

Luke - Commentaries by William John Hocking

Opening the Book in Nazareth and in Heaven, Opening the Book in Nazareth and in Heaven: Part 1

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Luke 4:14-22; Revelation 5:8

I have read these few scriptures because they bring before us our Lord Jesus Christ in two distinct and contrasted ways. We see Him in the Gospel of Luke opening the book, reading therefrom, and declaring to His audience the fulfillment of the prophecy read. We see Him again in the Revelation coming forward and opening the book, and the judgments of God follow. It is the same gracious Person in both instances, but executing two totally different offices.

On the first occasion the Lord inaugurates the day of grace, in the second instance the day of judgment. Both the past event and the future event are equally true, and both are equally God's ways of dealing with men here upon the earth.

It may be profitable for us this evening to consider both of them for awhile. It is good for us to recollect, that whether it be the present blessings of grace, or the coming dealings of God in righteous judgment, the same blessed and adorable Person carries them into effect. Jesus the Savior, the Lord whom we know and whom we serve, is the appointed Agent of divine justice. It is interesting to see that these two great subjects are connected, in the scriptures read, by their association with the opening of books. The book implies that the matter written therein was settled beforehand. God's books deal largely with the future, and in this respect they differ from human books. Man writes of the past; he writes history. God alone can write of the future; He writes prophecy. And it is, therefore, the privilege of the children of God to possess a knowledge of certain future events; though the way in which the books of which we have just read are introduced, shows us that there is only One who can adequately interpret them, and only One who can administer those divine schemes foreordained in God's book of purpose.

The prophecy of Isaiah, written as it was by that evangelical prophet of Judah and Jerusalem whom we all love, though we are Gentiles by nature, is full of Christ in grace and glory. Yet even his prophecy was sealed until the appointed day came, and then the Messiah Himself appeared in Nazareth to declare that the scripture was that day fulfilled in their ears. "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." The interpreter must be divine. While we have the scriptures given to us as God's precious gift, we none the less need the help, power and illumination of God's Holy Spirit to understand them, and this assistance He does not withhold from any diligent and dependent soul.

THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH FULFILLED.

The occasion on which our Lord spoke in this Galilean synagogue was a very momentous one— momentous for this reason. Communications from God had ceased for a considerable time. From the days of Malachi onwards, no prophetic voice had come from Him. This world was left alone as it were without any communications from on high. God was silent for four and a half centuries, and that is a considerable while. Look back 450 years in our own history. How far back the year 1460 seems, and what a time of darkness! People had no English Bibles to read 450 years ago. A period of similar extent passed in the history of the Jews without a voice from heaven. All the prophecies regarding Israel were completed. God had no more to say to His people until John the Baptist appeared—a voice crying in the wilderness, announcing the coming of the Messiah.

Thereupon we have the Blessed One appearing Himself, and coming before men in that quiet, unostentatious way which is so characteristic of Him in the days of His flesh. How stupendous is His mission! He is coming to speak for God. He is coming to stand in this world as God's Spokesman. He is coming to make that announcement which shall bring everlasting life to millions of precious souls. He is coming to shed abroad the love of God in this dark and evil world. He will chase away the darkness and loosen the chains that hold men in bondage to sin. But He comes quietly to the obscure place of His upbringing, to Nazareth where He dwelt many years, where He was known as the son of Joseph the carpenter. He goes into the synagogue, as His custom was He takes the book of the scriptures from the official of the synagogue and stands up to read.

Beloved friends, let us not omit to note the practical lesson in passing. For we must always look for the lesson to be gathered when our lips essay to speak of the grace and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here we mark His humble demeanor. And we need to learn to copy this humility. Meekness is so becoming when a man is doing God's will for when he is carrying out His purpose he needs no show. It was enough for this blessed Man that He was come to speak the words of God, and so He stood up to read in the synagogue of Nazareth. Hence the book was opened by Him not in Jerusalem but in the little town of Nazareth out of which no good thing could come, so people said—a little village by the Sea of Galilee, obscure then and now.

READING THE PROPHECY CONCERNING HIMSELF

Jesus stood up to read the evangelical prophecies given of God. They were written 750 years before, and now He was standing up to read these predictions concerning Himself. This indeed was a wonderful epoch in this world's history. The fulfillment of what He was about to read was to bring life and blessing, joy and peace to men everywhere, and we here to-night are recipients of the blessings which began to be proclaimed that day.

