

Matthew 13 – Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

Review

Last time, we finished our study of the seven so-called “Kingdom” parables that Jesus taught while sitting in a boat along the shore of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. Matthew 13 also records Jesus’ own explanation of the meaning of two of these parables – The Parable of the Sower, and The Parable of the Wheat and Tares. The remaining five Kingdom parables are not accompanied by an explanation, so God has left it up to us to decide the meaning and lesson of each with the help of His Spirit. In our studies, we saw that most of these parables have multiple aspects that coexist together.

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Now let’s press forward with the story of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth to conclude our study of Matthew 13.

***53**And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, **54**and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? **55**Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? **56**And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” **57**And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “**A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.**” **58**And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.*

Matthew 13:53-58 (ESV) (Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:16-30)

We’ll take a closer look at this story as Luke records it, but first let’s examine what Matthew has shared about it. First, it is interesting to note that we can determine the names of Jesus’ four half brothers from Matthew’s and Mark’s versions of the event. We also know from this account that Jesus had at least two (probably more) half sisters. It is also from this account we learn that Joseph was a carpenter by trade, and from Mark’s account that Jesus had apparently followed in Joseph’s footsteps until He began his ministry at roughly thirty years of age.

Before we take a look at Luke’s version of the story, notice in Matthew 13:58 that Jesus did not perform many miracles at Nazareth because of the people’s unbelief. This is significant. Recall that many of Jesus’ miracles were His response to the faith of those petitioning Him. For example, in Matthew 9 we find the account of Jesus healing a woman who had suffered for twelve years from a discharge of blood.

***20**And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, **21**for she said to herself, “If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.” **22**Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “**Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.**” And instantly the woman was made well.* Matthew 9:20-22 (ESV)

According to Matthew’s account, the people of Nazareth had little faith in Jesus, and consequently He was either unwilling or unable to perform many mighty works in their midst although Mark reports that He did heal a few people. This is a cautionary tale for us. When we pray, we must sincerely believe that God is able to grant us our petition although we must be careful to note that God answers prayer in His own way and His own time in response to our faith.

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Whenever we find a story from one gospel account repeated in one or more of the other gospels, it is always wise to look at all of the accounts in which the event is recorded. In this case, we find that the story of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth is found in all three of the synoptic gospels. The account in Mark is nearly identical to Matthew's. However, Luke's account of the event gives us some significant additional details.

WARNING – When comparing gospel accounts, it is imperative that we remember that only Matthew and John were eyewitnesses to Jesus' earthly ministry. Mark and Luke wrote their gospel accounts based on what they were told by the apostles who had witnessed the events. In fact, Luke and Mark may have heard much of what they recorded from Paul whom they accompanied on his missionary journeys. Paul in turn would have heard what he passed on to Luke and Mark from the other apostles. This by no means implies that we must reject the hearsay accounts. Luke himself tells us that his account is reliable.

¹Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. Luke 1:1-4 (ESV)

Nevertheless if there is any conflict, we must obviously give greater credence to the eyewitness accounts than the hearsay accounts. Also, as with all Bible study, we must continually bear in mind the context of the account.

In this case, Matthew records his account of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth immediately following Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom parables at Capernaum. In fact, Matthew prefaces his account of the rejection at Nazareth with a statement to that effect.

⁵³And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there [Capernaum], ⁵⁴and coming to his hometown [Nazareth] he taught them in their synagogue... Matthew 13:53-54a (ESV)

Luke on the other hand places his account of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth near the beginning of Jesus' ministry immediately after Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by Satan. Mark places his account of the event somewhere in the middle of Jesus' ministry. While we must always be careful to establish the context of any Bible passage we study, we must not misconstrue differences in the context of the reports as discrepancies between the accounts themselves. We should also remember that in Jewish narratives – particularly ancient Jewish narratives – the chronological sequence of events is deemed unimportant in relation to the overall theme and purpose of the narrative. Therefore we needn't concern ourselves too much with seeming discrepancies among the gospel accounts in the placement of similar stories within the narratives.

In the case of this story, we find that Luke's account gives us some additional details that neither Matthew nor Mark recorded. So it is worthwhile for us to look at Luke's account in depth.

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¹⁶And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

*¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim 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,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” [Isaiah 61:1-2a]*

*²⁰And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹And he began to say to them, **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”** ²²And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, **“Is not this Joseph’s son?”** ²³And he said to them, **“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Physician, heal yourself.”** What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” ²⁴And he said, **“Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵But 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, ²⁶and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. [1 Kings 17] ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” [2 Kings 5] ²⁸When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹And 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. ³⁰But passing through their midst, he went away.** Luke 4:16-30 [ESV]*

First, notice that Luke tells us that Jesus made a habit wherever He went of going to the local synagogue and teaching there on the Sabbath. Jesus was not formally trained for teaching in accordance with the traditions of the Jewish leaders. Therefore His merely teaching in the synagogues would have been a source of friction with them. Nevertheless, since the Word of God is His own, all of His teaching had the unmistakable ring of authority, so the leaders didn’t challenge Him here at Nazareth or elsewhere, much as they probably wished to.

