Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Jesus' Return to Nazareth: Ministry in the Synagogue
Scripture: Luke 4:16-21
Code: 42-53

Will you open your Bible, please, to Luke chapter 4? In our ongoing study of this immense work of God, the gospel of Luke, we come to verses 16 and following. This is Luke's first account of Jesus' public ministry. It's taken a long time to get here, hasn't it? Four chapters and many, many months of going through the beginning of the gospel of Luke to finally arrive at the point where Jesus begins His ministry.

Luke could have selected a number of events. None of the gospel writers give us all of the events that occurred in Jesus' life. In fact, the gospel of John says that all the books in the world couldn't contain everything He did and said. The gospel writers are selective. They pick and choose things that pertain to the emphasis that they want to make. Luke's first account of Jesus' public ministry is not the first actual event in His public ministry. As we noted last time, Jesus after His temptation, which Luke records in the first thirteen verses of this chapter, went up to His home town of Nazareth very briefly, attended a wedding there at Cana, and did His first miracle. He turned water into wine.

He was there for the duration of the wedding, which would have been a week or maybe a total of two weeks. He started south again back to Judea, stopped and spent a few days in the city of Capernaum, which is right at the tip of the Sea of Galilee, not far east from Nazareth and then proceeded south.

He was in Judea for something short of a year. Luke skips all that. He skips the miracle at Cana. He skips the visit to Capernaum. He skips the nearly a year of Jesus doing miracles, cleansing the temple, giving the gospel to Nicodemus, meeting the woman at the well. He skips all of that. John writes all of that. So in John chapter 1, 2, 3 and 4 we can fill in the gap of that part of Jesus' ministry.

Luke goes right from the temptation of Jesus to the launch of His formal Galilean ministry. Remember now, the land of Judea is divided into three sections, really, the southern part, the land of Israel, the southern part is Judea, the northern part is Galilee and in the middle to the east is Samaria. And Jesus ministered in Galilee and in Judea. The opening, as I said, the opening months of His ministry were in Judea with the exception of a few weeks when He attended the wedding in Cana. The rest of the time was in Judea. It was then that He cleansed the temple, made a whip, and threw all of those

that were turning it into a den of thieves out. It was there that He met Nicodemus who was there that He began to cement some of the relationships with His early disciples. It was there that He did some of His early miracles that followed up the miracle of making water into wine. But Luke skips all of that. And, in fact, so does Matthew and so does Mark. Only John fills in that period of time in the life of Jesus.

Luke begins in verse 14 with the Galilean ministry. It says, "And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. News about Him spread through all the surrounding district and He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all." That's how Luke launches his account of the ministry of Jesus, but keep in mind, now, nearly a year has passed before Jesus begins the Galilean ministry.

Now the Galilean ministry was the time that Jesus spent in the Galilee, as it was called, and it was about a year and a half long. For about a year and a half Jesus went through the towns and villages of Galilee. Josephus tells us there were about 240 towns and villages, so there were plenty of locales to visit and Jesus did that for a year and a half.

Now that Galilean ministry is the content of Luke's gospel from chapter 4 verse 14 through chapter 9 verse 50. So the next number of chapters, we're going to be occupied with seeing events that occurred in the Galilean ministry of Jesus.

Verses 14 and 15 just kind of give us an overview before Luke gets into details. And we learn about the place. The place was Galilee, as we pointed out last time. We learn about the power. The power was the power of the Holy Spirit. We learn about the popularity. News about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And we learn about the priority, verse 15. He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.

The place was Galilee, the power was the Holy Spirit, the popularity was everywhere, all through the surrounding district. And the priority for Jesus was teaching in the synagogues. As we will learn all the way through the study of Luke, as you would learn through Matthew and Mark and John, the priority for Jesus was teaching God's Word. Long ago somebody said, "God had only one Son and He was a preacher," and that is true. Jesus was a preacher and teacher. That was His primary responsibility, to preach and teach the Word of God. And you see that as the story unfolds.

For example, drop down to verse 31 chapter 4, "He came to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and He was teaching them on the Sabbath." Go to chapter 5 verse 3, "He got into one of the boats which was Simon's and asked him to put out a little way from the land, and He sat down and began teaching the multitudes from the boat." Verse 17, "It came about one day that He was teaching and there were Pharisees and teachers of the Law," etc. Chapter 6 verse 6, "It came about on another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching." And that is precisely what we're going to see all the way through. In fact, in chapter 11 His disciples come to Him, verse 1, and say, "Teach us to pray." He was a teacher. They recognized Him as a teacher and they asked Him to teach them.

Jesus was commonly known as "teacher." He was called teacher, He was called “rabbi.” In Matthew you have the great Sermon on the Mount, or better, the Sermon on Salvation in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. And when it was done, the Jewish people said, "He teaches as one having authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees." He was a teacher but His teaching was unique because He didn't have to quote anybody. He didn't have any footnotes in His sermons, He just took the Word of God which, of course, was His own Word, and taught it with power and explained it with clarity. He was a teacher. And you can read in Mark and you can read in John and you'll always see the priority of His ministry is teaching. And that is the important matter, to be teaching the truth. The miracles were simply to draw attention to the fact that He was from God, that He was the Messiah, that He was God in human flesh, but it was His message that was always the priority.

The word "teaching" there in verse 15 comes from *didask*, a very familiar Greek term that you know, and it's simply a word from which we get the English word “didactic.” He was engaged in a didactic effort, that is an explanation of the meaning of things, and in His case it was the Scripture. And so we see in verse 15 He began teaching, and that's what He did all through His entire ministry. He was a teacher and a preacher.

