

The Messiah Confronts His People

Luke 4:22-30

August 21, 2016

You'll notice there, if you're in Luke 4 verses 14 to 16, the scene is set there in the synagogue. The synagogue was the place of weekly Jewish worship and instruction. And we spent some time last time describing the synagogue because really it features so often in the synoptic Gospels. It's mentioned nine times of the synagogue in Matthew, 11 times in Mark, 16 times in Luke. Then there's another 22 times the synagogue is set as the scene in the Book of Acts. This is a very important setting to understand. Jesus, and then later his apostles in the Book of Acts, they make use of the synagogues to announce the fulfillment of God's restoration promises to Israel. The synagogues were, really, they were ready-made venues for this purpose to introduce the Messiah to the Jewish people.

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God, during the time of the exile in Babylon, in the sixth century BC, he raised up these synagogues to be really centers of, of Jewish instruction. Jewish people, they gathered there in foreign lands to retain their Jewish heritage and culture, and they did that by reciting the writings of Moses and the prophets. God's design in all of that, they may have been trying to hold on to their culture, their identity, but God's design was to prepare his people to see their Messiah.

All during that 400 years of silence, prophetic silence, between the prophet Malachi all the way to the birth of Christ, that entire 400 years was intended to keep people looking down at their Bibles so that when the Messiah finally arrived, they would look up from the pages of Scripture, see the one about whom they had read, recognize him for who he really is.

So, did they recognize him? Did they see him for who he really is? They were certainly looking at him. Look at verse 20, it says there at the end that their eyes were fixed on him. The verb used there is *atēnizō*. It's to stare at him, to look intently. These people are on the edges of their seats after

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Jesus reads that Scripture in their midst. They are extremely curious about him, having heard the reports. You could hear a pin drop in that place. But did they really see him? They were looking at him, sure, practically boring holes into his body with their eyes. But did they actually see what God intended them to see?

When we read Luke 4:22, we have the answer to that question. Jesus had just read from the prophet Isaiah, it's text that announced himself as the Messiah, a text that explained his Messianic mission, and then this in verse 22. Look at it there, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'"

Folks, that right there, that is the turning point in this narrative, that's the hinge, the pivot point. Their response is really what precipitates everything that happens in the rest of the narrative, first from Jesus and then from the people in the synagogue. That verse explains what, frankly, doesn't seem to us to make too much sense. How is it that something so, that

started so well, how did it turn out to be so dangerous for the very one who came to provide salvation?

That's what we're going to take our time to understand today. We're going to go through this text and figure out how it is that these people could see but not understand. How could they hear all that he said that day and then not fall down immediately and worship him as their gracious redeemer? This is a classic case of, so close, yet so far away. Speaking well of Jesus on the one hand, attempting to murder him within the same hour. It really is incredible, isn't it? This text tells us not only what happened that day, but why it happened as well.

Let's get into our outline so we can start to get some of those questions answered. I just mentioned God's gracious providence raising up the synagogues during the Babylonian captivity. He'd been instructing the people for centuries, from ancient generations, as James put it in Acts 15, all from Moses and the prophets, that is a mark there of gracious preparation of God, right? But beyond that you can see several indications in this

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text, this is going to be the first point in our outline. We see God's gracious preparation of these people.

Just call it the gracious preparation in your notes. And I want you to see this clearly here because it really does heighten the contrast between what God had done to prepare Nazareth and what Nazareth had done to reject God's grace. It's truly an amazing contrast. Notice, first of all in verse 16 that Jesus came home to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; where he'd been brought up. Before Jesus arrived in Nazareth, Nazareth had received reports about Jesus, verse 14, so they knew he was not the same quiet, unassuming son of a carpenter who left Nazareth a year, year and a half ago. He's a different man.

It's hard to see people in a new light, isn't it? Someone from your hometown, someone you've known all your life, they go away. God uses them in unique ways, gives them unique experiences, they return home. It's hard not to see them as you always did when they were growing up in your midst, isn't it? It's hard not to see them as the same person you knew way back when. And I'm sure on a human level that was part of the struggle for the

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people in Nazareth, just to see Jesus in a different light. That's why God prepared them.

That's why God made sure that the reports about Jesus had made it back to Nazareth way ahead of his arrival there. He even gave them time to process what they had heard, to ponder it, probably a year's time to think about it. So, when Jesus returned home to Nazareth, he was not an unknown figure as the Messiah; he was known. People had heard the news, they knew the reports from Judea, his miracles, his authority, his teaching. They had never heard of anybody like this. Never heard of any of these kinds of things happening. His reputation preceded him, which was part of God's gracious preparation.

Here's a second indication of God's grace in preparing these people. I'll just mention a couple more of these before we kind of get into a text just to get a running start. When Jesus finally arrived in Nazareth, God, right before them, he united the Scripture that they had read all their lives, he united that Scripture with the subject of the Scripture that they had read all their lives. That is an amazing thought.

