

The Gospel According to Jesus Luke 4:14-44

This passage begins the account of Jesus' public ministry, and is carefully constructed to indicate its purpose and to guide its interpretation.

The boundaries of the passage are set by the parallel between introduction and conclusion. In 4:14-15, Jesus enters Galilee to preach, and is widely acclaimed. In 4:42-44, Jesus is widely acclaimed, but moves on to preach the gospel elsewhere.

Similarly, the passage divides into two balanced parts (4:16-30; 4:31-41). The first takes place in Nazareth (4:16), and consists of preaching, without miracles (4:23). The second part takes place in Capernaum, and consists of miracles, without record – only mention – of his preaching (4:31-32). The juxtaposition indicates the breadth of the gospel: preaching salvation and enacting salvation, addressing both spiritual and human need.

Since Jesus begins by citing Isaiah 61, supplemented by Isaiah 58, that is where we begin also.

Day 1: Isaiah 61:1-6 The gospel according to Isaiah: what Jesus includes
Throughout his oracle, Isaiah warns about the coming destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. God's people have persisted in sin against him, and refused to repent, so he will bring in a foreign army to defeat them, destroy their country, and deport its leadership.

Here, though, Isaiah looks ahead to a subsequent time when God will declare the punishment over, forgive Judah its sin, and bring the people back to their land, in peace, prosperity and godliness. This return to God and to homeland is what Isaiah describes as 'good news to the poor', 'healing of the brokenhearted', 'freedom for captives/exiles', and 'release for the prisoners' (61:1). They will rebuild their cities and homes (61:4). They will be so prosperous that they can afford to hire immigrants to do their manual labor (61:5). They will enjoy a full, warm relationship with God (61:6). Salvation in Isaiah 61 is not only spiritual, but also political and economic.

As it happens, in Jesus' time, the promise of Isaiah was only partially fulfilled. Israel had returned to the land, and the temple was rebuilt, but

the people were not prosperous, the temple was unimpressive, and the nation was not politically independent but under the rule of the infidel Romans. So when Jesus began his ministry by quoting this text, he gained immediate attention: Would he be the one – would this be the time – to throw off foreign shackles, to gain world preeminence, and to become economically prosperous?

As we learn later, this is not what Jesus came to do. So it serves as a warning to us, not to suppose – like Israel, which at least had the promises of the covenant – that God ensures either the political, military, or economic fortunes of America or the American church.

Day 2: Isaiah 61:1-6 The gospel according to Isaiah: what Jesus omits

As we saw yesterday, the portions of Isaiah that Jesus quotes are instructive for understanding him and his mission. No less instructive is the part that he omits: ‘He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted.’ Additionally, had Jesus continued the Isaiah quote for two more lines, he could have added: ‘to comfort all who mourn’ (Isa 61:2b), but he chose not to. These omissions are likely instructive, because elsewhere Jesus warns his followers that faith in him brings not only spiritual satisfaction, but also sometimes significant emotional turmoil (e.g., Luke 2:35; 12:8-12,49-53).

This point is urgent today, when the gospel – likely pretty much everything else in our lives – is expected to bring us emotional satisfaction. The expectation is so strong that sociologists have characterized it as ‘the therapeutic use of religion’, that is, using God to meet my emotional needs. For us, raised on a therapeutic gospel, faith is quickly undermined when conflict or trouble comes. Yet Jesus never promises us an emotionally satisfying life. Instead of fussing over whatever we lack, we do well to honor God for what he does provide (see below).

Day 3: Isaiah 58:1-9 The gospel according to Isaiah: what Jesus adds

What Jesus adds is no less instructive than what he omits. Most of the quote comes from Isaiah 61, but into its middle, Jesus also adds a line from Isaiah 58, verse 6: ‘to release the oppressed’.

In Isaiah 58, God is calling the Jews to free the oppressed. His people complain, ‘Why do you not listen to us, even though we pray and fast?’ (58:3). ‘Because,’ God says, ‘you exploit your workers (58:3).’ Instead, God demands, ‘Loose the chains of injustice ..., free the oppressed ..., share

your food with the hungry, shelter the indigent poor, clothe the naked... Then when you call me, I will answer you' (58:3-9).

