

Faith that Fails

Luke 4:22-30

Funny how fast things can change. Luke only left us a one-sentence summary of the Savior's sermon in His hometown synagogue. So we can only guess at what Christ said that Sabbath. But His message must have been a honey to hear. Jesus' neighbors were powerfully impressed.

And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; Verse 22

I doubt that most of them really understood what Mary's Son said. But as the service ended, they all smiled and shook their heads in wonder. The Carpenter sure could speak!

Luke's original Greek describes the Master's sermon as *words of grace*. Grace was His message and grace was His manner.

Jesus spoke about God's great love for people. He described His heavenly Father as a helper and a healer, a God who was moved by their pain and problems, by their sickness and sorrow.

But that isn't all. The Savior also spoke with kindness and compassion. His words were weighty but His manner was meek. And as the service ended, the people were all buzzing about Him.

All of that makes what happened next even more surprising. In a matter of minutes, the smiles soured to snarls. Something the Savior said drove them from worship and wonder to murder and mayhem.

And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; Verse 28

It was not a seething, smouldering rage. They did not go home and brew about it. Their anger was so intense, they erupted into a mob.

...and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. Verse 29

A sheer cliff dropped off the southwest side of the city. So they pushed and dragged the rabbi's synagogue guest to the very top of it.

Jesus could have smiled and nodded when the people praised Him. But He did not. Our Savior was not satisfied with the smiles all around Him in the synagogue. But why not? That is the question.

Months earlier, Jesus visited Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. And people were filled with awe and appreciation there, too. But the Savior was not swayed. He knew the smiles they wore were merely masks that hid who they really were.

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. John 2:23-25

Jesus was not impressed by His Nazareth neighbors' smiles and kind words after the Sabbath service. He saw past the masks they wore to their attitudes, aims and affections: to their hearts.

Later, some Pharisees exhibited the same problem. And Jesus quoted Isaiah to describe them.
This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. Matthew 15:8

At first, the people of Nazareth greeted rumors of the Savior's miracles with disbelief and dismissal. But the stories not only persisted; they swelled into a tidal wave of excitement.

So the small town merchants and craftsmen at Nazareth simply had to believe them. But they still could not understand how the meek, mild-mannered Carpenter they knew could do anything more remarkable than build a bench or repair an ox cart.

So when Jesus finally came home, they were excited. And they packed the pews of the village synagogue. Now, they thought, we will see for ourselves.

But they did not. Our Redeemer simply refused to work any wonders in Nazareth. However, the reason was not because no one was sick, crippled, or blind in Jesus' hometown.

Following our Lord's second visit to Nazareth, Matthew Levi offered an explanation for the absence of any miracles.

He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. Matthew 13:58

Jesus was right, of course. Our God is filled with compassion. And He does want to work wonders in our lives. But He demands that we have faith before He pours His power and presence into us.

That is what Jesus saw behind the masks His neighbors wore. Deep within their minds and hearts, something was missing. They were without faith. And what little faith they did have was so twisted and warped, even miracles would not have persuaded them.

In our Savior's omniscient insight, it was like an open wound. And our Savior put His finger right on the bare nerve.

He spoke directly to both their problems and ours.

Faith and Proof

One thing clouded the minds of the men of Nazareth more than anything else. And it had nothing to do with what Jesus said. Or even what He did. What bothered them was who He was.

...and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" Verse 22

That is who the people of Nazareth supposed our Savior was. He was Mary's son. And she was married to Joseph.

I suppose the Master could have told them the truth. He could have explained how an angel had visited His mother. He could have told them He had no human father. He was and is and ever shall be the Son of God.

But that would have stirred up an old hornet's nest of questions about His mother. And Jesus was not about to allow that to happen. So He did not bother to correct His neighbors' mistake. He let it go.

But He did not ignore their larger error. He spoke, not to what they were saying, but to what they were thinking.

And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" Verse 23

Proof! They had not said so out loud, but that is what the Nazarenes wanted. If a doctor claimed to have a cure for the common cold, people would expect him to prove his healing powers by curing his own cough. No one would waste time with a doctor who came only with claims.

Jesus came to Nazareth claiming to be able to heal the sick and give sight to the blind. But if His boyhood neighbors were to believe His claims, He would have to provide some proof.

People all over Galilee were saying the Master had the power to work all kinds of miracles. Why not do the same thing in His hometown?

But that is precisely what our Redeemer refused to do. He was not unable to do as the people asked. He was unwilling to put on a show for them. Jesus was and is God in the flesh. And our God never works wonders merely to prove a point.

Every time Jesus transformed sinners' lives or touched sick bodies, He did so out of genuine love and compassion for that person. Our loving Lord was and is moved to ease suffering and help hurting people.

However, that is not the only reason our Lord refused to work a single miracle at Nazareth. There was another more important reason.

Jesus' neighbors had turned faith inside out. They wanted to see some miracle sign. Only then would they believe.

But that is backwards. Faith is cannot be built on a foundation of proof. It is founded only upon the infallible truth of God's Word.

...faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10:17 (NKJV)

Faith founded on proof is always powerless. It is not that the Lord of the universe is unable to act in an atmosphere that is without faith. Nothing is impossible with our God. He can do all things.

But He has chosen not to work when we are without faith. And faith built upon evidence is not really faith at all.

Faith and Possibility

Elijah was an unknown prophet when he first strode into Ahab's throne room. So the king smiled and scoffed when the prophet told him God would withhold all rain from Israel.

But each day, the sun rose up out of the Mediterranean in a cloudless sky. It baked and burned olive orchards, wheat fields and vineyards. Streams dried up and wells were reduced to dust.

