

Chapter 16

IN THE SYNAGOGUE AT NAZARETH

Matthew 4 vv. 13 - 17.

Luke 4 vv 14 - 30

It is the Sabbath in Nazareth!

The houses of that little town are nestled peacefully against the mountain sides. It is quiet and restful. Not one of the inhabitants busies himself with his daily occupation. It is, after all, the Sabbath, the day of rest. Only essential work is done. The farmers must look after their cattle of course, but nothing is done except that which is absolutely necessary.

This morning, however, the hearts of the Nazarenes are filled with joyful anticipation. They are getting ready quickly to go to the synagogue.

In Nazareth too there was a synagogue, where they assembled each Sabbath. Here on that day a portion was usually read from the books of the Old Testament for the New Testament did not yet exist. Normally the minister of the synagogue did this. The inhabitants of Nazareth went every Sabbath. It had become a matter of habit. How is it with you?...

But this Sabbath they are going to the synagogue with a different motive from previous occasions. Why then?

Well, they have heard that Jesus, the son of Joseph has come to the town. Everyone in Nazareth knew Him, great and small, young and old. No wonder, for He has lived in their midst for nearly thirty years. They have seen Him daily walking through their streets, probably carrying a toolbox. No, they did not dislike Him. Of course, He had always been different from other

Nazarenes. But He had never harmed one of them. He had never treated one of them unfairly.

A few months ago, however, He had suddenly departed. From that time they had heard such wonderful stories about Him. Many too had journeyed from Nazareth to Jerusalem at the feast of Passover. They had seen what He had done there. They had witnessed those signs and wonders themselves. When they had returned again there had been a lot of talk about Jesus. And the last few days yet more of those marvellous rumours about Him had got as far as Nazareth. In neighbouring Cana He had turned water into wine. This had already taken place in fact, before they had gone to Jerusalem. But now He had healed the son of a nobleman from Capernaum in a miraculous manner. He had just said: "Go thy way, thy son liveth", and it had come to pass. They had never heard anything like it.

Now He is in Nazareth. Is it any wonder then that they burn with curiosity? Is it surprising that more people than usual are getting ready to go to the synagogue? Anyone who possibly can go, does so.

Soon they are walking along the streets which lead to the house of prayer. Talking busily to each other they hurry on. They are going to listen to what Jesus, the son of Joseph, has to say to them. They go in the hope that a miracle will be performed in their town too. Alas, they do not go to listen to the word of Jesus, the Son of God!

# THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

## - NEW TESTAMENT -

Shortly afterwards the building is filled with a great number of waiting people. It is not very quiet there, for people are talking excitedly among themselves. We are not used to this in our churches. We sit down quietly in our seats and wait for the service to begin. At least, that is how it should be. How do you behave during that time? With us the organ is played softly and we listen to it for a short while. There things were quite different.

Suddenly all is quiet. The murmur of voices ceases at once. All eyes are turned towards Jesus, for He has risen to His feet, a sign that He has something to say. The minister of the synagogue gives Him the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Now you must not think that this was a book like those we know. Oh no, for printing and binding had not yet been invented. In those days they had great rolls of paper, or parchment, and the Bible-book was written on that. The parchment scrolls were neatly rolled up. There was a separate scroll for each book of the Bible. Since we read that the minister of the synagogue gave Jesus the book of the prophet Isaiah, that means then that Jesus was given the scroll on which the prophecy of Isaiah was written.

In breathless silence He unrolls the parchment and then reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord".

When Jesus had read this, He rolls up the parchment again, gives it back to the minister and

sits down.

It becomes even quieter in the synagogue, for now Jesus will go on to speak about what He has read from God's word.

"This day", begins the Lord Jesus, "is this scripture fulfilled in your ears".

And then He proceeds to tell them what those words mean, and why Isaiah had thus prophesied. He talks about "the poor". Yes, the inhabitants of Nazareth understand that word, for most of them are poor themselves. Most of them must work hard, very hard, almost like slaves, to earn a meagre crust of bread. And to the poor the gospel shall be preached.

Oh, they do not understand that Isaiah, and Jesus now also, speaks about another kind of poverty. They think only about earthly poverty, but Jesus means spiritual poverty. He means people who have sorrow for sin.

The Lord Jesus also explains the meaning of "broken-hearted".

Here sits a man who has had to bring his wife to the grave. There sits a mother who has lost her child by death, the world is full of brokenhearted people.

But even that is only outward. Above all, the Lord Jesus means rather those people who grieve over sin, who mourn after God and those broken ones would be healed. They would be comforted. The Lord would forgive their sins. Most of the listeners, however, fail to understand this either.

Thus the Lord Jesus goes further. He speaks of prisoners who will be released; of blind people to whom sight will be restored; of bruised ones who will be set at liberty.

Calmly and quietly the Saviour speaks. He speaks so simply, so clearly. He speaks with

# THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

## - NEW TESTAMENT -

feeling, for He means what He says.

You can well understand that the people of Nazareth listen with bated breath, Jesus speaks so differently from the minister of the synagogue. Oh, he also preached of course, but it was so cold, so unfeeling. No, nothing like this preaching. The minister of the synagogue spoke time and again about the laws, about what they must or must not do. He spoke no words of comfort. But Jesus speaks to their hearts.

The Nazarenes look at each other. They nod approvingly among themselves. They mean to say "Isn't it beautiful?"

In the Bible it says that they all bare Him witness. That means that they praised Jesus. They wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.

Suddenly, however, they all jerk up their heads and listen critically. What was that? ... Had they heard correctly? ... He, the son of Joseph, the common carpenter - the Messiah? ...