So in Isaiah, the gospel has not only religious – but also economic – implications. It entails not only worshipping God, but also acting justly in our personal economic relationships. And it entails not only preaching salvation, but also caring for the poor.

Day 4: Luke 4:16-21 The gospel according to Jesus

It's not enough to demonstrate that Isaiah's gospel had both spiritual and socio-politico-economic dimensions. We also need to confirm that Jesus intends all those dimensions when he quotes Isaiah.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries viewed themselves as enslaved and oppressed under the domination of the Roman empire, and hoped that Jesus would liberate them by military means. This he declines to do. So the gospel does not necessarily entail political freedom or harmony.

Jesus does, however, heal the blind, and free those oppressed by demons, both of whom would have fallen within the class of economic poor. He also welcomes the immigrant, teaches extensively regarding money, and advocates care of the poor. So, full realization of Isaiah's prophecy – especially its political and economic dimensions – may await Jesus' second-coming and heaven. But Jesus both teaches and models a holistic gospel. In this, he provides us an example, and a mandate.

Day 5: Luke 4:16-30 The response of the crowd to Jesus' gospel

Luke clearly intends 4:16-21 to be read in conjunction with 4:22-30. We know this from 4:16, which encompasses two parts: (a) "He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up," and (b) "on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom." The following account covers each part, in reverse order: (b) Jesus in the synagogue (4:16-21); (a) the response of the people from Nazareth, who knew his parents (4:22-30). In addition, the conclusion to the second vignette (4:28-30), contrasts with the conclusion to the first (4:22a), and with the introduction to the passage (4:14-15), uniting all three into one longer unit.

The two vignettes form a surprising contrast. Each sets out the blessings of the gospel: in the first, the blessings include freedom, healing of blindness, rescue from oppression, the Lord's favor (4:18-19); in the second, the

blessings include food in the midst of famine and healing from a frightful disease (4:25-27). But in shocking fashion, the two accounts contrast the recipients of the blessings: in the first, the gospel is offered to Jews in the synagogue (4:16,21); in the second, the gospel is offered exclusively to gentiles from outside Israel (4:25-27). The surprising twist provokes the crowd into an angry reaction (4:28-30).

We can draw two lessons from this juxtaposition. First, for us, as for Jesus' contemporaries, the gospel and its blessings are no entitlement. Through hearing about Jesus, we have opportunity for salvation. But we must not take this for granted, as though our salvation is therefore somehow assured. It is those who welcome Jesus who are beneficiaries of his largesse (4:23). Secondly, for us, as for Jesus, preaching the gospel will sometimes be met by warm embrace, sometimes by harsh rejection, and sometimes by an initial positive reaction which quickly or eventually turns hostile (4:22,28-30). We must be careful to share the gospel accurately, praying for God to work in hearts, celebrating when some accept it, while not being shocked by others who reject it.

Day 6: Luke 4:31-44

Luke again provides signposts that he intends these two vignettes to be read with the earlier part of the passage. The conclusion to the second vignette has the crowd praising Jesus, though he insists on moving on to preach in other towns (4:42-44); this recalls the introduction to the entire passage, where Luke describes Jesus first entering Galilee, to widespread acclaim (4:14-15). Thus, 4:14-44 form a single longer unit, and the two parts shed light on the others.

The point of this juxtaposition is that Jesus first preaches the gospel; then he enacts the gospel. First he teaches in the synagogue (4:16-19); then he exorcises a demon (4:33-37), and heals the sick (4:38-41).

Historically, this juxtaposition has driven gospel ministry, especially in the 19th century, and it is returning full-strength today. It is a reminder that the gospel ministry is not just about preaching salvation in the future or emotional nurture today, but is also about caring for the poor, the sick, the afflicted, the oppressed. The gospel is not just to be preached, but is to be enacted. Jesus did so; and he calls us to do likewise.