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They had been reading about the Messiah, hoping for his arrival, and in verse 16 he came to Nazareth. They had been reading about him, and now here he comes. "And as was his custom he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he stood up to read." On that Sabbath day in Nazareth, the Messiah of Scripture actually read the Scripture to these people, and the very passage that identified him as the Messiah and explained his ministry to them.

Listen, to hear the Messiah read Holy Scripture with all the proper emphasis, all the depth of understanding, his insight, all informed by years of sanctified study, remember not a sin in him, not a sin affecting his mind, no weakness in his thinking, he applies it to the Scripture. Imagine what it must have been like to hear him read the very words of God. These people were indeed an honored, privileged people.

But, not only that, when he read, he read words of salvation to them, not of judgment. Look at verse 17, "The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and

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found the place where it was written, '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, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'"

Look, Jesus had grown up with these people. He had lived there for 30 years observing their lives, noticing their sins, large and small, obvious sins, subtle sins. He knew these people. He knew their hypocrisies. He knew their petty jealousies, their village squabbles, their petty rivalries. He knew the expressions of their sinful desires expressed in their behavior, in their words, indicated by how they treated each other. Like all of us, these people did not deserve words of tenderness, did they? They deserved divine judgment. But God sent Jesus to read these words of grace, to announce the favorable year of the Lord, not his judgment.

Listen, if he's looking carefully at your life, he's looking carefully at my life, what does Jesus see? What thoughts flow through our minds? What kinds of petty complaints do we harbor,

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bitternesses do we hold on to? What kind of temptations solicit themselves to us? What kind of hypocrisies are apparent to him? What kind of critical-spirited judgments do we have about others?

Look, all of us, like the people in Nazareth, deserve judgment. But he begins here, he begins with words of grace, words of favor. God is here preparing these people to see Jesus, not first as judge, but of Savior , as Savior. And he sent them an early report of all that Jesus had done. He sent Jesus into their midst to read the Bible to them, read these words of grace, so gracious, so kind.

Here's another way that God prepared these people. Jesus didn't just read Scripture. He didn't just read words of grace. You know what else he did? He explained the Scripture to them. He was the expositing preacher that day. He didn't just read and leave the interpretation to them; he explained it as well. Verse 20 says, "He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down." Which means he assumed the position for teaching. "And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on

him." It says in verse 21, "And he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

When it says there, "He began to say to them," that means he merely introduced his sermon that way; rapt attention that people had all focused on him, listening intently. He says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That got their attention. They're in, they're listening, they're hooked up and they're going on the track with him. It's an explosive statement, and what followed was the most amazing teaching that had ever hit the ears of an audience in the history of the earth.

Wouldn't that be something? If Jesus stood up to read here at our church? Then sat down to teach us? We'd all be dialed in. We'd all be listening carefully, right? Every single word.

The next verse says, verse 22 says, "They marveled." That describes a common reaction to Jesus' teaching. Over and over people would proclaim, no one has ever said anything like this guy. No one has ever taught like he's teaching right now. No one

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has ever expressed this kind of power, this kind of authority in his teaching. We're going to see that again and again in Luke's Gospel. And what he taught them here from Isaiah 61, that text announced himself as the Messiah, it explained the purposes of his anointing, why the Holy Spirit was upon him in power, it unpacked the purpose of his mission. And the Holy Spirit was upon him, giving him power for miracles, for mighty works, for teaching, for Gospel proclamation. He came evangelizing. God sent him to proclaim liberty to the captives, as it says there, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. He sent, God sent Jesus to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And Jesus, the best teacher in the entire world, is there in Nazareth, a backwater town of no consequence except that he's from there. He taught these people exactly, precisely, what all these words meant.

Listen, there's no one on earth that received the kind of gracious preparation that these people received. The people of Nazareth were the beneficiaries, right here, of amazing grace. They watched Jesus grow up. None of them could remember any sin that he'd ever committed. They knew he was remarkable, but to hear him teach, to hear him say, verse 21, "Today this Scripture

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has been fulfilled in your hearing," frankly, no one, no one like these people here, better prepared to see Jesus for who he really is.

Folks, listen, that's what makes verse 22 to be one of the most colossal failures in all of the New Testament. All spoke well of him, marveled at the gracious words coming out of his mouth, they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

When I was a kid and growing up and playing sports, I wasn't a great athlete. I was athletic, but not a great athlete, if you know what I mean. Whether it was soccer or basketball, I was fairly decent at playing defense, not because of some kind of talent or skill, but just because I was just aggressive and energetic, okay? You know the kind of kid, right? He's always running around, getting himself into mischief, causing problems with everybody else.