Next, Luke tells us that Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah.

In Jerusalem today one of the sections of the Israel Museum is called the Shrine of the Book. The exterior of this building is designed to resemble a lid from one of the stone jars in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were preserved.

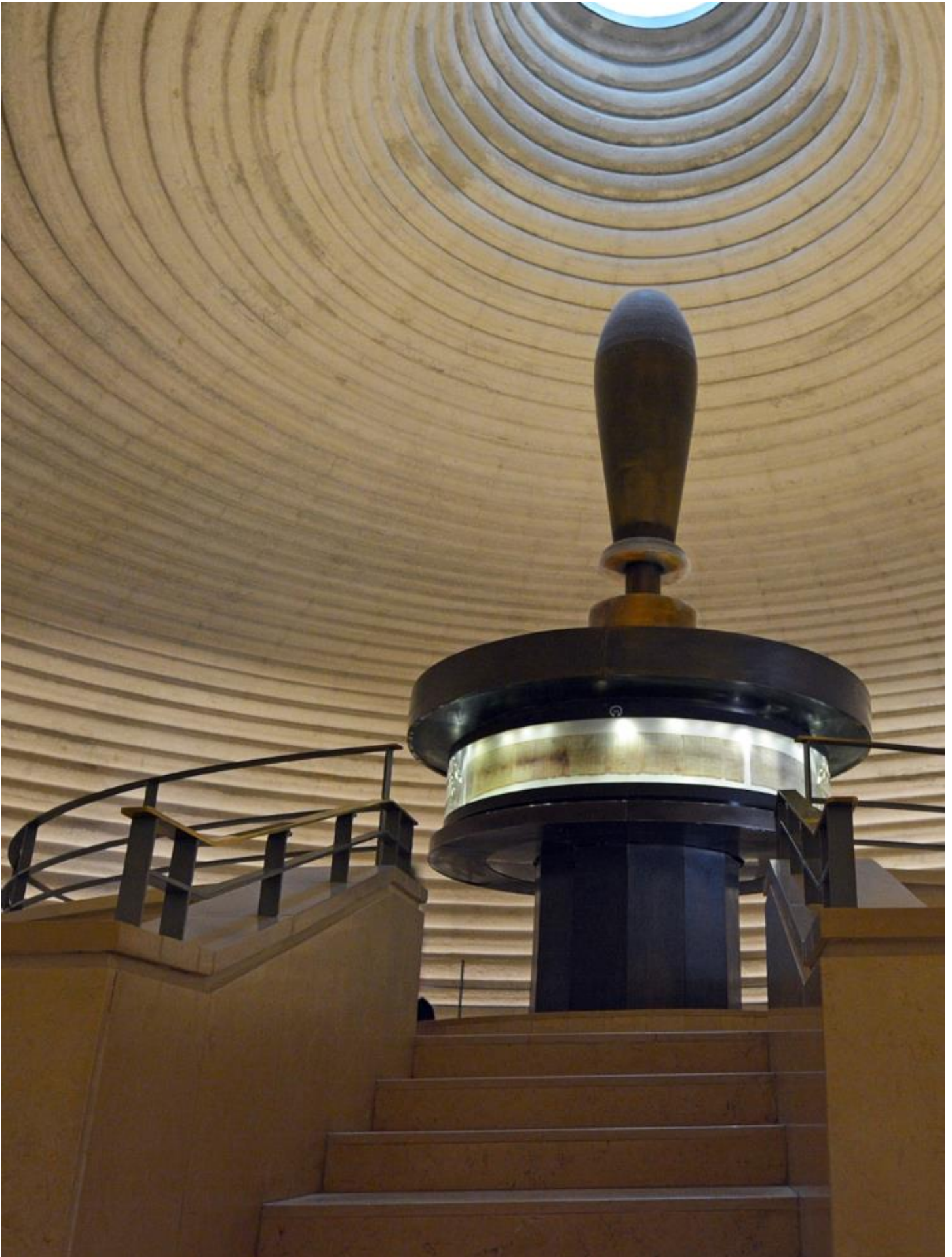
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Shrine of the Book – Israel Museum Jerusalem

Inside the shrine, one's attention is immediately drawn to the central display of this building which resembles one of the spindles used to hold Torah scrolls. Inside this display is a copy of the nearly complete Isaiah scroll discovered at Qumran on the Dead Sea.