Then Ahab's smile faded. And so did the smiles of people all over Israel. Many men died. And wives were left widows. Starving widows.

It made God's great heart ache to see the suffering the drought caused. And He wanted to help every hungry widow. But He did not.

And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land;" Verses 24-25

For a long, hot year, Elijah hid himself beside a mountain stream east of the Jordan River. Each morning, flocks of ravens fluttered over the mountain ridge with food in their beaks.

But each day the brook was smaller. Soon, it was little more than a trickle. Finally, it dried up all unapologetic. Then God's Spirit spoke to Elijah once again.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." 1 Kings 17:8-9

Zarephath was a hundred miles west, beside the Mediterranean Sea. It was an altogether pagan city, located just south of Queen Jezebel's hometown.

It was there that God spoke to a widow who was neither a descendant of Abraham nor a convert to Judaism. Overlooking all the widows in Israel, God chose her.

...and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. Verse 26

God could have fed any widow in Israel. Indeed, He could have fed all of them. But He did not.

So we are left with some questions. Why did God choose to speak to a woman who did not even know Him? What did He see in that pagan that was lacking in all of the widows in Israel?

To understand the answers to those questions, we must remember God's timing. When Elijah was still on the other side of the country in the mountains beyond the Jordan, God spoke to him.

The Lord told His prophet that He had already commanded a pagan widow to feed him. That seems simple and straightforward.

But there is one small catch. When Elijah finally finished his long hike to Zarephath, he did find the woman. But she was literally starving.

...he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." 1 Kings 17:11-12

It is amazing. But God actually commanded a woman without any food at all to provide for His prophet. Our heavenly Father ordered that woman to do the impossible: that she give what she did not have.

What our Lord demanded of that widow was faith. Great Faith! He insisted that she believe His Word more than her empty stomach and her empty cupboard.

That is precisely what God demands of us. He insists that we believe His Word as the final and infallible truth.

Even when everything in all the world screams in our ear that it can never be, we must believe God will keep His promises. We must not only believe He can do the impossible. We must also believe He will.

More than that, we must believe our loving Lord will enable us to do whatever He asks of us. And we must refuse to plot and plan, to scheme and strive to make God's will come about. Instead, we must trust that He will faithfully fulfill each and every one of His promises.

And even that is not all. We must also act upon God's Word and live as if it really is infallibly and unfailingly true.

It is never enough to merely believe that God's Word is true. We must also act upon it. Otherwise, our faith is limp and lifeless.

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:26

God searches the hearts of human beings. And in Elijah's day, He weighed the hearts of women all over Israel.

But they were numbed by years of ignoring the God of their fathers. And their hearts had been made dull by years of hedonism and paganism. So while He wanted to help them, they simply did not have the faith they needed to receive His blessings.

The same was true of the people of Nazareth. And the same is true in our own lives.

If God is to work powerfully in our lives, we must believe His Word. We must both accept and act upon the truth that our God both can and will empower us to do anything and everything He commands us to do. We must believe that only one thing in all the universe is impossible.

That God's Word will fail.

Faith and Pride

Sabbath services were over. But the synagogue was not emptying out. Instead, the people were still listening to Jesus. He spoke about a pagan widow. Then He added a second example.

And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. Verse 27

When the Master mentioned Naaman, the people considered it a sharp slap in the face. It was one thing to spotlight a pagan widow's faith. It was quite another to add a man who had attacked and enslaved Israel.

After all, it was a Jewish slave girl who first told the Syrian general the prophet Elisha could heal his leprosy. And Naaman believed her.

He journeyed to Israel and arrived at Elisha's humble hut with an entourage of horses and chariots, servants and slaves. But the old prophet was not impressed. He did not even come out to meet the proud general.

Instead, he sent an assistant with a message. The prophet's servant told Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan River.

When the general heard that, he was enraged. Elisha did not even respect him enough to come out and heal his disease. And if all he needed was washing, why not wash in one of Assyria's clear mountain streams?

Naaman's problem was pride. That was also the problem that plagued the people of Nazareth. They felt they were every bit as good as any carpenter's son. And they were not about to believe and obey Him.

In the end, Naaman swallowed his pride and sloshed into the green waters of the Jordan. Seven times the general washed. And the seventh time, he waded ashore, his skin was whole and healthy.

Naaman was healed because of his faith. He started by believing what the slave girl told him. Then he acted upon his faith that the prophet of God could and would do the impossible.

Finally, he added obedience to his faith. After all, Elisha was merely a messenger. The command actually came from God.

Naaman received the miracle he needed. But quite often we do not. And one reason why is because we are unwilling to do what that Syrian soldier did. We will not obey God and keep on obeying Him.

After all, if we will not do as God has commanded us, we can hardly expect him to bless us. Blessing and obedience always go together.

Blessed are those who do His commandments, Revelation 22:14 (NKJV)

We cannot expect God to mend our marriage if we are not willing to be the kind husband or wife He expects us to be. Neither can we hope He will heal our minds and emotions if we refuse to fill our minds with His Holy Word.

In the end, the people of Nazareth got what they wanted. But it was not what they expected.

They demanded a miracle as proof the Master really was everything people were saying He was. But Jesus not only refused. He also insisted that they were unworthy of His favors. Even idol-worshipping pagans were better than they were.

That enraged Jesus' boyhood neighbors. And in a mindless mob, they dragged Christ to a cliff to cast Him down and kill Him.

...they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way. Verses 29-30

We do not know how. But at the last second, our Savior overpowered them all and calmly walked through the mob and out of town.

In the end, the people of Nazareth got what they wanted: a miracle. But they did not get what they needed.

Like those people, all too often we want all the wrong things. We want miracles. When all we really need is a Savior.