

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice in all you have done for us, even though we often fail to fully understand it. We rejoice in your love, Your life, Your ministry, Your death, and Your resurrection. May we have the grace to respond to everything You have done for us by offering our lives in Your service, and by being content to follow Your guidance in everything. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Recall moments in your last 24 hours when you have been far from Jesus. Pray for persistent faithfulness.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your neighbours** *Pray for any neighbours of yours who are not well, and if you do not know, then resolve to find out*
- *Pray about the management of fishing in the world's oceans*
- *Praise the Lord for the power of music and the joy of sound*

Meditation

Lift us up, Lord Jesus, in body, soul and spirit:

Lift us above the world's false security,
Which pretends to protect, but is prejudiced against the poor.

Lift us above the world's ways of working,
Which attempt to be just, but lack understanding of the spirit.

Lift us above the world's misuse of knowledge,
Which glorifies achievement instead of the value of learning.

Lift us above the world's copies of religion,
Which appear to offer spirituality, but replace God with 'self'.

Lift us above the world's imperfect authority,
Which leaves most of humanity in poverty, and not in peace.

Lift us above the world's casual attitudes to love,
Which lead to anger and bitterness, by rejecting God's love.

And as we demonstrate Your Kingdom in this world,
May we seek to show the true path of Christian life,
Through Him who lived a perfect life of love, for all.

Bible passage - Luke 4:22-30

²² Everyone approved of Jesus and was amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips, and said, 'Is this not the son of Joseph?' ²³ He said to them, 'No doubt you will quote this saying to me: "Heal yourself, doctor!" Do here in Your home town as much as we have heard You did in Capernaum.'"

²⁴ 'Listen,' he said, 'no prophet is tolerated in his home town. ²⁵ But the truth is that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was not sent to any of them except to a widow in Zarephath, in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'

²⁸ All in the synagogue were filled with rage while they heard this. ²⁹ They got up and 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 off the cliff; ³⁰ but He walked on through the midst of them and went on His way.

Bible Study

Review

This is a very important passage, and as we study it, we will discover more about why this is so. Jesus had just delivered a frank message declaring God's power to save His people and liberate the 'poor' and 'downtrodden' (4:18), moreover, He claimed to be anointed by God to do His work in the world. Those who heard Jesus were initially amazed at His 'gracious words'; who could not be inspired by the picture of captives set free and 'good news to the poor' (4:18)? Yet as they listened, it did not take long for them to question what was happening. They began by finding fault with Jesus (4:23), and ended up rejecting Him and God's message of salvation out of hand (4:30); the whole incident is like a parable of how the people of Israel would respond to Jesus and the Gospel.

To begin with, they heard Jesus favourably, but they soon questioned who He was. People asked, '*Is this not the son of Joseph?*' (4:22) but what did they mean? On the one hand, this expressed doubt that an ordinary boy from their midst could speak so well and claim such things. On the other hand, this could well be a question that had dogged Mary and Joseph's young family for many years. The young couple had been engaged to be married and then left to have a child in suspicious circumstances; was this really Joseph's son? Ask the question in different ways, and you infer different things! The people in Nazareth had heard about Jesus' work elsewhere (4:23) and wanted proof of it, but their hearts were filling up with unbelief, and they lacked faith in Jesus.

Throughout His ministry Jesus saw into the hearts of men and women, and in this situation, He perceived the minds of his fellow citizens from Nazareth. To challenge them, He quoted a version of a proverb (not found in the Bible – see later) about the difficulty of being accepted in one's own locality, and then launched into an amazing speech (4:24-27) about the selective nature of God's work. Preachers often quote this passage when trying to explain 'unanswered prayer', suggesting that it tells us that God does not do everything everywhere all the time. Unfortunately, this reflects a rather limited understating of the nature of God let alone the message of Scripture. For Jesus' real message is that when Israel lacks faith, God takes His Gospel of deliverance and healing elsewhere.

