

Stories of the Master

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A Prophet Without Honor

It had been many weeks since Jesus was home. So much had happened since he left his family and went to find the prophet John. He had been baptized, he had fasted 40 days while praying in the wilderness of Judea, he had met his first disciples, performed miracles in Cana and Jerusalem. He had helped needy people in Samaria and taught in the synagogues of Galilee. News about him was spreading in the land. He was praised by all, and anticipation filled every place where he went. Now he was home in Nazareth, the little village in Galilee where he had grown up.

Nazareth was close to an important trade route from Egypt to Damascus and only an hour's walk from Sepphoris, the political capital of Galilee under the Romans. It was a rich city, a mixture of Jew and Gentile, culturally Greek, and called the "ornament of Galilee."

But in the eyes of God, this city of power and culture was insignificant compared to the simple synagogue where the humble residents of Nazareth would gather for worship and prayer. It was here that Jesus, as he was growing up would come every Sabbath with Joseph and Mary. It was here that Jesus learned to recite the Shema – the great Jewish confession of faith – and it was here that he became a man.

Jesus was surely loved as a young man by the people of his village and now he was back home after an extended absence. It was good to see everyone again, and it was good to see his mother Mary and his brothers and sisters all together.

But some villagers wondered, "Why was Jesus gone so long? Where had he been?" Some had said he had gone to the prophet preaching in the wilderness of Judea. They had heard that John was saying that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that the Messiah was among them and would soon reveal himself. And they had heard something else – they had heard that Jesus was performing miracles among the people, like a great prophet of old, and that he was teaching in synagogues and proclaiming that God's kingdom would soon be revealed.

Now, here he was, with his family and with a small group of followers who served him and pledged their loyalty to him. It was the same Jesus they knew growing up. Yet he was different. There was an air of authority about him, not pride or arrogance, but true authority like one who had endured a great conflict and come out victorious.

It was the Sabbath day, and the synagogue was crowded. Jesus would surely be asked to read and teach from God's word. And if the stories were true, perhaps he would perform a miracle. No one wanted to miss that!

Jesus' disciples came close to him and said, "Master, what will you do today? Is this the day you will tell others who you are? Is this the day, you will prove yourself before the people?"

Jesus smiled and said, "Watch, but be very much on the alert and be very careful."

It was time for the service to start. The synagogue official took his place at the front and recited the ancient Shema from the fifth book of Moses.

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“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Then came the Shemoneh Esreh, the 18 Benedictions, words of praise to the God of Israel, the true God of heaven and earth. This was the prayer, par excellence. The people stood and prayed silently. Then the leader recited these words:

"Blessed are you, O Lord, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, the mighty, and the fearful God—God Most High—who bestows kindnesses, and who is the Creator of all. You remember your love for our Fathers and you bring a redeemer for their children's children for the sake of your name in love. King, Helper, Savior, and Shield; blessed are you, Shield of Abraham."

Two more blessings of praise to God followed. Then 12 words of praise and supplication for daily need followed by three more words of praise to God. Jesus stood in the congregation. His hands lifted in supplication. His heart full of love for his Father. His mind focused on the mission before him and the announcement he would make.

The leader was now bestowing the final blessing. It would soon be time to read from God's Word.

"Bestow peace, happiness, and blessing, grace, loving-kindness, and mercy upon us and upon all Israel your people. Bless us, our Father, even all of us, by the light of your countenance, for by the light of your countenance you gave us, O Lord our God, the law of life, loving-kindness, and righteousness, and blessing and mercy, life and peace. May it be good in your eyes to bless your people Israel in every time and at every hour with your peace. Blessed are you, O Lord, who blesses your people Israel with peace."

The synagogue attendant, the hazzan, went to the chest that contained the scroll of the word of God. He reverently carried it and placed it on the lectern. Jesus, with a serious look upon his face whispered to his disciples. "Be on the alert. Be prepared." The disciples smiled. They knew something special would happen and they waited with great joy. Jesus then walked to the front. The crowd was hushed. Jesus unrolled the Scroll, and came to the reading for that day.

"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 oppressed,
to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

The people were familiar with the passage and nodded their approval. It was a favorite of many for it spoke of God sending His anointed one to give release to the people of God from their many burdens.

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Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the synagogue attendant. He sat down, and the eyes of everyone were fixed upon him, eager to hear him teach on this great prophecy of the kingdom, and Jesus said:

“Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Then he was silent. The eyes of everyone continued to look to Jesus and to wait for more words. But none came.

What? Is that all? But wait – what had he said, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”?

Has been fulfilled? How can that be? Jesus said that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled? The people were pleased with the gracious way the words fell from the lips of Jesus. They had heard about his wonderful teaching and they had heard about miracles, but this was different! What was Jesus saying about himself? This passage was about the Messiah and God’s work through him to bring salvation to Israel and now Jesus was saying that the passage was fulfilled *in him*.

