



TIME OF GRACE®

Christmas Hype: Jesus Is the Focus

Study Notes

Summary

How impressive is your Jesus? The answer to that question might determine the quality of your Christmas. That's why John the Baptist wants to remind you who Jesus really is and how impressive his work really was.

- Hype Man = The _____ that gets you _____.
- **Luke 1:5-17:** ⁵In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."
- **Malachi 4:5,6:** ⁵"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Points to Ponder

1. Which of the three “ways to celebrate Christmas” best describe your past Decembers? Looking back, do you wish you could’ve done things differently?
2. Name three reasons why even Jesus would need a “hype man.” (Reread Luke 1:16,17 if you need help.)
3. Study the lyrics of Zechariah’s Song (Luke 1:67-80). What hyped up John’s father as he thought about the coming of his son and the Son of God?

Homework for Next Week

Read Matthew 3:13-17.

Time of Grace Ministry
Christmas Hype: Jesus Is the Focus
Luke 1:3-17, Malachi 4:5-6
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Pastor Mike Novotny

You know, the older I get, the more I realize that there are two kinds of smart in the world. There's book smart and there's street smart.

Just ask my mother. When we went back to Appleton here five years ago and I started to pastor this church, we began a tradition in our family that we call FamFest. Every Sunday for lunch, me, my wife, our two kids, my mom, my dad, and my mother-in-law get together at one of our houses and we enjoy a meal together. We feel really blessed since I can be a pastor anywhere in the country that we're actually all together here so I want to leverage it, take advantage of it, so every Sunday for lunch, we celebrate FamFest.

But there's this thing about Sundays for me; they're kind of busy. Sundays aren't the only day that I work, like some of you think, but they are by far the craziest day that I have of work. And so what often happens at FamFest is that I polish off my meal as fast as I can, I shovel down dessert almost with two forks, and I grab my plate and I clean up and grab as many dishes as I can before I run out the door and get ready for church. And my mother, almost without fail, says to me, "Michael, it's okay. Just sit down." But it wouldn't feel right to make my mom cook and clean up after me. I'm 39; I'm not six so I kind of ignore her and I keep cleaning up the dishes and figuring out who's done eating what and so she says it again, "Michael, seriously, it's okay. Just sit down." But I know that church is coming for afternoon service and I don't want to leave everyone else to do all the work and so I keep cleaning, and if someone's done, I grab the dish while they're just sitting there, sitting and talking, until one Sunday, my mom said to me, "Michael, at FamFest, I'd kind of like to talk with my family." And so, right? We're running and we're rushing and I wonder if we can hear our Father's voice from heaven if he would sound a lot like my mom? And say, "Hey, hey, hey. It's called Christmas because it's about Christ." It's not called Giftmas or Decorationmas or Perfect Family Picturemas. We named it Christmas and we came up with all these traditions because we wanted to think deeply about Christ.

And I tell you that today because if you forget that, if you lose your focus on Jesus, you're going to spend the next month with more running than resting and rejoicing. You're going to trade your peace for a couple of presents that will end up in a garage sale four years from now. You're going to think so much about the gifts that you have to buy and give that you're going to lose sight of the greatest gift that's already been given. And so God, who wants you to truly have joy and peace and hope and love and life this holiday season, today he wants us to slow down and think deeply about what this season is all about.

Which is why I think he gave us a hype man. You might know the word "hype" means to get really excited about something; like your anticipation builds, you can't wait, your eyes are fixed,

you're leaning forward waiting for the first word. But the phrase hype man actually comes from the world of hip-hop music. Any rap fans in the house today? I asked that at the 7:30 service this morning at St. Peter and I was the only hand that went up, believe it or not. Yeah, way back in the '80s when like hip hop was being developed, there was a group called Public Enemy. Ever heard of them before? This really talented, intelligent rapper named Chuck D had a hype man. His hype man's named was Flava Flav. Anyone remember him? He had like 16 reality shows that I think were on cable TV. He had the big clock? And he would get on stage and his job was to get people so excited, so hyped up, that they would stamp their feet, they'd put their hands in the air, and when Chuck stepped onto the stage and started spitting his brilliant lyrics, people would be so excited to hear. And then Flava Flav would stand on the side, he wouldn't run off the stage, and whenever Chuck was rapping so fast you couldn't catch it, if something was really good they wanted the crowd to hear, Flava Flav would repeat it into the mic so you wouldn't miss it. In other words, the hype man wasn't the main man. If you're taking notes in your program today, here's how I'd define hype man. A hype man is the backup who gets you jacked up. In honor of the hip hop origins, I decided to rhyme it; that took me a long time to come up with, by the way. He's not the main event, he's not the star of the show. He is the backup and his job is to get you jacked up.

