

Luke 4:14-30

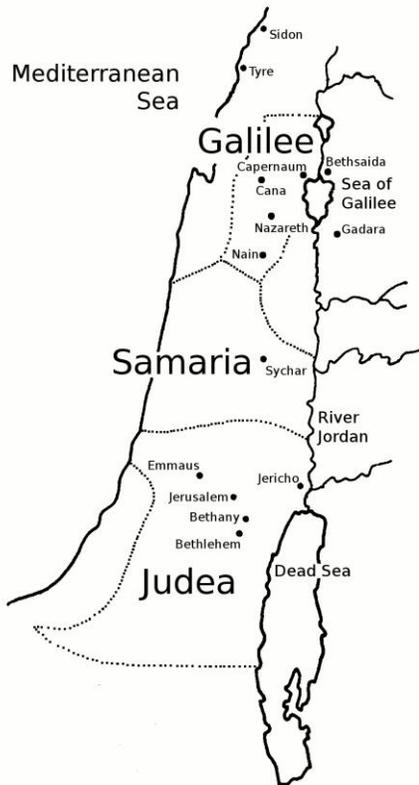
Jesus at Nazareth

The Context

In their narratives, Matthew, Mark, and Luke move quickly from the baptism and temptation of Jesus to His ministry in Galilee, even though the Galilean ministry happened about one year after those events. Only John accounts for the intervening time. John tells us that rather soon after His baptism and temptation, Jesus journeyed north to Cana to attend a wedding. Here He performed His first public miracle, and then He returned to Jerusalem for Passover. He spent several months in Judea. While there, as described in John 1-4, Jesus began to call His disciples, cleansed the temple during Passover, met Nicodemus, and encountered the woman of Samaria on His return trip to Galilee.

Galilee is located in the northern part of Israel. According to Josephus, there were about 240 villages in the region. Jesus moved from town to town preaching as He went. He was there for about 1 1/2 years. Jesus began by “teaching in their synagogues” (v.15). Jesus regularly visited the synagogue; it “was His custom” (v.16). Jesus followed the Law, “but you shall seek the LORD at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come” (Deuteronomy 12:5). Jesus was a teacher, a rabbi, and like a good teacher He taught from God’s Word. As He ministered and preached “news about Him spread” (v.14) and Jesus “was praised by all” (v.15). His ministry was Spirit-filled, synagogue centered, and widely heard.

Israel in the time of Jesus



Jesus came to Nazareth. Nazareth was a small, insignificant village midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean. Though He had grown up there, and was always called Jesus of Nazareth, this was His first extended visit since beginning His public ministry, and He would return only once (Matthew 13:54-58). One can only imagine Jesus, now a fully grown man, standing before elders who had known Him when He was a boy. Undoubtedly He had been in this synagogue before, after all it was His ‘home’ church in a sense.

The synagogue was not a substitute for the temple, for only at the temple could sacrifices be offered and only there could the feasts and ceremonies be properly celebrated. However, during the Babylonian captivity after the fall of the southern kingdom in 586 B.C, elders had met together (Ezekiel 8:1, 14:1, 20:1). When the captivity ended, many exiles were spread throughout the ancient Near East. These Jews of the Diaspora had little immediate hope of returning to Jerusalem, so the synagogue evolved as a place to gather.

Worship in the synagogue was very structured. The service began with thanksgiving and blessings (the *Shema*). Then there was prayer and response. This was followed by a reading from the Pentateuch and then a reading from the Prophets. After this was the teaching, and then a closing prayer. There was no full-time teacher, instead the local elders, led by the *archisunagogos*, possessed the authority to allow someone to preach. Paul frequently took advantage of these opportunities. The service was overseen by the leader of the elders and, at the appointed time, the *chazzan* or keeper of the scrolls would take the appropriate scroll for that day and present it to the teacher.

The Exhortation

Jesus began by reading from Isaiah 61:1-2. Compare the text with what Luke records Jesus as saying,

¹“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And opening to those who are blind

²To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn.” Isaiah 61:1-2

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because He anointed me
to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent me
to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”

Luke 4:18-19

All who heard would recognize this as a Messianic prophecy. The Bible used four metaphors to illustrate mankind’s utter need of a savior. We are poor, captive, blind, and oppressed, and the Messiah would come to bring good news, release, sight, and freedom.

First, we are poor. The word, *ptochos*, does not describe those who are near the bottom of the economic ladder, but those at the very bottom. It refers to those who are destitute and beggarly. There was a different Greek word for those who were poor but able to work; the word used here is for the beggar in the street, unable to help himself. It was used to contrast the beggar Lazarus with the rich man, ¹⁹“Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. ²⁰And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, ²¹and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores” (Luke 16:19-21).

More than physical poverty, though, this refers to an awareness of spiritual poverty. The Messiah was coming to those who were “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) and who recognized that “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isaiah 64:6). Isaiah perhaps says it best, “but to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). There is a moral, not economic, bankruptcy that is the point. We must have a “broken spirit” and “contrite heart” (Psalm 51) and not be like the unrepentant, proud tax collector of Luke 18. This is an attitude that cannot be contrived; genuine recognition of our spiritual poverty is a matter of the heart.

Second, we are captive. Those in the audience understood what it was like to be captives. Captivity and exile was a crucial part of Jewish history. Whether it was Egypt or Babylon, their culture was permeated with stories of captivity.

