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## **Jesus was born into a very long and dark night**

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And it wasn't just that familiar darkness between the setting of the sun at dusk and its rising at dawn the next day...

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## **Israel, the people of God, called and chosen to be light to the world**

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...had completely lost their way

Their politics was irreparably broken: King Herod, their king, was a brutal, corrupt and narcissistic puppet of Rome, and all Israel was deeply divided along ideological and socio-economic lines

The economy was collapsing - so many had lost their farms, their trade and their livelihood and had turned to crime to survive

Their religious life was filled with empty ritual, acrimonious debate, and utter hypocrisy - their spiritual leaders had abandoned honesty and simplicity and humility for fame and position and wealth... the average person wanted little to do with them

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## **It was dark in Israel...**

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And because it was dark in Israel, it was dark in all the world

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## **But in the darkness, the prophets of Israel spoke of hope... of one who was to come who would light up that darkness**

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They spoke, of course, of Jesus: our Messiah, our Redeemer, our King

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## **Listen to how the prophet Isaiah, living some 700 years before Jesus, spoke of his birth**

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**Isaiah 9.2 NIV** The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

**Isaiah 9.6 NIV** For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

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## **In Jesus, says Isaiah, light will dispel our darkness**

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And in Jesus, peace - full and final shalom - will finally be ours

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## **And that sounds really wonderful... until you give it a moment's thought**

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### **And you look at the world around us...**

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...filled with animosity, bitterness, racial tension, anger, hatred, conflict, and war

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### **Where is the peace that Jesus is supposed to have brought us?**

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What are we to make of the darkness that still fills the world around us, 2000 years later?

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## **Is this light for real?**

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### **How are we to make sense of these words of Isaiah...**

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... in the midst of the insane complexity, the escalating stress and anxiety and fear that seem to have become our new normal?

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### **Some 50 years ago, Simon & Garfunkel captured the complexity of our times in an amazing track**

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This track was recorded during the Vietnam years and the civil rights movement... but it captures the inherent tension of all times

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## **So let me read those words from Isaiah once again...**

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**Isaiah 9.2 NIV** The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

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**Isaiah 9.6 NIV** For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

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## I'd like to reflect on three essential questions that emerge from this text

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#1: What is the essence of this great **darkness** that surrounds us?

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#2: Of Jesus it is said that "the **government** will be on his shoulders": what's that all about?

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#3: Jesus is called the **Prince of Peace**... what might that mean?

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## I'd like to start at the end and work our way back to the beginning

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### Jesus is the Prince of Peace... what might that mean?

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Now if you give it a moment's thought, it's fairly obvious that peace is ultimately a relational issue

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You could be in the most calm and serene place on earth... and then an old quarrel breaks out between you and your spouse

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It's Christmas and you've had a very successful year at work - everything's gone your way... but along the way, you lost your family, and you're spending this Christmas alone...

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### Our experience of genuine peace is directly connected to the condition of our relationships

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And relationships are at their best when they're filled with genuine love

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And therefore, experiencing peace is simply a side-effect of giving and receiving genuine love

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### You don't get to peace directly - you can only get there through love

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To be at peace with God is all about receiving his love for us, experiencing his love, and in return loving him with all of our hearts

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To be at peace with one another is all about learning to love one another

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**But what are we talking about when we use the word love?**

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It's useful to have a clear working definition, and of course you remember these familiar words of Paul

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**1 Corinthians 13.4–8 NIV** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

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**So when you and I are at peace with each other, here's what it'll look like**

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We'll be patient with each other... we'll be kind to each other...

