

## **INTERPRETING THE BOOK**

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN  
February 12-13, 2011

No. 6:               The Best of Books  
Scripture:         Luke 4:14-44

What do you make of these statements that come from the Bible?

**"There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)**

**"God did not send his Son into the world."  
(John 3:17)**

**"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear."  
(Ephesians 6:5)**

**"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to  
speak." (1 Corinthians 14:34)**

Taken as they stand the first text suggests that as there is no God we are wasting our time here today.

The second infers that as Jesus didn't come into the world the story of his birth, death and resurrection is a fable.

The third seems to justify the evil of slavery.

The fourth forbids women from participating in the life of the church.

If this is the word of God we clearly have a problem.

In our series on **The Best of Books** we have seen how it is important to have the scriptures and read the scriptures.

But that is not quite enough is it?

We also need to interpret the scriptures.

This is what Paul describes as "correctly handling the word of truth."  
(2 Timothy 2:15)

If we handle the Scriptures wrongly we will come to all sorts of misleading and even dangerous conclusions about what the scriptures are saying.

Perhaps you think I am exaggerating by that statement. Then reflect on the fact that there are over 100,000 denominations in the world today. Many of these have come into existence because of different interpretations of the Bible. The church of Christ has been fragmented over the very book that was intended to unify us.

Remember the tragedies that involved the Branch Davidians from Waco, Texas and the followers of Jim Jones in Guyana. Faulty interpretation of the book of Revelation actually led to the deaths of many people.

Today in our own country a Bible scholar called Harold Camping has announced that Jesus will return and the world will end on May 21<sup>st</sup>. Mr. Camping says he is confident of this because of his studies in the Bible. Yet May 22<sup>nd</sup> will come and the church will be a laughing stock because of wrongfully handling the word of truth.

So today we are going to look at the vital subject of **INTERPRETING THE BOOK**. We call this hermaneutics.

It is an essential part of Bible study.

Please turn to Luke chapter 4 in your Bible and take out your message outline. Here we see how Jesus interprets a passage from the book of Isaiah so that its truth comes alive.

The passage begins, **"Jesus returned to Galilee."**

**(v 14)** The name Galilee means a circle.

It was called that because it was encircled by non-Jewish nations. As a result of their influence Galilee was the most progressive part of Palestine.

The Roman historian Josephus, who had been governor of the area, tells us it had 204 towns, none with a population less than 15,000.

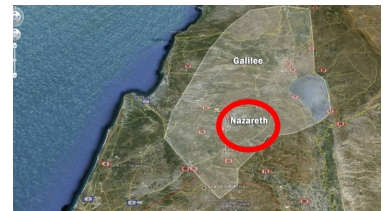
That means that 3 million people lived in Galilee.

Jesus made his way to his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee.

This was a town of about 20,000 inhabitants.

As a boy Jesus had climbed the surrounding hills.

From their vantage point he could see where Israel's history had taken place.



There was the Valley of Jezreel where Gideon won his victories.

In the distance is Mount Carmel where Elijah had done battle with the prophets of Baal.

He could see the town of Shunem where Elisha had lived.

But Nazareth was not only significant for its past.

It also had a role in the present.

For was near the intersection of three great roads.

There was the road from the south on which the pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem.

There was the Great Way of the Sea which led from Egypt to Damascus.

There was the trade route to the east bringing caravans from Arabia and Roman legions marching out to the frontiers of the empire.

Nazareth was no backwater, but a place influenced by the history of Israel and the wider world.

It was an appropriate setting for Jesus to start his ministry and announce who he was.

So Luke tells us, **"On the Sabbath day Jesus went into the synagogue."**

Let the implication of that verse sink into your soul.

Here is the Son of God going to church on the Sabbath. There was a temple in Jerusalem where the sacrifices were carried out but in every village where there were ten men there was a synagogue where worship took place.

Jesus was not likely to learn anything new.

There must have been many things about the synagogue with which he disagreed and which grated on him.

Yet he went. The worship was far from perfect.

It was often led by scribes and Pharisees who were his enemies. Yet Jesus never failed to join himself to God's worshipping people on God's day.

What an example to us!

We sometimes think of skipping church.

Maybe we don't like the music or the sermon or the people so we stay away. But we are missing the point.

Worship is not about us. It is about God and that is why Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day.

Let me tell you how the synagogue service went.

The congregation would start by reciting the Shema from Deuteronomy, chapter 6. Then they would pray using what were called the 18 benedictions. These were written prayers.

They were the same every week.

Then came the reading of the law, followed by a reading from the prophets.

These texts were read in Hebrew and then translated into Aramaic, which was the main language of the region.

Then followed an exposition that usually tied the readings together. Finally the service closed with a benediction.

Jesus was in such a service when, **"The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him." (v 17)**

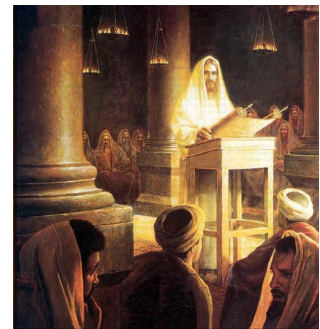
We know from the Dead Sea scrolls that the entire prophecy of Isaiah could be contained on one roll. Jesus is given it and he spends some time looking for a particular passage.