The manner of the Lord's announcement was simple. Yet there was something about Him that gave Him power over His audience. He had been going about Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and it was as a Spirit-filled man that He stood up before them, "full of the Holy Ghost." Galilee and Judea had already witnessed His deeds and heard His words on the power of the Spirit. Now in the synagogue of Nazareth, full of that same Spirit, He opened the Book of the prophet Isaiah and read from it the scriptures relating to Himself. The fulfillment of its opening clause is seen in the great fact that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him.

I think there is something of profound practical importance for us to lay hold of in this event. Consider that the Spirit of God, the word of God, and the Person of the promised Christ are all seen to meet at this particular juncture.

The blessed Lord standing before the audience was holding in His hand the written word, and He Himself was filled with the Spirit of God. Depend upon it there is no power in this world which can withstand such a coalition as that. The power of Satan can never withstand the power of Christ and the Holy Ghost, and as that great power was active for evil in that day, so it is an active power now. But there is the greater power of God unto salvation which is bringing the men of this world into life and blessing through the word of the gospel.

Do not let us overlook the vital things that remain in the church of God. There are many things possessed in early days that we have not, but we have the scriptures, we have the Holy Spirit, we have, blessed be His name, the Lord Jesus Christ. And happy the Christian who in His service is content to be carried forward by these forces. They are, if I may reverently say so, at the disposal of every earnest believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God will, if you are submissive, use you for the glory of Christ, and for the blessing of your fellow Christians. He is the same Spirit who filled Christ as He spoke in Nazareth that day.

CLOSING THE BOOK

The Lord read the scripture, and He closed the book. I want you at your leisure to look at the prophecy of Isaiah and to observe the wisdom of our Lord Jesus Christ who closed the book at the right moment just as He opened the book at the right moment. And while we love to see how He opened the book and with what a beautiful passage He began, so we must love to see how He closed the book and failed to read the dreadful words that follow— "the day of vengeance of our God."

The acceptable year was come; the time of deliverance and of preaching the gospel to the poor; the blind were to have sight given them; but the day of vengeance was not yet. Jesus closed the book, and the day of doom is not yet. The day of grace, the day of joy and peace began with our Lord Jesus Christ here in humiliation. For He was a man come to set forth the love of God; here to pass day by day, in and out of the places of common resort, and by His words of love and power, by His works of healing and mercy Show men God's love for this world. The Lord was the light shining in the darkness. Can you conceive for a moment what the awful condition of this world would be if the revelation made by Christ were suddenly withdrawn from us?

There would then be a reversion to the time before the Lord read these scriptures when all was dark and obscure. Noon would become midnight. Now the light of full salvation shines, and we know that God is full of love to men on earth and that He finds a joy when men repent. We know that in infinite grace He sends forth the words of everlasting life to all men upon earth, drawing them thereby to our Lord Jesus Christ. We know these things from the New Testament.

But here at Nazareth was the beginning of this day of grace. It began then, and it has been going on for nineteen hundred years. Think what a considerable section of human history this is. Go back nineteen centuries before Christ, and Abraham was just leaving Mesopotamia. Nearly all the events recorded in the Old Testament history happened during that period, but when you come to the New Testament we find the record of a much briefer space. There you have the account of a comparatively few events which occurred during some fifty years or so. Then the inspired communications of God ceased; but all the while from that day to this the invisible power of God's Spirit has been bringing men to God and Christ by His word. There has been a power, a great power working in all directions leading men into the joy of the gospel. Would that we might know more deeply the value of the day in which we live, the spiritual freedom we have, the valuable and precious things revealed to us as ours through grace!

THE LIMITS OF THE DAY OF GRACE

But this day of grace must have its end. We are not in eternity; we have not passed into that majestic glory where there will be no change, but here in this world's history there is still a greater event to be accomplished. Now grace reigns. Sin is not rebuked openly by God. There are the silent rebukes of the Spirit through the word, but there are no striking providential events which show God's specific displeasure with the evil ways of men. Has He not already said enough? is His word not sufficient? most surely it is, beloved friends. God has said all that need be said to show the men of this world what His will is and what His feelings are with regard to their ways before Him. Moreover, the same word declares there is a time of retributive judgment for men upon the earth. There is a time coming when the Righteous Governor of this universe will assert His rights over rebellious man in an unmistakable manner.