How do we get this message from this passage? Unfortunately, during Elijah's life Israel worshipped the Ba'als, so when drought came, God sent the prophet to help a Sidonian woman (a Gentile - 1 Kings 17) instead. Because of Israel's unbelief, Elijah had to battle with the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) before he was able to help them with the drought by calling on God for rain (1 Kings 18:41-46). Likewise, Elisha ministered healing to Naaman the commander of the Syrian army during the middle of the ninth century BC when evil kings reigned in Israel and Judah, and little faith was to be found in Israel (see 2 Kings 9,10 – a most disturbing period of Israel's history).

Many in Nazareth knew exactly what Jesus was saying; without faith, God would take His message to the Gentiles. No wonder they were up in arms (4:28)! The synagogue authorities who had offered Jesus the friendly gesture of reading from the prophets on the Sabbath would have been aghast! The citizens of Nazareth were well aware of the threat of Gentile towns springing up around them, occupied by people from all over the world taking advantage of the north / south trade routes through Israel. Jews believed strongly that Gentiles were outside God's redemption!

The citizens of Nazareth then performed an amazing prophetic act, by attempting to take Jesus 'outside the city' (see) to kill him (4:29). In due course, Jesus would be killed by His enemies but the time had not yet come, and he walked through the angry crowd of people unharmed (4:30). So with this story, Luke tells us what is to come in Jesus' ministry.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- How did the people of Nazareth question Jesus? (4:22-23)
- What does Jesus mean by 'a prophet is not tolerated in his home town'? (4:24-27)
- How does unbelief end up in death threats? (4:28-30)

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V24 'Listen ...'

The Greek word here is 'Amen'. It is used six times in Luke, and each time it introduces an important saying of Jesus (4:24, 12:37, 18:17,29, 21:32, 23:43). The word means 'truly', but when used at the beginning of an announcement such as this, it is more like 'listen to the truth ...' In English, it is adequately arresting to say 'Listen ...'

V24 'tolerated'

The Greek word has the sense of 'welcomed' or 'accepted'. You will be familiar with translations that read 'no prophet is accepted in his home town ...', but the sense of the word is more negative here. For this reason, I have used 'tolerated', which is a more modern word that means something very similar, and is better in current English.

Significant phrases

V23 'Do here in your home town as much as we have heard you did in Capernaum'

Other translations:

'Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum' (NIV)

'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum' (NRSV)

The Greek has a word meaning 'as much as' or 'whatever'. This is regarded as a weak word in Greek, but the sense of it should not be omitted altogether as it is in most translations. A strict translation would be '... whatsoever we have heard you did in Capernaum', but this does not read well in current English. My translation is as close to this as I can get.

V25 'when the heavens were closed'

Other translations:

'when the sky was shut' (NIV)

This phrase is not something that can be easily translated into English because our world view is different. It was a way of saying that it failed to rain. The ancients believed that the skies held back the 'waters' beyond, and the 'heavens opened', quite literally, when it rained. It would be correct to translate this phrase 'when it did not rain ...'; but it would be hard to sustain such a way of translating consistently throughout the Bible without destroying the complex way that we use the word 'heaven', and its spiritual meaning.

Going Deeper

How did the people of Nazareth question Jesus? (4:22-23)

Some commentators who write about Luke's Gospel have suggested that some people accepted Jesus and others rejected Him, and this is reflected in the different things said in verses 22 and 23. However, it is far more natural to suggest that the quick change of tone recorded in this text reflects the mood of the people as a whole. It is amazing how quickly people's mood can change; all of us have seen it.

In the introduction, we have already suggested that the question, 'Is this not the son of Joseph?' could have reflected the belief that Jesus was illegitimate. Certainly, this was a major issue in the days of the early church, when the Jews had launched a major attack on the credibility of Jesus on this basis. Certainly, if Luke was to defend the claims of Jesus to the wider Gentile world (see notes on chapter 1, verses 1-4), then he had to address this issue.