Now you'll notice the place where He was teaching, and it's very important, He began teaching in their synagogues. He went into Galilee and He had ready-made venues in which to teach. Synagogues were perfect places for Jesus to teach, and I'll explain why they were. Every town and village had one. All it took to have a synagogue was ten Jewish men. If you had ten Jewish men in a town or a village, that was enough men to constitute a synagogue and they would build a permanent synagogue. In most cases, the synagogues were made out of stone and typically they faced Jerusalem. So in the Galilee they would face south. That is to say when the teacher or the preacher was giving the sermon, he would be facing south. When people turned to go out the door they would be going south, they would be headed toward Jerusalem. The synagogue faced Jerusalem. And so the speaker would look to the back out the door and would be looking directly toward Jerusalem. Synagogues that were built to the east of Jerusalem faced west. Synagogues that were built to the

south of Jerusalem faced north because Jerusalem was always the focal point because that was where the temple was. For Jesus, every synagogue He ever preached in faced Calvary, and so He taught in the synagogues.

Two hundred and forty towns and villages in the Galilee, certainly there may have been a town that didn't have ten men but it would be a rare one. Most of them would have at least ten men. Some of them would have populations of twenty, thirty, forty thousand people. They would have more than one synagogue. There would be a number of synagogues that would be built in larger places. For example, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, and there are some scholars who debate this number, but according to the Jerusalem Talmud there were 480 synagogues in the city of Jerusalem alone. Only to point out that there were many, many synagogues in larger population areas. So Jesus traveling around the Galilee in 240 towns and villages would have more than that in the number of synagogues that He could teach in. So there were plenty of places for Him to teach. His priority was teaching the Word. And Jewish history had so worked itself into a situation by the time He began His ministry, that He had available venues in which He could teach, namely these synagogues.

Now Philo, ancient Jewish writer, tells us that synagogues had a name. They were called "houses of instruction." They were called "houses of instruction." And that is exactly what they were for. They were for the teaching of God's Word. They weren't for the teaching of anything else, they were for the teaching of the law, the Torah, the prophets, the *haftorah* and the holy writings, the *hagiograph*, as it's often called, the sacred writings, all of the Old Testament. That was what they were for. They were houses of instruction and perfect places for Jesus to teach. The Old Testament would be read there and it would be exposited there by someone who could explain its meaning.

By the time of Jesus, it was established in the land, synagogues were firmly established. As I said, many of them built out of stone. Archaeologists believe they have the footings even today of some of those synagogues from the time of Jesus although most of the ruins of synagogues, and you will see some synagogue ruins in the land of Israel, are from synagogues of later times, after the time of Christ, that may well have been built on the footings of synagogues there at the time of Jesus. But every town had at least one if they had ten men, and some cities would have many more than that.

Now if there was not a synagogue, let's say there was a town that didn't have ten men, the Jewish people, typically the women and the few men that were there, would gather by a running stream or they would gather on the seashore on the Sabbath to worship and to read the Law and to have someone explain it. That is what you have in Philippi. Philippi was in Greece, as you know, and when Paul went to Philippi in Acts 16, there was a group of Jewish women meeting by the river and that is

an indication that there weren't enough men to build a synagogue and that's where they would traditionally meet to read the law of God, the prophets, the holy writings and to be taught.

I would say that probably the proliferation of synagogues in the time of Jesus would be somewhat parallel to the proliferation of Christian churches in our society today. You go into the average town and there are churches all over. The smaller the town, the fewer the churches, the larger the city, the more the churches, and that's the way synagogues developed. They even developed around certain rabbis who taught a certain way and they also developed around certain trades. There were certain guilds, or certain groups of craftsmen who would have a synagogue for themselves. Maybe that's because they lived in a certain part of the town and that local area suited their craft and so that's where they lived and they came together in their own synagogue.

Now Jerusalem had always been centered on the Temple. You need to understand the difference between the Temple and the synagogue. There were hundreds and hundreds of synagogues, there was only one Temple. The Temple, of course, is clearly identified in the Old Testament. First of all, God designed a tent called the tabernacle. It was to be the place where He would dwell in the Holy of Holies, a place where the people of Israel would come and they would offer prayers and they would offer offerings and sacrifices and there were ceremonies and festivals and feasts and the priesthood would function there, of course, in the matter of taking care of all of that. And the Temple was a singular facility. The Lord gave instructions for the tabernacle when they settled in the land, the Lord gave them instructions for the Temple and you remember Solomon built the great...the great Temple.

Well the great Temple was destroyed. It was destroyed in 586 B.C. when the Babylonians came. They first came in 603, they came back in 597, each time they deported the Jews out of Judah, the southern kingdom. They finally came back in 586, completely devastated the city, razed it to the ground, destroyed the wall and destroyed and sacked the Temple and stole all of its wealth and hauled it off to Babylon, along with the remaining people.

Judaism, up to that point, had been defined by the Temple. The Temple was the place of ceremony. The Temple was the place of worship. The Temple was the place of instruction. And there were priests who served in the Temple but there were many more priests who weren't there. Priests, as you remember, they went to the Temple only a couple of weeks a year because there were twenty-four orders of priests. The rest of the time when they weren't serving in the temple for their two-week stint, they were out in their villages and towns where they lived and they were informal teachers of the law. The priests would be the local expert. If you had an issue of understanding the law, or of understanding the prophets, or the holy writings, you would go to the local priests and you would ask

for help and they would be the experts in understanding the Law. Some of those priests would be scribes, very careful in their handling of the Law.

