

## Luke 4:14-30

Sermon: **A slap of wrath**

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### INTRODUCTION

1. In previous sermons, I spoke about the “idea” of accepting God’s will precisely when it is hardest for us. Satan will always use our hardships as an opportunity to present God as not a good God, and in this he is incredibly skilled.

1.1. On the other hand, I want to emphasize another thought: if we live foolishly and recklessly, it will certainly affect the outcomes in our lives. But if we live wisely and use the reason and conscience that God has given us, we can rightly expect our lives to be filled with blessing—spiritually, psychologically, and even materially. The best proof that this is true is found in the Book of Proverbs. It was written by a man who had attained everything this life could offer. Through that process, he gained great experience and wisdom, and precisely because of that he decided to write a book that offers the reader principles: how to live wisely and how to avoid foolishness. In Proverbs we clearly see: the wise man enjoys the fruit of his life, while the foolish man heads toward his ruin. These are universal principles that still apply today, and we as believers should adopt and apply them in our lives.

1.2. But before we begin studying the new passage, I also want to stress this: suffering—or any other kind of hardship—is an unavoidable factor in the life of a believer. God strengthens us through suffering, He prepares us for His kingdom. And it is precisely through hardships that we receive solid proof—if we endure them—that we are children of God. Through suffering we realize how fragile and fleeting this life is; we see how absurd it would be to seek complete satisfaction here and now. Precisely because of this realization, despite the hardships we go through, we in our free will decide to follow the Father’s will for us. Our eyes remain fixed on what is unseen. We run the marathon toward the ultimate goal that the Bible promises to all who endure in hardships: eternal blessing, where there will no longer be sorrow, suffering, or any kind of trouble.

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## SYNAGOGUES

2. (Luke 4:14-15) “Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread through the whole region. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.”

2.1. In these two verses Luke briefly summarizes the events that took place during Jesus’ return from the wilderness. The timeframe of these events is not specified—it could have been several weeks, or perhaps several months.

2.2. In the Gospel of John, we read that after returning from the wilderness, Jesus went with his disciples to a wedding in Cana, where he performed his first public miracle—turning water into wine<sup>1</sup>. So, let us recap: after his baptism and after the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus begins his public ministry. We read in verse 14: “Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit.” What does the phrase “in the power of the Spirit” mean? It means that God decided to confirm his ministry before the people through the miracles that Jesus began to perform publicly. We read in the text that news about him spread through the whole region because of these miracles. And in verse 15 we see that Jesus was teaching in their synagogues. As I pointed out earlier, I believe Luke gives us here a summary of the events that took place before Jesus went to his hometown, Nazareth, and entered the synagogue as was his custom.

2.3. (Luke 4:16) “He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read.”

2.4. After that time Jesus returned to the region where he had grown up and, according to custom, entered the synagogue. The synagogue was a place—a community of people—where Jews of that time gathered to worship Yahweh. But it was not the center of the religious life of the Jewish people; the center was the Temple in Jerusalem. Catholics have a somewhat similar pattern in the structure of their religious practice: while churches around the world are places where Catholics worship God, the center of their religiosity is in the Vatican.

2.5. In the Old Testament we see that synagogues did not exist from the very beginnings of Judaism. It was only after the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon that the idea of synagogues began. When the Jews were physically far from the Temple, they conceived the idea of establishing synagogues to preserve faith in Yahweh, their God, and to teach new generations the faith that belonged to them as physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After returning from Babylon to the Promised Land, they retained this practice. So in the time of Jesus, Jews who lived far from the Temple had their own synagogues, where they could learn about their faith and observe their religious practices<sup>2</sup>.

2.6. What did worship of Yahweh in the synagogues look like? We do not have a complete and clear picture, but we can, based on biblical texts and historical sources, assume that the Sabbath meeting in the synagogue looked something like this: first there would be prayers and singing (Psalms), then a

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<sup>1</sup> John 2:1-12

<sup>2</sup> Philo of Alexandria (3rd century BC) — testifies to the existence of synagogues in Alexandria and other places in the diaspora.