God fashioned this world that men might inhabit it. He has peopled it with intelligent beings. They stand in definite relation with Him as distinct from the beasts that perish. Men were to govern the world; they were to do the will of God and are responsible to Him. The day is coming when God will insist upon those rights being respected, when He will bring into this world of ours order, righteousness and peace, when this world and its inhabitants shall all move together in one harmonious whole and in one united constitution, as it were, giving their glory to God above. Then the earth will present that unusual spectacle in its history of being in perfect harmony with the heavens above. Such a day is coming; God has written it in His word, and He will bring it to pass.

(To be continued)

Opening the Book in Nazareth and in Heaven, Opening the Book in Nazareth and in Heaven: Part 2

WHO CAN BE TRUSTED TO RULE?

Who is there competent to undertake to rule and govern the world in this manner? Empires spring up, and empires decay. Great rulers sit on the throne, but their rule is often other than glorious, and far from effective. But there is, one Man who fills God's mind and purposes of perfect government. There is one Man who distinguished Himself above all others on earth, one Man that has thoroughly proved His perfection. He was the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He walked through this world to the good pleasure of God; He suffered in this world; He tasted of every cup of trial that this world has to give; He suffered every form of suffering man is liable to endure; He Himself on the cross bore our sins in His own body, and thus tasted the full judgment of God against sins that were not His own.

This Man, by His perfect bearing amid un-paralleled vicissitudes, has acquired for Himself the right to rule and govern in this world, and, therefore, the Man who opened the book in the synagogue of Nazareth will also open the book in the day to come.

The Apocalypse is singular as everyone knows—singular in this respect, that it is so full of what was a strange, word in the Old Testament, and stranger still in the New, that is, the judgment of God. This judgment is varied in form, and is displayed in visions. God is a God of infinite love and grace, and judgment is His last resource. The Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is the book which unfolds God's coming judgments on this world of ours. It has an analogy with the book of Daniel which was written especially for the people of Israel and concerning the Gentiles. John was commissioned to write what had particular reference to the churches and also what concerned the political and religious powers of the earth. Therefore it is of interest to us. Why of interest, do you ask?

The greatest reason why this book should be of special interest to us is not because it satisfies a natural curiosity as to the future, but because it brings before us the glory of Christ as God's future ruler in the world. If you love the Lord you most surely will love to think that a day is coming when He will have His rights, and when He will be owned and adored by all men. Do you not long that everyone would bow at His feet now? I know you do, and the Book of the Revelation shows how in God's own time all will be brought under His peaceful sway.

CHRIST FIRST COMING FOR THE CHURCH

It is well to observe that the opening of the seven-sealed book and the visions which follow refer to what is coming on this earth when the members of the body of Christ are no longer here. The second and third chapters of the Book of Revelation apply, as we are definitely told, (Revelation 1:19; 4:1) to the things that exist during the present time while the assembly of God is upon the earth. There are seven churches in Asia to which the Lord addresses His epistles. And in those seven churches you see a general succession and declension until you come to the last, and this is so corrupt that it is spued out of the mouth of the Lord Himself. This rejection is not true in fact yet. Its accomplishment may be very near, but it is not yet come about, and therefore we have not reached the events we find depicted in the fourth and following chapters.

We are waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to come, and the result of His coming will be the removal of all those who are His own. They will be removed into heavenly association with Him-self in the Father's house, and you see them in the fourth chapter under the figure of the twenty-four elders. I just say this by the way so that we may understand just whereabouts this section begins, wherein the Lamb is seen to break the seals of the roll of mystery.

The fulfillment of the visions will commence to take place upon the earth subsequent to the rapture of the church of Christ. But I want especially to draw your attention now, not to the prophetic events, but to the striking contrast presented by the circumstances shown in Revelation as compared with the circumstances in Luke.

