

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

January 30, 2022

## *“Bible Struggle”*

*Luke 4:14-30*

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“Oh, but that means....”

Have you ever heard or experienced good news, and then later realize that the good comes with a cost?

You lose 25 pounds.

Oh, but that means I have to buy a new wardrobe.

Your daughter tells you she’s engaged to a great guy.

Oh, but that means there is a wedding to pay for.

Zoom makes it possible to attend meetings from home.

Oh, but that means when I’m home, I still have to attend meetings.

Recently it was decided that Ben Brannan and Aaron Copeland will lead a Thursday Morning Men’s Bible Study and each week they are going to focus on the passage and sermon from the previous Sunday. The first Bible study is this coming Thursday. That’s good news.

Oh, but that means the first time they meet—the first time they try this to see if this whole approach is worth their time—will be after I preach. It’s my sermon they’ll focus on first.

I decided to embrace it. I chose a passage about Bible study. In fact, in honor of this coming Thursday morning being the *first* time the Men’s Bible study will meet, I will look at the *first* time Luke’s Gospel speaks of a Bible Study that Jesus leads.



Before attending Jesus' Bible study, it is helpful to know the story Luke tells right before he gives it. Chapter 4 begins with Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness where, after 40 days of fasting, he is tempted by the devil.

- The devil first tempts the famished Jesus to turn stones to bread. In refusing, Jesus says, “**It is written that human beings shall not live by bread alone.**”
- The devil then tempts Jesus by offering to give him all the kingdoms of the world to rule, if only Jesus will worship him. In refusing, Jesus says, “**It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’**”
- With the third temptation, the devil transports Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, “**Prove that you are the Son of God and throw yourself off.**” Then, *the devil* says, “**It is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you.’ And ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’**” In refusing, Jesus says, “**It is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’**”

Quite a struggle this is. And did you hear how much the Bible is quoted? By Jesus *and* by the devil? This is a *Bible Struggle*, with the devil using scripture to tempt Jesus and Jesus using scripture to resist.

With that Bible Struggle in the wilderness in mind, listen now to the story of Jesus' first Bible Study on record. Listen not just to the words of scripture, for we have been reminded what Shakespeare said, that “**even the devil can quote scripture.**” Let's listen *not* for what the devil wants us to hear and not what *we* want to hear but for what God wants us to hear.

#### **Luke 4:14-30:**

<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup> He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

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

<sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that



came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”<sup>23</sup> He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”<sup>24</sup> And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.<sup>25</sup> But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;<sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.<sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers<sup>[d]</sup> in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.<sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.<sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

What do you know? In leaving the wilderness behind, Jesus does not leave temptations behind. In the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus

1. to put his own needs first,
2. then to sell his soul so as to rule the world,
3. and then to perform a miracle to prove that he is the Son of God.

Now, Jesus is tempted again.

He comes into town—his hometown—and stands before family, friends, and neighbors. The temptation comes “[when they all speak well of him.](#)”

I know that temptation and I am sure you do too. It is the temptation to not say what needs to be said, knowing that those who hear it probably will be disappointed and maybe even upset that you said it.

I well remember the day in 2009 when a few of us on the Mill Mountain Theater board walked into the auditorium where the theater staff was assembled for a staff meeting. They had no idea we were there to give the news that the finances had run out, the theater would go dark, and they would no longer be employed. I can’t tell you what a temptation it was to stay home and leave it to others to break that hard news.

Jesus faces a gathering of people who have watched him grow up, and he knows that *they will not like what he has to say.*

The temptation is worse because the Bible study starts off so well. Jesus unrolls the scroll of the book of Isaiah and reads verses they already love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2, 58:6.



No doubt that as Jesus reads these words some of the townspeople mouth them from memory. These verses are beloved because they speak of a coming day that they have been anticipating for generations—ever since the prophet Isaiah uttered them when their ancestors were exiles in Babylon. Then, after many exiles were allowed to return to the homeland, the verses continued to ring the note of hope that they will be freed from oppression, which obviously means living no longer under Persian and then Roman rule.

- Good news to the poor?
  - Yes, Holy God, let it be so. When they were exiled, the Babylonians took almost everything they had from them. And now, their current oppressors, the Romans, are robbing them blind with heavy taxation.
- Release for captives?
  - Yes, Holy God, let it be so. They prayed for that release when they were refugees in Babylon and continue to pray for that release as they live under Roman rule.

And then, after reading the passage, the first thing that Jesus tells them in giving his Bible study is this: **“It’s time. The time is now. The time has come to receive those blessings—to be liberated, healed, restored as a nation.”**

Oh, my: to hear one of their own say this, raising the possibility that he—*Jesus*—is going to lead the movement to make it so. Jesus has been teaching and healing in the area and he already has a reputation and a following; so something really might be beginning. Think of that, a messiah raised right there in Nazareth! How wonderful would that be? The one who restored Israel to its glory. **“We knew him when he was *Joseph’s boy*.”**

You might wonder why they would immediately believe that today is the day or that Jesus is the one. But does it matter if everyone believes it? What’s great is that he says it. The point is that it is possible. The point is that it needs to be said every day, just in case *today is the day*. It is going to happen. God promised it would. Why not today? Jesus is bold and brave enough to say it out loud and they all speak well of him.

Jesus has them in the palm of his hand. Can’t he just stop here?

