

Prayer

Jesus Christ, You have a remarkable way of standing by us in the midst of all that happens to us. We thank You for Your faithfulness, Your compassion, Your healing power and the assurance of Your power to save. We thank You because You are still there when we are struggling through life, and when we forget You because our spiritual senses have let us down. Thank You for Your loyalty, Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Recall what has gone well and what has failed in recent days: ask the Lord to make your judgement better

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your neighbours** *Pray for any of the people who live close to you with whom you have a recent or lengthy difficult relationship*
- *Praise the Lord for the power of music and the joy of sound*
- *Pray for Christians in Jos, Nigeria, and the violence with Muslims*

Meditation

This is the call of the Gospel; hear the Lord's call.

In faith, go further than the wisdom you have known so far;
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Seek to understand this complex world He came to save.

Reach out with kindness to those whose lives are different,
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Touch with love and grace the lives of those around you.

Set all else you have aside, all wealth and power and status;
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You'll have much more to give with which to serve the world.

Lose yourself within the Gospel; be content with Christ, not self,
And in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Lose yourself; and let others find their Saviour through what you do.

Give yourself that others might live, and follow your Master.

Bible passage - Luke 4:14-22

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread throughout the surrounding region. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues, and was praised by all.

¹⁶ When He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was His custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the 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 those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him, ²¹ so he began to say to them, 'Today, in your hearing, this scripture has been fulfilled.'

²² Everyone approved of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips, and said, 'Is this not the son of Joseph?'

Bible Study

Review

The first incident Luke chooses to record within Jesus' ministry is one of the most famous incidents of His early ministry in Galilee, that of the Sabbath day when He read the Scriptures in His home synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus specially selected (4:17) the passage he read, and it was the most potent passage imaginable! These words of Isaiah (4:18,19, Isaiah 61:1,2) were originally spoken to people who were downtrodden and oppressed by exile from the Promised Land, and they hoped that one day, God would send His Messiah to bring them God's covenant love and redemption. Luke realised that as Jesus said, they are most fully fulfilled in Him, and through Him, they now mean far more.

When Jesus read this passage He left His hearers in no doubt that He claimed God's Messianic anointing. We do not know exactly what this meant in Jesus' day, but in tomorrow's reading (4:22-30), we will read about the reaction of the local people. They began by being impressed by Jesus' teaching and charisma (4:20), but the questioning began at the end of our passage today. How could this man be the Messiah? Surely He was nothing more than a boy from their own midst (4:22)? Tomorrow, we will see where this questioning led.

Verses 14 and 15 are a general description of Jesus' ministry after His baptism, and Luke emphasises that Jesus returned '*in the power of the Spirit*' (4:14). Already, we sense Luke's message that God's will can only be done by the Spirit's work within those He has chosen, whether in Jesus during His ministry, or in us when we do His will. In the Spirit, therefore, Jesus began His ministry by going to where He knew people would gather for worship, that is, to the synagogues on the Sabbath (4:15); He would have to move on from there, but His message was first heard in the most obvious place.

We do not know much about what happened in synagogues (see later), but this was certainly a dramatic occasion. The passage Jesus chose is a radical call to action, and when he had finished reading, Jesus insisted that it was all coming true in the lifetime of those who heard Him! It is hard for us to understand what it must have been like for people of Jesus' day who had a hope in God's salvation, but their recent history had been one of failure as both a people and a nation. Rabbis spoke about the coming of a Messiah and false Messiahs had come, but no true Messiah had yet been forthcoming.

So, in front of such people, Jesus said that He had been anointed at baptism to fulfil God's commands through the prophet Isaiah! These were threefold; firstly, to 'preach good news to the poor' (4:18). The word 'the poor' would have meant a great deal to those present, for it spoke of all those who had been impoverished spiritually and physically by their Roman enslavement. Not for the first time, however, such expectations were not the same as God's intentions. God wanted to do more, to break down the barriers of sin between Him and all people, but this understanding of the 'Good News' would take time to unfold. Secondly, Jesus was sent to set prisoners free, give sight to the blind and release the oppressed. Again, these phrases can be interpreted in many ways, and Jesus' understanding of them will only become clear to us as we read on. The people who heard Jesus probably identified with these needs and longed for liberation, but few realised the full extent of the power of God's salvation that was about to be let loose.

