

The Maddening Word of God

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to our Bible reading now for this evening, which you'll find in Luke's Gospel in chapter 4. And if you need a Bible, if you don't have one with you, there's some at the side, some at the front, some at the back, and do feel free to go and grab one and then you'll be able to follow along as we read. We've been going through some of these early chapters in Luke with Josh over recent weeks and we've come to chapter 4.

4 and verse 14. And we're going to read from here down to verse 30. So after the episode where Jesus is taken into the wilderness and tested by the devil, we read in chapter 4 and verse 13 that the devil, when he'd ended every temptation, departed from him until an opportune time. And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee. And a report about him went through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he'd been brought up. As was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and 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 sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

[1 : 52] And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. But they said, Is that this Joseph's son? And he said to them, Doubtless you'll quote to me this proverb, Physician, heal yourself. What we've heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well. And he said, Truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But 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 were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha. And none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.

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. But passing through their midst, he went away.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. We'll do open once again Luke chapter 4 and have that in front of you and follow along.

What can turn lauding to loathing, toasting to terrorizing?

This passage escalates very quickly from glorifying Jesus to wanting to garrote him. The professing church of the day had heard all kinds of reports of Jesus' ministry and he was honored.

[4 : 26] He preached this to them and they speak well of him. That was until the penny dropped, until the tables were turned and all the honor turned to hatred.

We must be under no illusions. Jesus was not friend of everyone. And he was not afraid to put noses out of joint.

He wasn't a mealy-mouthed do-gooder. He was well thought of by everyone. Someone commented to me this week that they wonder how many times Jesus was invited back to people's house for dinner.

The gospel writers put before us again and again that Jesus is utterly fascinating, scintillating. How often does he answer questions in the way that we would?

How often does he surprise us and provoke us? How often do his words pack a punch whilst proclaiming peace? He is never boring, but he is always divisive.

[5 : 27] Jesus needs to be reckoned with by everyone who walks this earth. And he will either be the aroma of life or the stench of death.

There's no middle, neutral ground. And apathy towards him is ultimately hatred for him. Luke puts before us in this passage a truly remarkable claim, a wondrous piece of good news and hope. But in the end, the force of this passage is not celebrating such good news. It's a very clear picture of rejection. And in the end, it's a double rejection.

And so we need to be realistic. God's word never comes to us as if it isn't really for us. As if it's only for other people, but we get to listen in and give thanks that Jesus is so kind to speak to them over there.

Jesus speaks very plainly and very pointedly to the professing church, just like John the Baptist had. In fact, there are big parallels between this passage and Luke 3, where we saw John the Baptist.

[6 : 33] In both passages, we're given the identity and purpose of John and Jesus, explained through prophecies in Isaiah. Both passages have at their heart a concern for evidence.

In Luke 3, evidence from the repentant people. And in our passage, evidence from Jesus. Both passages have questions that center around the identity of the one before the people.

They ask John, is this the Christ? And they ask here of Jesus, is this not Joseph's son? And both passages end with hardened responses to God's prophet and God's son.

Prison for John, violence towards Jesus. And all of this is no mistake. Luke has a very clear message to preach. He has carefully constructed it so that the details and structure of his message add depth to all that he communicates.

Jesus' great arrival demands a response. John preaches a way of preparation. Repent, because Jesus is coming. And Jesus preaches pointedly to the professing church of the day that they need to reckon with him.

[7 : 40] One final detail to note before we dive into the passage. Luke arranges his material very deliberately. He doesn't cover all that Jesus did. He's selective in what he puts before us.

And the passage we have before us tonight, along with the passage we'll look at next week, are held together by Luke's comments as a narrator. So notice at 4.15, Jesus was teaching in the synagogues.

And similarly, in 4.44, he was preaching in the synagogues. And we don't have Jesus again in the synagogues until chapter 6.

Luke doesn't give us all of Jesus' teaching. He gives us two examples of it here. The first example is the passage we read tonight. And the second that we will come on to next week.

