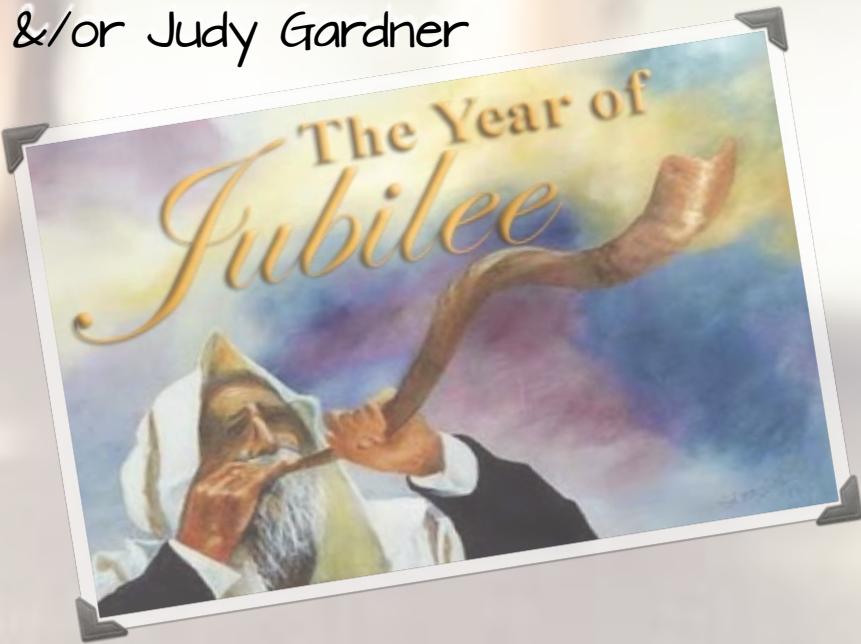


February 12-16, 2024 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part III

Jesus Rejected At Nazareth

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner



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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we'll be looking at the time Jesus got rejected at Nazareth and the people there attempted to fling Him off of Mt. Precipice just outside of Nazareth. So what happened? I'm glad you asked since that's what I'm going to tell you next.

First of all this occurs right after Jesus leaves Cana (where He healed the Royal Official's son via long distance). He leaves Cana and stops by His old stomping grounds- where He grew up. It was the Sabbath (the seventh day or Saturday) so He went to the synagogue (essentially the church He grew up in) and was asked to preach. Luke tells us what happened:

He went 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 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. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." 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. Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 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. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed-only Naaman the Syrian." 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. Luke 4:16-30 (NIV)

What was all that about? I was always so confused by so much about this story. Why were they happy with what they heard when He told them that "today in your presence this scripture is fulfilled"? Why were they so mad at Him just about a minute later after He told them about the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian general? And what did it look like when He "walked right through the crowd and went on His way"? So many questions but it all comes down to the year of Jubilee. What is the year of Jubilee you ask? It was (supposed to be) a very important part of ancient Israel's political socio-economic structures. Basically it was part of the Israelite's constitution (the Law of Moses) that was to be practiced every 50 years. What was it all about? Why was it important to God? These are the questions we'll be dealing with this week but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what questions you've got surrounding this story and if I don't get to your questions please send me a message and ask. I may not have a good answer for you but I promise we'll walk through it together.

Tuesday Reflection: So this week we're looking at the time Jesus was rejected at His hometown of Nazareth (and by rejected I mean they tried to kill Him) over the sermon that

He preached there one Sabbath day. What was the topic that almost got Him killed? He was preaching on the year of Jubilee:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19 (NIV)

Jesus said He had come to proclaim the "year of the Lord's favor". But what's that? What is the year of the Lord's favor? Well, even though Isaiah didn't call it the year of Jubilee that's exactly what he was referencing in the passage of scripture that Jesus read that day in Nazareth.