He wants to make a statement.

This is a critical time in his ministry.

He is about to explain who he is and what he is going to do.

He selects the portion and he stood up to read.



When he concluded, **"He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down." (v 20)**

Now we might think because Jesus sat down, he had finished but in those days you stood up to read the scripture and you sat down to give the sermon.

There was no professional minister in the synagogue.

So the president of the synagogue would invite any distinguished person present to speak and then discussion would follow.

Well the leader had heard about Jesus.

Everybody had for **"News about him spread through the whole countryside."**  
**(v 14)**

With the eyes of everyone in the synagogue fastened on him, Jesus began his message by saying to them, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."**  
**(v 21)** Jesus had selected a messianic text and so he is announcing that he is the Messiah.

Jesus then proceeds to interpret the passage from Isaiah. He explains what it means. For it is essential we not only hear the Word but understand the Word.

His sermon was absolutely riveting.

No one had ever heard anything like it before.

In fact they **"Were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips."**  
**(v 22)**

They were astonished that Jesus was speaking about God's grace. Grace for everybody including all the nations that lived in the circle around Galilee.

They just cannot believe what they are hearing and they ask, **"Isn't this Joseph's son?"** **(v 22)**

The answer is no, a thousand times no.

As the voice at Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan had declared, as the family tree had revealed, as the devil himself had admitted in the temptation in the desert, this is not the son of Joseph but the Son of God.

By his interpretation of the book Jesus wants us to grasp what it means for him to be the Son of God.

The first truth we discover is **JESUS' MISSION.**

His mission is to fulfill this prophecy from Isaiah 61.

**"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** **(v 18-19)**

Jesus' mission is to save us.

Here we see that a major part of our salvation involves release. Jesus uses the Old Testament picture of the Jubilee. This was the time when God's people were released from slavery and forgiven their debts.

The books are wiped clean.

All legal obligations are removed.  
 We are set free.  
 This is what Jesus has come to do for us.

Of course it is one thing to make such a claim and it is quite another to prove it.  
 That is why Jesus leaves Nazareth and makes his way to Capernaum.  
 Capernaum was a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee, 680 feet below sea level.  
 There he demonstrates that he is the great liberator.

He drives out an evil spirit from a man.  
 He heals Simon's mother-in-law.  
 As a result, **"When the sun was setting the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness and laying his hands on each one he healed them." (v 40)**

Jesus displays that he is the friend of the poor in spirit.  
 He is the physician of the diseased heart.  
 He is the deliverer of the soul in bondage.  
 This is his mission.

Then from Jesus' interpretation of the scriptures we learn about **JESUS' RESOURCES.**

How is he going to accomplish this mission?  
 He tells us. **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me." (v 18)**

The Spirit of the Lord fell on Jesus at his baptism described in the previous chapter.  
 This is why Jesus can fulfill his mission.

Think of this. Jesus' mission is also ours.  
 He tells us 'As the Father has sent me I am sending you'.  
 He gives us his resources to fulfill his mission.

If we are Christians the Spirit of the Lord is on us.  
 We have been anointed by God.  
 At our conversion we were baptized in the Spirit.  
 Because of his presence in our lives we can say with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Next we learn about **JESUS' ATTRACTION.**

Who do you think is likely to be drawn to a Savior who says he had good news for the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind and release for the oppressed?

At a wild guess I would say that the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed would be attracted to such a person. That is exactly who came to Jesus.

Now these verses from Isaiah have been interpreted to espouse liberation theology.

This claims that Jesus has a particular and even exclusive love for the poor and that the Messiah came with a message of economic improvement.

Now there is some truth to that claim.

People who follow Christ and obey the principles of scripture as a general rule will be better off.

Countries that seek to live by righteous and just laws will prosper more than those who don't.

The sociologist Max Weber identified the Protestant work ethic as one of the reasons for America's own prosperity.

But liberation theology misses the main punch of the gospel.

A poor sinner who becomes a rich sinner is still a sinner facing a lost eternity.

The gospel is not simply about giving a man better clothes and a bigger car in which to drive to hell.

Jesus came with a message of spiritual riches for all people.

When Luke speaks about the poor he is referring to the humble poor.

The poor are those who are trusting God to give them spiritual freedom from the chains of their sin and to deliver them from their blindness of unbelief so that they come into the glorious light of the gospel.

A person may be economically rich but spiritually bankrupt. Charlie Sheen has millions in the bank but his recent antics have shown that he is as much in bondage as a beggar in India.

Hugh Hefner lives in the Playboy mansion but the poor fellow desperately needs the ministry of Jesus so he can discover what true love really is.

Jesus can make a difference in our life when we come to the point of recognizing that we are spiritually poor, that we are prisoners to our lust. That we are blind to truth and that we are oppressed by the devil.