THE THRONE AND THE RAINBOW

There you have the man Christ Jesus teaching in the synagogue of Nazareth with no outward glory, with no attendant signs of dignity and pomp and excellence such as the world would acknowledge. But when you come to the Apocalyptic visions everything is seen to be totally different. The apostle John is taken away from the world. A door is opened, and he is called up into heaven, and what he sees is heavenly in nature. He sees One upon the throne, and the throne is not the throne of grace, for there are lightnings and thunderings and voices which all tend to keep men in their proper place of distance from it. Such a character is not one of invitation to draw near. When the Lord spoke at Nazareth all men wondered at the gracious words that fell from His lips; they were gentle and kindly, they were attractive and drew out the love of men's hearts to the Speaker. But in heaven as at Sinai there are thunderings and lightnings and terrifying, and He that is upon the throne is glorious to look upon like a jasper stone and a sardius.

John saw the throne of judgment, yet even there he saw the symbol of God's promise to His people of old—the rainbow. God has not forgotten His ancient promise, and although we are immediately to read of devastating judgments on earth, still God is slow in executing these judgments to the full. They are partial at the first, for the rainbow is there—a type of God's abiding mercy (Gen. 9:16).

THE SEALED ROLL

What next did the prophet see? In the right hand of Him that sat upon the throne was a book or roll, sealed with seven seals, written within and without. It was full to overflowing as it were with woes and lamentations. Think how many centuries full of sins have passed since Adam's day, how the judgments of God have accumulated, how man's guilt has been deepening as the ages have gone by. Do you imagine man has become better during this day of grace? Has man's heart changed? Are men today more like Christ than in His own day? Is there less bloodshed, less murder, less oppression today than there was two thousand years ago? The answer must be that there is no change. The guilt of man today is greater than ever, and man's heart is harder. There is nothing that can purify men's hearts. They must be born again.

Now in the vision John saw this seven-sealed book, written full of God's judgments, held back for so long through God's long-suffering mercy, in the hand of Him who sat upon the Creatorial throne of government.

THE LION OF JUDAH

The question now arising in the heavenly courts is, who is competent to execute these deferred judgments? Who shall let them loose upon this guilty earth? There must be no mistake; they must not be sent upon the earth too soon; there must be unerring wisdom in the exercise of this function, and who is competent to do it? And John, as he looked and listened, realized that there was no one found competent to undertake this fearful task of breaking the seals and letting loose the consuming judgments of God upon men. There was no created being in heaven, no one on earth, no one under the earth, as we can well understand, who could undertake this responsibility. John wept much, but one of the elders came and said, "Weep not; behold, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah hath prevailed to open the book." He, the Root of David, He is the One, the only One who can do it. He is the One because, being the Son of man, the Father gave Him the authority to execute judgment also. The Father will not execute judgment, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all men might honor the Son even as they honor the Father (John 5:22, 23, 27).

THE LAMB ONCE SLAIN

Then John looked for the Lion. He would expect to see a Being of might and majesty and dominion, but when he looked he saw the Lamb. I think this is a beautiful feature of the heavenly picture. All power is seen to be given to the all meek and humble One. No one came down so low as our Lord Jesus, and, therefore, no one was fit to be exalted as He has been exalted. He could and did glorify God in the lowest part of the earth, and He is the One who can and will glorify God in the highest. So also if we glorify Him in the hour of trial, we shall glorify Him in the day that is yet to come (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

We remember the submission of the Lord when the kings of the earth stood up in persecuting power, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lamb. He was then before His shearers as dumb. All were that day against Him. They smote Him; they spat upon Him. But He did the will of Him that sent Him, and He opened not His mouth. Was ever meekness such as His?

Now the prophet sees the Lord in heaven as a Lamb, and he sees Him too as a slain Lamb. It was at His death He went down lowest, and this deep humiliation is recorded in heaven, for the time is near when His glory will be manifested. Hence it is as a Lamb slain that He is seen in heaven. It is the same Jesus, at Nazareth, at Calvary, in heaven— Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Surely we love to read these words. We love to think of the Lamb of God in heaven as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, all heaven proclaiming Him to be worthy to take the book and to open the seals thereof. You and I know that if He undertakes it, there will be no mistake; He will do it well.

We sometimes wonder as to the mystery of God's judgments. There are those whom we love even now under judgment (John 18). Our hearts weep for them, and we pray for them that they may be brought out of the sphere of judgment into the grace and mercy of God. But we can only pray for them, and leave the result to the One who was slain.