Josephus Flavius (1st century AD) — describes synagogues in more than 18 cities, including Tiberias, Dora, and Caesarea, as key centers of Jewish religious and social life.

scroll would be brought out, a passage from the Torah (the Scriptures) would be read and translated, and then the teacher (rabbi) would interpret that passage to the gathered community.

2.7. In the continuation of verse 16 we read that Jesus was handed the scroll to read. At that time, the text was read in Hebrew, and then either the reader himself or someone else would translate it into Aramaic. Hebrew was the liturgical language of Judaism (lěshon ha-kodesh, “the holy tongue”), the language in which the Holy Scriptures (Tanakh) were written, and also the everyday speech of Jews in history. But by the 5th century BC, Aramaic had joined Hebrew in Judea as the common spoken language. Hebrew remained the liturgical language, while Aramaic became the language of daily life. Hebrew was mostly known by priests, scribes, Pharisees, and teachers, and they translated the text into Aramaic for their fellow countrymen. We can assume, based on the text that follows, that Jesus both read and translated the passage.

## DIRECTLY TO THE FACE

3. (Luke 4:17) “The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written...”

3.1. We read that Jesus was handed the scroll to read. At that time, books as we know them did not exist, but only scrolls that were carefully stored in a special place. The one responsible for the synagogue (the president) would take out the scroll that, according to the schedule, was to be read on that particular Sabbath. Who would read from the scroll? Most often a rabbi, a teacher, and if the synagogue did not have a rabbi, then someone who was respected in the community, considered wise and worthy of interpreting a passage from the Torah. We know from the text that Jesus’ fellow townspeople were familiar with what he had been doing in the surrounding area and that he had been teaching in the synagogues. We also know that Luke earlier recorded the event where Jesus, as a boy, stayed in the Temple talking with the teachers. At the end of that account Luke says: “*And Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and man*<sup>3</sup>.” From this verse we can assume that his neighbors praised his wisdom as he grew up, and precisely because of this he was considered worthy to interpret Scripture.

3.2. (Luke 4:18-19) ““The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me. He has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.””

3.3. Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, specifically from chapter 61.

3.4. (Luke 4:20) “Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.”

3.5. After the reading we see that Jesus “sat down.” If we look at this event through the lens of our culture, we might easily conclude that he simply sat among the others. But why then would all eyes be fixed on him? In our churches, when someone reads a passage, they return to their place, and no one pays special attention to them anymore. In Jewish culture at that time, the custom was different:

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:52

before a rabbi began to teach, he would sit in a chair. It was the same in the Temple, and very likely the same principle applied in the synagogues. So, after he read, Jesus sat in the teacher's seat, ready to interpret the passage, and that is why all eyes were on him. They wanted to hear what he would now say about the text he had read.

3.6. (Luke 4:21) **"He began by saying to them: 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'"**

3.7. Jesus then gives a statement that is simple, but powerful and shocking for everyone present: *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* He did not go into explaining the context of the passage, nor did he interpret what the text meant for Israel as God's people, which is what teachers usually did. The audience expected that, but he did not follow that path. Instead, he said something utterly unexpected: *"I am the one Isaiah is prophesying about."* I can only imagine the silence that fell, the sense of confusion, and then—the resistance and rejection of his statement.

3.8. (Luke 4:22) **"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' they asked."**

3.9. I think that the translations "spoke well of him" and "were amazed" here can lead us in the wrong direction. We might think that his fellow townspeople admired his wisdom after he said: *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled."* But I believe that is not the case. Namely, as we continue reading, we see that they were questioning among themselves: *"Isn't this Joseph's son?"* In other words: *"Isn't this our neighbor Jesus, whom we have known since childhood?"* By the end of the passage we see that they want to kill him, to throw him off a cliff. Therefore, the words "spoke well of him" and "were amazed" contradict the very context. A better translation would be: "they were astonished."

3.9.1. Why were they astonished? When Jesus read Isaiah 61, they knew it spoke of the Messiah whom Yahweh would send to deliver his people. That prophecy was sacred and deeply divine in nature.

