

Time of Grace Ministry  
**Does Christmas Really Change Anything?**  
Hebrews 2:14 – 3:1  
December 31, 2017

***Pastor Michael Novotny***

Hello, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny with Time of Grace. I have never seen a squirrel look so sad. I was walking downtown in my city a few months ago and saw this squirrel and watched him as he picked up the biggest nut I think he had found in his entire life. And he scurried up a tree and he found a little branch to sit on, he started gnawing on it, and he looked at me and he dropped the nut and the nut clunked from the branches to trunk, across the sidewalk where I was walking, and this squirrel looked so sad. He looked at me, was terrified, ran down the tree, and took off in the other direction.

You ever felt like you had something beautiful in your hands and then you lose it? Like a gift from God, better than any Christmas gift, but then it disappears? A period of good health and amazing relationships, a great job that you love, this intimacy and closeness with God but then it slips through your fingers.

Today, Pastor Mark Jeske is going to teach us to put our joy in something that we cannot lose; something that can't slip through our fingers. He's going to encourage us to fix our eyes on Jesus so that our joy can be new every single day and we will truly receive from God a gift that never ends.

***Pastor Mark Jeske***

I've got to tell you a story – once there was a woman who came to church here once who had no background in Christianity whatsoever. It was all new. I mean, everything was new. And she was a little lonely, didn't know anybody here, and came with a friend and couldn't get enough: "I can't believe this! What an incredible story!" And we went through the whole cycle of the church year, you know, the whole Christmas and Epiphany and Lent and Easter and Ascension and Pentecost and then the summer months of the Christian growth, the stories and the teaching in Scripture of personal growth – first the life of Christ, then the life of the Christian – and then she came almost every Sunday for a whole year and just seemed like a sponge, absorbing all of this. And then it was Advent again and we heard some of the same John the Baptist stories that had been circulated around when she came to visit for the first time and she said to me after church in one of those Advent Sundays, "I heard all that already." Like, when's the new stuff coming? I said, "Well, ah, this is a cycle. We go through this again and hear it again." I never saw her again. She thought, "I heard all that. Done that. Been there and done that." It's like, where's the new stuff?

Has that thought ever popped into your head: "Where's the new stuff? I know this already – okay, the baby in the manger – got it. Got it." I get how we can be so busy that the familiarity of the story doesn't hit here anymore. And I want to pause with you – before we say goodbye to

Christmas and launch into the new year, while we still have like one leg in Christmas and one leg in new year stuff – I want to talk about the transition. Has Christmas really changed anything in your life? Not just outwardly; possibly it's changed some outward things. Did anything change for you?

I'd like for some inspiration to dig into Scripture with you today from the book of Hebrews. The early Jewish Christians who were still processing the way in which the invasion of planet earth by the Son of God had rocked their world. The book of Hebrews is an elegant essay on the fact that the Old and New Testaments are not two completely different philosophies semi-hostile to one another and foreign to one another. They, in fact, are like this – tightly woven together. Everything in the Old points forward to Christ in the New; everything in the New is rooted, an explanation to, and provides meaning to everything that came before. And Hebrews, the book of Hebrews, written to Jewish Christians – all the first Christians were Jewish, weren't they? That whole first generation was heavily Jewish. This is an elegant set of 13 chapters explaining how Christ is the fulfillment of everything that they had been hoping for, longing for, looking forward to. In fact, Christ is the fulfillment of the meaning of the entire Jewish nation itself. The people existed for a variety of reasons but the chiefest of them all was to give the world its ultimate Christ-mas Christmas present.

