

6. Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

Luke 4:14-30

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

Ministry in Galilee

¹⁴Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him (Luke 4:14-15).

The name Galilee comes from the Hebrew word, *Galil*, which means *circle or ring* in English. It was so named because of a concentration of Jewish people living around the Sea of Galilee inside a circle of land fifty miles north to south, and twenty-five miles east to west. The First Century Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that, when he was governor over the area of Galilee, inside that circle of land there were 204 villages or towns and that none of them had a population less than 15,000.¹ That sum gives us an estimate of around 3,000,000 million people living in the area of Galilee at the time of Christ.

Nazareth is a city situated on a hill approximately twenty-five miles (depending on the walking route) to the Southwest of the Sea of Galilee. To the south of Nazareth is the Valley of Jezreel, popularly known today as the Valley of Armageddon. The apostle John tells us about the wedding at Cana of Galilee, where Jesus did His first miracle of changing water into wine and that, afterward, Jesus and his family spent a few days down in Capernaum on the north side of the Sea of Galilee (John 2:12). John is alone in telling us of the earlier period of ministry in Judea during which time many miracles occur while Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover: “Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name” (John 2:23). Luke’s focus is His return to the Galilee, perhaps some months after His baptism by John. He tells us that Jesus spoke among the many synagogues in the cities of Galilee (v.15) before coming to Nazareth.

¹⁶He 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. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is 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 freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:16-19).

The Synagogue

Nazareth was Jesus's hometown. It was where he grew up (v. 16). Most scholars believe that the population of Nazareth at that time was about 20,000. In that size of a town, most people know one another or, at least, know of one another. A synagogue was built when a town had ten families, so it was possible that there were a number of synagogues. No sacrifices were made at a synagogue. Jerusalem was the only place set apart to offer sacrifice before God at the feasts of Israel. Three times a year those living in the land were required to come up and appear before

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke*, Published by Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1975. Page 45.

God. The synagogue was a place where Jews gathered for instruction in the Word of God and to worship.

A typical synagogue meeting on a Sabbath morning had songs of praise from the book of Psalms. Then there was the reading with a Jewish lectionary specifying what passage from the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, were read. Seven different people were chosen to read, the first beginning with a benediction, and the last doing the same. It was the responsibility of the *Chazzan*, the minister or attendant, to bring out the scrolls and organize beforehand who would do the various readings. After the reading of the Pentateuch, came a reading from the prophets. The attendant asked Jesus if he would read from the scroll of Isaiah, the prophetic writings, then teach, and explain the passage.

Messiah's growing fame as a Rabbi and teacher had spread not only from His time in Jerusalem but also in Capernaum on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. As verse fifteen tells us, Jesus had been going around the Galilee area teaching in the various synagogues. Now, the opportunity arose to teach before well-known friends, and Mark 6:3 tells us that it was before His mother, brothers, and sisters, too. He looked around the room and saw people who would have been familiar to Him, perhaps people for whom He had worked as a craftsman, known as childhood friends, and friends of His parents. Maybe, there were even other people who had shared his trade, young men that He worked alongside. There would have been many with whom Jesus would recall worshipping, side by side. These people were those who knew the Savior's pedigree. They were well acquainted with His mother and the rest of His relatives. They had heard the stories about Him. A town success that has become famous will always draw out those seeking for some favor. Now that He was well-known in Jerusalem and all over Galilee, I can imagine that the synagogue was filled with those who came to worship, and went out of curiosity.

The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was given Him to read. He stood to read out of respect for the Scriptures, unrolled the scroll, and found chapter sixty-one. The prophecy of Isaiah states that the Messiah's mission was to preach to four categories of people; the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed. The good news was that the time of their release had come! In the Jewish calendar after forty-nine years came a year when every debt was canceled on the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25). All slaves were set free by their masters. All lands returned to their rightful owner with all mortgages canceled. Whenever land was sold, it was sold for the price of the harvests of the remaining years until the next year of Jubilee. Families were reunited. It was also a year of agricultural rest as nobody was allowed to farm. A complete year of rest. It was a time of restoration. Wouldn't that be a great deal for a lot of people worldwide? Jesus was saying that He was and is the One who inaugurates not only a year but an ongoing time of Jubilee where, in spiritual terms, those who were poor would be made rich, those that were spiritually bound would be set free, and that the land of their hearts would return to their proper owner.

