

A Prophet In His Own Country

Luke 4:14-30

The next event Luke gives us a record of in his gospel is Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and specifically how He was received in his hometown of Nazareth. In this text Jesus declares the scope of His ministry as Messiah and we also see the first large-scale rejection of Jesus. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (John 1:11). The way Jesus was treated in Nazareth is a miniature of how He would be treated by the people of Israel at large.

I. Jesus' Reception in Galilee (v. 14-15)

The beginning of verse 14 tells us that Jesus returned to Galilee: "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee." Note again how Luke draws attention to the Spirit's leading in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't return to Galilee just because that is the region where He grew up. Jesus didn't return to Galilee because that is where He just wanted to begin His ministry. Jesus didn't return to Galilee because His hometown was there and He expected to be warmly received there by people who knew Him. We know from this text that that was not at all the case. Jesus returned to Galilee because the Spirit led Him there. Jesus did nothing but His Father's will, and as was prophesied in Isaiah 9:1 and 2, Jesus returned to Galilee and was a great light in the darkness there.

Jesus returned to Galilee and “taught in their synagogues” (v. 15). The synagogues were local centers of worship for the Jews. The word “synagogue” is derived from a word meaning “congregation.” The practice of building and worshipping at synagogues appears to have arisen during the exile after the temple had been destroyed. After the Maccabean fight for freedom, nearly every Jewish city or town had at least one synagogue, and in areas where there were not enough Jews to support a synagogue there would still be a designated place of prayer where devout Jews and proselytes would gather to worship like we see in Acts 16:13. This attention given to public worship has been pointed to as one of the reasons the Jews never lapsed back into the idolatrous worship that they had been so prone to before the exile. Worship at the synagogue included prayer, the systematic reading of Scripture (first a passage from the Law of Moses, and then a passage from the prophets), and teaching and admonishing the people from Scripture. In small towns there would often be only one rabbi, or teacher, who led the services at the synagogues but in larger towns and cities those responsibilities would be shared by several rabbis. Though the Jews had greatly corrupted the system of worship God had delivered to them, these good things still remained: they publicly read the Scripture and taught the truth of what was read.

It was common for honored guests to be given an opportunity to address the congregation. We see an example of that in our text. We also see it in Acts 13:15, “And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent

unto them [Paul and his traveling companions], saying, Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.”

No specific synagogues are listed here in our text. These were just synagogues in the region of Galilee. As Jesus travelled through this region he made use of the synagogues as natural gathering places for teaching and preaching.

Look at how Jesus’ teaching in the synagogues was received. The second part of verse 14 tells us, “There went out a fame of him through all the region round about.” Word spread about Jesus: His teaching and His miracles. Not just in Galilee, but that whole surrounding region. People from Galilee, Judea, and Syria had heard of Jesus and many came to see His ministry for themselves. And this fame was positive.

The end of verse 15 says Jesus was, “glorified of all.” This word “glorified” means “the honor resulting from a good opinion.”¹ Eventually the masses would cry out, “Crucify Him!” But here, as Christ ministered throughout Galilee the people glorified Him. One commentator wrote, “A divine power shone in Christ, and compelled even those, who cherished a malignant spirit of contradiction, to join in admiring him.”²

After this short introduction and summary of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, Luke goes on to tell us about Jesus’ reception in his hometown of Nazareth.

¹ Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words

² John Calvin’s commentary on this text.

II. Jesus' Reception in His Hometown of Nazareth (v. 16-30)

Jesus “came to Nazareth” in his circuit through Galilee. This was the town where Jesus “had been brought up.” Jesus didn’t go to this town first, as if He sought familiar territory where He hoped to be well received. On the other hand, He did not avoid Nazareth as if He was fearful that those who were most familiar with Him would turn on Him. We know from this text that they did turn on Him. They did not receive Him. They went so far as trying to kill Him. But Jesus was not afraid of them. When He “came to Nazareth” He did not pass by, but continued His ministry of preaching there as He had in other towns and villages in Galilee.

Verse 16 continues, “As his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.” We are told that this was the “custom” of Jesus. Luke could be referring to the custom of Jesus in His public ministry. Verse 15 tells us that Jesus ministered in the synagogues of Galilee. Jesus taught the people in the open air, but when there was opportunity, Jesus also taught in the synagogues.

Luke could also be referring to the “custom” of Jesus to worship at the synagogues as a private person, before He began His public ministry. There the Scriptures were read and taught, and there Jesus in His youth gathered with others for public worship. In spite of the human weaknesses of the rabbis, Jesus did not neglect public worship. It was his “custom” to be there. And we are told Jesus went

to the synagogue on the sabbath day. This was the day that God had appointed as a day of rest. But the sabbath was not merely a rest from worldly labor, but a rest for worship. Pious Jews would gather on this day for the duties of worship, and so it was with Jesus. On the sabbath day there he was in the synagogue where there would be prayer, the reading of the Word of God, and teaching.