So there was an informal network of teaching, but in the entire Old Testament you will never find reference to a synagogue. There isn't any reference to one in the Old Testament. There is no divine charter. There is no divine design for them. They don't have any holy hardware in there like the Temple does. They don't have special altars and special lavers and special curtains and sideboards and all of the kinds of things that made up God's instructions for both the tabernacle and the Temple. They would be no different than this kind of a building, just a place. There were no sacrifices offered there. There were no ceremonies held there. There were no feasts held there as such in terms of the large feasts, the national feasts. They were still going to be held in Jerusalem, the Passover, Feast of Fruits, Pentecost, all of those kinds of things.

But what happened in 586 B.C. really shattered the Jewish structure. When the Babylonians came in in 586 B.C. and finally demolished Jerusalem and tore the wall down and literally devastated the entire Solomonic Temple and hauled all the people into captivity, that captivity lasted seventy years. For seventy years there was no land, there was no nation, there was no city and there was no Temple. The people then were in need of some manner, some method of getting together and hearing the law of God taught.

If you read the book of Ezekiel you will find out one thing they did. Ezekiel, for example, was a prophet of God. He was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. So when he was in captivity, he would be sitting somewhere, you'll find this in Ezekiel 8, Ezekiel 14, Ezekiel 20 and I think once in Ezekiel 33, Ezekiel sitting down with people sitting around him and he's teaching them the meaning of the Word of God. They simply did what they needed to do. They found somebody who could explain the meaning of God's Word and they sat at his feet. So in the captivity, the exiles met often and sat at the feet of prophets like Ezekiel to hear the Word of God.

Well apparently during the time of captivity, they began to develop these patterns and they would gather together in small groups on a regular basis, an increasingly regular basis, eventually on the Sabbath and they would read the Word of God and they would hear the Word of God explained to them. Devout Jews had a hunger for that. And as I said, they had no land, they had no nation, they had no Temple, they had no...no opportunity for instruction. And then the seventy years of captivity was over, you remember, and they were allowed to go back to the land. And when they went back to the land, the first thing they wanted to do was recover the Word of God and read it and explain it again. And you remember who did that, don't you? Ezra did that. In Nehemiah chapter 8, they opened

the book and they read the Scripture and gave the sense of it, which means they translated it into the common language, the local language and then explained its meaning.

So after the captivity when they came back, they don't have the Temple anymore but what has developed is small gatherings of Jewish people sitting around the feet of a teacher who reads the Scripture and explains it to them, reading and expositing, or giving the sense of it. It was the destruction of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem that precipitated or created the need for a place and an opportunity to meet for the teaching of divine revelation. It is also true that prior to, during and after the captivity, Jews were scattered all over the Mediterranean world. They were everywhere in the Mediterranean world. It was called the diaspora, the dispersion of the Jews. And as they were dispersed out all over the world, they obviously didn't have immediate access to the Temple, which if they lived in the land of Israel was very near to all of them because it was a very small place. Now that they're all over the world, they need some place where they can gather and meet together. And so in the dispersion these synagogues began to develop. And so by the time you get to the life of Jesus, there are synagogues everywhere there are ten Jews, in Galilee, in Judea, and all over the Mediterranean world.

Now the term "synagogue" is from the Greek word *sunaggs*, which simply means a gathering, a gathering or a gathering place. And that's exactly what they were. They were not a temple. They are not to be confused with a temple. No sacrifices were ever made there, no altars are there, no lavers are there, no sacerdotal or priestly paraphernalia are there. They were what Philo called them, "houses of instruction." The people gathered for the purpose of reading the Word of God and having somebody explain it to them. And as I said, everywhere the Jews went where they could get ten men together, they established a synagogue.

When you read the book of Acts, for example, and you see the apostles, the apostle Paul and those who worked with him, they start out into the Gentile world, they go into Damascus and there's a synagogue there. And they go into Salamis in Acts 13:5 and there's a synagogue there. And they go to Antioch of Pisidia in chapter 13 of Acts and there's a synagogue there. Chapter 17, they come across a synagogue in Thessalonica. Chapter 18, there's a synagogue in the city of Corinth. All these are Greek cities. There's a synagogue in Alexandria. There's a synagogue in Rome as well as all over Israel. Everywhere the Jews went, synagogues began to develop. Now this by the purposes of God was providential, wasn't it? Because when Jesus begins His ministry, He needs a place to teach. It isn't just in the Temple that He should teach because how is He going to reach the nation. But every place where there were at least ten male Jews had a synagogue and that's why Jesus' ministry in Galilee lasts a year and a half so that He can literally circumvent that entire land and touch those teaching opportunities at every local point.

A synagogue, by the way, also it was never and isn't even to this day, never seemed to be in competition with the Temple. It was never sort of a rebellious kind of thing. It was always a wonderful accommodation that the Jewish religion felt very positive about, even after they came back from captivity. You remember, Zerubbabel their leader after they came back from seventy years in Babylon, helped them build a temple. And they built a rather meager, small imitation of what Solomon's Temple glories were like. And later on, Herod came and built even a more glorious temple, the Herodian temple which was in its place during the time of Jesus and that was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans.