So that was me, and I was fairly decent at playing defense, but I really lost my nerve whenever I had opportunities to score; I'd steal the ball and I'd be dribbling down the court or

kicking the ball down the field, filled with adrenaline, right? And I could hear the excited parents cheering. I didn't want to let them down. When I finally realized I was at the hoop, I had dribbled way too far, misjudged my position and threw the ball away, and it hit the back of the backboard and bounced out of bounds. Total failure. The disappointment of the crowd, the gasps, the moans, yeah even the boos. The, get that kid off the court, that kind of thing. I heard that, too, crystal clearly.

Listen, that's what we need to hear right here, right at the end of verse 22, loud and clear. It should really stand out to us; it should leap off the page. "They spoke well," as they should, "of him." "They marveled," which is appropriate. But to only draw this dull, dim-witted, conclusion, "Is this not Joseph's son?" Folks, that an absolute failure. And it's not just a mistake, it's a very grave sin.

Even if they meant it favorably, which might not be the case, by the way, they may be saying, who does he think he is coming back here and putting himself at the center of that text? I mean, really, the audacity of that guy! But even if they are

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expressing surprise that this son of Joseph, a lowly carpenter, that he's such an amazing teacher, you know what, they've sorely misidentified him by esteeming him too lowly. That's a sin, folks.

Nicodemus and his colleagues on the san, at the Sanhedrin, they'd done the same thing. John 3 verse 2, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God because we've seen the works you've done and we figure you've come from God." Oh, really? Is that all you came up with? A bunch of really wise men sitting around the Sanhedrin, ruling all of Israel, and that's what you come up with? A teacher come from God? Is that all? Water into wine, clearing out the entire Temple, many amazing signs, all of Jerusalem in an uproar, the power of the Holy Spirit on clear display, and a teacher come from God is all you can see?

Again, verse 18, notice the, the center of all of this text is Jesus himself. He says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...He has anointed me...He has sent me." And "Today, this Scripture," me, "has been," filled, "fulfilled in your hearing." Joseph's son? Really? Not the anointed one? Not *ha'mâshîyach*, the Messiah

of Israel? That's kind of hard to fathom, maybe, from our vantage point as we read the text, as we have the benefit of 2,000 years of hindsight. But we need to ask, even as they're sitting there listening to him, what explains this response? What is it that explains such a dull, spiritually insensitive response? The answer is captured by a single word; it's the word *unbelief*.

These people are unregenerate, they're blind, they're unable to see the Messiah standing right in front of them even though God has graciously prepared them to recognize him when he visited the synagogue. They can't see him. He's even read the very text about him, and he said, Hey, that's me and here I am. And they can't see him. They're blinded by *unbelief*. And that's going to become even more apparent as we go through the text.

But before we move into our second outline point, I want to show you Jesus' explanation of this phenomenon of *unbelief*. We could look at Luke chapter 8, but let's not do that. I want to go to the parallel passage in Matthew 13. So, if you would, turn to Matthew 13, verse 10, because this is a text that gives us a

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fuller explanation. You may remember in your Bible reading that Matthew 13 contains some of the most well-known parables, beloved parables. It's the parable of the sower, we've got the parable of the tares among the wheat, the mustard seed, treasure hidden in the field, the, the pearl of great price, all those great parables of Christ.

But the disciples came to Jesus early on in the chapter, right after the parable of the sower, and they asked him the question that we all have, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" You've got plain truth, why couch it in a, in a story, a parable form, that could be lost on maybe the people who aren't thinking as deeply? Why'd you do that?

He said to them in verse 11, Matthew 13, "To you," that is to you disciples, "it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing

they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

“Indeed, in their case,” the prophy, “the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn,” read the word repent there, turn, repent, “and I would heal them.’”

That’s it, folks. They have dull hearts, deaf ears, and their eyes, even though their eyes are wide open and fixed attentively on Jesus, their eyes are blind. They’re staring directly at him. They’re listening to his gracious words, both read and explained, but they can’t see their Messiah. They can’t hear him when he speaks to them.

This obstinacy of unbelief, it’s understood only when you consider the power of spiritual deadness. They don’t see and

hear because they can't see and hear. And, going further, the mystery of iniquity is this: that they can't see and hear because they won't see and hear. Look, that's the mark of spiritual deadness. It's not simply inability; it's an unwillingness to come to the truth, to come to the light. Their hearts are revealed here. Jesus, though, he continues. These are words of confrontation that come next.

But you also need to understand these are words of grace. He's provoking, he's pushing this conversation forward. He's being provocative as he speaks to them. But it's provocative not just for the sake of being provocative, not for the sake of being controversial. He's provoking to a verdict. And he's provoking them so that they will turn and be healed. It's gracious, in the end.

Turn back to Luke 4. Starting in verse 23, we hear from Jesus, this is going to be point two in your outline, we hear from Jesus that he gives us the gloomy prediction, the gloomy prediction. In the next several verses, verses 23 to 27, we're going to see two aphorisms, an aphorism is like a maxim, a

proverb here, two examples of the prophets, and you can put this in alliteration in your outline if you're writing these down, two proverbs and two prophets. Simply, two proverbs, two prophets. He starts with the two proverbs, and he's just laying down a principle here at the heart, that lies at the heart of their rejection.