The very end of verse 16 tells us that Jesus “stood up to read.” This could be a situation like in Acts 13 where the rulers of the synagogue invited Jesus as an honored guest to share a word of exhortation with the people who were gathered for worship that sabbath day, and then Jesus requested to read from the book of Isaiah. It is also possible that in the providence of God this passage in Isaiah was the scheduled reading that day from the prophets and Jesus stood up to read as He undoubtedly had many times before, having grown up in that synagogue.

Verse 17 tells us that they brought the book of Isaiah to Jesus and He “opened the book.” Don’t miss the significance of these words. The physical action described here is simple, common, an every-day occurrence. Jesus opened the book. This would have been a scroll and Jesus simply unrolled that scroll until He found that passage where He would to read. To the people sitting there in that moment they would not have perceived anything particularly significant about Jesus opening that book, but we have the benefit of looking back on this event with the perspective of history.

The Old Testament was a closed book until Jesus opened it. As I Peter 1:10-12 tells us, the Old Testament prophets had inquired into and sought diligently for the fulfillment of the things which they had prophesied about the grace of God, the Messiah, but they did not see the fulfillment in their time. For them, it was (in this sense) a closed book. The Old Testament scriptures they had were full of so much hope and promise, yet still shrouded in mystery. Isaiah 29:11 says, “The vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed.”

In Romans 11:7-8 we read, “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day.”

Jesus opened the book. He fulfilled those Old Testament promises. He brought the light of revelation where there had been darkness. Those gospel promises which the Old Testament prophets inquired after and sought out diligently, those things are now revealed to us by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (I Peter 1:12). Luke 24:27 says, “Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” Jesus “opened the book.”

He read from Isaiah 61:1-2. This text speaks prophetically about the ministry of the Messiah. It begins by telling how Jesus was qualified or equipped for the work: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me.” Jesus had the spirit without measure. And He came, as verse 14 tells us, “in the power of the Spirit.”

Next, we see from this passage that the Messiah, Jesus, was “anointed” and “sent” from God.

And finally, from this passage quoted from Isaiah we see the ministry of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. He was to “preach the gospel.” Jesus’ work was a prophetic work, declaring the Word of the Lord. Three times in these two verses the word “preach” is used.

Now notice the condition of those to whom Jesus is to preach: poor, brokenhearted, captive, blind, and bruised. This is a description of mankind without the gospel. Yet there were many during Christ’s ministry who in the midst of their spiritual poverty, captivity, and blindness flattered themselves about the state of their souls. They were insensible to their need of the gospel Jesus preached. They happily continued on in their destitute state, not only apathetic to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but openly hostile toward Him.

One commentator wrote, “We cannot enjoy those benefits which Christ bestows, in any other manner, than by being humbled under a deep conviction of our distresses, and by coming, as hungry souls, to seek him as our deliverer: for all

who swell with pride, and do not groan under their *captivity*, nor are displeased with their *blindness*, lend a deaf ear to [the gospel] and treat it with contempt.”³

We saw earlier how the multitudes glorified Jesus, but it was a shallow popularity, and there were only a few who truly saw their spiritual need and were thus prepared by God to receive the gospel Jesus preached. But consider the healing, the redemption, the good state those who believed the gospel Jesus preached were put into. The spiritually destitute were made joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. The brokenhearted were healed. Captives were delivered. The spiritually blind could see. The downtrodden were set at liberty.

Are you in that number this morning? Can you look back to a time in your life when you saw that you were spiritually destitute, separated from God and from all hope because of your sin? Can you rejoice this morning because you heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and, being aware of your need, you have repented of your sins and trusted in the finished work of Jesus Christ for your salvation? This was the good news that Jesus was sent to preach and the work of redemption He was sent to accomplish.

This was a well-known messianic passage that Jesus had just read. Everyone who was there would have recognized this passage as speaking prophetically about the messiah. You can imagine the interest in the room. What would Jesus say about this passage?

³ John Calvin's commentary on this text.

The custom at that time in the synagogues was to read standing, in honor of the Scriptures, but then to teach seated, as a sign of humility. And so verse 20 tells us that Jesus closed the scroll, handed it back to the minister of the synagogue, and then sat back down to teach. And the end of verse 20 tells us that everyone there had their eyes fastened upon Him.

Jesus then explained the Scripture He read (v. 20-27). In verse 21 Jesus makes what must have been quite a shocking statement: “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” Jesus had just read prophecy, but He told them it is now history: “No longer look for the fulfillment of these words. I am here. This day this scripture is fulfilled.” This is an incredible claim Jesus has just made, so the initial response of the people might surprise us.

Verse 22 begins, “All bore him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.” What did they bear witness to? That He spoke very well and graciously.

What’s more, we are told that they “wondered” at His gracious words. There was interest in the things He had said. They pondered these words. They turned them over in their minds and considered them. But unfortunately, as we see from the rest of this text that they did not believe Him. It is possible to acknowledge and admire the gracious teaching of Jesus Christ and yet be unconverted. It is possible to dwell on the gospel Jesus preached, to ponder it, to consider it at length, to wonder at it, and yet remain unconverted.