But they came back and they did build a Temple. Zerubbabel was the guy who led them in the building of the Temple after they had rebuilt their city and their wall. But even then the synagogues continued to exist because they served such a wonderful need. The Temple was the place of ceremonies and sacrifices and rituals and offerings. There was instruction given in certain areas in the Temple services, but it was primarily for sacrifices and ceremonies. So it really was not in competition with the synagogues, and the synagogues really in a sense sort of formalized form of the informal priestly teaching that had always gone on in the towns and villages.

In the 18th chapter of John, for instance, the 20th verse, Jesus said, "I have spoken openly to the world, I always taught in synagogues and in the Temple where all the Jews come together." All the Jews still went to the temple for all the great ceremonies and all the great national feasts, as well as attending their local synagogues. And by the way, history tell us there was even a synagogue on Temple Hill, right on the Temple mount there was a synagogue. And the ruler of that synagogue was a man named Theodotus, who also was a priest. So he was both a priest who served in the Temple and the ruler of a synagogue right on the Temple Mount. So there was no competition because the temple's function was primarily national feasts and sacerdotal or sacrificial priestly kinds of functions whereas the local synagogue had one primary function. It was a house of instruction.

Now they were organized in a very simple way. This is something I find very interesting. They were...or I... Sorry for the history lesson, but we've got to do this because you're going to be in synagogues for years to come, folks, I'll just tell you. By the time we get through Luke you will have been to the synagogue many times and I want you to know where you are and what's going on.

I want to tell you about how the synagogue was structured. There was one man who was called the *archisunaggs*, the ruler of the synagogue, *archi* meaning the chief guy. There was a man who was called the ruler of the synagogue and you come across such rulers in the New Testament. Jesus had

conversations with rulers.

Now they were in charge of the facility, first of all. They would be responsible to make sure that it was in repair and that it was clean and that it was ready for whatever functions that were going to be occurring there on a day-to-day basis. The ruler of the synagogue was also responsible for the structure of the service. It was his responsibility to set the structure of the service and primarily to select the preacher. On each Sabbath occasion he would be the one who would approve the preacher, the one who was to preach the sermon. He would also select the Scripture readers. Scripture was read by different people and he would be the one who would select who would read the Scripture. He would follow the...lead the flow of the service and then he would have to approve the one who preached.

They did not have a full-time pastor. They did not have a full-time rabbi. They did not have a full-time teacher, as such. In fact, in a local town there would be perhaps a number of men in the town who could teach and do the preaching and the sermon and they would take turns doing that. And should a local teacher of some qualification or suitability or note come through town, he would always be invited to be the guest teacher. The people would welcome that. This was known as what's called in history "the freedom of the synagogue," the freedom of the synagogue. It was a policy that developed early in synagogue life to allow for various teachers, and the ruler had the responsibility to determine who that teacher would be.

Now this becomes another thing that God in His wonderful providence has brought about so that when Jesus begins to teach, all the synagogues that He would go to were operating on the basis of quote-unquote “the freedom of the synagogue” and they gave over their sermon to any visiting rabbi which was perfect because no matter where Jesus went, He was a well-known teacher and rabbi and it gave Him immense opportunities to teach. Everywhere there were ready-made venues for Him to teach and preach the gospel, to announce the good news that came from His lips.

And, by the way, beyond that the apostles did the same thing. When the apostle Paul went out and launched world ministry, where did he go when he went into a town? Every time, synagogue, the first place he went. He didn't go to the Gentiles first or he would have alienated the Jews because they didn't like the Gentiles. And he also knew that there wouldn't be an immediately identifiable venue in which he could teach the Gentiles, but there was one everywhere he went with the Jews. And if you went to the Jews, he would always have a place to teach. He was a Jew and He was recognized as a rabbi or a teacher. He had studied under the greatest Jewish teacher of his time, Gamaliel so he had credentials. He could tell them his background and his instruction. They would all know Gamaliel.

So Paul would go to the synagogue because there would be a group of people he could teach. Also, he went to the synagogue because if he could lead some Jews to believe in their Messiah, he would then have enlarged the force to evangelize the Gentiles. Whereas on the other hand, if he went to the Gentiles alone, the Jews would never have accepted him because they would have seen it as a Gentile message and he would have had to do it alone. So he always went to the synagogue and there he found a ready-make opportunity to teach, and so did the other apostles. They used the synagogues. God in wonderful providence out of the captivity gave birth providentially in Israel to the synagogues which became the place where the gospel was spread.

In fact, the synagogues, folks, actually became the place where the churches were born. Because what would happen is, Paul would go into a synagogue, lead some people to Christ, and then out of that synagogue they would come and they would establish a church. So churches were literally given birth in synagogues.

The ruler of the synagogue was the person who opened the door, if it were, to the visiting rabbis and the visiting teachers.

Now also the synagogue had a full week's schedule. There could be teaching in some synagogues every day. There could be teaching on the Torah, the *Haftorah*, the holy writings, every day. There also was in the synagogue typically an elementary school. The elementary school was for the training of children, not in “the arts and sciences” quote-unquote, but in the Law and the prophets. So the children were instructed in the Word of God and the synagogue was the place where the elementary school was conducted, and that is still true in many cases even today.

