

LUKE

“God in the Hands of Angry Sinners”

Luke 4:22-30

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And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have 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 in 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 (Luke 4:22–30, ESV).

Heavenly Father, you are glorious and holy. By the grace of your Spirit, give us eyes to see who you are as you have been revealed by your Son Jesus. Help us to behold him and worship him, even when he challenges us; for where you confront us is often where you heal us and free us and give us joy. So let us submit our hearts to your word today. In Jesus name we pray, AMEN.

I. Introduction

On July 8, 1741, a Puritan Pastor name Jonathan Edwards stepped into a pulpit in Connecticut, and preached a sermon named “Sinner’s In the Hands of ad Angry God.” Though now this sermon is often remembered in modern American literature classes a as an infamously dreaded hell, fire, and brimstone sermon, it was simply a sermon on the utter holiness of God, the reality of God’s judgment against evil, and a plea for unconverted people to find salvation in Jesus.

The reason this sermon became so famous was because of the effect it had. Many people were converted to belief in Jesus. In fact, when you read the old manuscript of this sermon, as it was later published, it was “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God. A sermon preached at Enfield on July 8, 1741. *At a time of great awakenings; and attended with remarkable impressions by many of the hearers*” (Image 1).

In fact, it was said this sermon was so powerful that before the sermon was over a man who heard the sermon ran down and knelt before altar before the sermon was even finished and yell, “Mr. Edwards! What must I do to be saved?”

But another often-untold part of this story is how the night before, in the vicinity of Enfield, there was a group of believers who stayed up all night praying for their community. They had heard the stories

of revival known as the Great Awakening, and they were concerned that this blessing would pass them by. But instead God heard their prayers, and their community experienced one of the most powerful moves of God in American history.”¹

I had a seminary professor once say our text today is in many ways the exact inverse of this Great Awakening sermon. Whereas Edwards’s sermon was attended by revival, Jesus’s first sermon in Luke’s gospel was attended by rejection. Whereas Edwards’s sermon changed hearts, Jesus’s sermon hardened hearts. Whereas Edwards’s sermon was known as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” here in Luke 4:22-30 we have **“God in the Hands of Angry Sinners.”**

Jesus preaches a sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. Initially, the response is somewhat of a mixture of wonder and doubt, but by the end of his time at the synagogue the response is unified wrath. Why? Jesus has made an implicit claim to be the messiah; the anointed one who will proclaim good news to the poor, set captives free, give sight to the blind, and usher in the age of God’s kingdom.

This all sounds good. But the people of Nazareth know Jesus. This is a son of a carpenter. Who is he to tell them what to do? Why is he all of the sudden – supposedly – doing great miracles in other cities, but not his hometown? Why is he talking about God’s grace toward other nations that are enemies of Israel? *They want the messiah; they just don’t want this version of the messiah.*

One thing that the Bible teaches very honestly and openly is that God’s people have been tempted to refashion our view of God according to our own preferences ever since the time of the golden calf. We are like Ricky Bobby’s family, praying to version of Jesus we like the best. And Americans, just like the people of Nazareth, often become enraged when someone suggests that the God of reality might not line up with the God of our preferences.

As we look deeper into this text, I believe we will see three reasons why the people of Nazareth become enraged at Jesus. And we will find they are reasons we here in the Bible-belt might become enraged at Jesus as well: **1.) We Can Become Familiar with Jesus, 2.) We Can Become Entitled to Blessing, and 3.) We Can Become Scandalized by Grace.**

II. Text

1.) We Can Become Familiar with Jesus.

According to this translation, it seems that Jesus initially impressed the people: *“And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”* (Luke 4:22, ESV). But while the words “spoke well of” and “marveled” seem positive in this English translation, they come from Greek words that could be negative terms. They could also mean that they “witnessed against him” and were “bewildered” by him. The listeners might have been impressed, but they might have also been dumbfounded that one of their own was acting so high and mighty.

