

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

'JESUS – THE SEEKER AND SAVER OF THE LOST'

STUDY 10

LUKE'S GOSPEL CHAPTER 4 VERSES 14 - 30

Writing in his journal about a visit to the town of Gloucester, the preacher Charles Wesley tells of how he sent a message to one of the local ministers. As he travelled, it was his custom in approaching a town to write to the minister of one of the local churches requesting the use of his church for an evangelistic meeting. One minister wrote back, saying – 'I would be glad to drink a glass of wine with you – but I durst not (I dare not) lend you my pulpit for fifty guineas.' An increasing number of responses like this literally propelled John Wesley into the open air to become 'a field preacher'. This is what John Wesley wrote in his journal of the day he began to preach in this way. Bristol, Monday the 2nd of April 1739:-

At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining the city. The Scripture on which I spoke was this – and is it possible any one should be ignorant that it is fulfilled in every true minister of Christ? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

In past days, when candidates were being considered for the ministry, the key question which the examining elders would ask themselves having heard someone preach was, 'Does he have the anointing?' Jesus had the anointing. Yet by the time this service in the Nazareth Synagogue was finished, the congregation was dragging Jesus out of the town to throw Him over Nazareth's very own 'Salisbury Crags' (a high cliff face overlooking Edinburgh). It's extraordinary! Anointed – but rejected!

Here is the context of this story. 'Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him' (Lk 4:14 – 15). These verses sum up the first ten months or so of Jesus' public ministry. But in what Luke then goes on to tell us he seems more concerned, not with how Jesus was gladly received in Galilee, but with how Jesus was so bitterly and furiously rejected in Nazareth. Why is that?

The answer is that Luke wants us to see what true Spirit anointed preaching is, and what such preaching demands from those who are privileged to sit under it!

1. HOW THE PREACHER APPLIED THE SERMON

This was a momentous, unforgettable day. For ten months Jesus had been ministering no more than twenty miles away in the region of the Galilee. All through this time, news about his ministry had been filtering back to His home town of Nazareth. Now the local boy 'made good' was back home. Everyone knew that on the Sabbath He would be in church, and that, according to etiquette respecting visiting

rabbis, He would be asked to read and expound the Scriptures. So it proved to be. 'He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "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 freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down' (Lk 4:1 – 20a). Sitting down didn't mean that He'd finished. In synagogue services you stood to read the Scriptures, but then sat to expound the Scriptures. 'The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"' (Lk 4:20b – 21). In other words, Jesus began, not by explaining the passage, but by applying the passage, and by applying the message to Himself! Now what was Jesus saying?

A. HE WAS SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT HIS PERSON

Every Jew knew that this passage which Jesus had read was from Isaiah 61, and referred to the Messiah. When Jesus said "Today (here and now) this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," He was telling the congregation, 'I am that promised Messiah'.

B. HE WAS SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT HIS WORK

This passage in Isaiah 61 explained what the Messiah would do in his coming. And again, when Jesus said 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,' He was telling the congregation, 'These very things are happening today – the poor are being made rich, prisoners are being set free, the blind are being given sight, and the oppressed are being given peace as their oppression is lifted away.' But who were the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed? Well they were to be found in this congregation in Nazareth – as they are to be found in every congregation. Are these people who are financially and materially poor? Well, that can't be the

(i) THE POOR

Are these people who are financially and materially poor? That can't be the case. Didn't Jesus preach to the rich as well? Yes, of course He did! These are the spiritually poor. They are the people Jesus spoke about in His first Beatitude: 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:3). In other words, the spiritually poor are those who have absolutely nothing in themselves by which they might gain entrance into heaven.

(ii) THE PRISONER

Of course, Jesus wasn't literally setting people free from prison. Just as He was speaking about a spiritual poverty, so He was speaking here of a spiritual bondage – a bondage to the guilt and the power of sin.

(iii) THE BLIND

The same is true for the blind in that this is a spiritual blindness. It's the opening of spiritual eyes to see, both the depth of our sin and the wonder of God's love.

(iv) THE OPPRESSED

Literally, lives that are 'crushed / shattered' by the devastating effects and consequences of sin. Jesus is speaking here about putting broken lives back together again.

In other words, through the preaching of the gospel Jesus is the one who MAKES RICH, SETS FREE, GIVES SIGHT, and BRINGS WHOLENESS.

2. HOW THE CONGREGATION RECEIVED THE SERMON

At first the sermon was well received. 'All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips' (Lk 4:22a). Then as what Jesus had said began to really sink in, doubts began to surface. After all, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked'. (Lk 4:22b). Jesus could see what they were thinking. "If you really are who you say you are then give us a miracle to prove it." Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum'.'" (Lk 4:23). Jesus' answer? – "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his home town" (Lk 4:24). It wasn't lack of evidence that was preventing this congregation from believing in Him and it never is! There is more than enough evidence for us to believe in Jesus. Rather, it was A wilful pride of heart which rested in and boasted of its self-sufficiency. Jesus pressed this home, much to the congregation's fury, by speaking about, of all people, two Gentiles. There was the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (v25 – 27). The accounts of their individual stories can be found in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 5. The reason why Jesus spoke about them was that they perfectly exemplified who and what He had just been speaking about – not least, that they were both POOR. Oh they were poor in different ways in that whilst the widow was materially poor, Naaman was physically poor (he was in poor health, in that he had leprosy) and there was absolutely nothing that they could do to help themselves. Quite simply – they were both dying! But, through Elijah the prophet to the widow, and Elisha the prophet to Naaman, they both received the Word of God to their hearts – and acted upon it. That is, they turned to God and trusted in Him to meet their need – which God did! Do you see why Jesus thrust the examples of these 2 Gentiles to this Nazareth congregation? For two reasons:-

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A. THEY REFUSED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR SPIRITUAL POVERTY

After all, they would have said, 'We're Jews, the chosen people. We have the law and the temple. Here we are, living good lives and doing good works, and every Sabbath coming to church. Poor? We're not poor!' This is why they were so furious! 'All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this' (Lk 4:28). What was Jesus saying to them? Well, He was saying that they, 'good Jews' though they may have been, had to be saved from their sin just like the hell deserving pagan Gentiles. What an insult! What an insult to, as one writer puts it, 'The good, respectable, synagogue attending, family-orientated, solid citizens of Nazareth.'

B. THEY REFUSED TO RECEIVE GOD'S LIFE GIVING WORD

The Word from Jesus, was that He Himself was the only source and means of them ever being saved.

Do you know what the wonder of the grace of God in the gospel is? It's not that that grace saves the worst of the worst; you expect God's grace to do that. It's that this grace saves the best of the best; those, who in their sense of spiritual pride and self sufficiency think that they don't need the gospel.

To go back to where we began, why did Jesus finish the reading where He did, dramatically rolling up the scroll, closing the Bible as He did so? You see, He never actually finished the reading which ends with these words: 'and the day of vengeance of our God' (Is 61:2b). In other words, Jesus didn't mention God's wrath! Why not? Because He was saying, 'this is the day of God's favour. This is the day of God's grace.' But the warning is this – when the day of grace is ended, the day of vengeance will be ushered in!