And so the first thing that Jesus' teaching shows us in this first passage, the first example of his preaching in the synagogues, the first thing his teaching shows us is that he is the revelation of liberty from sin.

[8 : 48] Jesus is the revelation of liberty from sin. Verses 14 to 22. Jesus is the one who proclaims the end of exile for his people and the one through whom the great debt of mankind would be dealt with.

Jesus is the one who brings to fruition all the hope-laden promises of God. Look at verses 14 and 15. These verses transition from the wilderness to Jesus' teaching ministry.

A report has spread about him. And he's taught in various synagogues. And he was glorified by all. And observe how Luke begins this section, verse 14.

Jesus returned from the wilderness to Galilee. He's just been in battle. He was in the wilderness waging war on Satan. And he returns, notice, not bloodied and bruised.

He hasn't just managed to escape life intact. He returns and sets about a glorious preaching ministry. But notice also that he begins this teaching ministry in a similar way to the way he went to war in the wilderness.

[9 : 55] Look back at 4.1. Jesus was full of the Spirit and led by the Spirit into the wilderness. In 4.14, he returns in the power of the Spirit.

I think Luke wants us to keep these two passages together in our understanding. Jesus' teaching ministry isn't separate from what he has just been doing in the wilderness.

His preaching ministry is part of his ongoing work to subdue Satan's rule. But I also think that Luke is setting us up to view the temptations in the wilderness as an echo of another great Old Testament event.

The Day of Atonement. But we'll come back to that. We also need to note at this point that Luke arranges this episode in a different way to the other gospel writers. He presents this as the first event of Jesus' teaching after the wilderness.

He isn't being sneaky or deceptive. He isn't reimagining the chronology of Jesus' ministry. As we've already noted, Luke's narration about Jesus, he teaches in various synagogues, 14 and 44.

[11:03] And in verse 23, Luke refers to the things that Jesus had already done in Capernaum. So Luke isn't claiming that this is the first ministry that Jesus does, but he does want us to see the significance of this episode for the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

I take it that Luke wants us to see Jesus' claims and his rejection here as programmatic, as a manifesto, as the lens through which to view his ongoing ministry.

Here it is, from the off, the great claim that Jesus makes of himself, his mission in his own words, and the kind of response that Jesus produces.

And so verse 16, Jesus returns to Nazareth where he'd been brought up, and ever the model of obedience, his custom was to spend the Sabbath at the synagogue for worship. He arrives on this particular Sabbath, and he stood up to read, all eyes upon him, and he searches through the scroll of Isaiah to find a particular passage, not just any passage, verse 17.

He found the place where it was written, and in verses 18 and 19, he reads from Isaiah 61, concluding at verse 19 with the year of Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor.

[12:23] Isaiah was picking up the provisions for the year of Jubilee in Leviticus, and he was prophesying about an eschatological year of Jubilee, a great future day when the grace and kindness of the year of Jubilee would be realized in an expansive way.

Back in Leviticus 25, the Lord's people are instructed to plant and tend and grow for six years, but that every seventh year was to be a Sabbath rest for the land.

And after 49 years, that is, after seven Sabbaths for the land, the 50th year would be a year of Jubilee, a consecrated year. And in this year, all debts would be forgiven, all slaves would be set free, and all land would be returned to those who had lost their share in it.

And each year of Jubilee would start with the most holy day, the day of atonement, the day when sin's debt was paid, when the slate was wiped clean, when the goat was sent out into the wilderness, carrying the sins of the nation.

The day of atonement at the year of Jubilee made the whole year holy. And so the significance of the day of atonement and the year of Jubilee was to refocus Israel, to realign them to the right understanding of their place with God and the world he's created.

[13:46] And all debts were forgiven. It was a year that recognized that God owned the land, that his people dwelt there because of his grace. And it recognized that in God's sight, all his people are equal.