- What’s wrong with stopping while he is ahead?
- What’s wrong with them thinking that every bit of the good news of which Isaiah speaks is for them?
- Why not at least for today let them think that God sees that they have been history’s victims and that it is time to put them first?
- What’s wrong with building a following and a reputation—winning love and devotion,  
so that Jesus can have some social capital to spend later?
- What’s wrong with giving them what they want so that Jesus gets what he wants?



Sound familiar? Didn't the devil tell Jesus, "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you will just give me what I want and worship me."?

Bible study is great. What is not great is what I would call "*Confirmation Bias Bible Study*." You've heard the term, "confirmation bias." It describes that tendency we have to look for and then give authority to what we already believe to be true. If you are determined enough, you can find a way to hear in the news, glean from experience, and research evidence to back up whatever it is that you really want or need to be true. And you can study the Bible that way.

- You can find the Democrat Jesus or the Republican Jesus if you look for him.
- You can find Jesus the emperor or Jesus the radical revolutionary.
- You can find Jesus the family man and Jesus the home wrecker.
- You can find the America-first Jesus or America-last Jesus.
- You can find
  - the champion of the poor Jesus,
  - the middle-class Jesus
  - and even the rich Jesus
    - if you know where to look.

If you were to assemble all the Jesus figures that readers have somehow been able to find in the Bible out in a field somewhere, you'd have to ask one of them to multiply fish and loaves just to get them all fed.

These townspeople know their Bible well, but they have read it with a confirmation bias.

- They *know* that God puts them first.
- They know that the prophet Isaiah, in speaking of justice, is speaking of justice *for them*.
- They know they are the victims of Babylonians and Romans, so if things are going to be set right for victims, it will be their day in the sun.

When Jesus says, "**The time has come**," they already know that he means "*Our time has come*." "**No need for Q&A. We get it. All we have to say is, 'Amen.'**"

Jesus is human and I have to believe that he is tempted to just go with it. The Bible that Jesus has available to him—Torah, the Writings and the Prophets—all have passages that he can use to reinforce the message that God is about *us*, not *them*— that if the world is to be righted it will be when our enemies are brought low so we can be made high.

If Jesus wants followers,  
if he wants approval,  
if he wants influence,  
all he has to do is say that... or at least stay quiet.

But Jesus resists temptation yet again. He goes on to interpret the verses he read. He does what good Bible teachers do; he uses scripture to interpret scripture. Instead of defending the



popular reading of Isaiah, he uncovers what the prophet really said. This prophet in Exile saw the suffering not only of the Jewish exiles but also of the Babylonians around them. He saw the suffering of Gentiles and Jews. He was an example of what scholars talk about when they say that in Exile, justice became less a prayer for Jews and more a prayer for the world.

That's what Jesus points out. The good news that Isaiah says is coming—that needs to come—is for the poor and persecuted all over the world... yes, even those who have been impoverished and persecuted *because of the Jews*. Jesus brings up stories from scripture that speak specifically of a time when Jews and Gentiles were all suffering with *God bringing relief first* to the Gentiles. For mercy and justice to be particularly helpful, it needs to be universally applicable: for them as well as for us

The townspeople respond just the way Jesus thought they would. Admiration changes to fury. Some are so upset that they are not seen as the victims that they try to do what the devil tempted Jesus to do to himself: throw him over a cliff.

You understand, don't you, that we can't read this story as simply about Jews and Gentiles, thinking, "Isn't it great that God came first to us Gentiles and not to those Jews?" No, this story is about those who consider themselves people of God. It is about insiders and outsiders. It is about

- the older son and the younger prodigal,
- the righteous and the unrighteous,
- those who know who they are the victims and are in a political party that stands up for them (I'm talking about both the Republican and Democrat parties)

It is about those who are of this race and not other races.

It is about the ones who know the deal

and are just waiting for the world to wake up to how they have it right.

Confirmation bias is something we all bring to the Bible. If we are going to get past *reading scripture* and get to *scripture reading us*, then we need to realize from the get-go that we bring that bias with us. When we accept that we always have an internal editor on call—then we are ready to accept that a *Bible Study sometimes needs to be a Bible Struggle*.

I am not saying that if scripture is rightly heard, it will not often affirm us, comfort us, or inspire us. I am not saying it will not often confirm what we already believe to be true. Yes, it will do all of that because sometimes the best news is old news heard as fresh news. But the Bible will not *always* do that because God's mind and God's will are God's own. Many times, the devil that tempts us *is the god we've invented*.

So,

to those who come to the Men's Bible study on Thursdays  
and any other study that happens in the week,  
and to those who meet in every Sunday School class we have,  
and especially to those who try to read and understand scripture alone  
with only their confirmation bias as a sounding board,



I say this:

The church has always insisted that the Holy Spirit must be in the conversation of Bible Study or God's living Word will not be heard. At the very least, this means being humble and curious about what is new or different that God has to say to us today.

Without humility and curiosity, Bible study is simply seeking intel for a cause.

In humility, pray not just for what you want:

approval, affirmation, inspiration, validation

but also pray for what you don't want but need:

to be judged, challenged, upset, and changed.

After all, isn't that our prayer, that God will speak to us and that we will be saved?

"I know what you will want to say," Jesus says before lowering the boom. "Physician heal thyself." But saving ourselves is precisely what we cannot do. So, in Bible study as in life, "God, let thy will be done and thy Word be heard."

