

Wright Words: How death made my 17th Christmas feel like my very first

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After school on Friday, Dec. 18, 1987, a friend and I drove to the University of Virginia hospital in Charlottesville. I was 16 years old. The next morning we were set to travel to a high school speech and forensics competition across the state.

I was there to visit my father, Willard Wright, admitted for tests and likely surgery. He was in round two of a battle that began as kidney cancer and had recently changed playing fields to his lower back.

That evening, as the winter sun set in his drab third-floor room, Dad took my hand to wish me well for the weekend. Then through light, quickened breaths he said two words that will never fade: "Be good."

At the time — given how well he knew my rambunctious personality — I assumed he meant to be good on the bus the next morning. Hours later I learned I was wrong.

While rehearsing a dramatic reading in my living room, the most dramatic moment of my life unfolded with a simple phone call. My eldest brother called to say Dad had stopped breathing and the rest of us needed to race to the hospital immediately.

I remember the nausea. I remember kneeling quickly in prayer with my other brother and my sister. I remember white-knuckle gripping the door handle as my brother flew us down our country road toward the hospital in his tiny blue Chevette.

I took the steps to the third floor three at a time. At the top, just outside the waiting room where my mother sat in shock and fresh grief, my brother met me with two more words I still hear today: "He's gone."

The next few days dripped by like gray raindrops on a window, each bleeding into the next. Every morning I opened my eyes and prayed the night's dream had been real. Because in the early days, I dreamed he was still alive.

Christmas morning, one week later, after the viewing and funeral, and after most of the out-of-town guests had returned to far corners of the country, we awoke to open presents Mom and Dad had bought — but that only mom would watch us open. It didn't matter because that

was the first Christmas I didn't wonder what was in the packages or gift bags.

The immediate and most pressing question when we lose a loved one is simple: "Will I see them again?" No matter your faith, or how faithful you are in it, the question is universal. For days that question rolled through me like a tired rerun.

Time passed and there were more lonely moments by myself in tearful reflection. But today, through the gift of a lens only time can bestow, I see that it may have just been the first real Christmas of my life. That morning, Dec. 25, 1987, launched a clean and deeper understanding of the holiday.

My parents taught me as best they could to remember that Christmas is about Christ's birth. But when my father died, it became much, much more. I came to realize that it's as much about the Savior's life and death as his humble arrival on earth.

Because of my desire to see my father again and finish learning the lessons I believe he was meant to teach me, I finally began to view Christmas as a stepping-stone to a more important holiday, Easter, the day we rejoice in Christ's resurrection.

Obviously Dec. 25 is an important cultural and religious holiday for many of us. But without his perfect life, wouldn't Christmas be just another birthday?

Without the bloodshed and anguish in Gethsemane, wouldn't Christmas be just another day to fill the stores?

Without the death on the cross, and, even more importantly, his resurrection three days later, Christ's birth would have been just another baby born in Bethlehem.

It is because of his heavenly mission, the atonement only he could fulfill, and his glorious resurrection that we live with hope. Hope we will not just live after death, but if we live well and righteously, we will live with him again.

I am eternally grateful that my Christmas sorrow in 1987 transformed to hope. Now, 23 years later, I rejoice that my hope turned to faith, that faith became knowledge, that knowledge matured to complete confidence, an unshakable certainty that not only does Jesus Christ live but my father lives, too. One day I will see both again.

Oh how I love Christmas! Not only for the birth of our Savior but for the holy beginning. And because of his perfect life, it is a beginning that hath no end.

