

June 5, 2022

JESUS BEGINS HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY

Luke 4:14-44

(10 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)

As we get to the point in this gospel where Luke speaks about Jesus beginning his public ministry, he introduces us to the idea of the kingdom of God. We see it at the end of our text as Jesus says to the crowds in verse 43, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” Clearly, the kingdom of God was a crucial concept for Jesus for him to state that preaching the good news of the kingdom of God was the purpose for which he was sent. In Mark’s gospel as well, Jesus’ first words of his public ministry are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

And it seems that it’s central in Luke’s thinking as well when we consider that Luke wrote both the gospel of Luke as well as the book of Acts. We’ve already seen that he introduces Jesus’ public ministry to us in terms of preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, and when he opens the book of Acts, he opens by noting that Jesus “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). In other words, Jesus’ begins his ministry speaking of the kingdom of God, and Luke shows us that Jesus spends his last days on earth before his ascension, speaking of the kingdom of God.

Moreover, he ends the book of Acts saying about the imprisoned Paul, “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31). Therefore, it’s hard to miss that the kingdom of God is a big deal to Luke, but what is it exactly? I mean, if Jesus can say he was sent to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, he used the last forty days he walked on the earth speaking about the kingdom of God, and Paul finished his life proclaiming the kingdom of God, then I think it’s fair to say that you and I should understand what the kingdom of God is. But my guess is that we may not know how to answer the question, “What is the kingdom of God?” And if we’re going to see the full weight of what Luke is showing us about Jesus in Luke 4:14-44, it helps us to see these verses against the background of the kingdom of God. So, what is the kingdom of God?¹

In its simplest sense, the kingdom of God is simply the understanding that God reigns as King and ruler over his creation. Psalm 103:19, for example, says, “THE LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” And before the fall, as I mentioned last week, God’s

¹ In explaining the “kingdom of God” I am greatly drawing from Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 591-96.

reign was represented over his creation through mankind, as Adam was pictured as his son (Luke 3:38) and image-bearer who reigned over the earth.

However, as we know, Adam and Eve sinned and so the earth no longer reflected God's perfect reign over his creation, through his human king. Instead, Paul can describe this creation after the fall as being under the reign of death and the devil can be called the god of this age. The good world became enemy-occupied territory.

But as soon as creation fell, God began promising that he'd do something to restore everything. He'd restore his kingdom, and his reign would come through another human mediator—another, *better* Adam, we might say. He promised the man and the woman in Genesis 3:15 that he'd raise up one from the woman who would come and crush the serpent's head. He was going to one day go to make everything right, restoring his kingdom. And when you go through the Old Testament and the Lord describes what this will look like, he speaks of there being forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:31-34), the end of death (Is 25:8), and a new heavens and new earth (Is 65:17). In other words, as God would establish his kingdom again, he'd establish his king and bring his saving blessings so that everything would be made new and glorious. And so the whole Old Testament is looking for the arrival of God's kingdom, the coming of his saving blessings through his king whom he promised was coming as early as Genesis 3:15.

Now, when the prophets would speak of God doing this, they'd use pictures that Israel knew well in their history. They'd speak of God bringing about a new exodus, creating a new Jerusalem, and bringing another David to rule as God's eternal king who'd make everything right. But with all of these promises, there was always a question—who could actually do this work? Here's what I mean. On the one hand, only God could bring these saving blessings and undo the curse that came with Adam's sin. I mean, who can bring forgiveness of sins but God alone? Who can bring the new creation? Who can bring judgment? Who can bring salvation? Obviously, the answer is God alone, as Scripture reminds us, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).

Yet, the Scripture would speak of God working through another human, another Adam, David's son, the Messiah. But no man is sufficient to do what God alone could do. How could this be? The answer of the Bible, of course, is Jesus. He is not only fully man, from the line of David according to his flesh. But he is God the Son. He is the God-man. And so the mystery is solved in him. He is coming to bring God's kingdom. He is coming to restore everything and make it right. He is coming to bring about the reality announced in Revelation 11:15—"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." In the words of Isaac Watts, bringing the kingdom of God meant that Jesus was coming to make God's blessings "flow far as the curse is found." And it's here, in Luke 4:14-44, that we see Jesus not only declaring that he is the one coming to establish God's kingdom on earth but beginning to demonstrate what it looks like. And so that's the first note I want us to see from this text: Jesus is the Spirit-anointed King of God's kingdom.