Do not simply admire Jesus from afar with hearts hardened in sin. Come to Him in repentance and faith. Be born again and know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. It does you no good to witness and wonder at Jesus Christ, you must be born again. Turn from your sin. Call out to Him for salvation, “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy upon me.” All who come to Him in repentance and faith He will not cast out.

We begin to see the doubt in the hearts and minds of those present in the synagogue at the end of verse 22, “And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?” Remember, these people knew Jesus. He had grow up there, among them. He had grow up as the son of Joseph, a simple carpenter. They knew Jesus had not received the education to be a rabbi. They knew of no natural source for the gracious words which they had just witnessed. Perhaps some concluded that Jesus must have been taught of God, since they knew no one else had taught Him.

But we know how this passage ends. These people ultimately try to kill Jesus. It seems more likely that they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” not out of wonder but derision. Instead of glorifying God, they found this objection and used it as an excuse to reject what Jesus had said.

Jesus continued to address these people in verses 23-27. In verse 23 Jesus addressed an objection the people of Nazareth had to His ministry. Jesus said, “Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country.”

“Jesus, we have heard you have done miracles elsewhere, now do miracles here. Prove to us the truth of your words. Certainly Nazareth is as worthy a stage as Capernaum for your teaching and miracles. Why don’t you do these wonders for your neighbors and acquaintances?”

The problem here was unbelief, a lack of faith, an unwillingness to believe the words Jesus had just spoken: that He was the messiah sent from God. We are no different than these people. We are just as prone to unbelief as they were. We are just as unwilling to receive the Word of God. It is only by the grace of God that the gospel pierced our hearts of stone. When we consider this, it should move us first to worship God for the grace He has shown us, and second, it should move us to be patient and kind as we share the gospel with those around us.

Jesus answers this objection to His ministry (or lack thereof) in Nazareth by showing the people there that they were to blame. In verse 24 He said, “Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country.” They refused to honor Jesus because He was so familiar to them. Again, the issue here was unbelief. Because they rejected the prophet God had sent, they could not expect to benefit from the ministry of the prophet.

To further illustrate this point Jesus gives two examples from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. The first example Jesus uses is the Zidonian widow. Sidon (or Zidon) was an ancient city of the Canaanites. There was a famine in Israel during the ministry of Elijah. Certainly there were many Jewish widows who would have

benefited from the supernatural provision God provided this Zidonian widow. Yet God sent Elijah to help a Zidonianite.

The next example Jesus used was of Naaman the leper who was healed during the ministry of Elisha. Naaman was a Syrian. The Syrians were the enemies of Israel and Naaman was the leader of the Syrian armies. Certainly there were many Jewish lepers in Israel during the ministry of Elisha. Yet we have no record of any Jewish lepers who were healed by God through Elisha, only Naaman the Syrian.

This reproof from Jesus landed particularly hard upon the inhabitants of Nazareth, but it extended to the whole nation of Israel. The whole nation was guilty of ingratitude and unbelief before God. It seemed as if the nearer the Lord drew to them and the greater honor and benefits of revelation that God gave to them, the greater became their contempt of the Lord. Jesus, in using these examples, showed that though he was despised by his own countrymen, His glory would be in no way diminished. God would still be able to honor and exalt His Son, just as He had His prophets among the gentiles.

This was the end of Jesus' teaching ministry in Nazareth. After Jesus had said these words, He was done speaking. Next in our text, we see how the people of Nazareth responded to Jesus' teaching.

III. The People of Nazareth Respond (v. 28-30)

They were filled with wrath in verse 28. There was no godly sorrow in this crowd. Instead of being convicted of their sin and seeking to correct them, they were driven to wrath. It is a mercy of God to receive reproof from Him. It is the height of foolishness to respond with wrath to God's reproofs.

This word "wrath" is the same word that is used to describe the angry mob in Ephesus in Acts 19. And like a mob, these sabbath worshippers rose up to do away with Jesus. Notice how quickly they turned upon Jesus. Verse 15 told us that He was generally glorified by the Galileans. In verse 22 these same inhabitants of Nazareth had wondered at His gracious words. But now, in their wrath, they stopped the sabbath service, they thrust Jesus out of their city, and they brought Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built with the intent of throwing Him headlong off of it.

As I studied this passage I couldn't help but think of the previous passage in the Gospel of Luke where we saw Satan thwarted at every turn as he tried to tempt Jesus. In tempting Jesus, Satan could win no victories. But maybe through the inhabitants of Nazareth he could accomplish the next best thing. Maybe through their murderous wrath Satan could snuff out the life of Jesus before He could finish the work the Father had sent Him to accomplish. You can imagine the scene: an angry mob, absolutely mad in their fury are pushing Jesus closer and closer to the

precipice. They intend to kill Him. A victory seems to be within the grasp of Satan. Yet he was defeated once again.

Luke very simply concludes this account with verse 30, “But he passing through the midst of them went his way.” His time was not yet come. His work was not yet accomplished. God miraculously preserved His life and Jesus went on His way to do the work the Father had given Him.