Part of this is explained by the make up of the audience. The synagogue of Nazareth isn’t just filled with people who knew Jesus when he was a young whipper-snapper. This synagogue is likely filled with Jesus’s childhood friends, family members, and in-laws. This is especially apparent when we

¹ Paul Lee Tan, [Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times](#) (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 1153.

read the parallel of this account in Matthew: *“and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.’ And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief”* (Matthew 13:54–58, ESV).

My brother-in-law tells the story of meeting an older man for the first time, and upon learning who my brother-in-law was this older gentleman said, “Dude, I used to drink so much beer with your uncle!” I imagine there is a similar dynamic at play here in Nazareth.

The people of Nazareth are familiar with Jesus. And you would think it would be a great advantage and honor to be from the same town as God in the flesh. But as Fred B. Craddock once wrote, *“...the people’s [of Nazareth] proximity and familiarity tended to be privileges that blinded them.”*²

Jesus later in this passage notes that prophets are not acceptable in their home towns. Hometown prophets are unpopular because they are able to point out blind spots that only insiders can know. We would prefer our prophets to preach against our enemies. But unfortunately the task of true prophets is to challenge. Read about Elijah and Elisha. Read about Isaiah and Jeremiah. They weren’t very popular.

It is said that familiarity breeds contempt. And I often worry that the familiarity of Bible-belt spirituality breeds contempt for the God of the Bible. In our familiarity, we can hold a low view of the holiness of God, and an all too high view of ourselves. In our familiarity, we can fail to honor God as God, which is an absence of the fear of the Lord and a corresponding lack of wisdom. In our familiarity, we can refashion and remake God into our own image and according to our own preferences, and as is often the case we can be blinded by our own idolatry.

But how do we know if our conception of God is true? I would offer this simple litmus test: A God that never challenges you is most likely God of your own making. But a God that can offend you that can challenge your individual preferences and cultural presuppositions is the living God of the Bible. And only a living God is capable of knowing you, loving you, and relating with you.

Stop reading the Bible the way you google articles on the internet to back up what you already believe. When you read the Bible ask yourself hard questions: what about this passage am I tempted to not believe? How might God be challenging me with this passage? Don’t let God grow familiar to you. But be like the Apostle John, Jesus’s beloved disciple, who the more he knew Jesus, the more astonished he was by his glory.

2.) We Can Become Entitled to Blessing.

Earlier in this chapter Luke characterizes the beginning of Jesus’s ministry in the following way: *“And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all”* (Luke 4:14–15,

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 63.

ESV). It's very likely that Luke bringing attention to the way that Jesus was "being glorified by all" as a contrast to what happens in Nazareth.³

Essentially Jesus discerns the thoughts of his fellow townsmen: "And he said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well'" (Luke 4:23, ESV).

The sense we get from this is that the attitude Jesus was dealing with was not one of humble yearning and expectation for God to move. Rather, Jesus is met with prideful presumption and a sense of entitlement.

The people of Nazareth view Jesus as being somehow indebted to them. They think, "If he blesses us,, then maybe we will acknowledge and glorify Jesus too."

I wonder how often we too believe a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch your back gospel"? We have to ask ourselves the honest question of whether or not our worship of Jesus is contingent upon him giving us the health, wealth, prosperity, and favorable circumstances we desire. Such a mindset is not Christianity. It is American idolatry in Jesus name.

If Christ is to be our all, he is to be our all in good times as well as in bad times. The church is called to be a distinctive people of God who faithfully glorify Christ in our blessing as well as our suffering, rather than simply being chaplaincy to consumerist culture. We are to come before our heavenly Father, letting our requests be known with humble expectation, not entitlement.

3.) We Can Become Scandalized by Grace.

Now, the sense of familiarity and entitlement might be able to explain Nazareth's disrespect for Jesus for Jesus, but it doesn't quite explain their wrath. To understand that, we have to look at the end of Jesus's talk where he intimates that his messianic mission is not just to deliver Israel from her political enemies, but rather to offer salvation to all the nations of the world, including outsiders and enemies. So he talks about how Elijah the Israelite prophet performed miracles for the widow of Zarephath, a woman who was likely a worshipper of Baal. He talks about how Elisha the prophet of Israel performed a healing on Naaman, a Syrian general who lead armies to rape and pillage God's people. These stories of grace were what led to the rage of the Citizens of Nazareth.