So, take a look at verses 23 to 24. These are the two proverbs. "He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.' And he said," verse 24, "'Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown.'"

So, he quotes a proverb that's really, characterizes them as kind of coming from their mind, and then he answers or retorts with one of his own. And he begins both proverbs with statement of strong affirmation, "Doubtless you will quote this to me." And then verse 24 "truly," that's the word *amēn*, right, amen. "Truly, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown."

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It's a future tense there in verse 23 "Doubtless you will quote this proverb to me." That's not, he's not just predicting the future like, Hey, one day you're going to say this." This future tense is used here to show not a prediction, it's used here to show a strong affirmation of what they're really believing right then and there. This is a revelation. He's exposed their thinking here. He's giving them what's on their minds at this very moment. He's basically reading their minds, their thoughts. They're exposed. And you can almost hear the sadness in his voice here. I mean, like I said, he knew these people well, for better and for worse. But he loves these people. These are his family, his friends. These are people chased him around the play yard, cares for them and here he is publicly revealing their sinful expectations.

The first proverb, it's a common saying in Jesus' day, "Physician, heal yourself." It could mean, take care of your own affairs first; it could mean that. Jesus interpreted this saying in the very next sentence, he says that, Physician, heal yourself, it means, give your people the benefit of your miracle working power. Physician, heal yourself, means, hey, take care of your own crowd. Take care of us.

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Notice the thoughts that he exposed there. "What we've heard you did at Capernaum." Is that a taunt? What we've, we've heard about your miracles, we've heard about mighty works but prove it, college boy . Show us what you can really do, if we're going to believe in you. Look, if that's what they're thinking, and it kind of appears that it was, those are wicked thoughts. Those are very wicked thoughts.

When they talk about Capernaum, they're talking about what we read before, a couple weeks ago, in John 4:46 to 54, when Jesus healed the son of one of the noblemen there. Capernaum wasn't far away. The report of that healing made its way back to Nazareth, just probably only about 20 miles away. The miracle of water turned to wine that happened in Cana, which was even closer. Cana is also a very small little town like Nazareth. There's probably a little rivalry between these towns. Jesus knew that in their hearts the people of Nazareth, they expected from him the very same things. They wanted him to share the wealth. They, they wanted him to give some of those healing benefits he provided for other people in other places. You did it there; why don't you do it here?

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The people want healing. They want miracles. They want tangible and, beneficial for them, expression of practical power. They want his miracles. They want all that he has done for other people, they want him to do it right there. And all he's done is come back and read the Bible to them. I mean, come on. All he's done is come back and give them another sermon. I heard one last week, Jesus, and I'm going to hear one next week. Come on, start dancing. I want to see miracles.

They were impressed with his teaching, yeah, but they virtually ignored it. His words were crowded out in their hearts by their own sinful expectation. They don't want to hear mere words any more. They wanted to see miracles. They expect to get something from him. They expect him to send a little love their way. What you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.

That proverb, by the way, "Physician, heal yourself," if you're familiar with the Gospel narratives you can hear kinda the echoes of that at the cross, right? Jesus is dying for the sins of his people and the cruel taunts that come rolling out, this

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time unrestrained, not whispered, but now vocalized and aimed at him without relent, without mercy. Those who passed by derided him. They're wagging their heads, and they're, they're saying, "You who would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself. If you're the Son of God, come down from the cross."

The same proverb, it's applied, a little bit, in a different way, "Physician, heal yourself." The chief priests they come by with the scribes and the elders, and they mocked him too. And they said, He saved others. He can't save himself. This physician is a fraud; saved others, he can't save himself. He's the king of Israel, let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him." Not likely. "Physician, heal yourself. You want us to believe in you, save yourself and then we'll consider your claims.

Who's on the lordship of their reason? They are, right? Their own sinful judgment is sitting as lord and arbiter in their hearts of what's they're going to accept and what they're going to reject. Perform to our expectations; we'll think about taking

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you seriously. These folks had no understanding of Scripture, which had taught them plainly that the Messiah had to die, had to be on that cross. But they didn't understand that. They were blinded by their own expectations.

Well, this cruel, unbelieving, spirit of taunting and reviling, even blaspheming, Luke wants us to see this right here at the very outset of his Gospel, that this is present in the people of Israel from the very beginning. And that when we get to the end of the narrative, the end of his Gospel and Jesus is on the cross, and you know what? Frankly, we're not surprised. We understand. It's a hard heart of unbelief. Which, by the way, is the hardest substance in the world, harder than any diamond, harder than any jewel . And it's deadly, too, as we're going to see.

To answer to the proverb that would one day be in the mouth of these people, and was in their hearts even now, Jesus retorted with a proverb of his own. He said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown." We have a similar saying, don't we? Familiarity breeds contempt.