Thirdly, Jesus was sent to '*proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*' (4:19), a classic statement of God's intent to bless His people. God's favour had come on Abraham, Moses, David and many great leaders of Israel, and now, said Jesus, this favour was at work before their eyes (4:21)! People often describe Jesus as 'meek and mild', but here, He is provocative! The earthly implications of Jesus' message are startling enough, but the spiritual implications are immense, which is why Luke told this story to begin his account of Jesus' ministry.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What happened in a synagogue, and how does this help us understand the text?
- How similar is Luke's quote of Isaiah to the original, and what does this tell us?
- What is the significance of the people's initial reaction to Jesus' ministry and words?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V18 'poor'

The particular Greek word used here denotes those who are destitute and dependent upon others for their survival. It is the same word used in Matthew 5: for 'blessed are the poor ...'

V22 'approved'

The word for 'approved' here is the Greek 'martureo', which means to bear testimony or witness. This word suggest that all who heard Jesus bore witness in their spirits that what He said about Himself was true. It is a highly suggestive comment by Luke.

Significant phrases

V16 'When He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up'

Other translations:

'He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up' (NIV)

'And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.' (English Standard)

You may wonder why I have said that the difference between these translations is significant. I strongly suggest that this sentence does not just follow on from the one before, Luke now writes to tell us about the general ministry he has just described in verse 14 and 15 (see study). Whilst this may be clear in Greek for technical reasons, it is not clear if translated in English as if it merely follows on sequentially from the previous verse.

V18 'to set free those who are oppressed'

Other translations:

'to release the oppressed' (NIV)

'to let the oppressed go free' (NRSV)

The Greek words used at this point in the text are interesting, and give rise to a variety of translations. It reads; 'to send out in release (or forgiveness) those who have been shattered'. The last word means people who have been broken, but using a metaphor from a pottery shed, for the word was used to describe a pot that had been smashed apart. This yields an abundance of interpretative possibilities.

V19 'then he rolled up the scroll'

Other translations:

'And he closed the book' (Authorised Version)

This phrase can be equally well translated 'rolled up the scroll' and 'closed up the book'. The actual Greek word used here is 'biblos', from which we obtain the word 'Bible'. It refers to a written document of any kind, usually one that is legally binding. The Bible is a formal testimony of the relationship of God with humanity.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V 'He has sent me ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners'

Just one major ancient manuscript adds an extra line after 'he sent me ...' reading '*...to heal the broken-hearted ...*'. This is generally reckoned to be an attempt by one scribe to make Luke read exactly as Isaiah 61:1. It is interesting to see that people in the third century AD were as concerned about the difference between what Luke wrote and the original in Isaiah as we are today! However, it is likely that there was confusion from early days about this verse (see study).

Going Deeper

What happened in a synagogue, and how does this help us understand the text?

The evidence for how an early synagogue might operate comes from two hundred years after Christ. Although there are some questions about whether this can be accurate for the studying of Scripture, it is worth considering, and the Bible is itself one of the earliest literary sources of evidence about how the Jewish people used synagogues.

Synagogues began as a mixture of community centres and teaching places, for originally, the worship of God was performed by the sacrificial system in the Temple. This was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD and made unusable, consequently, some elements of the Jewish festival and sacrificial system then passed over to the synagogues, but well after the time of Christ. In Jesus' day, they retained their principle function as a teaching place for God's Word, and the Laws of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy) were read daily on a three year rota. The prophets were read on the Sabbath but there is not the same evidence for a prophetic rota as there is for the Law. This may well explain why Jesus was free to 'find a place' (4:17) from which to read.

There are many other aspects of synagogue practice on the Sabbath, but one of them affects our reading significantly. The men who gathered were seated (with women elsewhere); however, the person reading the holy scroll would stand as they read as a mark of respect. This is what Jesus did (4:16), and after Jesus had read, He sat down (4:20). We might think this was because He had finished, apart from the additional comment; 'today, in your hearing, this Scripture has been fulfilled' (4:21), but this is not what happened.