And here's the meaning; here's why it happened, that God took human flesh into his divine nature, was born so humbly. Why? Here it is; one paragraph tells the story: "Since the children have flesh and blood," this is referring to a very kind term that God used for people – sinful fools like you and me – calls us children. Which is good news just in the third word of this sentence! He doesn't call you what you really are, which is prisoners or condemned or idiots or evildoers; it doesn't use any of those words. In fact, it uses this beautiful word – calls you "children." You're not strangers to the Father. You're not outcasts, you're not his enemies. Though all of those things in a sense once could have been applied to you, you are called children. What a tender way to refer to you. Christmas changes your self-identification from all those negative things to this beautiful term. Because he loved you enough to come and to be born like you, with you, for you, you now may call yourself God's child and call on your heavenly Father not as some mysterious remote deity that you have to kind of placate and buy off with good performance or the giving of some kind of tribute or placate him in some kind of way or try to guess what to do to make him not angry with you, you can live every day of your life in the absolute calm and serenity to know that the great power in heaven likes you and he's friendly toward you; he thinks you're cute. Not because you are but because he decided to think you're cute.

You know, some of the pictures on your fridge are not very good looking people, are they? Let's be real. But they're good looking to you because you love them. You don't view them the way celebrity magazines view people. Those people whose pictures are on your fridge are dear to you and they look gorgeous because you love them; they're connected to you. God thinks you're gorgeous. He's changed your ashes into beauty, the Scripture says, and he calls you children. And because you have flesh and blood, your rescuer had to have flesh and blood, too. "He, too, shared in our humanity so that he would have a body to give for you so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Do you feel like a slave? Have you ever felt like a slave? That's a kind of a hard word, isn't it? That's a strong word but I think it's true. Think of all of the behaviors we and people we know in our lives, think of stuff we do to push off our mortality and our fear of dying. Our lives are full of like a mad dance to pretend, pretend, pretend, pretend. We plaster makeup on our faces to look younger, try to dress peppy and dress young to feel younger, try to work out and keep our flab and blubber from overcoming us to slow us down. We try to get the newest kind of hairdo or newer haircuts to not look old. We're all scared to death of growing old and looking old and we're dancing faster, faster, filling our lives with distractions and activity to stave off the inevitable because we're terrified that the stalker, the reaper, is after us and he's going to get us one of these days. And we only have a tiny bit of time left – got to get it all! Got to do it all! Faster, faster, faster, faster! And Christmas allows you to slow down and say, "I don't have to do this. I don't have to live my life this way. I've been freed from that fear because I am now, through my faith in the God-man, I have become immortal myself." The Scripture tells us there's even a little bit divine in us now that he came to become human so that a little of that divine could be in us.

You're alive now. You're grafted onto the vine, the Scripture says. Jesus said I'm like the juice of life. Connected to me, you're alive; you'll never die. You are never going to cease being alive because your mind, your memories, your spirit, can easily survive the loss of your mortal remains. That isn't going to slow you down at all! You will just transition to an awesome new life in spirit. In some sort of form, God is going to keep you going and your mind and thoughts and personality and will still be alive as we then await the reunion with our bodies, made new one hundred percent, without any of the aches and pains you have now. So you can't lose; you are deathless and immortal. You're bulletproof, as it were. Even a bullet in your pumper only transitions you to an even better life. You can't lose so you don't have to get it all now. You don't have to view your life as a mad rush to try and squeeze out all the juice before it's taken from you. You can simply enjoy your days knowing you are loved, knowing you are forgiven and knowing you are immortal. And you might say, "Well, isn't this a little creepy to kind of smush Good Friday into the Christmas story? Can't we just talk about the cuteness of the baby and leave Good Friday for another day?" And I'm saying "No, that's the whole point; they fit together." His first bed was a donkey feedbox and his deathbed was vertical, wasn't it; it was a cross. But the reason he was born was so that he could offer himself to die for you and that is the meaning that is so life-transforming because we were literally "held in slavery by our fear of death." It's not the angels he helps. The angels are not part of the redemption story. The evil angels who rebelled are now stuck in their rebellion and they will share in Satan's condemnation and torment and there are good angels in heaven who never rebelled. They also are now confirmed in their holiness. It's we who need the help and here the writer to the Hebrews calls us "Abraham's descendants" and this doesn't mean Abraham's literal blood descendants. You were never able to be saved by race. The children of Abraham that God calls the true Israel was never just the physical literal nation; there were many Gentiles in Old Testament times who became part of the family of God. Your race never saved you. It gave you some advantages – you got a more likely chance to hear the word – but it's the believers, the people who believe what Abraham believed – who are the true Israel, then and now. It's not the angels that Christ came to help but Abraham's descendants; all who believe in the Savior that was promised to Abraham a couple thousand years before he finally did come.