All Israelite slaves were to be released. Here's what one scholar says of the year of Jubilee. It was a sign that the cosmos is finally being realigned with Israel's God.

In the year of Jubilee, God reminds Israel that they must function as a corporate faithful Adam who mediates God's rule over the promised land. Adam was the original image bearer who was to represent God over the creation, and he failed.

Then Israel were rescued to be God's representatives over the world. And the year of Jubilee was a means of doing that, recognizing that it was God's land, his kingdom.

And as his people recognize his rule and trust him, then it would be a land of abundance and of grace. But Israel didn't keep the year of Jubilee. Jeremiah tells us that the people released their slaves only to take them back.

[14:51] And so when Isaiah in Isaiah 61 speaks of the year of Jubilee, he does so in a future sense. He takes the provisions of Jubilee in Leviticus, and he makes them into a prophecy for the exiled remnant, for those who were exiled in Babylon.

Isaiah prophesied that God himself would guarantee a day when the glorious year of Jubilee would arrive through his chosen servant, so that the great day of salvation would correspond to the great year of Jubilee.

And so the words that Jesus reads, good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty to the captives and oppressed, they were spoken to God's people in exile.

The poor, blind and oppressed. They're not primarily the financially poor, the physically blind. It was those who were in spiritual poverty, in exile, estranged from God's kingdom and its attendant blessings.

And with no means of their own to solve their great problem. The phrase, the poor, here comes from the same word that's often used in the Old Testament for the afflicted, for the meek, for the oppressed.

[16:05] Ralph Davis points out that in the Psalms, the poor ones are those who are contrasted with the wicked. The poor are the afflicted. They're those who seek the Lord. He says, Yahweh's people, his remnant, who are often in dire and dismal circumstances, beaten down in the world, they're the poor ones.

To make this about the financially poor is to miss Jesus' point. He goes on to give two examples later in his preaching. One was poor, the widow, and the other was the commander of the Syrian army, who's certainly not poor in a financial sense.

In fact, Jesus' ministry was spent with many tax collectors, men who were wealthy. Now, the poor are those whose debt is far greater than a few pounds of gold to a bank.

It's the spiritual poverty that deserves God's judgment. The poverty that recognizes one is helpless without God's salvation. In Isaiah's day, God's judgment came in the form of Babylon, but that was but a shadow of the terrible day of judgment that looms over history.

In fact, what Jesus quotes, he stops short of a significant line from Isaiah 61, the very next line to what he read.

[17:26] Isaiah speaks of proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. It's not that Jesus wishes to remove the day of vengeance from view, but rather he intends to draw attention to the proclamation of salvation.

That's what he's saying. Jesus' message here is that the one who could deal with the spiritual poverty of God's people, the one who could deal with the darkness that blinds, the one who could deal with the captivity to sin, and Satan was here.

The wonderful year of Jubilee that canceled all debts. The death of sin. The year that set all the slaves free, those who were in captivity to Satan.

The year that gave back the Lord's people their inheritance in the land, their place in the kingdom.

That was here. Jesus rolls up the scroll, verse 20, and the eyes of everyone are fixed on him.

No doubt you could hear a pin drop. And verse 21, he lands his sermon. Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

[18:35] He says, you're looking at the anointed servant of God who proclaims Jubilee, who proclaims, verse 18, good news, gospel. The anointed king, who is a suffering servant, stands and says, I proclaim this day victory for God's king over sin and Satan.

I'm here with good news. But it's good news for the poor, the blind, the captives. I'm here to bring rescue from the day of vengeance of our God. Today is not about God's vengeance.

That day will come. No, today is all about salvation, Jesus says. To all who are poor and knew their need, to all who see their debt, to all who comprehend something of their spiritual blindness, to all who have become aware of their helplessness, their chains, their captivity to Satan and sin.

Today is a day of release, of liberty. And I think Luke strengthens his point somewhat with how he ties this event to the wilderness temptations.