Jesus deliberately stopped short in His reading of the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61. The passage continues to say, "...and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2). This day of vengeance of God, the Day of Judgment, is not yet. We are still in the time of God's favor—a time of grace toward those who are poor, blind, in a spiritual prison, and oppressed by Satan. Jesus then sat down, the typical posture of those that taught from the Scriptures at that time, and began to speak

and teach. It is likely that Luke summarizes the words of Jesus because the people were amazed at the gracious words that He spoke.□

²⁰Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked (Luke 4:20-22).

Although they were initially enjoying the gracious words from His lips, how do you think it set with them when He told them that this prophecy was no longer a future prophecy but a present-day (that very day) fulfillment?□

The Limitations of Man

They did not like these words because it was not about them. They wanted Christ to do a few tricks and put on a show for them. After all, He was from this town. He owed them! They were expecting many more miracles than those that they had already heard performed in Judea and the villages and synagogues around the Sea of Galilee.□

One thing did not sit well with them. Jesus was saying that that very day was the day that prophecy was no longer future but had now come to the present time and that He was the One sent to fulfill it. The thoughts quickly came to those listening. "Who does he think he is? This young man of thirty years old standing in front of us is the carpenter's son!" They were limiting the Son of God by their familiarity with Him. Jesus's words also offended them on another level. He was telling them He was the One to bring their freedom, implying that they were in need. Who were they? They did not see themselves as poor, blind, imprisoned or in need! In a parallel passage by Mark, we are told of similar words that Jesus said:□

³"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. ⁴Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." ⁵And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them (Mark 6:3-5).

They had difficulty accepting Him as the Messiah of God because of their knowledge of His playing in their streets, making their chairs, and building their homes. This kind of limitation and unbelief often happens in the Christian life, too. A man or woman who comes to Christ for salvation becomes a new creation in Christ but can be restricted by the limitation of those from his hometown and family:

¹⁶Therefore from now on **we recognize no one according to the flesh**; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.

¹⁷Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come (2 Corinthians 5:16-17).

Paul is saying to the church at Corinth that we are not to place limitations on people who have been born-again and walking in Christ. We are not to think of them in the way that we did before their conversion. They are new creatures in Christ, and we should not hinder their calling or work because of who they were in the past. There should be no words such as, "Oh, he or she has always been like that. They'll never change. We can lock other believers into what we think of them, restricting them to their past lives outside of Christ, rather than who they are now, and what Jesus thinks of them. Believe the best about one another and give them the freedom to be the person that God has called them to be in Christ. Matthew further clarifies the problem: **"And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief" (Matthew 13:58)**. Unbelief and lack of trust in God will dampen any man's faith and shut him off from the power of God to touch his life.

Has there been a time in your life when you have had limitations and restrictions as to what you can do placed on you? Have you felt held back by others' expectations of you? Briefly share with one another if you feel able.

Two Examples of Those Whom God Helps

Still sitting, Jesus carried on talking:

²³Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' " ²⁴"I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. ³⁰But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way (Luke 4:14-30).

Jesus recalled a time in Israel's history when the land was going through a time of famine. During this time, Ahab and Jezebel introduced the worship of the storm god, Baal. God reacted to this false worship by bringing a famine in the land for three and a half years. While many died due to the famine, God sent the prophet Elijah outside the land of Israel to Zarephath near Sidon, a Gentile region close to the Mediterranean Sea. Even though the woman was a widow and had a son, Elijah asked her to bake the last of what she had for him first, and then feed her son and herself, for the jar of oil and the cup of flour would not run out until the Lord ended the time of famine. The widow and her son were literally down to their last mouthfuls of flour. She believed Elijah's words and stepped out in faith and did as the prophet had spoken with a remarkable supply of God's provision continuing for many days (1 Kings 17:9-16).□

Jesus then talked about a Gentile Syrian army general named Naaman, an enemy of Israel. Naaman had a bad case of leprosy, but he had the good fortune of having an Israelite servant girl who inspired faith in him when she told him that the prophet Elisha in Israel could heal him.