3.9.2. At the moment when Jesus says it is fulfilled today, they thought in their hearts: *"You, who grew up with us, you, Joseph's son, are declaring yourself to be the Messiah? You claim to be our King, our Deliverer, the one Isaiah foretold? How dare you arrogantly take those sacred words for yourself! You are just an ordinary man, a villager from Nazareth, like us."* They did not admire his wisdom, but were "astonished" at his "arrogance." They said among themselves: *"How can he say this about himself? He is mad. Shame on him!"*

## A PROPHET IS NOT WELCOME IN HIS HOMETOWN

4. (Luke 4:23) **"Jesus said to them: 'Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"**

4.1. From Jesus' reaction and comment, we can conclude that what I suggested above is most likely true. Jesus knew that his hometown, where he grew up, had surely heard of all the miracles he had done in Capernaum and the surrounding region. But up until that point—at least to this audience now looking at him—it was not known that he had done any miracles in their own region. After their murmuring among themselves, Jesus—knowing the hearts of his neighbors—publicly voiced what

they were thinking within themselves. Why does he do this? In the following verses we see that Jesus has an “idea” he wants to carry out right there, in his hometown. By this rebuke he wants to awaken them from the darkness they are in, to save them from certain destruction.

4.2. (Luke 4:24) **“And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.’”**

4.3. Jesus, in studying the Scriptures, knew very well the history of his people. He knew that “no prophet was ever welcome in his own hometown.” Here he simply confirms what is obvious and clearly found in their Scriptures.

4.4. (Luke 4:25) **“‘I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.’”**

4.5. Jesus builds on this statement and gives the audience two examples.

The first example refers to the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:1–15), during a time when Israel suffered several years of famine because of their rebellion and disobedience to Yahweh. The people, including the king who ruled then, did not love Yahweh their God as he deserved. Therefore, the prophet Elijah, by Yahweh’s command, made it so that no rain fell on the land for three and a half years. During that time Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon. Yahweh blessed that woman so that her flour and oil were miraculously replenished day by day, and so she and her son had food throughout the years of drought. That woman, although not an Israelite but a pagan, believed that Yahweh was the one true God.

4.6. The second example takes place during the time of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5:1–14). At that time leprosy had spread through the land, and many Israelites were afflicted, among them Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram. The servant girl of his wife, who was an Israelite, told her mistress that Naaman should go to the prophet Elisha and that he would heal him. Of all the Jews, only one pagan—Naaman—went to the prophet Elisha and listened to him, and he was healed. No Israelite was healed of leprosy.

4.7. Why did Yahweh send prophets to pagans, or pagans to the prophets in Israel? Because his own people were not spiritually open toward their God. The people whom Jesus cites in these examples had open hearts and were willing to believe in Yahweh. But Israel, throughout its history, had been a people with hard and disobedient hearts—toward their God and toward his prophets. That is why Yahweh performed miracles where he found faith and love.

4.8. Jesus uses these examples from Scripture to prove to his neighbors that they are the same as their fathers in the past. He is essentially saying to them: *“Just as your fathers persecuted the prophets, so you are rejecting me today. Your hearts are hard and closed, and that is why miracles do not happen here.”*

It is the same message that John the Baptist delivered to the people: *“Do not think that just because you are Abraham’s descendants you have the right to inherit the kingdom of God<sup>4</sup>.” “If your hearts are not open to acknowledge who I am, then you are not authentic descendants of Abraham. In other words—you are not true Israelites, those who will inherit the kingdom of God,”* says Jesus to them.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:8

## A SLAP OF WRATH

5. (Luke 4:28–30) “All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”

5.1. Here we read and have proof of just how hard their hearts truly were toward the truth. Can we even imagine the depth of their hatred toward Jesus when, with united force, they wanted to throw him into the ravine and kill him? This was not just anyone—he was no stranger to them, but their neighbor whom they had watched grow up, who had grown up in that very synagogue, who had been part of their community. And yet, they decided to kill one of their own.

5.2. It is an astonishing truth that evil, when confronted with the goodness of truth, reveals itself in the full force of its wrath. When a hard heart is confronted with goodness, it explodes in hatred that seeks to destroy that goodness at any cost. In that moment it no longer matters whether you are a neighbor, brother, sister, husband, wife, or child—none of that holds weight anymore.