Notice the thread running through. 322, at Jesus' baptism, the spirit descends upon Jesus. 4.1, Jesus full of the spirit, as led by the spirit to the wilderness.

[19:52] 4.14, Jesus returned in the power of the spirit. And 4.18, the spirit of the Lord is upon me. And just as the year of Jubilee was always to be preceded by the day of atonement, I wonder if Luke shows us here Jesus' baptism and temptations as the great day of atonement before the great year of Jubilee.

Here was Jesus sent out into the wilderness, like the goat, the day of the atonement. And he was sent out having been baptized into sinners, just as the hands be laid on top of the goat.

Taking their sin upon himself, he's sent out to do battle with Satan. He carries away the sins of his people and cleanses out the land by defeating Satan.

And so Jesus' victory over Satan in the wilderness is extended, it's lit up, it's amplified by his Nazareth sermon. Here is who I am, and here is what I've come to do. And by the way, it's already begun. Do you see that? Jesus doesn't say, I'm here to do this at some point. Verse 21, today this scripture is fulfilled.

[21 : 05] Jesus has already begun the work of liberating those who are in captivity, because he has already done battle with the captor. This is astonishing news.

It's astonishing hope for us. We're so accustomed to people talking a good game, politicians, employers, all kinds of people promising the world and not delivering.

But here we have the most profound claim imaginable, that the one who could bear the world's debt, your debt and my debt, not of money, but of moral emptiness, of perpetual evil, of unceasing faithfulness to the good God, unfaithfulness to the good God.

The one who can atone for every stray thought, every recurrence of wrong that we despair at ourselves over her. The one who can make right a life that has only ever scorned God, all his goodness.

That person is here. And Jesus' claim doesn't come empty, for he's already retraced every bit of unfaithfulness that our first father, Adam, perpetrated.

[22 : 12] And every instance of idolatry and disloyalty as people Israel carried out, retracing, recapping perfectly, faithfully, and unseating the evil one in the process.

This is an astonishing claim, but Jesus' word is perfect. It's unbreakable. It's true. And so you'd think at such a declaration that there'd be great rejoicing.

Well, it did certainly bring forth rejoicing at first. Verse 22, all spoke well of him. They marveled at his gracious words. But you get a hint right at the end of verse 22 that perhaps this isn't the end of the story.

Wow, what a sermon. What amazing words. Wait, isn't that Joseph's son? And so Luke shows us secondly in verses 23 to 30, the rejection of the Lord who brings salvation.

The rejection of the Lord who brings salvation. Jesus has to be reckoned with and being confronted with the real Jesus will either well up into sweet relief or it will cause an eruption of self-righteousness.

[23 : 25] Jesus is so often confronting. He doesn't give wriggle room or say let's agree to disagree. He knew what was behind the question.

Isn't this Joseph's son? It was unbelief. It was a hard heart. Look at Jesus' response. Verse 23, doubtless you'll quote to me this proverb, physician, heal yourself.

Jesus is exposing what the people are thinking. The proverb is asking for proof. Jesus, you've proclaimed, so now produce.

Prove it. You've made a bold assertion. Back it up. We've heard what you did at Capernaum. Now do it here. Prove it. How often is that the defense of the unbeliever?

We would believe, we're willing to believe, if only God would prove himself. Give us irrefutable proof that you are all that you say you are. But such thinking is unbelief.

[24 : 26] It isn't openness. It's closed-hearted. Indeed here, they clearly know what Jesus has already done. Word has spread. They're simply asking him to repeat what he's already done in Capernaum.

Maybe you think it's reasonable to ask for proof. After all, didn't John the Baptist insist that genuine repentance be accompanied with proof, with evidence? If faith is to be evidenced and seen and proven, then surely it's legitimate to ask Jesus to prove that he is real, that he is who he says he is. Well, I think Luke is showing us that such thinking reveals the very spiritual blindness that Jesus comes to alleviate. And such thinking reveals the very pride that will preclude people receiving a salvation they so desperately need.