So what's the year of Jubilee you ask? Well, it was something that God told Israel to do every 50 years but before we get to that we need to spend some time talking about the concept of the Sabbath. If you have spent much time with Jesus then you've heard of the Sabbath. The Sabbath in Jewish culture was the seventh day. God has opinions about what the nation of Israel did with their "Sabbath day". His opinions on what they should do were so strong that He made it part of the 10 commandments:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Exodus 20:8-11 (NIV)

No work on the Sabbath. Not for you, not for your children, not for your slaves or animals or hired workers. The Sabbath was to be kept "holy" (which simply means to be kept completely separate from the other days of the week). Why? Because God "Sabbath-ed" on the 7th day from His work of creation. I always thought the word Sabbath meant to rest but it doesn't- it means to stop. God didn't need to rest after creating the universe and everything in it. He wasn't worn out. He simply stopped. He Sabbath-ed His work creating the universe on the 7th day. So He asked Israel to imitate Him. On the 7th day Israel would Sabbath from their work. They'd stop. Working that is. That happened every 7th day in Israel.

Then there was the 7 year Sabbath cycle. Every 7th year God told Israel to let the land "Sabbath". On the 7th year they were not to plant or harvest. That meant that after a farmer had harvested his crops on the 6th year he would not plant a crop to be harvested in the 7th year. They would let the land "Sabbath" or stop. They were allowed to eat from whatever crops naturally grew during that 7th year but they had to get just enough for what they needed on any given day rather than harvesting everything and storing it up for the future.

But then on the 7th of the 7 year cycles- after 49 years had passed then the 50th year was to be a year of Jubilee:

Set this year apart as holy, a time to proclaim freedom throughout the land for all who live there. It will be a jubilee year for you, when each of you may return to the land that belonged to your ancestors and return to your own clan. This fiftieth year will be a jubilee for you. Leviticus 25:10-11 (NLT)

What's this law that is written into Israel's constitution (the Law of Moses was ancient Israel's constitution) about? Well the 50th year was to be another "Sabbath" for the land. That meant that on the 50th year the farmers would have gone 2 years without planting or harvesting or storing up crops. It would have required amazing faith to trust that God knew what He was doing to not plant/harvest/store for 2 years. But the 50th year had another component to it that wasn't a part of the typical 7 year Sabbath cycle for the land nor was it part of the typical 7th day Sabbath. The 50th year was also a time when all land that had been sold in Israel went back to its original owner (or family if the owner who had sold the land had died before the year of Jubilee). It was also a time when anyone who had sold themselves into slavery (yes, it happened regularly) were freed and allowed to go back to their families.

Why did God do this? It was a kind of socio-economic reset that would prevent generational poverty and slavery. I know those are political buzz words that are sure to stir up some feeling when we read them but trust me when I say I'm not trying to get you to change your political views. This is how Israel was to handle poverty and slavery. It doesn't necessarily follow that it's how America is to handle poverty and slavery (whatever form "slavery" in modern day America might take)- this reflection is only about the practice in ancient Israel and whatever you think it does or doesn't mean for us in the USA is between you and God.

All that to say this is what Jesus is talking about in Nazareth. At first the Nazarenes are extremely happy with Jesus' sermon. Then their feeling make a hard u turn and they try to kill Him. Why? Maybe spend some time today thinking about why the year of Jubilee might stir up such hostility among a group of people for whom it was to be practiced every 50 years (but as far as historians can tell it never was practiced).

Wednesday Reflection: So the year of Jubilee. It was supposed to be practiced every 50 years. As far as can be told it wasn't celebrated even once in Israel's history. Why not? I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that it was never celebrated because the rich and powerful didn't want to celebrate it (for reasons that should seem obvious to us I would think). Any land sold by people who had gotten themselves hopelessly into debt would revert to the original land holder (or his family if he was dead). All slaves who had sold themselves into slavery would be freed and allowed to return home. God didn't set it up to be hard on the wealthy. In fact God warns the wealthy that as they're figuring up a price to pay for land or a slave they had to take into account the year of Jubilee. In other words they prorated how much they were willing to pay- how much a parcel of land or a person selling themselves as slaves was worth to them- based off of how many years there were until the next Jubilee.