Why did he say that? What's the point he's trying to make? He's pointing out that their rejection of him, it has nothing to do with miracles or no miracles. It doesn't have anything to do with him giving them a little miracle love or holding it back. It's not that they don't have evidence of his healing power, of his divine authority because they'd heard the reports. They knew what he said from Isaiah the prophet. They'd heard his teaching; his power, his strength, his authority, was unmistakable, undeniable.

The issue is a matter of unbelieving contempt. Rejecting what is familiar. The people, as I said, were not going to believe in him until he'd met their expectations, until he had given them something that they deemed worthy of believing. But, until then, they're not listening.

Hometown crowd, it's always happy to receive a hero but not a prophet. They're thrilled about a popular figure because popularity puts them on the map. It makes a little backwater town like Nazareth, remember Nathaniel's taunt, "Can anything

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good come out of Nazareth?" He starts doing miracles there. All of the suddenly, boom! Nazareth is on the map with a capital N. When the tide of popularity, pos, prosperity rises, all boats rise with it, right?

So, they are very happy to welcome home the one who will make them healthy and wealthy, prosperous, famous. But they're reticent to embrace the one who will call them to be holy. I hope that's not true of any one of us. I hope we're all coming here week after week, not because we want to be happy first, but because we want to be holy.

That's what God offers us in the gospel, is it not? To remove every sin in the cross by a dreadful curse on his own son and take away every single sin of thought, word, and deed, sin of past, present, and future, sins of omission and commission, everything, everything from the smallest to the greatest and everything in between, take it all way. He wants us to be holy, that's what the sacrifice is about.

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On the other side, not only is our sin imputed to Christ on the cross, but his perfect righteousness, that's imputed to us so that his righteousness becomes our righteousness. It's a perfect righteousness. It's absolute holiness. Beloved, that's the gospel. Sin gone, righteousness in its place, standing before God in his holiness, in Christ's holiness; not rejected but embraced. As Hebrews tells us, we're to strive for holiness because without holiness no one will see the Lord.

So, if holiness is our concern, we will receive Jesus and everything he has to say, and we will come into church every single week with that expectation. That this event we do here every single week is not about making me happy, it's about making me holy. You know what? In holiness, happiness comes for the believer.

Well, let's look at what happens next, because, folks, this is what really sets people off. You have to see that Jesus has responded to these folks with such generous mercy here, such graciousness. He could write them off and walk away, but he instead, took the time to teach them out of their own history

with a view to leading them to repentance and faith. It is provocative, no doubt. It is pressing the issue home. He's making them uncomfortable. He's making them squirm. And, as we see, he makes them angry. But he's not doing it to make them angry. He wants them to be saved.

We have seen the two proverbs that draw their attention to the heart of the issue, which is their unbelief. But now notice verses 25 to 27, the two prophets, because the two prophets, they illustrate the proverbs that Jesus just cited. These two stories here, they're both a warning on the one hand and they're an encouragement on the other; a warning and an encouragement that they must repent and believe.

Look at what it says there, verse 25. "But," I tell you, "in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there many lepers in

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Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”

Two examples, two prophets, two ministries, two people benefited. He provides these examples from Israel’s history because he’s demonstrating here points of continuity. He wants people to understand, as he’s speaking here, that he is walking in the same tradition as the prophets who came before him. In fact, according to verse 21, he came to fulfill the words of the prophets, right? Same historic line as Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah, Moses, all the way back to the beginning.

Also, and this is very important, at the same time Jesus is warning the people here, that while he himself is in harmony with the prophets, at the same time these people are demonstrating their historical continuity as, but not with, the prophets; their continuity is with unbelieving Israel. They are in harmony with the devil. They’re in harmony with sinful unbelief.

Okay, and now we start to see what made these folks seem so angry. The days of Elijah and Elisha, they're characterized by wicked unbelief in Israel. They're characterized by rampant idolatry, Baal worship. In fact, I'd like you to turn back, just as we illustrate this, go back to 1 Kings 16. I'd like to give you a quick look at the stories that Jesus cited of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and then Naaman, the Syrian.

While you're turning there, I'm just going to give you a bit of background of Israel's history, very, very brief. In the days of Elijah and Elisha, the designation, Israel, you may understand, it didn't refer to the nation as a whole. Israel, as a name, referred to the northern tribes of Israel that followed Jeroboam when he rebelled against Solomon's son, Rehoboam. So there were 10 tribes that went to the north, and they are called Israel. Rehoboam and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, they stayed in the south, and they were called Judah. So, now we have a fractured Israel, it's no longer a united kingdom; it's a divided kingdom. You have Israel and Judah. Israel in the north, Judah in the south.