Synagogues also became local courts, and I'll tell you why. There was the ruler of the synagogue, the *archisunaggs* and then there were the *presbuteros* in the Greek, the elders. They were a group of mature men, devout men, esteemed in the community who had the oversight, the general oversight of the synagogue. The *archisunaggs*, the ruler of the synagogue, sort of was the main elder. But there were other elders who helped him. They were responsible for the elementary school. They were responsible for opening the synagogue to prayers during the week. They were responsible for teaching through the week various series week after week. They became a local Sanhedrin, as well. In any town they became the judges in that town, they became the court in that town. It wasn't trial by jury in those days, it was trial by elders. And so every local town had its synagogue, every synagogue had its elders, and those elders constituted the local court. Whenever there was some adjudication, whenever there was some conflict, whenever there was some legality that needed to be dealt with or

whenever there was some issue in a family or between neighbors, it would be brought before the judges.

Now the...the elders in the New Testament are interesting. We see them many times and you'll see them in Matthew, and you'll see them in Mark, you'll see them in Luke, you'll see them in John, all the gospels and they are ruling in the synagogue. You see them sometimes scourging people, that's right, literally whipping people which is how they dealt with sinners. That's changed, as you well know and probably are grateful for. They also could excommunicate people. They could put them out of the synagogue. You know, to be one of the greatest Jewish, I guess, reproaches was to be unsynagogued, to be unsynagogued, literally mean to be thrown out of the synagogue. If you were thrown out of the synagogue, you were persona non grata in your society. They could even anathematize you, pronounce a curse of damnation on your head as you find in the New Testament accounts.

So that was the structure. There was also a man in the synagogue known as the interpreter. There might be more than one, the translator or the interpreter. The Scripture was always read in Hebrew but then it had to be translated into the local language. The local language was Aramaic. And so the translator would translate the Scripture into Aramaic.

There was one other officer, the lowest on the totem pole. He was called the *chason*. He is the lowest servant and his responsibility was to take care of the scrolls. All the scrolls were kept in a chest and he was the one who took care of the scrolls and made sure that everybody got the right scroll for the right reading. He also was kind of the school master for the elementary school.

So that was what the synagogue was, very much like a church today, isn't it? With all kinds of weekly activities, with people responsible to care for the facilities with elders, with somebody who is responsible for the oversight of all of that. That's very much the pattern of the church because the church was born out of the synagogue.

Now let's say today we were in Nazareth and we were going to go to the synagogue. What would the order of worship be like? What would it be like? Would it be anything like what we experience at Grace Church? Well yes, here's typically what we find when you look back at Jewish history.

A synagogue service would begin with singing and generally they would sing psalms because psalms glorify God. They would sing psalms of praise to God; very often the *Hallel*, Psalm 145 to 150, "Praise God, Praise God, Praise God." And then from the singing they would go to the *Shema*. The *Shema* is

Deuteronomy 6:4 and following, "The Lord our God is one, the Lord is one." This celebrates God as the one true living God as against all the many gods of the nations. So they started with worship. They started singing praise to God and then there was the recitation of the great identity of God as the one true and living God.

Singing and *Shema* was followed by supplication. There was a series of prayers and after the prayers there were punctuated “amens’ from the people. There would be a prayer and then “amen,” and then a prayer and then "amen," and “amen” means "let it be." And then after that prayer would come the *Shemoneh Esrei*. Shemoneh Esrei were 18 traditional benedictions or blessings that people would recite, sometimes called the *Tefillah*.

So they would come together, they would sing, they would again affirm the greatness of their God, the true and living God, the one true and living God. They would then have a time for pouring out their heart in prayer, punctuated by amen. And then there were 18 benedictions called the *Shemoneh Esrei*. Then came the main point. All of that was leading up to the Scripture. Always the Torah was read, the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers, the law written by Moses. They would read a section of the Torah. There would be verses read in one to three combinations. In other words, there might be several readers, they would only read one to three verses, then somebody else would read one to three verses, somebody else would read one to three verses.

They read through the whole Torah in three years. So they had 154 sections of the Torah that would cover the fifty-two weeks for three years. So they would read through the Torah, the five books of Moses, in three years.

Then they would read the prophets, the *Haftorah*, as it is called. And they had certain sections of the prophets, certain books of the prophets that they would read. They would read both the Torah and generally the prophets at each service. Then would come the sermon.

So, you go from the singing, the Shema, to the supplications, to the *Shemoneh Esrei*, benedictions, to the Scripture and finally the sermon. And that is when the appointed preacher gave an exposition of Scripture. After that there was a final benediction drawn usually out of Numbers chapter 6 verses 24 to 26, the benediction of Aaron, the first high priest.

Now that's the pattern. Now, you know, that's not unfamiliar, is it? And it's a little bit like what we do. We come together and we invite the glory and the presence of God. We sing hymns of praise to God. We pray together. And then there comes a time for the Scripture reading, we read the Scripture and then there's a later reading of Scripture on which a sermon is based, which is what I'm doing right now and it's ending with a benediction. That is a pattern that has been followed by the church, borrowed, if you will, from the synagogues. And it's an appropriate pattern and a wonderful one.

So here is a perfect location for Jesus to go into teach and that's exactly what He did. Back to the point that I made in the beginning, looking back at Luke 4, Jesus was first and foremost a preacher and a teacher who read and explained the Scripture. That's why we do what we do. That's why I do what I do because that's the pattern My Lord established for me.

Now with that in the background, we can come to the text of verse 16. "And Jesus came to Nazareth," He's... This is where He starts His Galilean ministry. "Where He had been brought up and was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath." Now this was a traditional pattern for Jesus. It was a Sabbath and He came to the synagogue.

Now why does Luke start with this? Of all the things that Luke could have picked, he didn't have to pick this first event at Nazareth. He could have picked something else. Jesus preached a lot of sermons. Why did the Spirit of God inspire him to write this? Why is this account important? Why is this the launch point for Luke's discussion for the ministry of Jesus?