⁹So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." ¹¹But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. ¹³Naaman's servants went to him and said, "**My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!**" ¹⁴So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. ¹⁵Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant." ¹⁶The prophet answered, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused. ¹⁷"If you will not," said Naaman, "please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD (2 Kings 5:9-17).

God is not bound to do things as we expect Him to do. Have you ever noticed that God has a way of offending your mind to reveal to you your heart? What do I mean by that? Naaman had faith arise because of the testimony of his slave girl, but when he drew up to the household of Elisha with a great retinue of chariots (v. 9), he wasn't received in the way he expected a general of his caliber should be. Elisha didn't even give him the common courtesy of going out of his door to meet him, but he sent his servant to tell him how to be cleansed of his leprosy. The word of the Lord from Elisha directed Naaman to do something humiliating to his flesh and offensive to his mind. He was told to go and wash in the Jordan River, that dirty, muddy stream that could barely be called a river that went from the Sea of Galilee down to the Dead Sea. Naaman's pride and anger rose up within him at such a humiliating thought. "Dipping myself seven times in the Jordan! Why the rivers of Damascus in Syria are a better and cleaner river than the Jordan!" he said.

The things of God are sometimes contrary and offensive to our minds. Naaman expected that Elisha would wave his hands over the diseased area of his body and he would be healed. We want our spiritual healing and the works of God on our terms, but God will not be bound by our terms. Some people say that there are many ways to God, but the truth is that you have to come to God on His terms, not yours. If there had been another way other than that the Son of God should be cruelly treated and brutally murdered, don't you think that God would have taken it? If there were another way to redeem humanity other than the ultimate sacrifice, the Father would have accomplished mankind's redemption another way. Instead, He chose the cross, which is an offensive thing, and used it ultimately for His higher purpose and glory. God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts! (Isaiah 55:8).

If Naaman had not listened to his servants, he would have returned to Syria still leprous. He had to humble himself and walk in obedience to the way of healing God had shown him. If God had required him to do something hard and challenging, he would have done it, so why not dip himself in the Jordan and trust God? Many of us want to do some great thing to earn our way. Just like the rich man when he “came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’” (Matthew 19:16). We are so focused on self-effort to bridge the gap between ourselves and God. We find it hard to believe that God would give us such grace and favor. □

Why does our human nature find it so difficult to receive God’s word and obey it? What is Jesus saying to the crowd in the Nazareth synagogue by referring to these two instances? Why did they get so angry to the point of wanting to kill Him?

Who Were These Rejecters of Christ?

Jesus had recognized that they wanted Him to do what He did in Capernaum and more because He had grown up in their town (Luke 4:23). He was telling them that He did not recognize those claims. He had not come to put on a show for them. The grace of God comes easily to those who are not deserving and to those who are spiritually impoverished, which is what the word *poor* means in Luke 4:18. He had come for those that were in a spiritual prison to the prince of this world, Satan. He had come for those that could not see the ways of this world, and because of that they could not break out of their blindness—they were lacking in the hope of ever finding the way to God’s house. The people of the Nazareth synagogue were not like that. They were good, fine, upstanding people that did not see themselves in that way. When He said that He is to preach to the broken-hearted, well, they were not conscious of any need of a broken heart. They also did not need a liberator—they were as free as a man could be! Their attitude was the same as the Pharisees who had said, “We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” (John 8:33). They did not recognize their need. □

I would encourage all of us to search our hearts. Are any of us like these people in any way? Do not be too quick to answer. Most of us in the Western world, North America and Europe, have grown up with the stories of Jesus. Many people have become immune to these stories and the profound truth Christ offers. The wonder has gone, because, like Nazareth, we have become too familiar with stories about Jesus. It has become comfortable for us to rely on our good habits acquired over time instead of the grace of God. Perhaps, you have grown up in Church and think that because you have joined in with songs and prayers all the way through your young life, that they will serve you well at the Last Judgment when you stand before Christ. As the town of Nazareth, you know much about Christ and could tell much of the stories, but do you know Him? It’s not enough to know about Christ, for only those who are known by Him will enter into eternal life (Matthew 7:23).