Which is exactly what John the Baptist did. This might be the first time in church history where John the Baptist has been compared to Flava Flav but today it's happening because they both have the same job. Their job was not to stand under the lights and be the star; their job was to draw a crowd, to get everyone's attention, and then to point and say, "Look, listen, because if you do, you're going to see something incredible." So starting today and for the next few weeks, we're going to listen to John the Baptist. We're going to follow his story, we're going to listen carefully to his message, because he's going to make sure that in the craziness of all the things of the Christmas season, we don't lose sight of what it's all about, the true source of peace, Jesus. So we're going to begin at perhaps the best spot to begin - in the beginning. And this is how Luke, a first century doctor who recorded the history of Jesus, begins this story.

"In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife, Elizabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of the incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside."

So John the Baptist's story starts here in history. Luke wants you to know this isn't some Christmas fable or tale from Netflix; this happened in real time and place, which is why he says during the days of King Herod. As some of you history buffs know Herod was the ruler of the southern part of Israel called Judea from about 37 B.C. to just after the birth of Jesus. Herod is kind of famous in the Bible because he's the king who was so obsessed with power and prestige that he tried to kill Jesus after he heard there was a new King of the Jews. But Herod was also

famous for this: The temple. Herod was an incredible builder in the ancient holy land and he took one of the mountain peaks in the city of Jerusalem and built these massive walls and filled it all in with dirt to create this huge section - multiple football fields big - called the temple mount. And then on top, he built this massive building, the Jewish temple, where God's people would gather for special holy days and worship. Now, I wish I had more time to tell you today why God organized his church that way but for what you need to know now is back in Zechariah's day, those temple courts were filled with people worshipping and he, as the chosen priest, went inside. You see, Luke tells us that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were godly and they were devout and they were righteous and they were blameless and they were childless. Apparently, believing in God and praying passionately doesn't mean you always get what you want. And some of you families out there know just how much emotion is packed into that little sentence; that month after month, when Elizabeth's period came and the prayers went unanswered, how it must have shaken their faith in God. How every time a sister or a niece or a neighbor got pregnant and started to show, every time they brought home a little baby, how hard it must have been. For this devout couple, to celebrate this gift that God had given to others they knew, and I wonder in the quietness of their own hearts if they wondered why God didn't give that gift to them, too?

But God had a plan; a plan not just to answer their prayer in the most miraculous of ways but a plan to one up them. To give them not just a son but a son who would prepare the world for the coming of the Son of God. That's where Luke goes next; verse 11: "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He's never to take wine or other fermented drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he's born. He will bring many people of Israel back to the Lord their God and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'" And that's exactly what happened.

And the angel's words came true; he would be a joy and a delight. And as we're about to find out, he would be great in the sight of God. In fact, I wonder if old Zechariah, who knew his Old Testament so well, caught exactly what the angel was saying because the angel wasn't just speaking; the angel was quoting a prophecy. I wonder if some of you longtime church attenders and Bible lovers caught it? Let me ask you - if you know the answer, feel free to shout it out - do any of you know how many books are in the Old Testament? Sixty-six total in the whole Bible. In the Old Testament? Yeah, 39 books in the Old Testament. Do any of you know what the last book of the Old Testament is? Yeah, the book of Malachi. Does anyone know how many chapters are in the book of Malachi? Wow, you guys are smart! There's four chapters. Did you hear me preach this already? Yes, you did. No, you can't participate. Four chapters in Malachi. Do you know how many verses are in the fourth chapter of the book of Malachi? There are six verses. And do any of you know what the sixth verse of the fourth chapter of the thirty-ninth and last book of the Old Testament is about? John.

