they will always be loved by You. We thank You. In the name and the power of the only name/the name above all names—the name Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Bob: Amen. Thank you for that.

Well, we hope you have a great Christmas Day; and hope you can join us back tomorrow. We’re going to hear from a woman, who has had to learn how to walk closely with God after receiving a breast cancer diagnosis; her name is René Rochester. Kim Anthony will join us to share that story. I hope you can be with us.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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