The answer to that is very simple, because what Jesus said on this occasion identifies Him as Messiah and perfectly defines His ministry. What He said that day in the synagogue of Nazareth when He began His Galilean ministry is a perfect summary of the Messiah's mission. That's why I've called this sermon "The Messiah's Mission." It is not in chronological sequence, it's not immediately after His...His conflict with Satan. As I said, it's nearly a year later. But it makes sense for Luke to pick an incident that is really definitive about who Jesus is and what His message was. As Luke intends to continue to show us that Jesus is the Messiah, this becomes critical and he wants to make it first because it establishes who Jesus is and why He came in absolutely clear and potent terms.

One little footnote. There is a similar event in the synagogue at Nazareth that happened at the end of Jesus' life. Don't confuse it. Matthew 13:53 to 58 and Mark 6:1 to 6 give the account of Jesus' visit to the Nazareth synagogue at the end of His ministry in Galilee. This one is at the beginning. They're discussing the final visit. This is His initial visit.

It's sad to say this, but this visit to Nazareth actually sets in motion Jesus' death. It's amazing. Before this Sabbath day is over, they try to kill Jesus. They try to throw Him off a cliff. Let me set the scene for you just briefly.

Nazareth stands on a little slope and it's in a hollow in the lower slopes really of the Galilee, near the plain of Jezreel. George Adam Smith describes it this way. "Looking from the hilltop the history of Israel stretches out before the watcher's eye. There was the plain of Esdraelon where Deborah and Barak had fought, where Gideon had won his victories, where Saul had crashed to disaster and where Josiah had been killed in battle. There was Naboth's vineyard and the place where Jehu slaughtered Jezebel. There was Shunem where Elisha had lived. There was Carmel where Elijah had fought his epic battle with the prophets of Baal. And blue in the distance there was the Mediterranean and the islands of the sea. But not only the history of Israel was there, the world itself unfolded in view from the hilltop in Nazareth. Three great roads skirted that town. The road from the south with the pilgrims from Jerusalem on it, the road, The Great Way of the Sea, which led from Egypt to Damascus with the laden caravans moving along it. There was the great road to the east with the caravans from Arabia on it and the Roman legions marching out to the eastern frontiers of the empire."

The crossroads of the world were going around skirting the little city of Nazareth. Jesus, it says in verse 16, had been brought up there. After His birth in Bethlehem and He stayed in Bethlehem for a little while. Remember the wise men came to visit Him while He was still there and living in a house. And then when Herod tried to kill all the babies, He was taken to Egypt to escape that massacre and He was in Egypt for a while. And finally when Herod died He left Egypt and spent the rest of His life in Nazareth, up until the age of thirty. It was His hometown. In fact, even though He spent His ministry — His ministry home was in Capernaum because they tried to kill Him in Nazareth, He had to relocate to Capernaum — even though His home during the ministry years was in Capernaum, He was always called "Jesus of Nazareth," He never lost that title. He's never called "Jesus of Capernaum," or anywhere else, but "Jesus of Nazareth." It was there thirty years almost, except for the time in Bethlehem and the time in Egypt, He had been in Nazareth.

He had done no miracles there. He had taught not at all. He hadn't told anybody He was the Son of God or the Messiah. He just worked in His father's carpenter shop. They didn't know who He was. They didn't hear Him speak. They didn't see any of His power. But they must have wondered at His person. It's a small town and His family was well-known and he was known and His perfection and uniqueness must have always caused them to wonder.

But all of that is in the past now. He has been baptized. His ministry has been inaugurated. He's passed the test against Satan. He has done the miracle of the turning the water into wine. He has cleansed the temple. He has given the gospel to Nicodemus and others. He has done miracles in Judea. He has brought about the salvation of Samaritans. And now He's back to Galilee and the word is traveling into Galilee from what He had done from the marriage at Cana which is right adjacent to Nazareth. You could walk from Nazareth to Cana. So they had heard about the miracle there and they heard about the cleansing of the temple because it happened at Passover and many of the people of Nazareth were there when it happened. And they must have heard about His other miracles and about His teaching and they may even have heard about the fact that He had brought into the kingdom and to salvation Samaritans. And so there was this growing interest in this local boy who is coming back. And after nearly a year of ministry in Judea, He comes back. You can be sure that when He went to the synagogue that day, it was packed.

As was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath. I love that. Wherever you see Jesus in the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you will find Him on the Sabbath in the synagogue, always there. It was His custom to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath. When it came to the day of worship, the day which God had prescribed for worship, He was there, always faithful to the synagogue services. And you find that throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

On this occasion, however, something was different. For the first time, for the first time He stood up to read. Verse 17 says, "The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him and He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.' And He closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all of the synagogue were fixed upon Him."

The actual posture for reading the Scripture, that's why we do it, was to stand up as a sign of respect. So He's the reader and on this occasion He's the reader and the expositor of the prophets. In the reading of the Torah, as I said, they read it in one to three verse increments and several people would read. But when it came to the prophets, apparently Jesus was the only reader and He was reading the text for the sermon that He would give. He had been approved by the ruler of the synagogue or else He wouldn't have been given that opportunity. And surely there would have been a lot of clamoring. Did you hear that Jesus, the one whom John said was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; did you hear that Jesus, remember, who cleansed the temple; Jesus who talked

about the new birth with Nicodemus; Jesus who made water into wine; Jesus who was healing people in Judea; this Jesus who claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God; this Jesus; this Jesus we know, Jesus the son of Joseph and Mary, Jesus who grew up in our town in the carpenter shop, Jesus has come back, and He's going to be at the synagogue. And for certain this was the time to give Him the scroll and let Him be the preacher. He was to be the *matheteer*, the reader of lessons from the *Haftorah*, the prophets.