So a wealthy farmer who was asked to buy someone's land would pay much more if there were 40 years til the next Jubilee than they would if Jubilee was next year. Basically they were paying for a certain number of harvests since the land given to the Israelites could never really be bought or sold. An Israelite family's allotment of land was their eternal inheritance and could only be leased until the next Jubilee.

That means that Jubilee was mainly a joyous event for outcasts in Israel. People who had found themselves in a situation where their only recourse was to sell/lease their land and

maybe to sell/lease themselves into slavery. For these people Jubilee was a HUGE deal. It was a party. It was the year of the Lord's favor. Even the prophecy in Isaiah makes that obvious:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:16-19 (NIV)

Who has this mysterious Servant Of The Lord figure that is prophesied so often in Isaiah and other prophetic writings been sent to help? The poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed. That's mainly who the year of Jubilee is for- the outcasts. The people that polite society looks down upon because "they've gotten themselves into this mess". So often the rest of us who are doing ok don't particularly like the concept of Jubilee. Why should they get a do-over? I don't need a do-over so what's in this for me? It's a common way of looking at outcasts- heck some people still feel that way to this very day.

Now let's go back to the fact that it doesn't appear that Israel every actually followed through on this 50th year of Jubilee celebration. Does the fact that they never did it mean that this is not a very important part of their constitution? Nope. There were lots of things in the Law of Moses that Israel never followed through on. It doesn't mean those things aren't important. It mainly means that the humans that ignored God's directions didn't share His heart for the outcasts. The year of Jubilee still demonstrates the very heart of God even if His people ignored it.

So let's talk about us now, shall we? How does the year of Jubilee sound to you? Because whether we like it or not- it's here:

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" Luke 4:20-21 (NLT)

Jesus essentially says, today the year of Jubilee begins! Israel is no longer a sovereign nation at that point so He's not talking about political/socio/economic policy- He's talking about a way of dealing with the outcasts who have gotten their lives so messed up that the rest of polite society often wonder why we should ever help them? Why should we care, we often ask ourselves and others. Because, God cares. Because Jesus cares. And if we are going to develop the heart of God then we are going to have to engage this question. Again, I'm not talking about American political/socio/economic policy here. I'm talking about my heart.

And yours.

Because the year of Jubilee that Jesus said began that day in His sermon in Nazareth is still ongoing to this very day. The only question is, how are you and I participating in God's dream for outcasts and how are we pursuing His heart by being a part of Jubilee?

Thursday Reflection: Ok so we're talking about the year of Jubilee (if you don't know what that is you need to go back and read the last couple days worth of reflections because none of what comes next will make sense to you unless you've been following along with us this week talking about Jesus' sermon in Nazareth and why it made the nice synagogue going Nazarenes attempt to murder Him) and what it meant for the Jews of the first century and

what it might mean for us today. When Jesus reads the prophecy from Isaiah 61 (The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.") how do you suppose the people of Nazareth respond? I always thought this was why they wanted to kill Jesus- because He had claimed to be the Messiah. But that's not what's going on. They don't mind that He claims to be the Messiah. In fact they're pretty pleased with the whole thing:

Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. "How can this be?" they asked. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" Luke 4:22 (NLT)

How do they respond? They like it. They're pleased. Why are they pleased? Because they think He's talking about them. Aren't they the poor? Aren't they the prisoners? Aren't they the oppressed? Aren't they all under the domination of the evil Roman Empire? They have no idea that the poor/prisoners/blind/oppressed folks that Jesus is talking about is "those people" or the outcasts. They're just sure Jesus is talking about them. They're sure Jesus is saying, "Jubilee is for you fine upstanding Nazarenes".

But He isn't saying that. And He knows they've missed the point of His sermon. He knows that if He stops there then as He leaves the Nazarenes will come pat Him on the back and say, "great sermon, Pastor. You really nailed it on the head today!"

