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The Year of the Lord's Favor

December 26, 2021

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TEXT: Luke 4:16-21 (NIV)

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Well, Mary's life is a reminder to us that we serve a God of surprises. You know, as we're celebrating this Sunday here and we're looking forward to a new year and we're in the middle of this Christmas season, I want to talk with you today about, again, the deeper meaning, the deeper purpose behind this season. Because beyond the glitter and the activities and all that, there's a great purpose for what we're celebrating. And in the midst of this busy time, it's good to reflect on and let this stir in our hearts and let this minister to us. This baby that we're celebrating, who is in the manger, is not just another child born into the world. This is the Great I Am. This is the lion of Judah, the lamb of God, the spotless lamb that would take away the sin of the world. This is the Messiah of Israel. This is the long awaited one. This is the one before whom every knee

will bow and every tongue will confess. There's something more going on here than the glitter of Christmas. God has invaded our world, and he has told us through the prophecies that he was coming. And then at this time, when he arrived in the fullness of time, God sent his son, born of a virgin, born of Mary, laid in a manger. And it's a great thing to celebrate because of what it means for us in the world. It is our great hope.

We have the prophecies. But if we look in the scriptures, we see when Jesus was among us, he slowly unveiled more and more specific fulfillments and purposes for which he came – fulfillments of prophecies. And I want to look today with you, as we read earlier in Luke 4, where he said “The spirit of the Lord is on me,” just at the start of his ministry after he was in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, led into the desert by the Holy Spirit and then tempted by the evil one. And after he was through that trial, he went to his hometown of Nazareth, where he'd been brought up. And on the Sabbath Day, as was often his custom, he went into the synagogues there and he listened. And even when he was 10 years old, he was drawn there and his parents were confused when they lost him. And he told them, “Oh, didn't you know, I had to be at my father's house?” And there he was, back in the synagogues at the start of his ministry. And the scroll of this prophet, Isaiah was handed to him. And he opened it and he found the place where it is written: “The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” And then he said, “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Then he rolled up that scroll, gave it back to the attendant, sat down... the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. Who's this man who grew up here in this town; this young, this young boy named Jesus, who's now become a man who sang this to us? And he said to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus came for a purpose. He unveiled some of those purposes here to proclaim the good news: he's been anointed to bring freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind. The truth of the matter is at Christmas, we're celebrating the overwhelming goodness of God breaking through into our world that is filled with so much darkness and evil, and giving us the inspiration of hope. As we're in this period between Christmas and the new year, I thought it would be good today to look at these words that Jesus said in verse 18 here, Luke 4, when he said “He has sent me, he's anointed me to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” I sure hope as you listen, your heart stirs with hope as mine has studying this text of scripture. You know, this year of the Lord's favor

that Jesus is referencing here is found in Isaiah 61. This is the prophecy that was made about him, that he was reading from the scroll that was handed to him. And this year is a year of transformation, a year of God's goodness breaking through. It's a year available to anyone and it's a year that you and I can walk into by faith as we're looking towards 2022 because of the gift of Christmas, because of the work of Christ. This year has in it various characteristics. It's a year where God comforts those who mourn, according to Isaiah. It's a year where he provides for those who've been grieving. He bestows on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes. He gives them the oil of joy instead of sadness; the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. It's about God coming to his people and rebuilding them, renewing them, having them rejoice, rewarding them.

The year of the Lord's favor is available to anyone. It's a part of what God came to bring us in the gift of Jesus, and I want to look today at how a person sets themselves up to experience the favor of the Lord. I mean, it's been provided for us in Christ and his favor is available to us. God loves absolutely everyone. But in order to please God, there are certain characteristics and attributes in life that you and I can model, we can develop. We can respond as the Holy Spirit instructs us and leads us. And this year of the Lord's favor something I've thought about many times in my life and as I look towards 2022, it's a proclamation of something that's coming that should give hope to you and I. And this word "favor" is used various times in the scripture, and as it's used, we should pay attention to: what are the characteristics? What are the circumstances around which God's favor is poured out on an individual? And of course, in the Christmas story, we don't have to go any farther than looking at Mary.

Mary found favor with God. Luke 1:28-31, says

An angel went to her and said, "Greetings you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at the Angel's words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus."

You know, Mary qualified for the favor of God. You know, there's sometimes restrictions before a person can experience something, receives something, do something. I remember when I was younger and I went to my first amusement park, and there was a sign beside the roller coaster with a little picture of a guy in his hand was held at a certain height and it said, "You must be this tall to ride this ride," to enjoy

the privilege, the favor of riding this ride, this roller coaster. And of course, I wasn't tall enough and I was so discouraged that I couldn't ride that ride. And I just have a sense there's a lot of people who feel discouraged that they haven't experienced the favor of God in their lives. Because in a sense, you know, even though God loves them, they haven't modeled the characteristics that allow God to bless them. And I know that I've had a challenge doing this at a time.

I want to look with you specifically today about why this favor came to Mary. You know, Pastor Kramer talked about Mary a couple of weeks ago on this broadcast and highlighted so much about how she was blessed. But I want to even look more specifically. What about her was so pleasing to God? What had God's heart bent towards her that she would be the one to find favor with God to carry the Christ child? Well, in Luke 1 we read about this. Mary got ready after she heard from the angel about her proclamation that she was going to be treasuring, carrying this child, and she went to her relative, Elizabeth's house. And Mary's greeting there, the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb and was filled with the spirit of God. And in a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed, are you among women! Blessed is the child you will bear! Why am I so favored?" Even Elizabeth found favor here that Mary visited her, "that the mother of my lord should come to me. As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she, who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her." And Mary said now in Mary's song, that Pastor Kramer looked at earlier, listen to this now, she said, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior." Mary was one who was quick to worship. She was a worshipper of God.