Jesus is the Spirit-anointed King of God's kingdom

In Luke's first reported episode of Jesus' public ministry, he chooses a moment when Jesus went into Nazareth into the synagogue. Now, I say that Luke *chose* a moment because the time in Jesus' public ministry that Luke decides to begin with clearly isn't the first thing Jesus does in his public ministry. Luke gives us a summary statement in verses 14-15 to tell us that Jesus did much, writing, "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." Then, he focuses on Nazareth, writing, "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up" (v. 16). This is the event he really wants to focus on. Why? Well, no doubt for a few reasons, but one of them is because Jesus announces very clearly who he is.

Luke tells us that as Jesus came into Nazareth, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and took up the scroll. He found Isaiah 61 and began reading, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (vv. 18-19). Then, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. And everyone's eyes were fixed on him. What was he going to say about this text? And—no doubt to everyone's surprise—he said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21).

Do you see what's going on? Isaiah 61 is a text that is speaking of the blessings of God's saving reign breaking into this cursed and fallen world. It's a text about the restoration of God's kingdom, with everything being made right. Captives are freed, sight is restored, the oppressed are released, and the Lord's favor is here. And specifically Isaiah 61 notes that God will do this through his Spirit-anointed mediator. And here's Jesus, reading that text, rolling back up the scroll, and saying, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). Jesus is announcing that he's the one. He's establishing the kingdom of God. He's bringing the blessings of salvation into this age. He's the king who will reign over God's kingdom. And if we've put together the threads of the Old Testament where the one to do this must be God and a man from David's line, Jesus is declaring once more that he's the God-man.

But, now, let's put the brakes on for a second. I mean, anyone can say this, right? This is one of those things that easier said than done. It's one thing to claim you're the one, but it's another thing to demonstrate it. If he's really the king to restore God's kingdom and make everything right, wouldn't we expect him to heal sickness, drive out demons, and deliver people from their bondage to sin and death? Shouldn't he begin to show us some of these promises that the prophets spoke of that would come with God's saving reign? Indeed we would, and that's exactly what we find.

He doesn't do it right there in Nazareth, which we'll talk about in a second. But starting in verse 31, he goes to Capernaum, and sure enough, we see Jesus bringing the blessings of God's kingdom into this age. In verses 31-37, Luke tells us that as Jesus goes down to Capernaum, he was teaching in the synagogue, just like he'd done in Nazareth. And they're astonished at his teaching because his word possessed authority. In other words, he was speaking to him as if he had the authority of God (for good reason!). But then Luke also says that in the synagogue there

was a man who had a demon tormenting him, and that demon recognized who Jesus is and what this meant for him, so he says, “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God” (v. 34). In other words, the demon is putting two and two together in light of Jesus being God’s eternal king.

But Jesus silences him and demands that he come out of the man. And Luke tells us that the demon threw the man down and came out from him. And the people were rightly amazed that the demons obeyed his commands. As the Spirit-anointed king of God’s kingdom, Jesus was demonstrating the blessings of the age to come in this present age. He’s stepping into enemy-occupied territory and telling the enemy to scatter.

But it didn’t stop there. Luke also tells us that Jesus went to Peter’s mother-in-law’s house where she was ill with a fever, and he rebuked the fever so that she was immediately well and rose and serve them. Not only does he drive out demons, but just as there will be no more sickness in the age to come, so he drives it out now. He’s delivering people from sickness and death. And finally, Luke gives us a summary statement in verses 40-41 noting that he healed all the sick who were brought to him and cast out demons, who all acknowledged that he was Jesus. Even if we didn’t know that Jesus read Isaiah 61 and said, “Today this is fulfilled in your hearing,” wouldn’t we be saying, “This looks like God’s king who is inaugurating God’s kingdom”?

But the greatest way that Jesus brings the blessings of the age to come into this present age is by delivering people from their sins. This is why Jesus makes clear in a text that has him casting out demons and healing people that his mission revolves around preaching the gospel. He says in verse 18 that God anointed him “to proclaim good news to the poor,” and then says in verse 43, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”

As amazing as healings and exorcisms are, the greatest way that we get a glimpse of the power of God’s kingdom in this age is when we hear the gospel preached and our eyes are open to the glory of Christ. Colossians 1:13-14 pictures that as if we were bound in Satan’s clutches, and Jesus steps in and says, “I’m taking this one,” binding the enemy and taking his captives. Paul writes, “He has transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” That’s who Jesus is and that’s what he’s come to do. And every time you and I preach the gospel and someone is saved, we’re witnessing the power of God’s kingdom breaking into this this fallen world of darkness and giving us a glimpse of what’s coming. And really, that note leads us to the next. We also see in this text that Jesus brings all peoples into God’s kingdom.