I love the words of Alfred Edersheim whose volumes on *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* have blessed so many people. Edersheim writes, "Starting on Friday as the lengthening shadows of Friday's sun closed around the quiet valley, Jesus would hear the well-remembered double blast of the trumpet from the roof of the synagogue, proclaiming the advent of the holy Sabbath. Once more it sounded through the still summer air to tell all that work must be laid aside. Yet a third time it was heard and the one who blew it would lay it down right where he stood and not profane the Sabbath by carrying it, for now the Sabbath had really commenced and the festive Sabbath lamp was lit. In the morning, Sabbath morning dawned and early Jesus went to the synagogue where as a child and as a youth and as a man He had so often worshiped in the humble retirement of His rank, sitting not up there among the elders and the honored, but far back. The old, well-known faces were around Him, the old well-remembered words and services fell on His ears. How different they had always been to Him than to the people with whom He had...He had mingled in common worship, and now He was again among them, a stranger among His own countrymen, this time to be looked at, listened to, tested, tried, used, or cast aside as the case might be."

It was the first time, as far as we know, that He taught in a synagogue. The synagogue was His own in Nazareth. So the book of the prophet Isaiah, verse 17, was handed to Him. It was a scroll. Isaiah could be contained on one scroll. We know that because when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found Isaiah was contained on one scroll. It was kept in a chest wrapped in cloth and it would be taken out by the attendant, mentioned in verse 20 as an attendant, *huprets*, means a low slave, the under-rower, *huper* means under. He was called a *hazan*. He was the lowest officer there, responsible for the caring of the scrolls and he delivered the scroll to Jesus. He handed it to Him. He was also, as I said, the synagogue school master.

You know, they had some pretty high standards. This guy was the lowest officer there. He was the school master. He was the one who attended to the scrolls, but according to Edersheim he had to be without reproach, his family without reproach. He had to be humble, modest. He had to know the Scriptures and he had to be distinct and correct in his pronunciation of Scripture, simple and neat in his dress, an absence of self-assertion. All qualities which later on show up in lists that Paul had for elders and deacons. So he handed Jesus the appropriate scroll.

It may have been that in the reading of the *Haftorah*, the prophets, it was time to read Isaiah. They may have been in a series of readings in Isaiah. Although He doesn't open the scroll to any particular reading because it says, "The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him and He opened the book." Jesus unrolls the scroll to the scripture that He wants to read and speak on. He found the place where it was written. The place He found is Isaiah 61:1 and 2, and He reads them in verses 18 and 19. Verses 18 and 19 are quoted from Isaiah 61:1 and 2. So Jesus read them and there's slight variation. There's one phrase that's omitted. There's the phrase borrowed from Isaiah 58:6.

And I just want to mention something here because it's so important, particularly for Jewish people. The gospel, the Christian gospel, is not a disconnect from Judaism. It is not a disconnect from the Old Testament. It is not another religion. In fact, it is rather... Christianity is rather the fulfillment of the Old Testament, isn't it? When Jesus wanted to identify Himself He read the Old Testament. Christianity is not a new religion, it is the culmination, it is the glory of the Old Testament. The Old Testament speaks of Jesus. Luke 24:27, Jesus talking to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it says, "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." He was opening the Old Testament and the Old Testament was all about Him.

So what Jesus did was go back to Isaiah to messianic prophecy and this is what He read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." And He reads that scripture.

Now they knew that this was messianic. They knew that. They knew the prophet. They knew that Isaiah's prophecy is largely prophecy about the Messiah. And it starts, does Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He anointed Me." They knew that Messiah would be anointed by the Holy Spirit, that was a messianic prophecy, that when Messiah comes He will be anointed by the Holy Spirit. Anointed means "set apart for special service, empowered for special service."

In Isaiah chapter 11 you have a similar prophecy about Messiah. In Isaiah 11 the Messiah is a shoot that springs from the stem of Jesse. Jesse is the father of David, meaning that He comes out of the Davidic line. He's a branch from his roots and it says, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him. That Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and strength, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord," the seven-fold full Holy Spirit will rest on the Messiah, so it says in Isaiah chapter 11. In Isaiah chapter 42 and verse 1, "Behold My Servant, Messiah, whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom My soul delights, I have put My Spirit upon Him." Again another

messianic prophecy indicating the Messiah will be empowered and anointed by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 48 of Isaiah, verse 16, "The Lord God has sent Me," says Messiah, "and His Spirit." And then in 61 you have this statement, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He anointed Me."

So they know they're hearing messianic prophecy. The Messiah was going to come, anointed by the Holy Spirit. Now what do we remember happened at Jesus' baptism? In the third chapter verse 21 it says that when He was being baptized, verse 22, the Spirit of God descended upon Him, right? And then in chapter 4, look at verse 1, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan where He was baptized." In verse 14 which we read earlier, He returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. So Jesus has on Him the anointing and the power of the Holy Spirit, just as the Messiah is to have, according to Isaiah. He's been anointed for special service.