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When Jeroboam and those 10 tribes of the north, they split off, the nation is divided, right? And to keep those northern tribes separate from Judah and Benjamin, to keep them from wanting to reunite with their brothers in the south, Jeroboam, he was ingenious as an unbeliever and he said, You know what? Religion unites people, but it also divides. So, I'm going to erect a couple of altars. I'm going to go back and create two golden calves. I don't know what it was with Israel and golden calves, but there it is. He wanted to put two golden calves, one in Bethel in the south of the northern area and one in Dan, all the way in the far north. So he wanted the people to be united in their own region by their own religious expression. He didn't want them going back down to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple, so he replaced worship at the Temple in Jerusalem with the worship of two golden calves. As I said, one in Bethel, one in the far north in Dan.

It's interesting to note that in the city of Dan, the chief city, of the tribe of Dan, of Dan, it's located on this thin little strip of land up to the very far north, it juts up like, kind of like a point, it's like a, almost like a peninsula, locked in by land and on the east side it's the nation of Syria,

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where Naaman's from. On the west side is the land of Sidon, where this widow is from. The Syrians, the Sidonians, they were constant enemies of Israel. They were nemeses, constantly harassing the people, raiding them, terrorizing them. They were hated, utterly despised by Israel. Nothing's changed in history much, has it? Israel is still surrounded by people that are pressing down on them, and Israel, in turn, is turning and hating them as well.

So when Jesus illustrates his point here, as he's using individuals from each of these despicable nations, a widow from Zarephath in the land of Sidon, a leper from Syria, if you are among the people in the synagogue in Nazareth that day, you could feel the temperature rise in the room. It's like hitting a deep nerve in the people, very painful, extremely provocative. Tempers are beginning to flare here. Anger is boiling in their furnace just waiting for the time of eruption. They don't like good examples from either of those nations. It would be like talking to Israel now and evangelizing them by pointing them to the example of faith of a Palestinian. If you want to get into an immediate fight, try that.

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Back in the days of Elijah and Elisha, the kings who ruled Israel during those days they were all wicked and particularly the two that reigned then. Ahab, you remember the name Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel, they reigned during Elijah's ministry, and then Jehoram, who's the grandson of Ahab, his name is sometimes written as Joram, ruled during Elisha's ministry.

Look at, look at the end of 1 Kings 16 verse 30, because I just want to give you a flavor of the spiritual condition of Israel in Ahab's reign. There in 1 Kings 16:30, "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal," Baal, there it is again, "Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

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Boy, that is a pretty high mark of idolatry because all those kings were idolatrous. All those kings are wicked. That he did more to provoke the God of Israel than all of them together, that's wicked. His grandson, Jehoram, he wasn't much better. The land, in fact, is so saturated with Baal worship that after Jehoram died, God raised up a zealot, a guy named Jehu, you might have read about him. Jehu proceeded to go through the land systematically and brutally to eradicate Baal worship from Israel. He just slaughtered Baal's prophets. It was a bloody, bloody time.

So, this idolatrous time, this wicked time, the people in the land immersed, saturated in idolatry, the worship of Baal. In fact, you remember Elijah's complaint. Flip a couple of pages over if you're there and go to 1 Kings 19:10, 1 Kings 19:10, because here Elijah laments before God. This is just an indication of how bad it was. He says, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts." And he, he had just, by the way, 1 Kings 18, he had just killed 450 prophets of Baal. His mighty, mighty act up on Mount Carmel, and he runs to get away from Jezebel. He's afraid even though God dropped fire down on people. He's still afraid. Look, he's just a man like us, right?

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He gets afraid even as a mighty prophet. But even with 450 prophets dead, he's still concerned. "I've been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, they've thrown down your altars, they've killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away."

It means that Jezebel, her threats, her anger, it was shared around the land. The land of Yahweh had effectively become the land of Baal. It was, it was worse than the lands of Sidon and Syria. It was a total disgrace. And Elijah here feels utterly isolated, feels totally alone, kind of like Jesus must have felt at this very moment in his hometown in Nazareth, alone, isolated, an outcast among his own relations, his own people.

Turn back to 1 Kings 17:8, and let's get a look at this severe famine is going on in the region caused by a drought, three and a half years without rain. I know some of the people in this congregation have come from California. California, I don't know why, I think it's under God's judgment, but it doesn't have rain either. It's under Judgement, right? Here in Colorado, the land

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of plenty, under God's blessing. Rain. That's a joke, folks. I mean if you're from California. I love you. I'm just kidding. You're like, Yeah, but it was a bad joke.

So people in Israel are dying, slowly dying . They're, they're dying of starvation and thirst. And God sent Elijah, not to Israel. He sent him out of Israel. He sent him away from all of Israel's widows, each one of them equally desperate. And God sent Elijah 75 miles away, a cross a desert, to the land of Sidon, the birthplace of Ahab's wicked wife Jezebel. And God sent him to minister to a widow in that God-forsaken land. But that God-forsaken land is now becoming a God-visited land, right?

Look at verse 8, "Then the word of the Lord came to him," to Elijah, "'Arise go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' And so he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks.

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And he called to her and said, 'Hey bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.'"