Jesus challenged the people of Nazareth by using the saying, 'Heal yourself, doctor!' (4:23). Despite some intriguing suggestions about Biblical proverbs, there are no similar sayings recorded in the Bible. A Greek proverb says 'doctor heal your own limb', and an Arabic expression about a 'doctor who cures other people but is himself ill' (see the commentary on Luke by Howard Marshall). Whether Jesus was reflecting either of these sources or any other well known saying of the day, we cannot know, but it is partly explained in what is said next; 'Do here in your home town as much as we have heard You did in Capernaum'. So the people were wanting Jesus to prove His popular message, and they also wanted Him to perform the miracles they perceived He had done elsewhere.

Of course, Jesus said these things in order to make known what the people were thinking, and this illustrates a typical human sin. This is the sin of thinking things, presuming them and even acting on them without actually checking either what they mean or whether they are correct.

It is worth remembering that at this point in his Gospel, Luke has not recorded any previous ministry of Jesus in Capernaum, though in both Matthew and Luke, this incident in Nazareth comes after some significant ministry by Jesus in Capernaum (see Matthew 13:54-58 and Mark 6:1-5). The fact that Luke does not choose to record things in the same sequence should not alarm us. None of us should imagine that the four Gospels record all of Jesus' three years of ministry. We have only what the writers felt was necessary for us to know in order to understand Jesus' work and message.

What does Jesus mean by 'a prophet is not tolerated in his home town'? (4:24-27)

Yet again, there is no real equivalent of this saying in any other part of the Bible, and this has caused some consternation amongst scholars. Jesus begins this mini-speech with an important word (see notes above on 'Listen' - verse 24), indicating that what He is about to say is indeed very important, so we expect some Hebrew saying or at least some sentiment that can be traced back through the Old Testament. However, the truth is that almost every society has 'sayings' which reflect the idea that a person will not be best appreciated if they remain in the same place they were born. Greek culture reflects this in a saying by Philostratus; 'philosophy is a struggle for those living in their hometown'.

We must therefore be broadminded enough to perceive that the Old Testament has already set a wider theological framework for our understanding of what Jesus says. Studies of Isaiah reveal prophecies that the people of Israel would not be able to comprehend the coming of God's message and His messenger (see Isaiah 6:9-13, and much of his later prophecy). Jesus was acutely aware of the work of Isaiah, as all His ministry shows, and as His selection of Isaiah 61:1,2 in the synagogue at Nazareth shows. As a consequence, Jesus' comments here (4:24-27) reflect not just His relationship with Nazareth and His inability to do much work there (Mark 6:5), but they are prophetic of the whole of His future ministry, which would be rejected one day by the Jewish authorities (Luke 22:66 to 23:56), but after His resurrection, spread abroad throughout the world.

Of course, the rejection of the Gospel by the Jewish people helped spur the early church on towards its ministry to the Gentiles, and some would suggest that our passage today is simply a prophecy of these events.

How does unbelief end up in death threats? (4:28-30)

When people feel threatened they will quickly become angry, and everything Jesus said was a threat to their self understanding and all they believed about God and their faith. Jesus' words about Elijah and Elisha, the great early prophets of northern Israel, suggested that if God's people would not receive the Gospel and the Messiah, then it would be offered to the Gentiles. No other message was more designed to inflame the passions of the people of Nazareth, and they responded with venom by attempting to kill Jesus.

There is talk of attempting to kill Jesus towards the beginning of most of the Gospels, and all of them maintain this theme to the end. Because of this, most scholars reckon that Luke saw this incident as prophetic of Jesus' own death and resurrection. What actually happened is painful to read and distasteful, for Jesus' own friends and neighbours took him out of the city of his birth to kill Him. They 'drove' Him to the place where they were used to killing people who were condemned by the law as murderers, and others condemned by ritual law, including those who claimed to be divine. The story is quite feasible, for the city of Nazareth was on the side of a hill, and there are dangerous cliffs in the region.

Luke's story is paralleled by three occasions in John's Gospel when people attempted to kill Jesus (John 7:30 8:59, 10:39), but Jesus walked away from each situation without suffering a blow, because as John puts it, '*His time had not yet come*' (John 7:30). Here at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had much more to do and He was just beginning His work.

