

Luke 4:14-30 — The Rejection at Nazareth

(Isaiah 61:1–11; Matthew 13:53–58; Mark 6:1–6)

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and the news about him spread throughout the surrounding region. 15 He taught in their synagogues and was glorified by everyone.

16 Then Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath. And when he stood up to read, 17 the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it was written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him, 21 and he began by saying, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

22 All spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that came from his lips.

“Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” they asked.

23 Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard you did in Capernaum.’”

24 Then he added, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

25 But I tell you truthfully that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and great famine swept over all the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. 27 And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet. Yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.”

28 On hearing this, all the people in the synagogue were **enraged**. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, **in order to throw him over the cliff**. 30 But Jesus **passed through the crowd** and went on his way.

Footnotes

18 BYZ and TR He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives

19 Or to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord ; Isaiah 61:1–2 (see also LXX)

27 A leper was one afflicted with a skin disease. See Leviticus 13.

44 BYZ and TR Galilee; see Mark 1:39.

vv.14-15

“Jesus returned to Galilee” — To lay the foundation for this story, Luke offers a two-sentence summary of Jesus’ ministry tour of Galilee after his temptation. The narrative of John 2-5 covers in some detail the events of that time, which included the miracles of turning water into wine and healing a royal official’s son. (Ellicott)

During that tour, Jesus had earned “a reputation throughout the land as a doer of good deeds and a worker of miracles.” (Stedman) Now Jesus returned to his hometown, where everyone knew him as “the carpenter’s son.” But word of his remarkable works had made it back to Nazareth and likely the entire town turned out for synagogue on the Sabbath –hoping he would perform a miracle there as he had in other cities.

v.16

“As was his custom” – Both as a boy in Nazareth and as he traveled, Jesus faithfully participated in the congregational life of his people. Handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah on this day, Jesus unrolled it to what we would call chapter 61, verses 1-2 – a passage modern Judaism associates with the Day of Atonement. Because “everything in Judaism rests mainly on old traditions ... there is therefore nothing extravagant in the belief that it was on the Day of Atonement that the great Atoner thus struck what was the key-note of his whole work.” (Ellicott)

vv.18-19

It's a bit of a complicated matter, but contemporary translations of vv.18-19 will not correspond exactly to the way our Isaiah 61:1-2 reads. The "recovery of sight to the blind" phrase is not there, and "release the oppressed" is drawn from Isaiah 58:6. Ellicott suggests that "recovering of sight to the blind" speaks to setting free those who have been imprisoned in darkness. The Expositor's Commentary argues that "the variation from the usual wording may simply reflect the interpretive translation in use at that time." To gain the most benefit, a person might consult the two Isaiah passages in addition to this one in Luke and list all the various elements, to capture the broadest insight into what Jesus had in mind that day.

Too many Evangelical commentaries give short shrift to the physical dimensions of these verses and head straight to the spiritual, as if the two can be so cleanly separated. One writer notes, however, that Jesus' ministry "was as broad as human need" and Stedman asserts that "We must never forget our Lord's story of the sheep and the goats, and the basis of his judgment between them. The whole point of the story is that Christians must not evade activities that involve them in the pain of the world. The hungry must be fed, the naked must be clothed, the sick must be visited, and those in prison must be helped to find the liberating Lord in the midst of their confinement."¹

Begg, however, pulls the focus beyond the merely physical to the spiritual condition of every human soul. Speaking to a well-heeled congregation, Begg said: "If Jesus only came to address poverty, we might as well play golf, because we're not poor. But we are all poor, captive, blind, oppressed, and indebted."²

Stedman would add: "Do you know any captives, any people who are bound by outlooks and attitudes which hold them in captivity? Do you know anyone who is struggling to free himself from hurtful habits which hold him in a vise-like grip? Do you know any people who are locked into a pattern of poisonous hate or possessive greed which they seem powerless to break? ... The good news [is] that God has not left the human race to struggle hopelessly in bewilderment, pain, and darkness. God has done something about our condition."³

A final observation about these verses: When Jesus spoke of "the year of the Lord's favor," his hearers' thoughts would have jumped immediately to the

Jubilee, celebrated one year in every fifty, when debts were forgiven and slaves set free. (Leviticus 25:8-17). Yet Jesus deliberately stopped short of reading the last phrase of the Isaiah passage, which referred to “the day of vengeance of our God.” The Expositor’s Commentary points out: “Jesus’ audience would suppose that the day of their salvation would be the day of judgment on their pagan enemies, but the delay of judgment means that this time of the Lord’s favor benefits the Gentiles also.” When Jesus implicitly made that point (vv.24-27), he brought the audience’s temperature to the boiling point.

v.20

“And sat down” — The pulpit of the rabbi was the chair near the place from which the lesson was read. (Ellicott)

v.21

“Fulfilled in your hearing” — The hometown boy begins his sermon by announcing himself as the Messiah. Edgar comments: “No wonder the eyes of all were fastened on him. The Anointed One was in their midst.” And Ellicott adds: “This was what startled them: He had left them as the son of the carpenter – mother, brethren, sisters were still among them – and now he came back claiming to be the Christ, and to make words that had seemed to speak of a far-off glorious dream, as a living and present reality.”

