JESUS REJECTED AT NAZARETH

Luke 4:14–30

Key Verses: 4:18,19

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Are you gullible? Do you easily believe things? Or are you more of a skeptic? Do you immediately question whatever’s being said? Most people think it’s wiser to withhold our trust. In today’s passage Luke records how Jesus goes to his hometown Nazareth to share the good news with them, but then, how the ending turns out really badly. What’s going on? What was Jesus really saying? What was he offering? How is this still an offer to us? And how and why should we take his words? May God open our hearts and speak to us today.

In chapters 1 and 2 Luke describes the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, to show us what great things God was doing in sending them to this world. Basically God was fulfilling his long awaited promises of salvation. In chapters 3 and 4 Luke shows us a period of preparation before Jesus began his ministry. First, John the Baptist tells people they need to repent to get ready for Jesus’ coming. Then Jesus receives the Spirit and faces temptations he needs to resist, to be fully prepared for his ministry. Now in chapters 4–9 Luke begins the first major section of this Gospel: describing Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. Jesus’ Galilean ministry is the main focus of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But unusually, Luke changes the order of events by beginning with Jesus’ visit to his hometown, Nazareth. For Luke, this event says so much about the core of Jesus’ ministry, and, about why his good news ended up spreading to the Gentiles.

Read verse 14. Luke begins by again emphasizing the Spirit’s role in Jesus’ ministry (3:21,22; 4:1). This time he uses the phrase “the power of the Spirit.” It was because Jesus had just defeated all the devil’s temptations. In his ministry he would face all kinds of challenges, problems and resistance. But the Spirit gave him power to overcome it all and really do the work God had called him to do. To live as Christians we too need the power of the Spirit (Ac1:8).

Luke also tells us here about a report spreading about Jesus. Luke often uses this word “report” to show us how the good news spread (4:37; 5:15; 7:17). In this case, it spreads “through all the surrounding country.” How? Read verse 15. Reports spread mainly through Jesus’ Bible teaching ministry. He went to the local synagogues, where people typically gathered, and focused on sharing God’s word. He quickly became famous for it. His being “glorified by all” means people immediately recognized his God-given gift. Luke is going to tell us a lot more about Jesus’ teaching ministry (4:31; 5:3,17; 10:39; 13:10,22; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37; 23:5). He’s also going to tell us how often Jesus is called “Teacher,” not only by his disciples but also by so many other people, of all kinds (7:40; 8:49; 9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18; 19:39; 20:21,28,29; 21:7; 22:11). The point is, the main content of Jesus’ ministry was teaching people God’s word. He wasn’t overly “teachy”; he was just so good at it. It’s what he became known for most.

Then Luke narrows in on one particular event. Read verse 16. Matthew and Mark place this event later (Mt13:53–58; Mk6:1–6a). But Luke places it here at the beginning of his account, because it tells us something so important. What is it? Read verses 17–21. Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us what Jesus actually said when he went to his hometown Nazareth.

What is Jesus talking about here? First, he mentions how he’s been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord. Next, we notice the contents of his message: “good news,” “liberty,” “recovering of sight” and “the year of the Lord’s favor.” Finally, we notice the kinds of people Jesus mentions: the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. He explains no further, except to say that “this Scripture has been fulfilled.” So what’s it all about? It was from the prophecy of Isaiah. All four Gospel writers tell us about Isaiah’s prophecies being fulfilled in Jesus (Mt1:23; 3:3; 4:15; 8:17; 12:18,21; 13:14; 15:7; 21:13; Mk1:2; 4:12; 7:6; 9:48; 11:17; 15:28; Lk2:32; 3:4; 4:17; 8:10; 19:46; 22:37; Jn1:23; 6:45; 12:38,39). But only Luke tells us of this special quote from Isaiah 61.

What’s the context of this? Isaiah wrote about God’s people sent into exile in Babylon. It wasn’t just a relocation; exile for them meant being enslaved, far away from home, stripped of all their property, crushed by harsh rulers, maimed by traumatic scars. But they were not the victims. Their captivity was no accident. The Bible tells us again and again that it all happened to them due to their stubborn sins against God (e.g. Ez5:12). Their captivity was a metaphor for our common human condition. After the first human beings sinned against God, then came curse, pain, a meaningless struggle for survival, restless wandering, death, and on top of all that, a continuous downward spiral into worse and worse corruption. Despite our best intentions and efforts, these consequences of sin keep happening in every place and every generation. Clever people try to escape this huge mess by amassing wealth, insulating, pampering and preserving themselves. Most everybody else feels the full brunt of the harshness of this evil, cruel and meaningless world. All its wars and injustice and oppression, all its sickness and death and suffering, are due to the power of sin and its consequences.