5.2.1. Although this act was an expression of hatred driven by the wrath the Jews felt toward Jesus in that moment, I do not believe their intention to throw him off the cliff was entirely irrational and without reason—at least not in their own eyes.

What do I mean by that? Some biblical teachers claim that their decision was purely the product of a wicked heart that did not love God, and that in that moment nothing else mattered: the moral compass was switched off, rage took over, and everyone—his neighbors, those who had watched him grow up, the rabbi in the synagogue, the elders of the town, friends of his family and relatives—all decided to cast him to his death. I do not believe that.

We must put ourselves in the shoes of a Jew of that time. Every Jew had been raised under the instruction of the Pharisees. And in the Bible we have many accounts of Pharisees passing judgments: stoning or otherwise punishing those they declared heretics, blasphemers, or adulterers. The Pharisees had the authority to tell the people who, according to the Law of Moses, deserved punishment. I think that is exactly what is happening here. After Jesus declared that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, in the eyes of the rabbis, the president of the synagogue, the elders, and the people, he became a heretic, a blasphemer. And according to the Law of Moses, the Pharisees had the authority to say: *“Jesus, if you do not retract your words, we will have to act.”* When Jesus did not, they decided to take him to the cliff and throw him to his death.

5.3. If that was indeed the reason, then his fellow countrymen—from their perspective—acted justifiably. To us today, it is chilling to hear that his own people wanted to do this, but we must understand: they had grown up in a culture where it was normal to condemn a blasphemer and punish him with death. They had all witnessed such events and, deep in their hearts, believed that by doing so they were acting rightly and justly before God. That is what they had been taught from childhood in the Pharisaic tradition.

5.4. Today, in a more civilized world, we may have different experiences. But still, if we are zealous in speaking the truth—and I say this from personal experience—we too may be struck by the slap of evil and wrath, even from those closest to us.

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5.5. (Luke 4:30) **“But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”**

5.6. I believe this was a supernatural miracle performed by God. By his action he delivered Jesus from the evil that his neighbors had prepared for him. We read that Jesus “walked through the midst of them and slipped away.” This could only have happened through Yahweh’s miraculous intervention.

5.7. In conclusion, I want to say this: as we have already seen in the temptations of Jesus, there is no number of miracles that can change a hard heart—an unbelieving heart—into a heart of flesh, a faithful heart. Jesus knew this. He knew the condition of his neighbors’ hearts, and that is why he chose not to perform many miracles in his own hometown.

5.8. In the same way, Yahweh did not send the prophet Elijah to change the heart of the widow in Sidon. Her heart was already open toward him. The miracle that took place in her home was a confirmation of Yahweh’s love for her, and for the widow herself it was a clear sign of whom her heart belonged to.

Let us not forget: in those days pagans believed in many gods. But that widow now came to know that there is one true God, and she decided to give herself to him.

5.9. I want to be absolutely clear: we cannot influence the plan that God wants to accomplish as the Author of this reality that he created. If we have faith in God, it does not mean that he will bless us with food like the widow in Sidon, while others go hungry; it does not mean that he will heal us of disease or always deliver us from troubles in this life. God heals some, and he does not heal others. He does not do this because he loves some more than others, but because he is fulfilling his purposes and plans within the reality he has created.

5.9.1. We know from the Gospels that the apostles, even though they healed others, could not heal themselves or save themselves from their own troubles. We also know that Jesus performed many miracles, yet he did not save himself from the cross. Why? Because God the Father, in his sovereignty, had decided that his story would unfold that way. Jesus knew this—and he chose to be obedient to the Father’s will. So must we.

Even though we may not like the state we are in—whether illness or some other hardship—we know, thanks to the wisdom Jesus has given us through his teaching, that God is leading us toward salvation and eternal blessing. The sufferings of this present time are nothing compared with the glory that awaits us in the resurrection<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 Peter 5:10; Revelation 21:4; Isaiah 25:8; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2–3