Our world has little real understanding of this. Ours is a culture focused on freedom, and we too often mistake freedom for license. The idea that if we are free we ought to be able to do whatever we want is pervasive. We live in an age of tolerance and individual liberty, and those two elements have combined to create a culture that allows for human depravity to flourish largely unchecked by either government institutions or social mores.

The Bible makes it doubly clear that we are not free. First, we owe an unrepayable (by us, at least) debt to God (James 2:10, Matthew 18:23-35). Second, we are slaves to sin itself. "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). Romans 6 makes it clear that we are not our own -- we will be either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. We are slaves by nature.

The word release, *aphesis*, means deliverance, forgiveness, or pardon. "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). We are free from the penalty of sin because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. We need no longer fear. Jesus has "canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14).

Third, we are blind. "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them" (1 Corinthians 2:14). We "walk about in darkness" (Psalm 82:5). We are so naturally blind that we dread and avoid the light, "¹⁹This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." (John 3:19-20).

The Messiah, though, is coming "to open blind eyes" (Isaiah 42:7). Jesus claimed to have come "so that those who do not see may see" (John 9:39). Paul reminds us that we "were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord" Ephesians 5:8. This light must come to us before we can see. We cannot create it ourselves. No blind man can heal himself.

Finally, we are oppressed. This is a *midrash*, or comment on the text, offered by Jesus, the reader. This was a common method of explaining a passage. That is, it is as if Jesus is stating that what Isaiah meant by giving sight to the blind was that they were being set free from oppression. The word for 'oppression' means to break or to be crushed by cruelty. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are burdened by our sin and the inability to live a life of obedience to God's law. Only in the Messiah can we find "rest for our souls" (Matthew 11:29). We must lay down our burden and take up His. After all, His "yoke is easy and [His] burden is light." (Matthew 11:30).

All of this would all happen “the favorable year of the Lord” (v.18). This would be the “day of salvation” (Isaiah 49:8), the “year of redemption” (Isaiah 63:4). Everyone in the room listening to Jesus read this had longed for that day. That was the day when the Messiah would come.

Jesus “gave it back to the attendant and sat down” (v.20). Then with “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him” (v.20), He made the very simple and profound statement, “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v.21).

The Response of the People

The immediate response was approval. “All were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips” (v.22). This was often to be the case. Those who heard the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:28-29) and those sent to arrest Him (John 7:58) responded the same way. This was to be a common pattern. Very often when Jesus spoke there was amazement and then rejection.

To be sure, some had to be wondering why Jesus had stopped reading when He did. He not finish verse 2, “the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:2). It was expected that the Messiah was coming to rule and to drive out the Roman infidels. Jesus, here, is separating Himself from that idea. Even His own followers would have a difficult time coming to the realization that this Messiah would suffer and die, not conquer and rule.

But all, it seems were frustrated that the conditions that Jesus laid down for salvation was that one be poor, captive, blind, and oppressed. After all, His audience were Jews who followed the Law of Moses. They were righteous in their own eyes. So, naturally, they demanded proof of such a statement. Knowing their thoughts, and perhaps hearing their murmurings, Jesus said, “No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician heal yourself; whatever we heard was done in Capernaum, do here’” (v.23). Jesus must prove His claim by demonstrating by signs that He was the Messiah.

This made no sense. Did they not believe the signs done in Capernaum? Did they actually have to see for themselves? Lack of evidence was never the issue. The Pharisees asked for sign after sign (Matthew 12:38, 16:1). There could never be enough signs. “Though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him” (John 12:37). Despite what they had seen and heard, their prejudice against the son of a carpenter prevailed.

Instead of performing a miracle, Jesus reminded His listeners of two historical events. The first was the miraculous sustaining of the widow in Zarephath during the famine and the raising of her son from the dead by Elijah the prophet (1 Kings 17). Elijah had been sent to her, by God, and the result of these miracles was that “the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth’” (1 Kings 17:24). The irony here is that Zarephath is in the land of Sidon, which was the home of Jezebel, the wicked queen who had corrupted King Ahab during whose reign Elijah prophesized. Elijah had not been sent to perform miracles for Jews during the famine, but a person from the land of the enemy.

The second story was of the healing of Naaman the Syrian of leprosy by Elisha. No doubt Israel and many lepers worthy of healing, but Elisha performed no miracle for them. Naaman, a Syrian, was a Gentile as well as a leper, therefore doubly outcast according to Mosaic Law. Nonetheless, he was the one chosen by God to receive miraculous healing.

The Jews of Nazareth were being told that they were worse than Phoenician widows and Gentile lepers. Their opinion of Jesus changed in a moment from admirable teacher to false prophet, and false prophets are to be killed. Yet, though Jesus had come to die, this was not the appointed time, and He passed through them and “went His way” (v. 30). Whether this was done by supernatural power, or simply the awesome presence of His person we do not know.

Few things frustrate people more than the sovereignty of God. God owes no one. He can bestow His blessings as He sees fit. God is sovereign whether we like it or not.

Take Aways

Let us attend church regularly and with the right heart. If Jesus, the Son of God, could attend worship without a critical spirit, then certainly we can.

Let us not despise things because we are familiar with them. There are many young leaders in this church. We should remember who they are in Christ and who they are now, not who they were as a child.

Let us not be those who listen to gracious words but go no further. Like those in Nazareth, our eyes should be “fixed on Him” (v.20), but must “prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).