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## Epiphanies: He's Good News!

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TEXT: Luke 4:16-30 (ESV)

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.

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The Nazareth post, the local newspaper, had this headline: "Mob Riots in Local Synagogue." The byline read: "Local son enrages congregation and nearly loses his life." Pardon my imagination, but if there were newspapers back then, I'm sure that would have been the headline the evening of Jesus' visit to his hometown synagogue. He caused quite a commotion in that congregation when he was invited to read some scripture and then expound upon it. The scroll that was chosen for him to read was from the book of Isaiah the prophet. He unrolled it to Isaiah 61, which was a messianic prophecy, announcing, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he's anointed me to bring good news to the poor, sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight for the blind; to set out liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year the Lord's favor." And then he rolled it back up and everyone was listening, and Jesus turned and said to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, your wait is over, the time of God's favor is now. Jesus is pointing to himself announcing, "I'm the one that you've been waiting for so long, your messiah. I'm the fulfillment of that prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, and a new chapter now lies ahead. God is up to something very big for you." The listeners were taken aback and surprised by his words. "Well, it's a nice reading, I've always liked that one," they said to each other, "such a nice young man. But what's that he's saying?" His announcement was greeted with some skepticism. Someone said, "Nice kid, but can he really deliver on something like that? Look at him. He's Joseph, the carpenter son. He doesn't look anything like messiah material to me." Another mother in the congregation said "I watched him grow up. I know the family. I remember when he gave his parents that scare in Jerusalem, when he was 12 years old, running off to the temple for three days." Someone else said

He was such a good boy. Mary did a great job raising him and his siblings as a single mom after Joseph died. But what Jesus is claiming here sounds a little bit crazy, and his mother must be frightened by this. There's no way he can be Israel's messiah sent to save us from our enemies and lead us to a new and better day. After all, he's just one of us.

You see, the congregation had a different picture of the Messiah – what he would be like, where he would come from, what his mission would be. And Jesus definitely didn't fit that picture. So, the message wasn't received well or believed. In fact, as you know, they ended up running him out of town as a false prophet, attempting to throw

him off a cliff so they could stone him to death for his blasphemy. But God obviously intervened, and Jesus miraculously escaped them somehow. You see, his hour for dying had not yet come.

Now, I've given some sermons over the years that have gotten people upset, but wow, they've never induced violence. Why did they get so mad, you might be wondering? Well, it's because Jesus hit a hot button after their skeptical response to his announcement. He referred to two Old Testament stories from the dark, unfaithful days of Israel, reminding them of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, who went to non-Jews and blessed them instead of Jews who were rejecting God and wouldn't receive the message of repentance. And these Jewish people in the synagogue hated non-Jews so much that when Jesus intimated that he would be taking his message to them instead, that God was turning his back on them, they saw that as blasphemy. They got angry with Jesus, angry enough to even kill him.

Well, there's big picture things being spoken of in Jesus' good news. You see, he's giving them an epiphany, revealing himself and God's intentions. When he spoke that day, what he spoke was the gospel and it was the gospel truth – he was outlining his mission to come. It's true that as you read through Luke's gospel, Jesus went about announcing God's good news to poor people and to all kinds of people. And he did proclaim release and freedom and healed the blind and many other afflictions as well. But ultimately, Jesus was describing something bigger with those words in the synagogue that day in Nazareth. His mission was to save the world from sin and its consequences. The world's broken by sin. Humanity's separated from life with God because of it, and we couldn't fix it. So God sent Jesus to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. And he did that for us. So Jesus is good news for the poor, the spiritually poor who need a relationship with God, but they're spiritually broke, indebted to God by their sin, deserving of prosecution, but unable to pay the debt. Eventually, Jesus would go to the cross and pay for that debt. There's liberty and release for the captives. All of us are helplessly held captive to sin and death and the devil. There's an old spiritual that I love, it says,

I'm so glad Jesus set me free. I'm so glad Jesus set me free. I'm so glad Jesus set me free. Singing glory, hallelujah! Jesus set me free. Satan had me bound, but Jesus set me free. Satan had me bound, but Jesus set me free. Satan had me bound, but Jesus set me free. Singing glory, hallelujah! Jesus set me free.

And Jesus is the healer of the blind. Those walking in spiritual darkness, unable to see the way and the truth about God and his purposes for life. Like the hymn writer declares, though because of Jesus, I was blind, but now I see. And Jesus is jubilee. The year the Lord's favor. Jubilee was to be a time of release from debts and release of indentured servants and restoration of lost property to families in Israel. It's fully described in Leviticus 25. And Jesus is saying – and it's described as the Lord's favor – and Jesus says “I'm announcing the year the Lord's favor” as he points to himself. “I'm ushering in a real, fresh new start for people, forgiveness for the debt of sin, freedom from slavery to sin and death in the devil, restoring of eternal heavenly property to those that have lost it because of sin.” Jesus brings the unmerited favor of God, which we call grace – amazing grace. Someone once said,

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need is forgiveness, God sent us a savior.

And that's the epiphany being given this day: salvation has arrived in Jesus Christ.

As I read this account from Luke's Gospel, I couldn't help but be reminded of a statement that the apostle John wrote in the first chapter of his gospel. It goes like this: “Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But do all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God; who were born again, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” God's unmerited favor has come to us in the person of Jesus. Hallelujah! He's our Christ, our messiah, our rescuer, our redeemer. And he came to be received by us so that we might be made children of God. He came to bring God's favor, his unmerited favor, called grace, to you and me. Pastor and author Colin Smith, writing about this announcement from Jesus, says,

I'm so glad that Jesus came to bring the year of the Lord's favor and not the day of the Lord's justice. Justice is what we need when we're innocent. But when we have fallen short of all that God has commanded, justice does not help us. Justice is of no use to any of us before God.

We need favor. We need grace. We need mercy, we need kindness beyond what is due and usual kindness that you do not see in this world, kindness that only comes from God's largeness. We need our debts to God canceled. We need to be set free from those powers that bind us. We need the lost inheritance of everlasting life restored. Jesus says it is for this very reason, precisely, that he came.

So, if you're a Christian today. I hope you're having an epiphany, and coming to the realization of just how rich you really are in Jesus Christ – how blessed you are. You are living under the favor of God. His smile is upon you because of what God in Christ did for you and me at the cross, your sins are cancelled out, forgiven; and the life of God is now within you. You have the Holy Spirit, you've been set free and you have this eternal inheritance waiting for you. You are rich in Christ as a child of God. And you have every reason to rejoice and be confident. The apostle Paul testifies to the supreme value of knowing Jesus the Christ. Writing to those early Christians who are being tempted to trust in themselves, in their own obedience, to get right with God, Paul testified with these words,

If anyone thinks that he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin; Hebrew of Hebrews. As to the law of God, a Pharisee. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Jesus Christ. Indeed. I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ, my lord.

Friends. It's true. How great is the gain of those who have Christ Jesus in their lives? Not only saving them, but leading them. And we see as well how great is the loss of those who reject him? If you have never really seen or known the supreme value of Jesus Christ for your life; if you've never tasted God's grace and kindness in Jesus; if you've never realized all that can be yours in him, I hope and pray you will seek and find him, and follow him – that the Lord's favor will become yours to enjoy forever. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this epiphany from your Holy Spirit-inspired word. You have really loved us through Jesus Christ. Open the eyes of our hearts to trust and follow and serve Jesus each and every day. We ask this in his name. Amen.