Fred Craddock explains this in his commentary on Luke: "If the people of Nazareth assumed privileges for themselves, that error is joined to a more serious one: resentment that Jesus has taken God's favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially Capernaum, said to have had a heavy non-Jewish population. Jesus defends his ministry to outsiders by offering two Old Testament stories. Both Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-14) and Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-17), prophets in Israel, took God's favor to non-Jews. That these two stories were in their own Scriptures and quite familiar perhaps accounts in part for the intensity of their hostility. Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced."⁴

³ "It is enough here to show that he taught in the power of the Spirit and aroused the praise of men. Elsewhere in Lk. δοξάζω is used of glorifying God, not men (2:20). The motif may be intended as a foil to the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth." I. Howard Marshall, [The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 177.

⁴ Craddock, 63.

Today we might think of grace as one of the more non-offensive ideas of Christianity. But that is only surface understanding of grace. To truly understand grace, we must first acknowledge that outside of Christ we are by nature enemies of God and children of wrath. For God to give us grace means that he died for us in our worst moment. And for us to live a life of grace means that we must walk in grace toward those we would consider our enemies.

This scandalizes those who were in the political environment of first century Palestine. And it should scandalize and challenge and inspire those of us who live in the political environment of twenty-first century America.

Grace demands grace. And when those who would be our enemies reject us and demonize us and silence us, we are to seek to display amazing grace. While this doesn't mean we should subject ourselves to abuse, we forsake the poison of bitterness and we seek to be neighbors.

III. Conclusion

Now combined together, this drives the people of Nazareth to want to murder Jesus. Now if you are familiar with how Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are written, you might think it odd that Luke is the only one who uses this story as to describe the beginning of Jesus's ministry. In Matthew and Mark, this event happens a little later in Jesus's ministry.

Does this mean there is a contradiction in the gospels? Not at all. We know from Luke that Jesus's ministry had already begun and his fame was already growing. So why we might ask is Luke intentionally positioning this story here?

Well, it is helpful to remember that the Gospel According to Luke is only the first volume of what will be a two volume story; the second part being the book of Acts. And it is possible that Luke is putting this story here at the beginning of Jesus ministry so that the rejection of Jesus is in Nazareth mirrors the rejection of the church in Israel.⁵

But there is also another literary reason Luke might be putting this story here. Luke begins Jesus ministry with Jesus being led up a hill to be executed and ends his ministry in the same way. The hands of God the Son will be pierced by the hand of angry sinners.

Now the Jews would not have wanted a messiah who would die on a cross. A death on a cross was a cursed death, and an apparent failure by every standard. But *the savior we needed is far greater than the savior would want.*

For the cross is the antidote to our anger toward God. In a sense Jesus places himself in the hands of an angry God. And by the cross he ends the power of sin and evil and injustice, without ending us in the process.

⁵ "Luke places the Nazareth visit first because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. That is to say that this event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church." Craddock, 61.

Let that truth of the love of his cross comfort you. Let it challenge you. Let it destroy familiarity, and replace it with holy fear. Let it destroy all entitlement, and replace it with humility. Let it destroy all hatred, and replace it with amazing grace. AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Questions

1. *Read Luke 4:14-30, along with the parallel accounts of Matthew 13:54-58 and Mark 6:1-6. As you study these passages, what are some of the reasons the people of Nazareth are offended and enraged by Jesus?*
2. *Have you ever been mad at God? What were/are root motivations of your anger toward Him?*
3. *This passage ends with Jesus being led up a hill to be killed by those who would attempt to kill him (Luke 4:29). Toward the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus's enemies do kill him (Luke 23). How might we view the cross as the ultimate antidote for our anger toward God?*