v.22

“All spoke well of him” — The congregation was “amazed,” an expression that does not necessarily indicate either favor or disfavor. (Expositor’s)

“Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” — One might as well insert a ‘but’ at the beginning of this sentence. Whatever Jesus said as he continued his sermon – unpacking the truth of vv.18-19 – familiarity with the carpenter’s son overtook admiration of the widespread miracle stories and his messianic announcement. The whispered question “seems to express perplexity and irritation at this man who grew up in the home of a fellow Nazarene and is now making such impressive claims.” (Expositor’s)

vv.23-24

“Physician ... Capernaum ... prophet” — Jesus turns a couple of popular proverbs back onto his now-skeptical hearers. “A physician who cannot cure himself will not be in much demand to cure others,” Edgar preached. “So if Jesus will not, by a miraculous display at Nazareth, establish his reputation which familiarity is undermining, they are prepared to say it is because he cannot.”

And what did Jesus do in Capernaum? Here’s where reading John’s narrative would come in handy. It was at Capernaum where a royal official’s son lay dying, and the Lord healed the boy even though he was in Cana, where he had turned water into wine at a wedding.

The coup de grâce was delivered when Jesus took his stand in the line of Jewish prophets rejected by the Chosen People but accepted by Gentiles.

vv.25-27

“Elijah ... Elisha” — The knife blade drove deep when Jesus pointed out that one of the great prophets had been sent to a widow among the Phoenicians, who were despised by the Jews. The dagger twisted in the wound with a second illustration: God’s healing mercy toward Naaman, commander-in-chief of Syria’s army and a great foe of Israel.

Edgar preached that these two historical reminders declare that God in his sovereignty might pass by all the Jews to bestow blessings on outsiders — that Jews had no exclusive claim on God’s favor and, should God be so inclined, he could bypass them to deliver pagans from their darkness.

vv.28-30

“Were enraged” — Like most other Jews, those in the synagogue that day dreamed of the day Messiah would bring deliverance and a prosperous golden age to Israel. In fact, however, “the large majority of the Chosen People were scattered abroad; their own land was crushed under what seemed a hopeless servitude; poverty, ignorance, universal discontent, reigned alike in Jerusalem,

garrisoned with Roman legionaries, and in the most distant of the poor upland villages of Galilee.” (Pulpit)

Now this hometown boy, who clearly had just announced himself as Messiah, was suggesting there might be faith among the pagans that was altogether lacking in Israel. The early admiration turned quickly into bitterness. (Ellicott) The people were enraged that Jesus spoke of Gentiles “in the same breath with us, the chosen and elect of God” and hinted “at the possibility of the accursed Gentile sharing in our promised blessings.” (Pulpit)

On top of that, it was clear Jesus had no intention of working miracles in his home town. Stedman writes: “When they saw he was claiming divine appointment as the Messiah without demonstrating any miraculous proof of his claim, they went ballistic! The crowd turned into a lynch mob.” ¹

The NLT renders v.29 — “Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff.” Close to Nazareth is a cliff about forty feet high, although the traditional site of the incident, called “the Mount of Precipitation,” is some two miles away. Since this happened on a Sabbath, walking such a distance would not have been allowed under the Law. (Pulpit) Certainly a prominence two miles away could hardly be characterized as “the brow of the hill on which the town was built.”

“Passed through the crowd” — How was it that Jesus escaped the mob’s wrath? The Pulpit Commentary notes, “There is nothing hinted here that our Lord rendered himself invisible, or that he smote his enemies with a temporary blindness.” And Ellicott takes it further: “We have no right to insert miracles in the gospel records.”

The residents of Nazareth wanted a miracle, and what they got was Jesus calmly walking away from lifelong friends who wanted to kill him. He left Nazareth behind, never to return.

Let us close by listening to Stedman’s voice about the “day of vengeance” and “the acceptable year of the Lord.”

“The day of vengeance of our God awaits the second return of Jesus Christ. But the present age is the acceptable year of the Lord. Salvation is still possible. When we proclaim this great fact, we explain and make clear what is happening in our world. We relieve the cold grip of fear which clutches at the hearts of thousands who get up every morning scared to death, not knowing what will happen to a world that has apparently gone quite mad. ...

“[People] feel lost, like hopeless, helpless victims of inexorable forces far beyond their ability to understand, much less control. The people of our world today desperately need to hear Christians proclaim to them the acceptable year of the Lord. They need to see from the Scriptures that God knows what He is doing in our day and age. ...

“In these perilous, polarized, apocalyptic times, it is easy to find an occasion to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. It is almost impossible to avoid it! You can quiet the fearful with a reassuring word of hope in almost any situation. All you need is a newspaper headline or a television commentary, and you have a wide open door to tell men of what God is doing in history and where he says it will all end.”¹

1 <https://www.raystedman.org/thematic-studies/body-life/the-work-of-the-ministry>

2 <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/who-jesus>

3 <https://www.raystedman.org/daily-devotions/body-life/the-work-of-the-ministry>