To put Jesus to the test is to fail to appreciate the mountainous debt, the terrible peril, the profound predicament that we're in. To ask such questions, to demand that God prove himself, to say, we'll believe if you show us X or Y or Z sign, that's to exhibit a posture that is proud before God, that places us in the judgment seat over him.

Jesus' appearance is glorious good news, but for who? It's not for the mighty and the proud. It's glorious good news for those of lowly posture, those whose conception of their poverty brings them to their knees and causes their empty hands to reach out and take hold of Jesus, those whose eyes well up at the thought that there is a way out of the mess and the mire.

[26 : 14] Jesus makes clear that hardness of heart is history repeating itself. The prophets were rejected again and again by the people. Verse 24, they were not acceptable in their own towns.

And J.C. Ryle comments, how apt men are to despise the highest privileges when they're familiar with them. Familiarity with the greatest privileges of God can cause one to missee oneself, to be blind to reality, blind to spiritual poverty.

Jesus' words here are a hammer blue to the presumptuous. Jesus' response to the Nazarenes is chilling. Verse 25, In truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the heavens were shut up for years and there was famine.

And who was the prophet sent to? It wasn't to any Israelites. No, the word of God was scorned. It was pushed out in Israel. Treacherous worship had taken hold.

And where does the prophet of God go? Where does the word of God go? Where does the word of salvation go? Baal country. Pagan land.

[27 : 29] Outside of Israel. To a poor widow and her son who at the word of the prophet hear and respond. They receive the prophet and receive his word.

The widow saw her predicament. She says, I have only food for one meal for my son and I and then we die. That's it. But at Elijah's request, she responds in faith.

The very words the prophet spoke to her were salvation. His words tended to her dire need. The prophet's words were good news to the poor.

Similarly, verse 27, there were many lepers in Israel, but what happened? Elisha brought healing and restoration not to the Israelite lepers.

He brought restoration to Naaman, the Syrian. Naaman at first was in a rage with the prophet. How humbling, how humiliating to be told to wash in such a way of this prophet and he's about to storm off.

[28 : 30] But what changes his mind? What is it that causes him to heed the words of the prophet? Well, Naaman's servant points out Naaman's dire need. Riddled with leprosy.

Here is someone who offers water that washes away the disease. Why not listen? Why not respond? These two examples Jesus gave are utterly provocative to his hearers.

He's saying two things to them. First, he's telling them that when God's word is rejected, when his prophets are scorned, when God isn't taken at his word, then the time will come when such a word will be removed.

It will go elsewhere. Rejecting God's word and God's king will see God reject you in the end. What happened in Capernaum wasn't going to happen in Nazareth.

That's what Jesus is saying. Don't presume upon God's grace. Don't think that belonging to the nation of Israel, don't think that showing up at the synagogue from time to time means that you'll be all right.

[29 : 36] God's patience is long-suffering. He is gracious and patient beyond measure. But the time will come when his patience runs out. It had with Israel in history.

And the year of the Lord's favor will one day give way to the day of the Lord's vengeance. Jesus was telling his hearers that God's salvation would bypass the presumptuous and his salvation would extend even to the Gentiles.

And the second thing he's saying in these examples, Jesus had clear inference is that his hearers were in great need. A need comparable to the poor widow and the sick Syrian.

But with a key difference. The widow and Naaman respond in faith. They recognize their poverty.

They recognize their needs. And they responded in faith. Jesus is telling his listeners that they are in great spiritual poverty, that they have a mountainous debt that needed to be forgiven.

He's saying you are poor and riddled with deathly disease. But of course they don't want to hear that, do they? And look at how quickly the mood changes.

[30 : 53] Verse 14, words spread throughout all the country. Verse 15, he's glorified by all. Verse 22, all spoke well of him and marveled at his gracious words.

Verse 28, they were filled with wrath. Verse 29, so much so that they want to throw him off a cliff. I don't know about you, but when I read these words, I find it chilling.

