

The Messiah Confronts His People, part 2

Luke 4:22-30

We have seen the two proverbs that draw their attention to the heart of the issue, which is their unbelief. But now notice verses 25 to 27, the two prophets, because the two prophets, they illustrate the proverbs that Jesus just cited. These two stories here, they're both a warning on the one hand and they're an encouragement on the other; a warning and an encouragement that they must repent and believe.

Look at what it says there, verse 25. "But," I tell you, "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 many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." Two examples, two prophets, two ministries, two people benefited. He provides these examples from Israel's history because he's demonstrating here points of continuity. He wants people to understand that he is walking in the same tradition as the prophets who came before

him. In fact, according to verse 21, he came to fulfill the words of the prophets. Same historic line as Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah, Moses, all the way back to the beginning.

Also, at the same time Jesus is warning the people here, that while he himself is in harmony with the prophets, at the same time these people are demonstrating their historical continuity as, but not with, the prophets; their continuity is with unbelieving Israel. They are in harmony with the devil. They're in harmony with sinful unbelief.

Okay, and now we start to see what made these folks seem so angry. The days of Elijah and Elisha, they're characterized by wicked unbelief in Israel. They're characterized by rampant idolatry, Baal worship. So when Jesus illustrates his point here, as he's using individuals from each of these despicable nations, a widow from Zarephath in the land of Sidon, a leper from Syria, if you are among the people in the synagogue in Nazareth that day, you could feel the temperature rise in the room. It's like hitting a deep nerve in the people, very painful, extremely provocative. Tempers are beginning to flare here. Anger is boiling in their furnace just waiting for the time of eruption. They don't like good examples from either of those nations. It would be like talking to Israel now and

evangelizing them by pointing them to the example of faith of a Palestinian. If you want to get into an immediate fight, try that.

Back in the days of Elijah and Elisha, the kings who ruled Israel during those days they were all wicked and particularly the two that reigned then. Ahab, you remember the name Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel, they reigned during Elijah's ministry, and then Jehoram, who's the grandson of Ahab, his name is sometimes written as Joram, ruled during Elisha's ministry.

Look at, look at the end of 1 Kings 16 verse 30, because I just want to give you a flavor of the spiritual condition of Israel in Ahab's reign. There in 1 Kings 16:30, "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

Boy, that is a pretty high mark of idolatry because all those kings were idolatrous. All those kings are wicked. That he did more to provoke the God of Israel than all of them together, that's wicked. His grandson, Jehoram, he wasn't much better. The land, in fact, is so saturated with Baal worship that after Jehoram died, God raised up a zealot, a guy named Jehu. Jehu proceeded to go through the land systematically and brutally to eradicate Baal worship from Israel. He just slaughtered Baal's prophets. It was a bloody, bloody time.

So, this idolatrous time, this wicked time, the people in the land immersed, saturated in idolatry, the worship of Baal. In fact, you remember Elijah's complaint. 1 Kings 19:10, because here Elijah laments before God. This is just an indication of how bad it was. He says, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts." He had just killed 450 prophets of Baal. His mighty act up on Mount Carmel, and he runs to get away from Jezebel. He's afraid even though God dropped fire down on people. He's still afraid. Look, he's just a man like us, right? But even with 450 prophets dead, he's still concerned. "I've been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, they've thrown down your altars, they've killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away."

It means that Jezebel, her threats, her anger, it was shared around the land. The land of Yahweh had effectively become the land of Baal. It was worse than the lands of Sidon and Syria. It was a total disgrace. And Elijah here feels utterly isolated, feels totally alone, kind of like Jesus must have felt at this very moment in his hometown in Nazareth, alone, isolated, an outcast among his own relations, his own people.

Turn to 1 Kings 17:8, severe famine is going on in the region caused by a drought, three and a half years without rain. So people in Israel are dying. They're, they're dying of starvation and thirst. And God sent Elijah, not to Israel. He sent him out of Israel. He sent him away from all of Israel's widows, each one of them equally desperate. And God sent Elijah 75 miles away, a cross a desert, to the land of Sidon, the birthplace of Ahab's wicked wife Jezebel. And God sent him to minister to a widow in that God-forsaken land. But that God-forsaken land is now becoming a God-visited land.

Look at verse 8, "Then the word of the Lord came to him," to Elijah, "'Arise go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold I have commanded a widow there to feed you.'" And so he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the

gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, 'Hey bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.'" Now that's a land of drought. No water to be found, but she goes and finds a drink. She's going to bring it. He called to her and said, Hey! "And bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." Seems like cruel, doesn't it?

"She said, 'As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.'" Oh, that's tragic! "And Elijah said to her, 'Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah."