Here's what it says: "See," God says, "I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents of their children and the hearts of the children to their parents or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction." Period. Quote. End of the Old Testament. God had promised that before that day would come, when the Lord himself would walk upon the earth, before it would be a dreadful day when he would strike sinners with a curse, he would send someone to prepare the way. He called him Elijah; a nickname he would have because just like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, he would preach with boldness. It didn't matter who you were - Gentile, soldier, Jewish Pharisee, tax collector, prostitute, brand new to Jesus - it didn't matter. He called everyone to repentance so they would be prepared to be saved instead of judged. And that's exactly what John did.

Over the next few Sundays, we're going to see how John preached boldly. How he took down proud and lofty people, leveling those mountains of arrogance and pride. How he lifted up people who were depressed and despairing, ashamed and guilty, thinking their lives were too dark to see God face to face. He made crooked ways straight so people could walk and see the face of God. He prepared a people; he made them ready for the coming of Jesus.

So my question for you today is are you prepared? As another Christmas gets closer, are you ready to have that straight, smooth road to see as much of the face of Jesus as you can? You know, I think there are three different ways that you could approach this Christmas season. Let's imagine for a second that this Bible represents Jesus. Now, I think there are one, two, three different ways that the next few weeks could go for you. The first one is common - although I hope you don't choose it - is to turn your back on Jesus. Like, some people think about Jesus, they're all into the Christ of Christmas but it's just not your thing. Maybe you're watching this on TV, maybe someone dragged you to church today, you're really not that spiritual, so you're going to focus on family and friends and some time off of work and school. You could do that. Or you could do this; you could believe in Jesus, you could love him, you could come to church a Sunday or two or Christmas Eve, but really the bulk of your time and focus is on planning for this party and cooking those desserts and visiting these friends and making sure you travel to that place and you get little glimpses of Jesus but the season's going to rush by with other things. Or you could do this; you could focus the next few weeks on the Jesus of this book. Yeah, you might get distracted and you might have commitments, but your focus, your heart always comes back to this place because you're ready to receive the greatest gifts from him.

I hope this year you choose to live like this because I want your Christmas to look a lot like this. This is a powerful drawing from one of my favorite Christian artists who described how most people in this world live. They live in this world of shadow and darkness where our spiritual enemy has turned our eyes away from a glorious Jesus. We might be clutching on to our possessions, we might be held back by money, staring at our phones, returning another work email. We might be caught up in pleasure and drinking and relationships but what God wants for you is to see things through the eyes of faith, to break through as you study the words of this book and see the glory and light and life of God, to seek his face, and to find everything your

heart wants in him. That's not easy, it's not natural, and our culture and our country won't push it on you. But if you take the time to meditate and to seek him, you can see him.

And I hope you do because here's the truth: Everything on the left side of that picture - all the things of this life - are not guaranteed. If your joy this Christmas season comes from having the perfect family, I can't guarantee you'll have it. With multiple commitments, I'm not sure if they'll make it, how long they can stay, or if they'll be nice when they're sitting at your kitchen table. In a world where our bodies are broken, I can't promise that when those big moments come, your stomach won't ache or your back won't hurt or your head won't throb. I can't promise you that your relationship's going to turn the corner so it really is a merry Christmas. I can't promise that you're going to have money to buy the gifts you want. I can't promise that your kids are going to appreciate the gifts they get. Everything in this life is uncertain, which is why we're so stressed and why so few of us have peace.

But if you fix your eyes on Jesus, if you seek him and meditate deeply on the words that he said, you have something that this world can't take away. You have a love that can't be touched. You have a friendship that can't be changed. You have a glorious body waiting for you in your future; the perfect spiritual family and a friendship with God himself. You have his approval, his affection, his attention so that when you pray, when you speak, even though everyone else in the room is looking at their phones and devices and distracted and juggling their to-do lists in their heads, your Heavenly Father gives you his full attention as your prayers rise up to him like incense. And even if no one cares, even if you're just an old guy praying for his family in a pregnancy, like the angel said to Zechariah, "Your prayer is heard." And so if you want joy and life and light, seek Jesus.