How easy is it to say, oh, what a wonderful sermon. Oh, the Bible teaching here is great. Oh, how easy to shake a preacher's hand at the door and say, thank you, that was stirring, that was helpful.

And to do these things again and again until the very implications of God's word confront you and me. And then we change. That's what Jesus does here.

He confronts his hearers with a mirror. He shows them reality. He exposes where the word of God has to have its way with them. He tackles their little kingdoms. His word got under their skin.

[31 : 58] And he says, you need to reckon with me. How easy it is to celebrate a ministry, a church, the gospel, Jesus, until his word exposes something you love, until his word is let loose on a reality that you don't want to face, until the reality that Jesus is Lord and Savior drives home to us our need and our place.

And how quickly the celebration and appreciation of a ministry, a church, of the gospel, of Jesus, can turn to sheer and unreasonable rage. That ought to give us pause for thought.

When indignation boils up within us, is it because God's word has gotten under our skin and we don't want to deal with it? Listen to Ralph Davis again.

He says, there were many who were sleepless in the synagogue that day, and this is vintage Jesus. He may anger you, fluster you, upset, disturb, and infuriate you, but he won't let you yawn.

You, he says, have got to deal with who I am. Well, I think Luke exposes just how severe the reaction of the Nazarenes was in verse 29.

[33 : 22] Notice that the people rose up and drove him out. The word for drove there is actually most often translated in Luke as cast. They cast him out.

A word most often used for casting out demons. Look at the detail in verse 29 about taking him to the briar of the hill. Well, over in Luke chapter 8 with Legion, when the demons are cast out, they go into the pigs at the top of the hill and down to their death.

I think Luke is showing us that the Nazarenes are treating Jesus here like he's a demon. Rejecting God's word, failing to see just exactly who Jesus is and what that means for us, failing to recognize our immense spiritual poverty is to treat Jesus not like God as he is, but as the opposite, as the devil.

Chilling. We'll finally look at verse 30. Jesus passes through their midst unharmed. His foot was struck against no stone. This passage has echoes of the temptations once again.

The words Jesus read from Isaiah, don't they make it so very plain that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, just as Jesus' will be his.

[34 : 49] He doesn't need to go the devil's way to do it. And then temptation 3, Satan wanted Jesus to test God, quoting Psalm 91, jump down from this great height and you'll be protected. No stone will strike your foot.

And then here in verse 29 and 30, where Jesus was put in danger at a great height, no harm comes to him. Luke layers onto his account confirmation that God's word can be trusted.

The people don't take Jesus at his word and he rebukes them. And whilst Luke wants us to hear that rebuke, he also wants to assure us, his readers, with his carefully ordered account that God's word can be trusted, that all that Jesus spoke to Satan and to the Nazarenes is unimpeachable truth.

So Jesus' message, Jesus' teaching shows us that he is the revelation of liberty from sin, glorious good news, but only for those who recognize their plight, only for the spiritually poor, only for those conscious of their need.

And so conscious that Jesus' words were glorious good news for them. I know that there are some of us here who have a persistent struggle of thinking that they're terrible Christians, that we need to do more, that we're hopeless and helpless.

[36 : 20] We beat ourselves up because we see so clearly that we're spiritually poor. Well, it is to those who see their need that Jesus proclaims good news.

Indeed, I think Luke once again brings to mind Mary's words that we've looked at each week. The direction language appears again here, up and down. The people ruse up in a display of might and pride that they might throw Jesus down.

And Mary's words continue to ring true throughout Luke's gospel. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted, lifted up those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty. Okay. Jesus came to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor for the poor, the blind, the captive.

Let's pray. Gracious God, how we marvel at your Son.

[37 : 38] But Lord, we ask for your grace to help us ever to submit ourselves to your Word, to receive it even when it stings, even when it humbles us.

And so teach us to find comfort and relief in all that we are not so that we would better apprehend all that Jesus is for us. And it's in his name we pray.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.