“For this reason,” because we needed saving, “he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God.” The Latin word for a priest is a pontifex; that means a bridge-builder. The pope in Catholicism kind of borrowed that word to describe himself. You’ve heard the word “pontiff,” well that is just a shortening of the old Latin word “pontifex.” The bridge-builder is somebody who connects two things and that’s what priests do. They are brokers of the mercy of the deity down to the people and they bring the prayers of the people and are kind of channels and funnels to get those prayers up to heaven and that’s what Jesus came to do. He is the cotter pin, the lynchpin, that holds God and man together and he did it in his human body and he loves you so much and is so into this role, he kept his human body, which is so extraordinary. He not only came to do a tough, difficult, and even dirty job for you, but as a gift to you, as a sign of how much he values you, he stayed human, which blows my mind. That’s one of the most stupendous, almost unbelievable, things in the entire Bible to me. I can wrap my head around the idea that he might just choose to love me enough to die for me but then once I got ‘er done, if that was me, I would have ditched this limiting earthly taxi and I would have gone back to being serene God of all eternity and not been limited in any way where I actually had to attend to a body anymore but he kept it in order to demonstrate the extremes to which he was willing to go to bond man and God back together as a high priest like this. A high priest in Old Testament times would offer animals as a substitute to teach the people your sin makes you evil and dirty enough to die for. The old covenant worship was built around ritual death and the message is that should have been you but a substitute will be provided whose blood will be shed so that you may be spared and that visual was hammered home over and over and over and over until Jesus came to do it once and for all. And that is why he’s in his little manger; to be a merciful and faithful high priest and emphasis on merciful. Because he fully experienced all of our human frustrations, except for the sin. He knows all of our limitations. He got tired. He had to wrestle with Satan not just when he was feeling good, but 40 days in the wilderness with which his ministry began was how he practiced and toughened himself up for the ultimate when he would have to face down the devil as he was dying and growing weaker, physically. But he did that for you and for me and that means that he has compassion on you as you struggle because sometimes you fail. But he doesn’t despise you for your failures. He doesn’t think you’re just stupid, ignorant trash. His heart hurts because he knows how hard it is. He knows how you struggle. He himself suffered fatigue, physical exhaustion, pain, wounding, physical assault, and pre-experienced something you have never gone through yet. It’s coming for you but if you’re listening to me talking, you don’t know what it’s like to be dying. Jesus did and he’ll be ready for you at that moment, as well, because he’s a merciful high priest.

High priests are not interested in judging; they’re interested in rescuing. He came to rescue us. “In service to God to make atonement for the sins of the people.” You and I are born into the rebellion; that means we are at odds with God. Jesus came to make us at one with God and that’s how our English-speaking ancestors came up with this word. “Atonement” is a made-up word that replaces at odds with that one; it means he came to bring us back together. He did that all alone, all by himself, that little babe wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger is the only thing standing between you and me and everlasting condemnation in hell. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

This is the continuing power of Christmas. This is with you internally even as the outward stuff starts to fade away. When your presents break or you spend the money that you were given or you start wearing out or put tears in the clothes you were given and the memories of your gathering start to fade away, this will endure: That you can celebrate the fact that you have a helper from day to day whose compassionate at the struggles you're going through. Does not despise you for being weak and is more interested in helping you than in beating you back down or shaming you or making you feel smaller or stupider or more insignificant. His word continues to pour that affirming love into your life so that as he believes in you, you can believe in yourself again. I'm not some worthless piece of trash. I'm not just a meaningless spec of evolutionary debris. I have meaning. I am somebody. I matter to God. And my struggles should not be interpreted as a sign of his anger. In fact, my struggles then only become a platform by which God can work his way within me to have other people do things for me that I can bond with them and to enable me to be useful – sometimes through my strength – also through my weaknesses and failures, I can be useful to somebody else. Because he's not punishing me or despising me, he's my merciful and patient high priest who has come to give joy and meaning and purpose back into my life. He's removed my terror and fear of dying and set me free to enjoy living for I know I shall live forever.