Jesus brings all peoples into God’s kingdom

One way that Jesus makes clear that he has come to save is how he reads the Isaiah 61 text. We see it in verses 18-19. He notes that the Spirit is upon him, he’s anointed, and he’s proclaiming good news to the poor and liberty to the captives. He continues, saying that he’s giving sight to

the blind and liberty to the oppressed, proclaiming the Lord's favor. But that's not where Isaiah 61 ends. The very next line says, "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2).

So why does Jesus stop before that line? I think it's because though he will indeed bring the Lord's judgment, that will not come until his return. Many expected the Messiah to come and bring the Lord's salvation and judgment in one fell swoop. After all, isn't that what bringing God's kingdom would demand? He would save his people and judge his enemies. And this is why so many were confused about Jesus. Even John the Baptist would send his disciples to Jesus from prison to confirm that he really is the one. I mean, he's working all of these saving realities in his ministry, but why is John in prison and why aren't people being judged?

The answer is that'll happen, and Jesus will do it. But we'll only see his judgment fully at his second coming. In his first coming, he comes to bring salvation, and not just to believing Jews but also to believing Gentiles. Jesus makes this clear in a way that angers those in Nazareth.

As Jesus proclaims himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah 61 the people are immediately astonished, marveling at him. But soon they begin to question him, noting that he's Joseph's son. In other words, he can't be all that special because they know him. He's just one of them, right? Well, Jesus knows that, and so he says, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself'" (v. 23), which in this context probably means that Jesus needs to do at home what he's done elsewhere. In other words, let the hometown folks get in on seeing these miracles as well.

And Jesus answers in an odd way. He says, '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" (vv. 25-27). What Jesus is saying is that during times in Israel's history as the Israelites were unbelieving, the Lord allowed his blessings to bypass them and go to Gentiles. And in the same way, that'll happen again.

Now, of course, this is a negative word about their unbelief, despising Jesus because he was familiar to them, but positively this is a reminder that Jesus is coming to save not only believing Jews but believing Gentiles as well. I mean, it's hard for us to feel how radical of a statement this is that Jesus is going to bring God's saving blessings to Gentiles as well—and in large numbers. But that's what Jesus is saying. Believing Gentiles—like you and me—will be among those who hear Jesus say on that final day, "Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). And so as a church our mission is not only to preach the gospel to our neighbors but to the nations, but God's saving blessings will come to all peoples. But finally we're reminded by Luke that Jesus' mission would involve rejection and death.

Jesus' mission involved rejection and death

If I were to tell you that Jesus is God's eternal king who has come to make everything right and bring God's saving blessings into this cursed world, you might think that everyone would be excited about him, but you'd be wrong.

As Jesus points out the unbelief of those in Nazareth, Luke tells us that they "were filled with wrath" (v. 28), and they drove him out of the city so that they could throw him off a cliff. But, Luke tells us, "Passing through their midst, he went away" (v. 30). Now, this may mean he did this miraculously, or it may mean that they were simply walking behind him, ushering him away from crowding him, and then he turned and walked back into the crowd, through them and went away. But either way it's a reminder to us that Jesus wasn't warmly received. Jesus begins his public ministry and the first crowd Luke chooses to focus on Jesus ministering to is a crowd that tries to kill him.

Now, ultimately, even this is part of God's plan. Jesus will be rejected to the point that men haul himself outside of Jerusalem and will hang him on a cross so that he'll die one Friday. But they couldn't have crucified him if he hadn't let them. Isn't that what this story in Nazareth shows. "But passing through their midst, he went away" (v. 30). He could've done that again. But he was laying down his life for sinners, paying our penalty so that we might have forgiveness of sins. Moreover, he was raised from the dead three days later, announced that his rule as God's king was universal, and eventually ascended back into heaven where he now reigns as God's king at God's right hand.

But Jesus' rejection here is a sobering reminder to you and me. Jesus warns us multiple times that if they rejected and persecuted him, they'll reject and persecute his followers as well. We shouldn't be caught off-guard when we, as Christians, are rejected and persecuted in our society. And yet, we must press on and obey Jesus. After all, he is God's eternal king. He's already given us a taste of what is to come by saving us, and one day he'll come back and everything really will be made perfectly right. God's kingdom will be here fully. Until then, let's trust and obey every command of our crucified, risen, and reigning king. And let's express that now as we come to the table. Amen.