THE WORSHIPPING HOSTS

The Lamb was the one who took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne, and it is well to note the effect of this act in heaven. It must be something momentous to move the heavenly host. We here on earth are moved by very small events perhaps, but in heaven, in the place of glory where everything is, perfect, it needs to be something vast to command widespread interest. But when the Lamb took the book all heaven was moved to worship. Think what the sight must be to the millions of redeemed souls, to those who have tasted of His grace, walked, worked, and waited for Him in this world, and are now brought into the fullness of His love. on high. When they see the loving One who died. for them thus honored they can do nothing but praise and worship Him. They are so glad that He has come into His own. They are so glad that He has the chief place in heaven, that no one else is found worthy to undertake this work.

The spirit of worship always is to make much of Christ, to have our hearts full of Christ. God looks down froth heaven to see men and women so enamored of Christ that they feel they must worship Him, and what can be better employment than that? It is the anticipation of what will be our chief occupation in heaven. Elders, angels, and all creation united to worship the Lamb. And the four living creatures said, Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped. All join in praise and worship that the day is now about to, come when the Lamb will break oppression, and set all crooked things right in this world.

Nearly nineteen centuries have gone by since the cross, since Jesus died, since that great sacrifice was offered. Myriads have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, and have been brought into possession of the privileges of grace. Yet sin has not disappeared from this, world; death is still here; sorrow abounds. And are these sad facts nothing to the One who died? They are surely ever before the Lamb of God "who, taketh away the sin of the world." We know the tenderness of His heart because He still says, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He delivers from sin by His work of redemption and His word of forgiveness.

THE LAMB OPENS THE SEALS BUT DOES NOT APPEAR ON EARTH

But the Lamb who puts away sin by the sacrifice of Himself will also put away sin by the power of His irresistible might. And the hour may be close at hand when the Lamb will open the seals, and the judgments break forth in succession upon the earth like the plagues upon guilty Egypt. They are of the nature of providential judgments—famines, wars, pestilences, and death. They fall upon this world as the seals are opened in series, but it is to be observed that these judgments are not exercised by the Lamb in person. He opens the seals, and the judgments follow. They are clearly the result of the breaking of the seals by the Lamb, but He Himself does not come forth from heaven to carry them out.

You have to wait for His appearance until you get to the nineteenth chapter of this book when He is seen in the opened heaven with a sharp two-edged sword going out of His mouth; He comes in person to put down unrighteousness in this world. But at the opening of the seals, judgments are inflicted upon the earth at His bidding. And they are types of that judgment of wider scope which is to follow. But in the limitations of the woes of the seal period, we see a mark of the lingering mercy of our Lord over this world, who is not willing that any should perish.

During those dark and cloudy days there will be messengers of "the gospel of the kingdom" traveling far and near, calling men to repent quickly. But men's hearts in that day will be still unrepentant. They will still refuse to confess their sins, although the mercy of God is set before them in loving entreaty.

THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

The unchanging character of the Lamb is what I want, in closing, to point out especially. There will be no change in Christ Himself, though His office may differ. He is still the same blessed person, whether testifying of grace in Nazareth, or of judgment in heaven above. In whatever He undertakes He cannot change Himself. And we know the Lamb and love Him, and we wait for His coming from heaven. There are many things that cause us anxiety here, particularly at such a crisis as the present, but there is always One to whom we can turn with confidence. We may be but poorly instructed in the details of prophecy, but the Christian is not bound up necessarily with a knowledge of the details of prophecy for the peace of his heart.

The one thing that he rests his every peace and joy upon is this, that whether it is a question of grace or judgment, the Person in whose hands the matter is placed is the Person whose hands were pierced. Therefore, we have every confidence in Him. This as truly applies to national matters as it applies to personal matters. Our affairs altogether are in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is the gist of my message to you to-night. The Lord Jesus Christ is our Lord; He is our Savior; He is the One in whom we have placed our trust, and He is the One in whom we must place trust continually.

The Lord has prepared our path for us. He has at Calvary's cross borne the burden of our sins in His body. He is now shaping the daily matters of our life to the accomplishment of His own gracious purpose, and He is the One with whom our future lies. Our future is with Him, and we wait for His coming that this hope may be realized. His coming means that we shall then be where He is, and once with Him we shall never leave Him, for "we shall be forever with the Lord."

W. J. H.

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