So He explains what He was getting at. He tells them about two of their favorite stories from the Old Testament scriptures:

Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner- a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian." Luke 4:25-27 (NLT)

And what is the result of His explanation? Outrage on the part of the fine upstanding Nazarenes:

When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way. Luke 4:28-30 (NLT)

What. Just. Happened?????

They were so pleased with Jesus until He explained His meaning. Why did Jesus bringing up the widow of Zarephath and General Naaman move them to such outrage that they wanted to kill Him?

Well we need to look at who these people were. Neither one was an Israelite- they were both foreigners. The widow was in desperate poverty. The general was fabulously wealthy and yet still would have been considered one of the spiritually poor (remember that Hebrew thought lumped all outcasts into the category of spiritually poor even if that outcast had tons of literal money (like Naaman or possibly even like Matthew who was a tax collector but was an outcast all the same)).

In essence Jesus is telling these people- look I'm here for the outcasts and the spiritually poor but that's not who you think it is. I've come for the outcasts and the spiritually poor the same way that Elijah and Elisha were sent to the outcasts and spiritually poor 900 years ago. And when they hear that they are enraged. Why? We'll talk more about that tomorrow but maybe for today spend some time thinking about who exactly you think Jesus came to save.

Friday Reflection: So the Nazarenes realize Jesus is saying He's come for the outcasts and not so much for them and they are outraged. Why? Because they're not spiritually poor or spiritually wealthy- it's more like they're spiritually middle class (which in this metaphor is not a good thing). The spiritually poor welcome the year of Jubilee because they need it so desperately. The spiritually wealthy welcome the year of Jubilee because they have the heart of God and they love and care about the people who so desperately need the year of Jubilee. But the spiritually middle class hate everything about the year of Jubilee. I mean think about it for a minute. The spiritually middle class would probably say that they've worked hard to get where they are. They made good choices and didn't make bad ones and so (the thinking goes) God owes me. I don't like the idea of the year of Jubilee because it rewards those who made mistakes and were irresponsible and punishes good hard working smart industrious folks like us who didn't make those same mistakes.

Sound like anyone from another one of Jesus' stories? It reminds me of the older brother from the story of the Prodigal Son. I mean think about it- you've got three people represented in this story- the younger son (spiritually poor), the Father (spiritually wealthy) and the older son (spiritually middle class as far as this financial metaphor goes). The younger son takes the money his father gives him and goes off and wastes it all on riotous living. When he's left with nothing he goes back home and begs his dad to take him back as a slave. The day recognizes the spiritual poverty in his younger son and because the father is spiritually wealthy he welcomes the younger son (the outcast) home with mercy, forgiveness and a massive party. Enter the older brother. The older brother is outraged that the father would enact a sort of year of Jubilee for the younger brother. And it makes sense to us, doesn't it? I mean the older brother worked hard, followed the rules, didn't openly rebel against his dad and was the good kid. Now that he sees the true heart of his father what does the older son do?

He rages against that father.

Just like the Nazarenes.

Why? What happened? The older son (and the Nazarenes) were spiritually middle class which meant they HATED the very concept of Jubilee if it didn't benefit them and if it did benefit people who had gotten themselves into deep, deep, doo doo (that's a technical theological term in case you didn't know).

If we're not careful we'll do the same thing. American Christians are notorious around the world with our other Christian brothers and sisters for having tons of money and a willingness to help those around the world who are less fortunate but we are also famous for being smug and feeling like we have what we have because of how hard we've worked and how we've avoided bad decisions and made all the right ones.

Which is partially true but it's not the whole story. Generational poverty and slavery are real but we often refuse to see it. So maybe we should all spend some time reflecting on where we stand in the financial metaphor I've been using today: do you see yourself as spiritually wealthy, spiritually poor or spiritually middle class. And if you don't know maybe try reading the gospels and figuring out who you identify with most in the stories Jesus tells.