You will have various resolutions you're going to make in this new year and I've got a couple of things of unfinished business in my own life. Man, I know I need to work on and I'm going to have to sit down and have some quiet talk with myself later today cause there's some stuff about my life I do not yet have under control that I have got to get a grip on. I know I need some work and this is a perfect time. There's never a bad time but man, at the beginning of the year, my resistance to change is lower now and I've got to seize this moment when the new year looms. And so maybe you're going to join me in that – you don't have to – but maybe you've got some energy for some New Year's resolutions today. Well, here's one from the book of Hebrews I know that, to me, is the key to unlocking everything: “Therefore, holy brothers and sisters who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”

And to just pressure myself to do more or to make myself get better is probably not going anywhere unless I have some heavenly energy and heavenly inspiration. So I invite you to join with me – wherever, whatever situation in life you are, wherever you are – is to choose to do better at fixing your eyes and thoughts on Jesus who is our apostle, the one that was sent, who is our high priest, our bridge-builder, our connector, our one connector to God, so that his wisdom, his power, his strength, his love, may make us strong and his vision will help us to know where we should put our energy in the coming year. What is our particular role and value? How do we fit into God's overall plan? What are the things that are wrong that we need to quit doing? Which are the things we've been omitting where we need to step up? And may the Lord Jesus, our newborn Savior, bless you with both the vision and perceptiveness to know what are the Christmas issues you need to be working on to let his Christmas blessings flow not only into you but through you. May you have the vision to see it and may you have the will to say, “Yes, Lord; yes, I will. I'm going to fix my eyes on you and once again, re-declare you to be the center of my existence and then look for ways how I can be useful to you in your agenda.”

Happy New Year, everybody! Amen.

***Pastor Michael Novotny***

My youngest daughter sings the most frustrating and beautiful song. It's a little jingle that she made up and it goes like this: "Daddy, don't lose your joy in tiny things." When I'm driving and the traffic's backed up and she sees that I'm frustrated and gripping the wheel, guess what she sings from the back seat? And when something doesn't go well at home, when her sister spills a glass of milk on the table and daddy's face gets a little bit red, you know what song is being sung right at our kitchen table.

It's a great reminder that some things matter, some things last, and we shouldn't put our joy in something so temporary. Ironically, whenever I sing the song back to her in one of her difficult times, she looks at me and says, "Not now, dad!" It's difficult, right, to put our joy in the right spot? But Pastor Jeske told us that there is one tiny thing - rather, one tiny person - where we can put our joy and we will never be disappointed. Jesus Christ might have come as a tiny baby in Bethlehem but he grew up to be a powerful Savior. And if your joy is in him, in his grace, in his salvation, in his forgiveness, in his love, in his presence, the Emmanuel, always with you, you will have a kind of joy that few people on this planet have.

So listen to my little girl's advice: Don't put your joy in tiny things. Fix your eyes on Jesus and your joy will always be there.

We would love for you to join us in our prayer.

Dear Jesus, thank you for coming into this world as a small child to do the biggest things for our hearts and our eternities. Thank you that in this world with all of the ups and downs, all of the struggles and the trials, we can always count on you; that your love never fails. Your love never runs out. Your love will never give up on us. We're so grateful to know you, to believe you, to have you in our hearts and in our lives. We know that the gifts of this past season will end up in the back of our drawers, in garbage cans in months and years to come, but there's one thing that we will never throw away; it's a treasure, it's too precious to us. It's you. So thank you for always being with us. We pray that you would give us that kind of treasure of faith that we would value and prize you above all things. May that give us incredible happiness and gladness this holiday season. We pray all these things in your beautiful and big name, Amen.

With Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny and it all starts now.