Wow! Remarkable. God passed by all the needy widows of Israel, and he sent Elijah to be cared for, received by,

provided for, a Sidonian widow. There's no indication at all in the text that she sought God's favor. There's no indication she's any more righteous than any of the other widows in Israel. But, when God extended his grace, she received the prophet. She trusted him, his word, trusted his God, obeyed his word. She's a desperate, dying woman; she's illustrated here a principle of humble, saving faith.

You think anyone in that synagogue in Nazareth heard the grace that Jesus extended to them by reminding them of that story? You think they identified themselves with the poor widow? Identified and put themselves in her shoes as the foreigner, the stranger, the alien to God's covenants of promise? They themselves being just like her in desperate need of divine mercy? They didn't.

But what about you? What about me? Do we think of ourselves that way? Because we really should. We're just as desperate as she was. We're beggars before God, spiritually speaking, physically speaking. Every single breath we rely on from him. Now, with that in mind, turn quickly to 2 Kings chapter 5 and we're going to look just briefly at Elisha's ministry to Naaman the Syrian. The widow of Zarephath is truly a sympathetic figure to us, isn't she? I mean, she's clearly a *ptōchōs*. She's someone

of low status, someone that our heart goes out to. We can feel for her, but not Naaman; Naaman's different. There's actually nothing much to commend him at all.

Take a look at 2 Kings 5:1. It says there, "Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria," he, "was a great man with his master and in high favor because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife."

Stop there for a second. This text describes, in introducing Naaman, describes him as a commander. It describes him as a great man winning great victories. But listen, that's with his master that he's in, he's in high favor, high esteem. From Israel's perspective, not big fans. They're not so fond of him because God had given him victory over Israel as a judgment on Israel. So when you think of Naaman, think ISIS commander, think a leader in the Taliban. That's what this guy was.

He may be esteemed in his own nation among his own people, his own tribe, his own Syrians, but from Israel's perspective, this is one of the bad guys. He's the commander of an army that's been conducting border raids on Israel and look it even



says there that he kidnaps and enslaves little girls. He's not a nice guy. And from a religious point of view, Naaman's a leper. He's a leper. That had significance in Israel. In the Jewish mind it meant he's under the just judgment of God. And, after all, why not? He's a Gentile. He's a Syrian. He's a commander of an army that harassed Israel at the borders. He's grabbing little girls and making them his slaves. Yeah, of course, this guy deserves to be judged as a leper. Let him rot! That's the mind set of Israel. From a Jewish perspective, this is about as unsympathetic of a figure as can be found in the entire Scripture.

But let's keep reading. Back in verse 2, "The Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. And she said to her mistress, "Would that my lord, were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Isn't that just like God? To use a little girl to bring healing to this leper. Verse 4, "So Naaman went in and told his lord, 'Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel.' And the king of Syria said, 'Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel.'

“So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing.” Think about that in terms of all the stuff that he’d robbed from Israel, and was theirs anyway. He’s bringing it back. “So he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, ‘When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.’” Now the king of Israel is angry, feeling like he’s being provoked. He read, “the letter, he tore his clothes and said, ‘Am I God to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.’”

“But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, ‘Why have you torn your clothes? Let him now come to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.’ Naaman came with his horses and chariots, stood at the door of Elisha’s house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.’ But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, ‘Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the, the

rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?’

“So he turned and went,” his, “away in a rage. But his servants came near and said to him, ‘My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? He has actually said to you, “Wash and be clean?”’ So he went down, dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”

Again, Naaman’s reaction to the great prophet at first, it only increases the antipathy any Israelite is going to feel toward this guy. Gentile, despicable Syrian, threat to the safety of Israel, cursed leper. He spurns the prophet. He sends him away. He despises him. He insults the land. Arrogant ingrate, isn’t he? Then he finally, at the appeal of his own servants, turns, does what the prophet said. Why was Naaman cleansed? Again, he acted in faith. He trusted. He may have been a prideful man. He certainly was.

May have been a violent man. He was that. He was a godless pagan, idolater, kidnapper, enslaver of little girls, but he did humble himself to come seeking the prophet. He humbled himself again to a greater degree when he followed the prophet’s

instructions. And then, after he's healed, we can see it really took in his heart because he turned, returned, and acknowledged the God of Israel as the true God. And he tried to express his gratitude. What a remarkable turnaround, right? Listen, that is the power of grace which comes on the basis of faith. What is Israel (God) trying to tell his people here? These stories are parallel, aren't they?

First, many needs in Israel back then, many needs in Israel now. There's a parallel there. Second, the times of Elijah and Elisha are marked by spiritual infidelity in Israel, hard hearted unbelief and nothing much has changed. Third, God has by-passed Israel. He's sending his prophets to others, to people who had not been seeking him. And that's exactly what is going to happen right now, today. God's salvation would be rejected by Israel at the end of the day. It would be found by Gentiles, those who sought him not.