I won't be envious of you when something good comes your way... and you won't boast of it or turn proud and arrogant on me

I won't speak ill of you when you're not around... I won't gossip about you

We'll look out for each other... you'll have my back, I'll have yours

We won't be easily irritated with each other... and if we fail one another, we'll forgive, and forget... we won't keep track of it

We'll protect one another... we'll trust one another... always and forever

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**So imagine a world in which every possible relationship looks like this**

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Parents & children... husbands & wives... colleagues at work... supervisors & employees... Wall Street & Main Street... Congress & the White House... international relationships

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**Can you imagine that?**

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That's shalom, that's peace

And that's what Jesus - our Prince of Peace - came to accomplish

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**But how?**

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**This kind of love is hard enough between parents and children**

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In the most natural of relationships within which you'd think genuine love would simply happen, and continue

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**And it's hard enough within marriage...**

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Within a relationship where two people make a serious and solemn promise to love each other

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**But when you look around today and see the deep-rooted anger, hatred, bitterness and violence that fills our world... there's no way**

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**And yet... this shalom, this love, this peace... is precisely the dream and the promise of Christmas**

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This is what Jesus - our Prince of Peace - was born to bring

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**But how? That's the question, isn't it?**

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What possible plan, scheme or strategy can move us from this place of deep unrest, anxiety, tension and animosity... into shalom?

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How can my marriage - now dying a slow death, filled with angry words and cold silence - ever be filled up again with love & joy & peace & patience & kindness & goodness & gentleness?

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How can we ever get back to a place where our children look at us again with trust and love and simple joy - as they once did?

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How can this war-torn world possibly lay down its sophisticated weapons of mass destruction and experience genuine peace?

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**And that brings us to our second question: the "government will be on his shoulders"... what does that mean?**

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Well... it simply means that Jesus is in charge... Jesus has all authority and all power to accomplish this task... and he is going to get it done

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**But how? That's the question, isn't it? How is he going to bring about peace?**

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It's absolutely crucial to get this right...

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**How would you go about it?**

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If you had all power, how would you set out to fill the world with shalom... with love and peace?

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**Well, one way would be to use your power to force everybody else to surrender to your plans, whether or not they wanted to**

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And once everybody is in alignment with your plan, there'll be world peace, right?

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**Consider how I might set out to use force to bring about peace in my marriage, for instance**

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So I say to my wife - Listen, Jeanne, clearly, God put me in charge of everything, so if you'd only get your act together and do what I tell you, we're going to have a great marriage...

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How do you think that's going to work out?

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**Or we might try to impose peace by force with our children...**

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"As long as you're living in my house, you're going to do what i say"

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We're bigger and stronger when our children are young, so we can make them do what we want

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**But what kind of relationship do you think the raw use of power creates?**

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And what happens when our children grow up, and have the option of leaving, of moving on?

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**Using raw power to impose peace always fails... eventually**

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And it leaves behind greater anger, and tension, and hatred and pain

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## So how did Jesus go about it?

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How did he use the power at his disposal to bring about shalom?

There's this intense moment in the gospel of Matthew when Jesus is betrayed by Judas into the hands of those who would crucify him

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**Matthew 26.50–54 NIV** Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

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"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

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**Matthew 27.27–31 NIV** Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

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Jesus, the one who has all power and authority in the universe at his disposal, doesn't use any of it to impose his will on those around him

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### **Rather, he uses all of it to pick up his cross and die on Calvary for us**

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He uses all the power at his disposal to turn the other cheek, to walk the second mile, to hold himself in check while the soldiers hammer nails through his body...

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And he uses all the power at his disposal to pray for our forgiveness - while we, through our selfishness and sin, drive in the nails that hold him to that cross

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He uses all the power at his disposal to die for us, for our sins

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## **This is how Jesus sets out to bring shalom into a world filled with evil**

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Our sin, our abuse of power, our lies, deceptions, unfaithfulness, our anger, our violence... our utter disregard of our Holy God fills the world with evil, and hurt, and pain...