It seems that the whole of this passage, coming after Jesus' announcement of Messianic claims (4:16-21) is a prophecy of all that was to come in Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus had been born into the world, dedicated, baptised, and tempted by the devil, and now, in chapter 4, Luke records Jesus' acceptance of His calling as Messiah and the announcement of this claim to the people in His home town, and this included Jesus' acceptance of rejection by His own people. Their response tells us much about what is to come, as Jesus moves out of Nazareth to Capernaum (see tomorrow p Luke 4:31f.) and re-starts the ministry required of Him by God.

Application

All of us have been in situations that have turned sour very quickly, sometimes almost imperceptibly. Our passage describes a situation like this; but what happened was very necessary. The sooner the reader of Luke's Gospel faces the fact that Jesus is a marked man the better, and where Matthew and Mark record this threat as coming from the religious authorities, Luke records it as first coming from Jesus' own people, including His family and friends. We start Luke's Gospel knowing that the stakes are high.

This passage of Scripture is often referred to as a comment on unanswered prayer, as mentioned above. The fullest explanation of unanswered prayer is more than hinted at above, for this passage says that God did not work here, because His people would not receive Him or follow His ways. This translates to our having to accept that we cannot presume that God will work in circumstances where His people will not exercise faith, or where they worship other gods. This may sound judgemental, but it is not; we either have faith and trust that God has His hand on all things for good, or we do not.

It is worth adding that when prayers for miraculous healing remain unanswered, it may be that just as we see here, and as is illustrated by the examples from the time of Elijah and Elisha, God's agenda is far bigger than human expectations or the healing of certain individuals. Whilst individuals always matter to God, His focus is also on the wider picture; He is interacting with the processes of life of millions, and He is working towards the eventual salvation of all those who love Him. All who love the Lord know that whilst they may suffer in this life and constantly pray for the release of that suffering, their destiny is in the hands of their Lord. To take the route of questioning this and damning God for what appears to be 'unanswered prayer' merely succumbs to the devil's trick to separate us from our God through suffering, and divert us towards hell rather than heaven.

Until we stand back and realise that it is a prophecy of His ministry, this passage is like a collection of strange stories at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Luke. So, as a whole, this passage suggests that we look towards the bigger picture of God's work in the world, and take our bearings from this, especially in the matter of signs and wonders, whether deliverance, healing or other miracles.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it help you understand this passage if you read it as like a prophecy of what is to come?
2. What do the stories about Elijah and Elisha tell you about the way God works in the world?
3. What makes people really cross at church, and is this something that is godly, or ungodly?

Topics covered by this text

- *Doubt and faith*
- *Signs and wonders in the Christian faith*
- *The ministry of Jesus*
- *Suffering and rejection and its purpose in the Kingdom*

Personal comments by author

I feel quite strongly that the matter of unanswered prayer needs to be addressed carefully and well in the life of the church today. This is because too many Christians retain a belief that if someone is not healed, then there is something wrong with the faith either of the church or the person who is praying (and perhaps the one not healed). This is usually denied, but it is implicit in much comment. Let there be no mistake; we have no 'right' of receiving miraculous healing. We do have the right to come before our heavenly Father and request that He releases us from the burdens of life (including our illnesses) so that we can fulfil what He wants us to do, and be the people he wants us to be. He will let us know how He will respond.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *There may be a number of issues of unanswered prayer in your own life, and some of these may give you great cause for concern. Ask the Lord about this, and enquire whether the lack of an immediate answer means that He has this all in hand, or whether this is a test of your faith. His answer may well help you.*
- *Pray for all those who feel deeply burdened by unanswered prayer, because they cannot see a way through some situation. Ask the Lord to give them the satisfaction of resting in His love and finding contentment in His peace, both themselves and the people for whom they are concerned.*

Final Prayer

Father God, in Your infinite majesty, bless all those who are seeking to find answers to difficult moral and spiritual questions today. Whatever these issues may be, You have the answers and You are able to guide people to a place of peace, love and hope. Bring us to Your home in our good time, we pray: AMEN