The disciples looked at each other, at a loss for what to do or say. The crowd became restless. Finally, someone in the crowd rose from his seat, and with great anger in his voice said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?”

Of course everyone knew Jesus and who had raised him. They knew Joseph and Mary and his brothers and sisters. They knew Jesus from his childhood, but now he was blaspheming. Jesus might be a great teacher and God may have used him to heal people but to claim to be the one fulfilling this prophecy, to claim to be the one who would bring release to the captives of Israel was going too far.

“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” the man asked, the question itself being an insult. He was only a village carpenter and he should not be making such claims for himself.

Then, Jesus spoke:

“I am sure that now you are going to quote a proverb to me, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ – meaning, ‘We’ve heard of your miracles at Capernaum, so do them here and now in your hometown to prove your claim.’”

Jesus knew they would not believe his words, no matter how gracious and wise they were and that they would demand a sign from him. They had heard about a miracle he did in Capernaum and they wanted to see a miracle right now to prove himself. But Jesus never did miracles to prove himself, especially in front of people who did not have hearts that were humble before God and so he said,

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“No prophet is welcome in his home town. Have you not understood the stories of our people? In the days of the prophet Elijah, there was a great famine in the land. For three years God shut up the sky and no rain fell upon our people. Hunger was great, many died, and there were many widows. But when God sent Elijah to a widow who would care for him during this time of suffering, he did not send him to any widow in Israel. Instead, he sent him to a widow in the gentile land of Sidon. She would accept him and his words. She would serve him and care for him.

“In the days of the prophet Elisha, there were many lepers in Israel. But God did not heal any of them. He healed only the Syrian general, Naaman, for he listened to the words of the servant girl who told him about the prophet and he believed.

“It is a heart of obedience to God’s word, it is a heart of faith that God is looking for ...”

But before Jesus could continue, many more people in the synagogue stood to their feet and said. “Enough! We have heard enough! You have blasphemed and now you are dishonoring our people. We are the people of God. God will bless us. We do not know what he will do with the gentile dogs, but we know that God has promised to bless us, his chosen people.”

The disciples looked at one another with fear. This was not going as well as they had hoped.

Some men grabbed Jesus roughly. They shoved him out of the synagogue. The crowd gathered in the street and some said, “To the hill, where there is that steep drop off. He deserves to die for this outrage today.”

Others in the crowd did not know what to do. They looked upon Jesus’ family, filled with great concern and their cries to stop drowned out by the fanatical cries of the congregation that had now formed into a mob. The disciples followed along in the crowd, fearful and powerless. They were shouting for the people to stop, but the mob continued to move toward the brow of the hill, as if pushed by an invisible force.

When they got to the edge, a voice, a sinister voice penetrated into the mind of Jesus. “Throw yourself down, Jesus. Prove yourself by this great work of power that you really are the anointed one.” It was the voice of the evil one who had returned, who energized the mob, and who now wanted Jesus to prove before all that he was the Messiah in a spectacular display of power.

Jesus recognized the voice and said, “I will not! Enough of this!” The people stopped. What was Jesus saying? To whom was he speaking? They let go of him as if they had been controlled and now released from an unseen power.

Jesus turned and faced the people with grief, anger, and wonder at their hardness of heart. He said, “A prophet is without honor in his home town.” He looked into their eyes with piercing authority and walked through their midst and out of Nazareth rarely to be seen there again.

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The disciples grabbed their few possessions and ran after him. “Jesus. That, that didn’t go very well. They were going to kill you! Weren’t you afraid for your life? Where are you going now?”

“No one has any authority over me unless my Father gives it. My life is in the hands of my Father, and I trust him. A prophet is without honor in his home town. But others will listen. To Capernaum, men, to Capernaum. It is time to release the captives of Israel. It is time to give sight to the blind and set free those who are oppressed. It is time to proclaim God’s favor upon those in need. To Capernaum. We will start there.”

Interlude

After his rejection in Nazareth, Jesus went to back to Cana where the royal official met him. He had asked Jesus to come with him to Capernaum and Jesus had refused, but still healed his son from a distance. Now it was time to go. And when he arrived in Capernaum, one wonders if the royal official and his family were there to greet him.

Matthew 4 tells us that Jesus settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region where the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had lived so long ago. And this was just as the prophet Isaiah had said!

¹⁵ “In the land of Zebulun and of Naphtali,
beside the sea, beyond the Jordan River,
in Galilee where so many Gentiles live,
¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light.
And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow,
a light has shined.”

¹⁷ From then on Jesus began to preach, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

One Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue. The people were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority like they had never heard and soon they would see how great his authority was.

While Jesus was speaking, a man suddenly stood up and growled,

Go away! Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

The man was possessed with an evil spirit. The demon threw the man down in the midst of the people. He writhed and convulsed on the floor screaming, crying, cursing. And then Jesus said, “Be quiet! And come out of him!”