Now what would that look like for you? Before I say amen, let me give you a bunch of practical ideas that could make this Christmas different. For some of you, I would suggest that right after church, if you don't have a regular plan to dig into the teachings and life of Jesus, you open up your phone, you download a Bible app, and you search for a Christmas plan. And for the next few weeks at the start of every day or at the end of every evening, you're going to get a great chance to meditate deeply on who Jesus is and what he's done. For others of you, it's going to be with music. You're going to swap over your Christmas playlist and make it more about worship than just about fuzzy holiday feelings; a little less Pentatonix and a little more Jesus. And this time, as you sing, you're going to think deeply about the words. What does it mean that peace has come? What does it mean that God is with us? What does it mean that it was a holy night? And maybe for the first time, you won't just sing it but you'll think about it and it'll help you see the face of Jesus. For some of you who are raising kids, it's going to be spending a lot less time thinking about the gifts they want to get and a lot more time meditating on the gifts they already got; defining hope and peace and forgiveness and love, talking about how incredible it is that God came to be with us so that one day we can go and be with God.

But for most of you, what you need to do is going to be very difficult. To make this Christmas any different than it was the past 10, 20, 50 years, you're going to have to learn to say "no." In a world where everyone wants your time and everyone wants to volunteer and everyone wants to

get a white elephant gift and make it an ugly sweater Christmas party, when everyone wants to hang out with you and every family wants quantity time, if you say "yes" to all of it, you will have zero time for Jesus. So for some of you, the godliest thing you're going to do is look a loved one in the face and say, "no." I love you but I can't make it. Our hearts rarely grow without quantity time with God. And so, maybe this Christmas you're going to slow down, you're going to clear out some time in your calendar, and you're going to seek the face of God. And when things get crazy and you feel distracted, you're going to meditate on his amazing unfailing love.

And today, I'm going to help you practice. Right now, if you're holding anything in your hands - a Bible, a pen, a program, a cup of coffee - I want you to set it down for just a second. And I want you to take both of your hands and put your palms up on your legs like this and I want you to close your eyes, I want you to breathe in through your nose, and out through your mouth, and I want you to think to yourself, "It's about Jesus." And breathe in and breathe out and think, "It's about Jesus." And when the holiday season gets crazy, I want you to take a second, I want you to find a quiet room, I want you to hide in the bathroom if you have to, lock the door, leave the phone in your pocket. I want you to breathe in and breathe out and think, "It's about Jesus."

A couple hours ago, I saw my mom at FamFest. Our family dined on some exquisite food - chicken nuggets and fries. And you'll be proud to know, as I was thinking about today's message, I left my dirty plates on the table and I spent some great time with my mom. And this Christmas season, if you don't get everything done, your Heavenly Father's okay with that because he doesn't want more running; he just wants to talk because his word is what gives peace and joy that goes beyond understanding. So whatever's going on these next few weeks, remember it's about Jesus.

Let's pray.

Dear God, it's easy to say no to things in a place like this. But when we're face to face with that person who asks us to do one more thing that we just can't fit, it's so hard to have the courage and strength to politely and graciously say no. And so I ask for the help of your Holy Spirit this Christmas season that we would not be so caught up in the traditions that we started to honor Jesus that we just don't have time to actually honor Jesus. Give us the strength that we need, especially for those of us who love to please other people. Help us, God, to clear out our schedules to truly have a Christmas full of Sabbath rest so that we have time to think, time to breathe, and time to seek the face of your Son.

God, we prepare our hearts today. We are ready to hear from you during this Christmas season. We're ready to read those old stories in the gospels and to think deeply about what they mean for us, now and for all eternity. Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you hear this prayer. Thank you that when little people like us in a little place like this talk to you in Jesus' name, you give us your full attention. We can't wait to see how you answer this prayer like you did for Zechariah and Elizabeth because we pray to you today with boldness and confidence as we come to you in Jesus' name and all God's people said, "Amen."