Now that's a land of drought, right? No water to be found, but she goes and finds a drink. She's going to bring it. He called to her and said, Hey! "And bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." Seems like cruel, doesn't it?

"She said, 'As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.'"

Oh, that's tragic! "And Elijah said to her, 'Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did

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the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.”

Wow! Remarkable. God passed by all the needy widows of Israel, and he sent Elijah to be cared for, received by, provided for, a Sidonian widow. There’s no indication at all in the text that she sought God’s favor. There’s no indication she’s any more righteous than any of the other widows in Israel. But, when God extended his grace, she received the prophet. She trusted him, his word, trusted his God, obeyed his word. She’s a desperate, dying woman; she’s illustrated here a principle of humble, saving faith.

You think anyone in that synagogue in Nazareth heard the grace that Jesus extended to them by reminding them of that story? You think they identified themselves with the poor widow? Identified and put themselves in her shoes as the foreigner, the stranger, the alien to God’s covenants of promise? They themselves being just like her in desperate need of divine mercy? They didn’t.

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But what about you? What about me? Do we think of ourselves that way? Because we really should. We're just as desperate as she was. We're beggars before God, spiritually speaking, physically speaking. Every single breath we rely on from him.

Now, with that in mind, turn quickly to 2 Kings. We're in 1 Kings 17, turn to 2 Kings chapter 5, just quickly and we're going to look just briefly at Elisha's ministry to Naaman the Syrian. The widow of Zarephath is, is truly a sympathetic figure to us, isn't she? I mean, she's, she's clearly a *ptōchōs*. She's someone of low status, someone that our heart goes out to. We can, we can feel for her, but not Naaman; Naaman's different. There's actually nothing much to commend him at all.

Take a look at 2 Kings 5:1. It says there, "Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria," he, "was a great man with his master and in high favor because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of, val, valor, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife."

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Stop there for a second. This text describes, in introducing Naaman, describes him as a commander. It describes him as a great man winning great victories. But listen, that's with his master that he's in, he's in high favor, high esteem. From Israel's perspective, not big fans. They're not so fond of him because God had given him victory over Israel as a judgment on Israel. So when you think of Naaman, think ISIS commander, think a, think a leader in the Taliban. That's what this guy was.

He may be esteemed in his own nation among his own people, his own tribe, his own Syrians, but from Israel's perspective, this is one of the bad guys. He's the commander of an army that's been conducting border raids on Israel and look it even says there that he kidnaps and enslaves little girls. He's not a nice guy.

And from a religious point of view, Naaman's a leper. He's a leper. That had significance in Israel. In the Jewish mind it meant he's under the just judgment of God. And, after all, why not? He's a Gentile. He's a Syrian. He's a commander of an army

that harassed Israel at the borders. He's, he's grabbing little girls and making them his slaves. Yeah, of course, this guy deserves to be judged as a leper. Let him rot! That's the mind set of Israel. From a Jewish perspective, this is about as unsympathetic of a figure as can be found in the entire Scripture.

But let's keep reading. Back in verse 2, "The Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. And she said to her mistress, "Would that my lord, were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Isn't that just like God? To use a little girl to bring healing to this leper. Verse 4, "So Naaman went in and told his lord, 'Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel.' And the king of Syria said, 'Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel.'

"So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing." Think about that in terms of all the stuff that he'd robbed from Israel, and was

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theirs anyway. He's bringing it back. "So he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.'" Now the king of Israel is angry, feeling like he's being provoked here. He says, he read, "the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.'

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"But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him now come to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.' Naaman came with his horses and chariots, stood at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.' But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, 'Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the, the rivers of

Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?’

“So he turned and went,” his, “away in a rage. But his servants came near and said to him, ‘My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? He has actually said to you, “Wash and be clean?”’ So he went down, dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”

Again, Naaman’s reaction to the great prophet at first, it only increases the antipathy any Israelite is going to feel toward this guy. Gentile, despicable Syrian, threat to the safety of Israel, cursed leper. He spurns the prophet. He sends him away. He despises him. He insults the land. Arrogant ingrate, isn’t he? Then he finally, at the appeal of his own servants, turns, does what the prophet said. Why was, Nathan, er, Naaman cleansed? Again, he acted in faith. He trusted. He may have been a prideful man. He certainly was.

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May have been a violent man. He was that. He was a godless pagan, idolater, kidnapper, enslaver of little girls, but he did humble himself to come seeking the prophet. He humbled himself again to a greater degree when he followed the prophet's instructions. And then, after he's healed, we can see it really took in his heart because he turned, returned, and acknowledged the God of Israel as the true God. And he tried to express his gratitude. What a remarkable turnaround, right? Listen, that is the power of grace which comes on the basis of faith. What is Israel (God) trying to tell his people here? These stories are parallel, aren't they?