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The spirit screamed one more time. The man shook violently, and then he breathed deeply, and his eyes and face cleared. He sat up and said, "It is gone! That tormenting spirit is gone! I am free! You have saved me!"

The man went forward to Jesus and knelt at his feet. But the people in the synagogue were speechless. They had never seen anything like it before in their lives. Such disruption, such evil, and then such words of authority from Jesus. Amazement came upon them all and someone finally said, "How could he do that? How could his words have such power? He ... he commanded the demon to leave and the demon obeyed at once!"

"Jesus, what is your message," they asked.

"I have come to set free those who are oppressed, just as the prophets have said!" And the report about him spread far and wide into the surrounding regions.

The service ended. People walked home still talking about what they had seen and heard that day, and Jesus went to the home of Simon Peter.

"Peter, your wife was not present today."

"Yes, master. She began to be sick last night. And this morning her fever was worse."

"Let me see her." And they brought Jesus to her bedside. Her face was pale, her body weak, but she smiled and said, "You have come."

"Yes, I have come," Jesus said with tenderness in his voice. He touched her hand and the fever left at once! The color returned to her cheeks. New strength coursed through her body. She was healed and immediately got up from her sickbed with joy and began serving him and the other guests at her home.

They ate lunch and rested on the Sabbath as others in the village were doing but as the sun was setting their day of rest would soon come to an end and their quiet repose would become a crowded place of ministry.

People started coming to Peter's home and they were bringing the sick with them. Soon, it seemed the whole city was at the door of the house. One by one, they would come to Jesus. One by one he would lay his hands upon them, and one by one they would walk away healed.

In some cases, people were controlled by evil spirits, who, when they would see Jesus would shout out, "You are the Son of God!" But Jesus would silence them and then command them to leave. And the evil spirits obeyed.

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Deep into the evening the people came. Capernaum had never seen anything like it. The royal official whose son was healed by Jesus knew about his love and power, but now the whole city was experiencing it. Joy filled the hearts of all. Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “What I read in Nazareth in the synagogue, that God’s favor is coming upon his people, this is what you are seeing. Blessed are your eyes which see these things. Blessed are your ears which hear these things!”

Finally, the day came to an end. Jesus and his disciples went to bed. But early in the morning, knocking on the door awakened them. More people wanted to see Jesus. Peter went to the place where Jesus had fallen asleep, but he was not there!

Very early in the morning, before the sun had risen, and before anyone else had stirred Jesus quietly got up and walked out of the city to a secluded place to be alone with his Father and to pray. This would be a habit of Jesus – to be alone with God and to speak with Him and to listen. Finally, Peter and the others found Jesus and with great eagerness and excitement they said, “Jesus, everyone is looking for you. You must come at once.”

“Yes, I know. And there is great need in this place. But I cannot remain in this city. I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.”

And without another word Jesus went back to Peter’s home, gathered his few possessions, and prepared to go to other villages to preach.

What is the primary lesson we learn from these stories? Jesus read from Isaiah 61 and said the prophecies were fulfilled. What were those prophecies? Jesus cast out a demon in Capernaum and everyone said “What is this message?”

What is the primary lesson? It is that Jesus was inaugurating the kingdom of God in Israel and the world. Jesus said he must preach the kingdom of God to other cities. Jesus was teaching that through him the reign of God’s kingdom was coming back to earth! And he was showing it through his acts of power and mercy.

When God created Adam, God gave him the commission to rule the world and make it a beautiful place for the glory of God and the good of mankind. But Adam rebelled and his descendants made it a place of conflict and death. Rather than the earth being the place of God’s kingdom, God’s reign, the earth became a battleground among the kingdoms of the world and a place where men worshipped false gods and defied the Creator.

But God promised that he would restore his kingdom to the world. He chose a man named Abraham and said that through his descendants he would restore the kingdom. Abraham’s descendants became Israel and in Israel God chose a man named David from the tribe of Judah and told him that the king who would rule the earth would be one of his descendants. This king would preach good news to the poor, heal the sick, and bring release to the people.

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This was the message of the prophets. The earth that was full of conflict would have peace. The earth that was full of sin and injustice would be righteous. The earth that full of death would see life and paradise restored for God would restore the kingdom to earth.

When Jesus read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue in Nazareth he was claiming to be that king of Israel, that son of David who had at last come. When Jesus cast out evil spirits, he showed that he was the king. His message was not mere words, but it was a message of action, authority, and power.

When the disciples wanted Jesus to come back into the city he said, “No, I have to go to other cities and proclaim the kingdom of God,” and my friends that is exactly what Jesus did. His message of the kingdom went into all Israel and now through his followers the message of the kingdom of God has gone out into all the world and to you who are listening to my words.

When Jesus was in his home town of Nazareth, the villagers shamed him. He was a prophet without honor. But what is Jesus to you? Do you shame him by rejecting him, or do you honor him? Have you given him your life? Have you bowed the knee to his kingship? Jesus is Lord of all and wishes to be your Lord as well.