The Lord Jesus is speaking about the prophecy as being now fulfilled. He says that He has come to do this.

But that they will not believe. Who does he think He is? How dare He say such things?

The quietness in the Synagogue disappears at once. Anger rises in the hearts of the Nazarenes. They say to each other "Is not this Joseph's son?" By this they mean "How dare he say that he is the Son of God?"

Jesus knows what is going on in their hearts. He knows that hostile thoughts are welling up inside them. They do not believe His words, no, they resist them. It is useless to go on speaking, for in the hearts of those Nazarenes there is no room for the Lord Jesus. Yet He will once more warn His fellow citizens, in love, not

to reject Him. Moreover He will give them to understand that He is all-knowing.

"Ye will surely say unto me" says Jesus "Physician, heal thyself" or in other words "If you really are the Messiah, let it be seen. Perform a miracle here too. There are just as many sick people in Nazareth, why not then heal the sick here, in your own home town, and not in Capernaum?"

Yes, what the Lord Jesus says is true. Such thoughts do indeed come into the hearts of the Nazarenes. Oh, they know the Lord Jesus so well, at least that is what they think, and that is why they do not believe that He is the Messiah.

But the Lord Jesus goes on to say why He is not doing any wonders here in Nazareth. They themselves are the cause, for their hearts are full of unbelief. Jesus will illustrate this with an example from history.

"Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent", Jesus tells them. Not to an Israelite widow, but to a widow in a heathen land, who lived in Sarepta (or Zarephath). And why? Because the Israelitish widows did not believe that Elijah was a prophet of the Lord. They preferred to serve the idols which Jezebel had introduced.

Yes, He will give them another example from the history of the Jewish race. Just listen.

"And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet: and not one of them was cleansed." Only the heathen Naaman the Syrian general, He reminds them, was restored from his incurable disease. And why? Because not one of the Israelite lepers went to Elisha to be

# THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

## - NEW TESTAMENT -

healed through him, for they did not believe in Elisha. But Naaman went, and he returned whole, though he was but a heathen.

Oh, what a solemn warning. It was as though the Lord Jesus said: "My people, listen to Me now, and don't do the same as the widows and the lepers did in days gone by."

He lays the full responsibility on the inhabitants of Nazareth themselves. No, Jesus is not to blame that there are no sick or diseased people healed in Nazareth, they themselves are to blame, through their unbelief.

And ...? How do the Nazarenes answer? ... Do they repent? ... Just look what is happening. A wild uproar begins in the Synagogue at Nazareth. Red with anger they rush from their seats. An unruly stampede takes place. With clenched fists and eyes ablaze they press in on the gentle mild Jesus. They take hold of Him roughly, drag Him by force out of the Synagogue and thrust Him from the city to the top of a hill just outside. Here, there was a precipice, or a very steep slope.

Ah, they intend to throw Him down. They want to cast Him on to the sharp pointed rocks below. They speak to Him harsh words, full of mockery, anger and scorn.

And does Jesus allow all this to happen? ... Yes, apparently helpless, He allows Himself to be thrust forth by these angry people. But why? ... Is He not able to defend Himself from this wild troop? ... Has He then been delivered up weakly to their rage? Of course not! Shall the King of kings have no power? Of course He has!

Oh, He needed only to say one word and all those angry, mocking men would fall dead. Just one word and the lightning would shoot forth and destroy those foolish people with fire.

But the Lord Jesus does not want to do that. He is not come to destroy. His work is not to kill, but to save. He wants to see too, how far they will take Him. Yes, He knows that already, for He knows the murderous thoughts which lurk in their hearts.

There they are on top of the hill. Just a few moments and Jesus will hurtle down into the abyss.

But then...? Oh, just look! Suddenly the Lord Jesus makes His way through them, and the many hands let go of Him. Why? ... O, they cannot tell. The same hatred and anger burns in their hearts, but they have to release Him. It is not that Jesus struggles free; it is not that He kicks or punches His way out - oh, no. The Lord Jesus does nothing, and yet they must let Him go. They do not want to, and yet they have to.

Calmly the Saviour passes through the midst of that angry mob, and walks down the hill.

Go on, Nazarenes, catch Him. Stop Him. Throw Him over the precipice, to die a terrible death. - No, boys and girls, they are not able. The Lord Jesus gives them to feel just a little of His divine power, and they can do nothing more.

In their hearts they have killed the Messiah. It had only remained for their hands to thrust Him over the precipice. The Nazarenes had wanted to see a miracle. Well now, here they do see a miracle. But this miracle is not for them a blessing, but a curse. It is to their disadvantage. It is a miracle, which separates them from Jesus.

When Jesus has departed, they also return to their homes. Will it have made some impression on their souls? ... Alas, no apparently, for we do not read that one turned back in sorrow. We do not read that one of them called

# THE BIBLE HISTORY TOLD TO OUR CHILDREN

## - NEW TESTAMENT -

upon the Lord Jesus with weeping for forgiveness. They rejected the Saviour deliberately.

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And now it was still indeed the Sabbath day. What a terrible story, isn't it? Perhaps some of you are thinking: "I would never do such a thing."

Children, don't be mistaken. That same ugly devilishness lives in your hearts too. It lives in us all. We hate God and we hate our neighbour.

Do you believe that? ... Perhaps one or two of you think that you are better than the Nazarenes, don't you. Oh, that's what you suppose, but yet it is not true. If God prevent not, then you too will reject the Lord Jesus. Left to ourselves we shall never love the Lord Jesus. We shall never seek Him. We shall never ask our way to Him. O children, if God does not give us a new heart, then we keep our sinful, dead heart.

May the Lord give you a heart, that fears Him, that honours Him, that loves Him.