In powerful revivals in the past, it has often been noticed that God will raise up a John Wesley or a George Whitfield to take the Gospel onto the streets. These men went out of the cities into the fields where upwards of twenty to thirty thousand who had never heard the gospel were hearing it for the first time. Oh, Lord, please let it happen again in our day. We can be so like the town of

Nazareth because we don't care about those who are outside; we want God to work among us. Do here what we have heard You do in Capernaum, China, India, and Africa! Many of us have heard of Jesus many times, but we care little for those who have never heard of the Savior in Asia and the Middle East. Oh, God, deliver us from a spirit of apathy toward the lost of this world!

Why Did They Reject Christ?

It was a lovely moment up until the time He went and spoiled it all by sharing Who He indeed was, and the people to whom He was sent. What fuel was it that fed the fire of their anger? The trouble was that they did not see themselves in this story! They wanted to hear that they were the sole recipients of God's grace, without acknowledging their need of Him! He angered them to the degree that they wanted to murder Him! They could not tolerate the apparent compliment that Jesus paid to the Gentiles. The Jews were so sure that they were God's people that they utterly despised the Gentiles and felt justified in doing so. With the two examples, Jesus was comparing the synagogue goers to the stiff-necked Israelites whom God overlooked because of their unbelief and self-sufficiency.

The two passages of Scripture that Jesus quoted are of two Gentiles that God chose to rescue. He intervened in their lives because of their desperation, faith, and humility. Most importantly, they were people who were acutely aware of their own need. Let's think about those two people for just a moment. One, Naaman, was a leper from the idolatrous land of Assyria. It is likely Naaman would have been accustomed to bow in the house of the false god, Rimmon, to receive his healing! Now, in desperation, he turned to God's prophet who went to God on His behalf. God healed him, even though he came from this idolatrous country! As if that was not enough to stoke their anger, Jesus gave them another example of a widow, someone who had no social standing in their world, a woman from idolatrous Sidon! Contrast that to the people who were in attendance in the synagogue on that day. That is what Jesus did, and this is what angered them. How dare He compares these Gentiles, these outsiders, with upstanding people of faith, such as themselves? The people before Him in the synagogue felt that they owned Him. They believed themselves deserving of His grace. God does not owe any man. Worse than that, Jesus was proclaiming that He was the One bringing in the time of God's favor—what blasphemy, from the lips of a local man Whom they knew as a boy! It was all too much for them. Their response to Him was self-righteous indignation. Because of this, Jesus was correct in saying that He could do no great works in front of them, for they did not come to Him in need, but as those who were spectators, wanting a show.

It seems that the people did not even wait until the end of the service. They rose from their seats, grabbed hold of Him, and pulled Him outside to the nearby brow of the hill, but Christ shook off their grip on His arms and walked through them. Isaiah prophesied correctly of Christ when he said, *“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem”* (Isaiah 53:3).

Everybody goes through rejection, and in the plan of God Jesus endured everything that we could experience and more so that no one could say, “Well, it was easier for Jesus. He didn't

have to go through what I am going through.” It must have been hard to be rejected by His friends in His hometown. It is comforting to know that He had to go through many of the same things that you and I have had to experience. The feelings of rejection were not unknown to the Son of God. He can come alongside us when we go through similar things and say to us, "I know how you feel."□

Prayer: Father, thank You for Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, Who comes alongside us and lifts us up when we go through various trials to our faith. Grow us in our faith to be more like Him. Amen!

Keith Thomas

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com □