First, many needs in Israel back then, many needs in Israel now. There's a parallel there. Second, the times of Elijah and Elisha are marked by spiritual infidelity in Israel, hard hearted unbelief and nothing much has changed. Third, God has by-passed Israel. He's sending his prophets to others, to people who had not been seeking him. And that's exactly what is going to happen right now, today. God's salvation would be rejected by Israel at the end of the day. It would be found by Gentiles, those who sought him not.

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And this message for these people in Nazareth had to infuriate them for sure. But if that's all they heard, they were truly missing the hope that Jesus pointed to in these stories. And their condemnation is deserved. Because even though you couldn't find two different people, the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, those two people shared some common spiritual characteristics.

So, looking at it from what unites them, notice the widow is a woman, Naaman is a man. Widow, well notice the contrast first. The widow is absolutely destitute, penniless, ready to die. Naaman is extremely wealthy. The widow is a woman of low status; she's inconsequential, she's easily set aside. Naaman, he's a man who is heard. He's a man of great consequence. He's a man who gets his way. Widow, she's socially conditioned toward humility. Not Naaman, he's a very proud man. He's used to getting what he wants. So by external measures, these two couldn't be more different.

But they're very similar and united by common things. They're both equally lost, living in pagan lands. Neither of them know

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God. They're equally needy. The widow is suffering from abject poverty, and she's ready to die. Naaman is suffering from leprosy, a debilitating disease, obvious, had a profound social stigma. For both of them, immediately for the widow and ultimately for Naaman, what the prophet commanded, they were willing to obey. They listened, and against fleshly judgment, against everything their mind told them to do, they listen, they heard, they obeyed in faith. They humbled themselves. They received God's grace on the basis of simple faith. That's the hope that Jesus offered them.

Conditions were the same except for this: God did not by-pass his people, he sent Jesus to his people. He's right there, in Nazareth. They're not getting passed by. They're visited by divine grace, and all the people need to do is follow the faith of the Sidonian widow. All they need to do is follow the faith of the Syrian commander. They need to humble themselves and listen, obey the prophetic voice. Listen, if he would extend his grace to these people, small and great, rich, poor, male, female, certainly he'll do so for all the *ptōchōs*, those of low status, the humble in Israel. If they'll just humble themselves, repent and believe.

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We know the outcome. Just quickly, look at verse 28, our final point, the grim conclusion. "When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. Passing through their midst, he went away."

Incredible, isn't it? All in the synagogue, means he doesn't have one ally. He doesn't have one friend here. Not one penitent sinner, who heard the truth, saw Jesus as Messiah, came to, coming to him to extend grace to the poor, like Elijah, Jesus absolutely alone. This uprising, it's like an immediate, retributive justice. They, rather than hearing what Jesus said, interpreting his ears through humble words, they're so long in the habit of external religion, hollow and carnal and they interpret Jesus in exactly the opposite way of what he intends, to bring grace to them.

So, they form a lynch mob on a Sabbath day, nonetheless.

Probably justified this impulsive action, this administration of

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the death penalty, maybe on the basis of Deuteronomy 13, calls for the execution immediately of false prophets. Is that how they're judging him? False prophet, really? But really, they didn't think it through. They just reacted.

Pride, anger, hatred; try to imagine the scene. Try to put yourself in it. As this angry synagogue crowd mobs Jesus, surrounds him, grabs him, pushes, shoves him outside of the synagogue through the town, this cacophony of anger and hatred, pushing him, swelling crowd, gathering other people, they're pushing him up the brow of the hill to the edge of the cliff. It's aggressive, violent, confusing. Probably you've seen some videos on the Internet recently, whether it's in our own country or other countries, of these violent mobs, shouting, threatening. There is no reasoning with them and there's no escape. Think of yourself there, victim of one of these mobs. How terrifying that would be for you and for me. Totally out of control. Just subject to the will of this incoherent, violent group of people; they're wanting to murder you.

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Jesus, he's not frightened. He's calm. He knows God will deliver him because his time had not yet come. And so he escapes from his hometown. He passes harmlessly through their midst. God favored them, but they did not favor him, did they? They cast him out of their midst.

Jesus will later return to this scene, later on in his ministry, at the end of his Galilean ministry before he heads to Jerusalem. Matthew 13 and Mark 6 both describe that return, and it's the same thing. I can't believe he goes back. It kind of reminds me of Paul, remember when he was stoned? I think it was in Iconium and Lystra or whatever. He gets, they take him out of the city. They stone him. He gets back up and marches right back into the city. He's not afraid. That's Jesus. He goes right back there.

As we think about how it's the people who are closest to the truth, that when you cross them, they're the most violent against you. It's a sobering truth, isn't it? We're reminded of what the apostle John told us in introducing his first Gospel. He said Jesus "was in the world and the world was made through

him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave them the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but they're born of God."

That is the difference, right, between us and them? It doesn't depend, Romans 9:16, "on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." It depends on grace; sending the Holy Spirit, causing us to be born again that we might receive him, become children of God. Look, we would have reacted the same way as these unbelievers in Nazareth were it not for sovereign grace. Amen?