But Isaiah’s main message was that, despite all the bleakness and darkness, God has hope. God plans to restore this lost world. More than any other Old Testament prophet, Isaiah repeatedly paints beautiful pictures of God’s hope. God planned to fulfill his hope by sending a deliverer, the Messiah, his Servant, the one anointed by his Spirit. Isaiah predicted that this Messiah would usher in a beautiful kingdom, where God’s light shines brightly. This kingdom is for all the nations. No more war, violence, injustice or hurting each other. No more hunger or thirst. No more sickness or death, crying or pain, sorrow or sighing. Everlasting joy and peace.

In verse 18 the word “liberty” is repeated. In the original language it’s the same word as “forgiveness.” And this is the main gospel message of Luke: Jesus came to bring us God’s forgiveness (1:77; 3:3; 5:20,24; 7:47,48; 11:4; 17:3,4; 23:34; 24:47; cf. Ac2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). Only God’s forgiveness gives us real liberty. When we taste his forgiveness, we’re no longer spiritually poor, but rich; no longer captive of sin and guilt, but set free; no longer spiritually blind, but have clear spiritual vision; no longer oppressed by life, but empowered and uplifted. All this is what God really wants to do for us.

The last part of Jesus’ quote says: “…to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (19). This is Isaiah’s reference to the year of Jubilee. God gave his people many laws to govern their lives and society. He told them every seventh year was to be a Sabbath year, when all slaves should set free and given generous reimbursement for all their services. After seven consecutive Sabbath years—49 years—on the fiftieth year, not only were all slaves freed, but also, everybody’s debts were cancelled and anybody separated from family could finally go home. It was announced with a loud trumpet. This became known as “the year of the Lord’s favor,” the year when anybody could be accepted again, the year of Jubilee, the year of great joy. This is what Jesus came to bring us (2:10). It points to our ultimate hope in the kingdom of God, the kingdom Luke mentions again and again, from the beginning of this Gospel to the end (1:33; 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1,10; 9:2,11,60,62; 10:9,11; 11:2,20; 12:31,32; 13:18,20,28,29; 14:15; 16:16; 17:20,21; 18:16,17,24,25,29; 19:11ff.; 21:31; 22:16,18,29,30; 23:42,43,51; cf. Ac1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31).

Read verse 18 again. All the suffering of people is summed up here as “the poor.” This is another major theme of Luke, which he repeats again and again (6:20; 7:22; 14:13,21; 16:20,22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:2,3). The poor so often are despised, neglected and left out, but not by God, and they shouldn’t be treated like that by his people, either. Being poor isn’t just a financial situation; it also represents being humble (1:48,52), as well as all those really suffering in this life, and it includes all those who humble themselves (14:11; 18:14). Luke portrays Jesus as having a real heart for the poor. The poor and humble are more open to God, more open to the good news about Jesus.

How do his hometown people respond? At first it says their eyes were fixed on him (20). Verse 22a adds, “And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.” “Marveled” means they were amazed. His words were so gracious and attractive. They really liked what he was saying. But then they started to change. In verse 22b they asked, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” They suddenly remembered this was the Jesus they all knew, the one who grew up in their town. They knew him as the carpenter Joseph’s son (cf. 3:23). They knew him too well humanly to accept that he was any fulfillment of prophecy. As the famous saying goes, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” It made them too blind to really listen to him as God’s Servant.

How does Jesus respond? Read verse 23. It tells us that Jesus had already performed miracles in their rival town of Capernaum, and he knows it’s what they’re expecting him to do now. Jesus wants them to believe not based on miracles but on his words, but they don’t want that. Read verse 24. It’s a well-known truth, seen again and again so many times, both in the Bible and in our world. And it’s pretty simple. It’s a warning for us of how easy it is not to take Jesus, his words and his servants seriously.

Luke uniquely records how Jesus goes on to teach them some examples from the Bible. Read verses 25,26. This is a story from 1 Kings 17. The prophet Elijah was rejected by his own people, but this humble Gentile widow listened to him as God’s servant and experienced God’s help and healing for her son. Read verse 27. This is a story from 2 Kings 5. The prophet Elisha also was rejected by his own people and made fun of because he was bald. But a Gentile army general named Naaman humbled himself to follow Elisha’s instructions and experienced God’s healing. Jesus was predicting how the gospel message would eventually go out to humble people all around the world, even today. The last part of today’s passage shows how, when people’s pride is hurt, their praises soon turns to hatred, anger and even attempted murder (28–30). But these people couldn’t stop God from accomplishing his plan through Jesus.

So what are me to make of this? This passage shows us the wonderful news Jesus came to bring us. He came to bring us God’s forgiveness and real joy and restoration. But we have to make a decision. We can either decide to humbly accept his message, or, we can choose to despise and reject him. Are we skeptical? Or are we ready to truly listen to Jesus? May God have mercy on us and help us experience this beautiful hope of his kingdom through the forgiving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.