And this message for these people in Nazareth had to infuriate them for sure. But if that's all they heard, they were truly missing the hope that Jesus pointed to in these stories. And their condemnation is deserved. Because even though you couldn't find two different people, the widow of Zarephath and

Naaman the Syrian, those two people shared some common spiritual characteristics.

So, looking at it from what unites them, notice the widow is a woman, Naaman is a man. Widow, well notice the contrast first. The widow is absolutely destitute, penniless, ready to die. Naaman is extremely wealthy. The widow is a woman of low status; she's inconsequential, she's easily set aside. Naaman, he's a man who is heard. He's a man of great consequence. He's a man who gets his way. Widow, she's socially conditioned toward humility. Not Naaman, he's a very proud man. He's used to getting what he wants. So by external measures, these two couldn't be more different.

But they're very similar and united by common things. They're both equally lost, living in pagan lands. Neither of them know God. They're equally needy. The widow is suffering from abject poverty, and she's ready to die. Naaman is suffering from leprosy, a debilitating disease, obvious, had a profound social stigma. For both of them, immediately for the widow and ultimately for Naaman, what the prophet commanded, they were willing to obey. They listened, and against fleshly judgment, against everything their mind told them to do, they listen, they heard, they obeyed in faith. They humbled themselves. They

received God's grace on the basis of simple faith. That's the hope that Jesus offered them.

Conditions were the same except for this: God did not bypass his people, he sent Jesus to his people. He's right there, in Nazareth. They're not getting passed by. They're visited by divine grace, and all the people need to do is follow the faith of the Sidonian widow. All they need to do is follow the faith of the Syrian commander. They need to humble themselves and listen, obey the prophetic voice. Listen, if he would extend his grace to these people, small and great, rich, poor, male, female, certainly he'll do so for all the *ptōchōs*, those of low status, the humble in Israel. If they'll just humble themselves, repent and believe.

We know the outcome. Just quickly, look at verse 28, our final point, the grim conclusion. "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. Passing through their midst, he went away."

Incredible, isn't it? All in the synagogue, means he doesn't have one ally. He doesn't have one friend here. Not one penitent sinner, who heard the truth, saw Jesus as Messiah, came

to, coming to him to extend grace to the poor, like Elijah, Jesus absolutely alone. This uprising, it's like an immediate, retributive justice. They, rather than hearing what Jesus said, interpreting his ears through humble words, they're so long in the habit of external religion, hollow and carnal and they interpret Jesus in exactly the opposite way of what he intends, to bring grace to them.

So, they form a lynch mob on a Sabbath day, nonetheless. Probably justified this impulsive action, this administration of the death penalty, maybe on the basis of Deuteronomy 13, calls for the execution immediately of false prophets. Is that how they're judging him? False prophet, really? But really, they didn't think it through. They just reacted.

Pride, anger, hatred; try to imagine the scene. Try to put yourself in it. As this angry synagogue crowd mobs Jesus, surrounds him, grabs him, pushes, shoves him outside of the synagogue through the town, this cacophony of anger and hatred, pushing him, swelling crowd, gathering other people, they're pushing him up the brow of the hill to the edge of the cliff. It's aggressive, violent, confusing and there's no escape. Think of yourself there, victim of one of these mobs. How terrifying that would be for you and for me. Totally out of control. Just

subject to the will of this incoherent, violent group of people; they're wanting to murder you.

Jesus, he's not frightened. He's calm. He knows God will deliver him because his time had not yet come. And so he escapes from his hometown. He passes harmlessly through their midst. God favored them, but they did not favor him, did they? They cast him out of their midst. Jesus will later return to this scene, later on in his ministry, at the end of his Galilean ministry before he heads to Jerusalem. Matthew 13 and Mark 6 both describe that return, and it's the same thing. I can't believe he goes back. It kind of reminds me of Paul, remember when he was stoned? they take him out of the city. They stone him. He gets back up and marches right back into the city. He's not afraid. That's Jesus. He goes right back there.

As we think about how it's the people who are closest to the truth, that when you cross them, they're the most violent against you. It's a sobering truth, isn't it? We're reminded of what the apostle John told us in introducing his first Gospel. He said Jesus "was in the world and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave them the right to become children



of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but they're born of God."

That is the difference, right, between us and them? It doesn't depend, Romans 9:16, "on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." It depends on grace; sending the Holy Spirit, causing us to be born again that we might receive him, become children of God. Look, we would have reacted the same way as these unbelievers in Nazareth were it not for sovereign grace. Amen?