And Jesus takes upon himself all that evil that we have created... and continue to create... and he loves us, forgives us, invites us to receive his love and so be at peace with him

**Isaiah 53.4–5 NIV** Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

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## **This is the Jesus way... this is the only way peace enters our world**

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Not by self-centered force...but by self-giving love

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## **And then, our Prince of Peace invites us to do the same**

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### **Because that's his plan to bring about world peace**

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That we his followers would trust him, and follow him, and take up our crosses and follow him all the way into self-sacrificial, self-giving love

This is so crazy, so counter-intuitive and it sounds so foolish that we instantly dismiss it... and yet, there's no other way to peace

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## **So do you want to experience the peace of God?**

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**Do you want to experience God's own peace** filling your heart, filling your marriage, your family, your relationships, your world?

**Then pick up your cross, and follow Jesus** into the path of self-giving love, of forgiveness, of receiving injustice and offering grace, of receiving evil and returning a blessing instead

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**Doesn't that sound absolutely crazy?**

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I wrong you, and our relationship is now broken. How does it make any sense for you to be the one to now do everything in your power to forgive me, to take on yourself the wrong I have done to you, and offer me love in return?

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**And that brings us to our last question: what is this great darkness that surrounds us?**

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**Well, I think it's clear, isn't it?**

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If you're following Jesus into self-giving love, into self-sacrificial forgiveness... then you are walking in the light. If you aren't, then you're walking in darkness...

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**The darkness that surrounds us, and sometimes seeps deep into our own hearts, our own lives...**

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...is rooted in this unquestioned assumption that the goal of our lives is to maximize ourselves... and that anyone who opposes us or gets in the way of our agenda is our enemy... and to achieve peace, we must acquire power and use it to destroy those who oppose us

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**And that's the darkness that covers our world**

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Our selfishness, our self-centeredness, our self-righteousness

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And our pursuit of power to accomplish our own plans and desires - at the cost of those around us

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**And Jesus is the light that entered into this darkness**

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Who shows us the way of love, the way to peace... through his life, his words, and his self-sacrificial death on that cross

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He died for us in love, not raising a finger to defend himself, not saying a word to justify himself

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And on that cross, as his life bled out of his wounds, he prayed for us - Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are. doing

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## **Jesus, our light has come to us...**

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Making peace with us on that cross

And thereby showing us **how** to be at peace with one another

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## **That's the message, and the hope, and the promise of Christmas**

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## **So... it's Christmas Eve**

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### **And judgement day is at hand, isn't it? The sheep and the goats...**

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On the right are the righteous - all who have already planned and completed their Christmas shopping - with thoughtful, inexpensive and tasteful gifts for all, wrapped up and stashed away

And on the left, the lost... the rest of us, who will find ourselves scrambling desperately on Christmas Eve, scrabbling through the beef jerky display at the local gas-station, trying to find the perfect gift for our wives...

...praying to the gods of Amazon Prime to overnight that weighted blanket to us that we forgot to buy weeks ago even though both the wife and the daughter often reminded us

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## **It is truly the most wonderful time of the year, isn't it?**

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I'd like to invite you to take three steps toward entering into the peace of God this Christmas

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### **First, receive his love...**

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Immerse yourself in it, let it blow your mind, overwhelm your heart and set your spirit free...

Jesus loves you... no matter what you've done, you are fully forgiven...

You are set free, you are his - now and forever

He died for you on that cross, that you might live forever

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**Second, release and reject any anger, or unforgiveness or bitterness that might still be weighing your heart and mind and soul down**

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Have you been treated unjustly? forgive, and offer grace instead

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Have you been wronged? forgive, and offer a blessing instead

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Have you been rejected, excluded? forgive, and offer welcome instead

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Have you been attacked, criticised, falsely accused? forgive, and offer kindness instead

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**Third, renew your relationships... talk with your spouse, your children, your closest friends...**

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Spend some real time with your closest relationships this Christmas... put that phone aside for an hour

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Ask them - how are we doing? Where is my selfishness and self-centeredness hurting our relationship?

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And then, will you forgive me, and help me follow the Jesus way, the self-sacrificial self-giving way of our Prince of Peace

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**Will you stand and pray with me?**

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