The one who had stood to read would usually resume a seated position for the honour of interpreting the Hebrew script into the local language (Aramaic, in Palestine), and then add some teaching or exposition of the text as they so wished. It is likely then, that the words 'today, in your hearing, this Scripture has been fulfilled' (4:21) are Luke's summary of what people remembered of Jesus' exposition (while seated); and Jesus taught that this prophecy was not about the past or to the future, but the present. In this study, I have concentrated so far on Jesus' application of this text to Himself, but we should remember that His battle was to try and move the people away from whimsical fancy for the past and unreal expectations for the future. He said that this prophecy of the coming of God's Kingdom and Messiah was present and real; He said so with authority, and people believed Him, at least, initially.

How similar is Luke's quote of Isaiah to the original, and what does this tell us?

Below, I quoted the exact Hebrew text of Isaiah 61:1,2. You will notice that just after the words 'He has sent me ...' Isaiah says 'to bind up the broken-hearted', where Luke does not. Scholars today reckon that Luke has miss-quoted Isaiah for some reason, but no one can agree why! In his commentary on Luke, Howard Marshal comments helpfully that this wonderful passage of scripture was probably read and repeated many times by both Jews and Christians, and history shows that where this happens, words do sometimes get accidentally left out or changed. It is therefore quite reasonable to say that whether or not Luke wrote it down correctly, his intent was to quote Isaiah accurately. The sentiments of the passage are close to a Christian interpretation of salvation, and early Christians used it as a proof of their faith in Jesus.

In order to gain a feel of how Luke's quote connects with Isaiah's quote, I have included after it, my own comments on the passage from the studies in that series. They will enable you to see why Jesus chose the passage and why Luke felt it so important to report His teaching on it.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
He has sent me
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour. (Isaiah 61:1,2)

Fundamentally, God's work of redemption is 'good news for the poor' (60:1), and God's priority for the poor is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. The prophets speak forthrightly about injustice and the rejection of God by the people of Israel in ancient times, but only Isaiah was given a clear and systematic picture of what God would do about human sin and he was told that neither he nor the people of Israel could do anything about their sins (6:9-13). Isaiah foresaw the poverty of God's people (3:5, 52:4 etc.), the destruction of Jerusalem and the land (10:5-11, 31:9, 44:26 etc.), and the mourning of God's people for all they lost when they were taken into captivity (3:26, 22:12 etc.). From his earliest prophecies (7:14) Isaiah perceived that God alone would work in sovereign power through one chosen by Him as a King (9:6, 11:2) and as a Servant (42:1f.), even a suffering servant (53) to restore liberty and freedom not only to His people but to all. He alone would be the Saviour of the world through His King and Servant! (commentary by Paul H Ashby)

The words of this quote can all be applied in a powerful way to almost any human situation of desperate need, and they are therefore an accurate description of the human plight both before God and in the world at large. For this reason, our passage has been used to explain that fundamentally, the Gospel is 'good news' of liberation. Those liberated are the 'poor' meaning anyone who is crushed and destitute (see notes above), the 'captives' might indeed be the 'broken hearted' (see Isaiah), or people in any number of trials

including those who are blind (4:18). 'Prisoners' could refer to those held against their will by evil in the form of human dictators, Satan's bondage or any number of personal circumstances inflicted by self or the world.

So, when the passage concludes with '*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*' (4:19), what people expect of this is a matter of how they think the '*Lord's favour*' will be expressed. Some still look for salvation in terms of a purely physical liberation, and it is important that God's people be involved with helping people wherever they are and for whatever reason. However, the Christian vision is of God's favour as peace with Him, which is the power behind all radical change. There is no division between what some call 'social Gospel' and 'evangelism' in God's heart; His desire is to set people free in every way, without exception, and so that they might be fulfilled as He made them, in Him.

What is the significance of the people's initial reaction to Jesus' ministry and words?

We have already seen that when Jesus sat down, He did so in order to teach and speak to the people, and His words were electrifying, because they not only revealed that God was active now, but they drew attention to Jesus Himself. Typically, Jesus did not say, '*today, this is fulfilled in me*', but the effect was not far from this. However, the passage could be interpreted differently, suggesting that Jesus read aloud the Old Testament text and merely said that this was being fulfilled in the present, with no reference to Himself, except through the coincidence that Isaiah's quote speaks in the 'first person' ('*the Spirit of the Lord is on me ...*'). However, Luke was interested in far more than this, and the way he tells the story makes it clear that we are supposed to read this as far more than a comment by Jesus on Messianic hope. Jesus was saying that this was His own calling.