Then in the...verse 18 there are four concise components to Messiah's mission, to bring good news to the poor, to announce release to the captives, to give sight to the blind, and to liberate the oppressed. Now, folks, I want to tell you, this is why Luke picked this because you can't have a better summary of the mission of Messiah than that. Four groups are identified, the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. And the Messiah comes to change those tragic conditions. He comes to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed. Now that speaks of His saving work.

And verse 19 sums it up, also from Isaiah 61 verse 2, "To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." What is that? That's the year the Lord brings favor. And what is the year the Lord brings favor? It's the year the Messiah arrives. The favorable year of the Lord is the time of Messiah's arrival. It's the time of God's favor mentioned in chapter 49 of Isaiah, verse 8, which is also called the day of salvation. It's equal to the day of salvation. It's equal to what Isaiah 63:4 calls the year of My redeemed.

What it's saying is this is the age of salvation. The framework around this ministry, I'm going to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, sight to the blind, liberate the oppressed, and it's all going to happen within the soteriological framework of the era of salvation. In other words, what He's saying is salvation has come, the age of salvation you've long awaited has arrived. This is the year when the Lord shows His favor by providing you the Messiah, the Savior, the sacrifice for sin. It's favorable because it means that it's going to cause good news to come to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberation to the oppressed. This is the favorable year.

So Isaiah prophesies that. They were familiar with that passage. The Messiah will come. He will be anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, which means He'll be able to say things that are divine and He'll do miracles that are evidence...evidence of the Spirit's power. He will come and liberate and He will release and set people free, and so forth. And this will be the age of salvation we've long awaited.

It has overtones of another great event in Israel's history called the Jubilee Year. Back in Leviticus 25 the Jews were instructed that every fifty years there was a Jubilee Year. The fiftieth year was a Jubilee year. You remember what happened? You can read Leviticus 25. All slaves were freed, all debts were cancelled. All property returned to its original owner.

Now this is reflective of the genius of the mind of God. This is economic genius because it keeps people from amassing anything because you're going to get it all taken away from you in the fiftieth year. All the property goes back to its original owner, all debts are cancelled and all prisoners, or slaves, are released. Jubilee was like the symbol of salvation when there was release and forgiveness and restoration. And this was the hope of Israel that as was symbolized in the Jubilee, there would come that final Jubilee, that favorable year of the Lord was the Jubilee year but that was only a symbol of the real favorable year of the Lord, the year when Messiah arrived and all the promises to Abraham would be fulfilled and all the promises to David would be fulfilled. And this was their hope and they knew the passage, they knew it well. They read it many, many times and their hearts were filled with hope. It was regularly read in their synagogues, all their lives it had been read.

Amazingly, by the way, verse 19 where Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:2: "To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." He stops in the middle of the verse because the rest of verse 2 in Isaiah says, "And the day of vengeance of our God." And Jesus leaves that out. It's not time to talk about vengeance. It's not time to talk about judgment. It's time to talk about salvation.

After He read that, closed the book, rolled it back up and gave it back to the *hasan*, sat down, because being seated was the traditional posture for teaching. "And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him." What is He going to say? "And He began to say to them, 'Today the Scripture...this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Whoa! Nobody ever said that, no preacher had ever said that. They had always said, "Someday," not "today."

Crammed, jammed full of people, I'll never forget staying in Tiberius next to a synagogue for several days and seeing the people crammed and jammed in there, just imagining that kind of scene here, and Jesus says, "Everything you've been waiting for is here, everything you've been hoping for

stands before you. Today, right here, right now, this scripture has been fulfilled," perfect tense verb indicating an existing state of fulfillment. You are seeing the fulfillment of this passage before your eyes. You are hearing it with your ears.

The prophecy of God through Isaiah is no more in the future. It is now. The Messiah is here. Salvation has come. The messianic age has begun. He was saying, "I am the Messiah."

Now you say, "That's a very short sermon," verse 21. I don't think it was that short because verse 21 says in the Greek, "And He began to say to them today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And the structure of that, "And He began," indicates this was just a summary of a much more detailed explanation. But the sum of it was "today." This is no longer future, it is present. They had had a lot of sermons about the Messiah now they had one from Him. They had a lot of sermons about the age to come. Now they were in it. Dramatic, dramatic. Before it's over, verse 29, they try to throw Him off a cliff. Amazing, but we'll have to wait to see that.

And next Sunday, let me tell you this now, I'm going to explain to you what...what Isaiah meant when he wrote chapter 61 and what Jesus meant when He read it by the four statements: preaching the gospel to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and setting free those who are downtrodden. I'm going to unfold those truths to you so you will understand the nature of Messiah's mission. Who are these poor? Who are these captives? Who are these blind? And who are these downtrodden? And what does He offer them? That's for next time. But at least now we have the setting and we'll give you, I think, probably, I'm going to try, at least, give you an exposition of Isaiah something like Jesus must have given that day before He summed it up saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," so you'll know exactly what His mission is.

Father, it's so refreshing to...to attend a synagogue in Nazareth with Jesus today, to be taken back to see the wonder of His person another time. He is so amazing to us, so glorious. We thank You that You have caused us to know Him and love Him, that He is not to us a stranger, that He is not to us an unattainable end, but that this Jesus who stepped into His own town, into His own synagogue, this Jesus who announced that He had brought the age of salvation, this Jesus who preached the good news belongs to us and we to Him. He is ours, He lives in us, He loves us, He gave His life for us and someday He will take us to glory to be with Him forever. Father, increase our love for the Savior and may the wonder of His person continually translate into increasing devotion to honoring Him in our lives. We pray in His name. Amen.

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