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Central display of the Isaiah Scroll in the Shrine of the Book

The original Isaiah scroll is stored under very careful environmental conditions to preserve it. Many of the original Dead Sea Scrolls are kept at the Israel Museum for scholars to study, and some of the fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls are on public display in the Shrine of the Book. One of the most fascinating items on public display at the Shrine of the Book is the surviving portion of the Aleppo Codex. Until 1947 this book was one of the oldest known copies of the entire Hebrew Bible dating from about 920 AD. Unfortunately, the synagogue at Aleppo, Syria where this codex was kept was burned during anti-Jewish rioting in 1947. Since then, a significant portion of the Aleppo Codex has been missing.



Nearly Complete Isaiah Scroll from Qumran

But I digress...

The passage from Isaiah that Jesus read that day in Nazareth is clearly a Messianic prophecy with which everyone present would have been well familiar. When Jesus handed the scroll back to the attendant and took His seat, no doubt the congregants expected Him to give some sort of teaching regarding their anxiously awaited Messiah. How shocking it must have been for them when Jesus proclaimed that He Himself had fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy in their presence. But most of them didn't believe Jesus' claim to be their Messiah. After all, many of them had known Jesus His entire (earthly) life, and their familiarity with His family history led them to view His claim with a certain degree of contempt along with their disbelief. No doubt there was still talk even many years later about the suspicious circumstances of Jesus' conception. Probably most of them entirely disbelieved Mary's and Joseph's claim that Jesus was conceived by God's Spirit despite the fact that they had heard the news of Jesus' miracles in Capernaum and elsewhere. Of course, Jesus was aware of their unbelief, and chastised them about it.

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²³And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Physician, heal yourself.” What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” ²⁴And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵But 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, ²⁶and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. [1 Kings 17] ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” [2 Kings 5] Luke 4:23-27 [ESV]

The two stories that Jesus referred to here in Luke 4:25-27 concern miracles of God worked through His prophets Elijah and Elisha. In both of these cases, the beneficiaries of the miracles were at first unbelieving and even disrespectful of these prophets, but God worked the miracles for them nevertheless. In the case of the widow of Zarephath, God first provided food for the woman and her son who were near starvation due to a multi-year drought. Later, God used Elijah to raise the woman's son from the dead. In the case of Naaman the Syrian, when the prophet Elisha directed him to wash in the River Jordan and be cleansed, Naaman at first refused and was even angry. But later on, he submitted to Elisha's direction and was miraculously healed. In both cases, the ones who had disbelieved and disrespected the prophets until God performed the miracles through them, afterward believed in the prophets and more importantly in the God whom they served.

Jesus points out that the widow and her son to whom God sent Elijah weren't the only ones in danger of starvation during the drought, but God in His sovereignty chose to rescue only the two of them miraculously. Likewise, Naaman the Syrian wasn't the only one in Israel suffering from leprosy, but God chose to heal only Naaman. The point Jesus was making was that God had chosen to reject the people of Nazareth because of their unbelief, choosing instead to work His mighty healing and other miracles elsewhere for His own good purposes.

Nobody likes to be told they've missed the boat, and the people of Nazareth were angry with Jesus for shunning them – so angry in fact that they tried to cast Him off the high cliff at the edge of town which drops several hundred feet to the floor of the Valley of Jezreel. Of course, Jesus came to Earth in the flesh of the man Jesus of Nazareth for the very purpose of dying on the cross to save mankind out of death in our sins. This Sabbath day in Nazareth was not yet the appointed time for Jesus to die, by being cast over a cliff by His own townsfolk. Therefore He was able to pass right through them and depart from the town.

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Brian, Sue, & Christian at Nazareth

In this photo, we are sitting on one of the stone benches in the city park at Nazareth. Behind us is the cliff Luke writes about in his account of Jesus' rejection by the townsfolk of Nazareth. The view is toward the southeast across the Valley of Jezreel – one of the most fought-over properties in all the Earth. Alexander the Great fought here as did the rulers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. Roman legions, the Crusaders, and Napoleon fought here. So did the armies of Great Britain and Imperial Germany. God's Word tells us that another battle is coming to this location – Armageddon. In the middle of the valley, the great dome of Mt. Tabor stands alone. This is the location where Barak and Deborah defeated the army of the Cananites (Judges 4). Mt. Tabor is also one of the two possible locations for the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9, Matthew 17) – the other possibility being Mt. Hermon on the Syria, Lebanon, Israel border.

But I digress again.

Looking Ahead

God willing, next time Pastor Brian will take up the next chapter of Matthew's gospel with the story of the death of John the Baptist.