Firstly, Luke emphasises that Jesus selected the passage (4:17), presumably to make a point about the Messiah. Secondly, the effect was to draw attention onto Jesus (4:20), and thirdly, the question asked in verse 22 implies that people were already wondering whether Jesus was the Messiah. Luke, and all the other Gospel writers, are very cautious about reporting anything that might sound like a simple verbal claim of Jesus to be the Messiah. This would sound too coarse and demeaning. Each Gospel writer, however, makes it obvious that this is what we are being asked to believe. Both Matthew and Mark make this very clear during Jesus' ministry with the disciples in particular, and during His crucifixion. Here in Luke, the first four chapters all focus on Jesus' coming as the long-expected Messiah, and the narrative does not make sense without this essential thread. So when people suggest (as some do) that this passage does not actually 'say' that Jesus is the Messiah, they misinterpret the context of the passage and Luke's point in telling the story.

At the end of the passage we are left wondering what the crowd will eventually think. We have been introduced to Jesus as the Messiah; He is a man, born, brought up, foretold, baptised, and now ready to act within the world. What will people think? How will people respond?

Application

This great text is an important passage for preachers. It offers us a picture of Jesus' own self understanding at the beginning of His ministry, and we cannot afford to ignore what it says. It is perhaps unwise to try and find an exclusive list of Jesus' ministry using this passage, not least because of the issue of its disagreement with Isaiah, and the fact that '*recovery of sight to the blind*' is not part of the original quote from Isaiah. However, we can say that Jesus' ministry was to be one of fulfilling God's appointed plan for the salvation of the world, and this will include at least preaching the Gospel, and performing acts of liberation, healing and deliverance. Some analyses of this and other passages of Scripture suggest Jesus' ministry included 'teaching' as well as 'preaching' and 'performing acts of power and liberation'. I would suggest that in this context, we are not intended to make strict demarcation between preaching and teaching; certainly, the whole setting of the story is that of Jesus 'teaching' on the Sabbath.

The challenge for all God's people is to put Jesus' call into action themselves, in their own time, as God so calls. There are no rules here for this, and every generation has been challenged by God to continue Jesus' ministry at all levels, from purely humanitarian help or liberation, to the direct presentation of God's call through appropriate evangelism. We should perhaps be most challenged by the last phrase in Jesus' quote from Isaiah; '*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*'. There will be many ways we can tell people that God loves them, and every generation in every country and culture has the task of conveying to people in a damaged world the fact that God's favour is awaiting them in Jesus Christ. This is not a threat to anything but sin, or to anyone except those who will not listen or prefer to hold on to the evil with which they are accustomed. It is an expression of God's love, as Jesus was preparing to show in the rest of His life.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does this passage help us understand the ministry of Jesus today? How does Jesus set people free today?
2. Should we read verses 18 and 19 literally, metaphorically (symbolically), or spiritually, and what is the difference?
3. Who needs God's liberating power today, and how may we minister this to them?

Topics covered by this text

- *The mission of Jesus in the Holy Spirit*
- *Jesus and the synagogue*
- *The use of the Old Testament in the New*

Personal comments by author

That Jesus should stand and read such a passage and apply it to Himself sets Him apart from the rest of us. It is either an act of pure arrogance and presumption or it happens to be true, and by the challenge presented to us by all He did in the rest of His life, I, for one, am prepared to say that He was God's Messiah. Many people today are not willing to take this step of faith, and it is profoundly sad that they feel modern life has provided them with all they need to reject His salvation as unnecessary.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down a list of today's social and spiritual issues that correspond with Jesus' message here in this passage. How can God's people be His means of providing liberation for such people and such circumstances today? This is our challenge, otherwise we call ourselves Christians in vain.*
- *Think about how your own church is organised, and consider the difference between how it is run and how the synagogue was run in Jesus' day. Which gives the better teaching? What can we learn from the synagogues of Jesus' day?*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. You stood up in front of people and said that You would do God's will, and you did. Help us to be effective in word and deed by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and may we be true ambassadors of Yours in this needy world, bringing salvation and deliverance as required. AMEN