You know, all of us are made to worship. We're worshipers by nature. You see this in the sports arenas. You see this in how we exalt and lift up heroes, and we want to create individuals that people follow after. And it's in our nature to want to give allegiance to someone, to praise someone, to honor someone. And God has told us he wants us to have no one before him in our lives to worship and honor – no one – to have no other gods before him. Mary was a worshipper of God. "My soul glorifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my savior." She is a worshipper.

Friend, who today are you worshipping? Is your heart bent towards the Lord? Are you inclined to put him first in your life? Is he at the first place in the mantelpiece of your life? Is there any other God before him? Any other passion before him, any other zeal

before him? In order to experience God's fullness of blessing the favor of God, he wants us to put him first. Jesus said it this way: "If you seek first the Kingdom of God in his righteousness, all of your needs, all the blessings that God has for you will come into your life. All of your needs will be met." She was a worshipper God.

But then she said after she praised him, "He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." Not only was Mary a worshipper, in order to be a true worshipper, you're looking up at someone greater than yourself being God, and that means you have a humble state. You are in a position of humility. And she embraced her role as a servant of God. "He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 tell us very clearly that God opposes the proud, but he shows favor and pours out his grace on the humble. King Saul was disqualified because of his pride. Mary was anointed, chosen, given favor, in part because of her humility, her worshiping heart, and her humble state; her humble, servant-minded attitude about who she was before the Almighty.

She was a worshipper of God. She was humble and servant minded, and this caused God's heart to be bent towards her. And then in Luke 1, she says, "From now on, all generations will call me blessed. The mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him." This word "fear," as Pastor Kramer referenced earlier this month, is a sense of reverence for God, a sense of taking God very seriously in one's life. It's not being afraid of God, but being reverent of God and trusting that what he says and who he is and what he's revealed about himself as is true and he can be taken very seriously at his word. And then Mary does this. Remember what Elizabeth said to her in Luke 1:45? When Mary came into her home and was greeted by her and Elizabeth parroted back to her that she was blessed because she had believed what the Lord had said to her – that the Lord would fulfill his promise to her.

When I was younger, I heard the phrase and the phrase was like this: "God said it or Jesus said it. I believe it. And that settles it." And that's what was true of Mary. When Mary heard this word from the angel, she simply said, "Let it be done to me, as you have said." Elizabeth said, "You're blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said he would do on your behalf." As a matter of fact, when the angel said this to her, she said, "I am the Lord's servant." Mary answered, "May your word be fulfilled to me." She had a deep reverence for God and took him at his word. Thinking

then about Mary, she had this worshipful heart. She was honoring God. She saw the majesty and the glory of God in her humble estate there in Nazareth. She was tender towards the Lord in her soul. She was servant-minded towards him, she saw herself as a servant of God, and she believed with deep reverence and fear what God said, what God revealed about himself. She was discerning and as she heard it, and it went into her heart. She believed it. These are characteristics that God rewards. See, this kind of faith is nurtured through worship, and it's nurtured through a humble spirit that the spirit of God then can work in and minister in the gift of faith. And when a person has this kind of faith and this kind of confidence in God, the scripture says he rewards that.

You know, as we're looking towards the new year, I wonder if you're feeling hopeful. Do you have a sense of it being the year of the Lord's favor for you? Do you have a sense that your humble spirit, your servant-minded identity, your worshipful heart and your ability to read and believe and take God at his word is setting you up for the favor and the blessing and the reward and the kindness the year of the Lord's favor – the renewing, the refreshing, the rebuilding that he's promised to those that want to walk with him? You know, it's been a challenging couple of years, but I have to say as we look ahead, we can look ahead with great hope – not because of who governs us, not because of things that are going on in the world, certainly not because of what we hear about so much on the evening news and in all of the information that's passed around our world. We can have hope and anticipation and look forward because of what Jesus said to us. He came to set captives free, to bind up broken hearts, to open the blind eyes. This is all a work of God's spirit in us, the very presence of the spirit of Christ working in people right now to stir in them the gifts of faith and hope and love, and a passion and a confidence that goes beyond this world – a peace that passes all understandings. And this can be yours and mine as we humble ourselves before the Lord, confess our sin to him and our grievances before him, our doubt, our lack of belief. And we ask him to nurture in us a heart of worship and praise and a heart of believing and receiving from him.

Christmas is about the overwhelming goodness of God breaking through into our world that's filled with much darkness and evil. And it comes most thoroughly to people who share these characteristics that Mary had: this humble spirit, the servant-minded identity, this worshipful heart, and this heart that's willing to believe, to receive, and believe. I sure hope, as you listen to this message today, your heart is open

to the goodness and kindness of God and the favor he wants to bring to you this next year. Let's get ourselves in position for this favor. Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for this time together where we can look into your word and be instructed by your word and have our hearts open to what you might want to say to us. I'm sure that you're speaking to each one of us in a way that only you can. Give us ears to hear what you're saying. Correct, instruct, rebuke and train us in righteousness that we could follow in your way and be set up for your divine blessing in this new year. Help us position ourselves to walk closely with you and bear your eternal fruit in our lives and find this joy in the process. Bless 2022 as we head towards it, Lord. Thank you. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.