Those who see that love him.

Those who don't find no attraction in him.

Then this passage goes on to speak of **JESUS' DESTINY**

The congregation in the synagogue in Nazareth were initially impressed by Jesus' sermon but as he went on to interpret the text they became more and more angry.

The reason is that Jesus pointed out that God's love was not exclusively for Israel, and that two of Israel's greatest prophets, Elijah and Elisha, could do no great work for the Israelites because of their unbelief.

So Elijah raised a boy whose mother was a Sidonite. Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian of leprosy.

This idea that God would put Gentiles before Jews was more than the congregation in that synagogue in Nazareth could stand.

The Jews were so sure they were God's people they utterly despised everybody else.

They believed that, "God had created the Gentiles to be fuel for the fires of hell."

This explains why, **"All the people in the synagogue were furious . . . they got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way." (v 28-30)**

They are treating Jesus like a false prophet who was to be put to death.

This rejection anticipated the growing disillusionment that people would have with Jesus.

It foreshadowed the time when Jesus was taken to a hill, thrown down on the ground and nailed to a cross. Because Jesus was God he knew his destiny and yet he did not run from his divine appointment with Calvary.



Here we see there is a cost to interpreting scripture. What was true for Jesus is true of his followers.

Monday is Valentine's Day.

St. Valentine was a third century priest.

The Roman Emperor Claudius interrogated him and tried to persuade him to embrace paganism.

Valentine refused and instead tried to convert the Emperor to Christianity.

This led to Valentine dying a martyr's death.

Valentine's story doesn't have much to do with roses, chocolates and heart shaped cards.

But it has a lot to do with real love.

Love presents the truth of the gospel even when the consequences are painful.

Recently Nancy Davis was killed by drug smugglers while working as a missionary in Mexico.

Her husband is going straight back to their work of building churches and medical clinics in that country.

He said "I miss her dreadfully but those people who killed her need to be saved. I pray for them that God will have mercy on them and help them to know him."

Do you see what Jesus does with this obscure passage from Isaiah? He interprets it. He makes it come alive.

He applies it to himself and shows how it contains truths that are life-changing and world changing.

That is why it is essential we interpret the book.

Let's go back to those verses we began with.

That statement **"There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)** is taken from a verse which reads in its totality, **"The fool says in his heart there is no God."**

Those extra words make a big difference.

We can't just wrench a statement out of the Bible.

We must put it in its context.

For a text without a context is a pretext.

It is the same with the next statement, **"God did not send his son into the world." (John 3:17)**

When we read the whole verse it declares, **"For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."**

Now we have a very different meaning.

What about **"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear." (Ephesians 6:5)**

Is the Bible endorsing the pernicious practice of slavery, as some have suggested?

Paul is writing in days when 25 percent of people were slaves. Under Roman rule that wasn't going to change for a time so Paul tells Christian slaves how to live for God's glory.

But again we must interpret the text.

Now we need to read the whole New Testament to discover how Paul wrote a letter to Philemon telling him how to treat his slave Onesimus with kindness.

The key to understanding what God thinks of slaves is found in Galatians 3:28 where Paul tells us, **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."**

It was that overriding spiritual principle of the equality of all people before God that eventually led Christians like Wilberforce to press for the abolition of slavery.

The final verse is more challenging.

**"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak." (1 Corinthians 14:34)**

On the face of it this seems clear enough.

However, when we look carefully at Paul's teaching, we see that he cannot be forbidding women to participate in worship.

We know this because earlier in the chapter Paul has instructed, **"When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." (1 Corinthians 14:26)**

We notice the word "everyone." It appears that all the congregation could participate. Back in chapter 11 Paul has said, **"Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head."**

**(1 Corinthians 11:5)** The assumption is that women are going to pray and prophesy and not remain silent.

When we look at the situation in Corinth it appears that Paul is addressing a practice of that particular congregation. During the services the women would interrupt worship by asking their husbands questions. This distracted others and meant that things were not done decently and in order. In that very limited situation Paul is telling the ladies to be quiet in church and to wait until they get home to talk things over with their husbands.

This is not to pretend that interpreting scripture is easy.  
There are passages that are immensely hard.  
We are not always sure what they mean.  
Sincere Christians can sometimes disagree.  
But those passages are in the minority.  
95% of the Bible can be understood with a bit of work.

God has not left us alone in this task.  
He gives us his Spirit to help us discern the truth.  
He also gives us his church.  
He provides scholars who for 2000 years have wrestled with the text of scripture and interpreted what it means.

It would be foolish not to take advantage of this spiritual resource. I read the books of about 20 commentators to prepare this message. Some wrote in the fourth century.  
One wrote in the last decade. They all helped me interpret the book.

In your own Bible study ask the Holy Spirit to guide you but also get a good study Bible or a commentary.  
You can find one at Christos.  
Then the word of God comes alive.  
Jesus reveals himself to us.  
The good news is that to those who receive him and believe on his name, he gives the right to become children of God.