

Rejection

One of the most powerful evidences for the truth of the Bible is the depth of prophetic insight it offered hundreds of years before the prophecies were fulfilled. Take for just one poignant example, these words from Isaiah 53:

He was despised and rejected -- a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by. He was despised and we did not care. (Isaiah 53:3)

Who is Isaiah describing in this verse? Someone he calls the “servant of Yahweh”, a man who would offer his life as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of God’s people. The servant of the LORD became one of the pieces of the picture of Messiah, the Redeemer who was to come, but this suffering servant was confusing and even troubling to the expectations of a people that was waiting for a strong deliverer, someone to rescue them from their enemies and establish the nation in peace. “Rejected! How can the Messiah carry out his mission to save us if he is being rejected and despised?” That’s the question that comes into play as Jesus begins to experience rejection from a number of important places and people in His life.

Jesus left that part of the country and returned with His disciples to Nazareth, his hometown. The next Sabbath He began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were astonished. They asked, “Where did He get all his wisdom and the power to perform such miracles? He’s just the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us.” They were deeply offended and refused to believe in Him. Then Jesus told them, “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.” And because of their unbelief, He couldn’t do any mighty miracles among them except to place His hands on a few sick people and heal them. And He was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6:1-6)

There’s an old saying that goes, “Familiarity breeds contempt” and it applies here when Jesus revisits the town He grew up in. “Oh, we know the carpenter. We know his whole family, grew up with them, they’re still around.” The question they can’t answer is the first one they ask: “Where did he get all his wisdom and the power to perform such miracles?” There’s a disconnect going on here - they see, or at least have heard about, the miracles, but then they think, “I saw that kid grow up here. He was just a kid like any of the others. He was nothing special.” And they import their opinions, their self-confidence that comes from their experience of Jesus as a boy, and, even though it doesn’t make any sense, they dismiss the miracles. Their prior knowledge becomes more important than the evidence of Jesus doing the miraculous. Their prejudices against Him as a miracle-worker clash with the obvious evidence of His miracle-working power ... and they choose their prejudices: “He’s **just** the carpenter.” It’s so interesting how the human mind works. The people who knew Jesus as the local carpenter can’t accept Him as anything more, anything greater, than that. They are locked into their view of Him because of how they knew Him when He was young.

The result of this is that Jesus can't do much in Nazareth - at least, not as much as He was doing in Capernaum and in other places where He ministered. He was blocked from doing more by the people's unbelief, by their certainty that they knew Him because they had known Him before He was filled with the Spirit and began His public ministry. He did heal a few people - but that was much less than He had done elsewhere - and the text tells us that He was amazed that they could not, would not, believe in Him.

Let's look at our second story for today, the case of the rich man who rejected Jesus:

As He was starting out on a trip, a man came running up to Jesus, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you call Me 'good'?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good. But as for your question, you know the commandments: Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not testify falsely. Do not cheat. Honor your father and mother."

"Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was a child."

Jesus felt genuine love for this man as He looked at him. "You lack only one thing," He told him. "Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me." At this, the man's face fell, and he went sadly away because he had many possessions.

(10:17-22)

Jesus and the disciples are just heading out of town, when all of a sudden a man comes running up to them and blurts out this question that's obviously been on his mind for some time: "Good Teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?" It's the kind of question you don't run after someone to ask ... if you already know the answer, or if you don't think that person does. So, let's assume that this man didn't know how to gain eternal life, but he was pretty sure that Jesus did. It's interesting that he had no confidence in other ideas about eternal life. I'm sure he could have asked his local rabbi and that man would have assured him that he was doing all the right things, that for sure he would be granted eternal life. But this young man wasn't easily satisfied with answers from people who didn't really know for sure -- so he ran to Jesus, somehow having the confidence that Jesus did know.

What did Jesus see? He saw an earnest young man, a guy who had lived a god-fearing, moral life, but who felt that there must be something he was missing. Jesus saw the hunger in his heart and, the text tells us, He loved him. Does love mean never saying hard things to that other? It can't, because in the very next verse, right after we're told that Jesus felt genuine love for this man, we hear His response to the man's question: "You lack only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Was Mark just fooling when he said that Jesus really loved this rich young man? Wasn't it cruel to tell him to sell everything and give his money away?

No, it just provides us with all kinds of answers to life's most important questions:

1. It tells us that money should never be placed in the position of having the greatest value in our lives. It tells us that we shouldn't make it the absolute that rules our decision-making - that gaining possessions is not the purpose for our existence.
2. It tells us that Jesus knew what was bothering this young man. He knew that a guy doesn't run up to you to ask a question like that unless there's something missing in his life. Jesus knew that this man had a sense that he wasn't where he should be. He knew that there was something wrong with his life, with his priorities, that somehow, even though he was doing well, that he wasn't pleasing God. Jesus could have lied to the man and told him to keep everything he had and, "Don't worry, be happy", but He loved him; He cared about this earnest, good young man, and He wanted what was best for him. So Jesus told him what would make that feeling go away - the feeling that things just weren't quite right. "You will know deep and lasting peace if you sell your stuff, give the money to people who need it, and come and follow me.
3. Jesus knew that the man wasn't putting God first, and that he needed to do that to get his life in line. His religion was probably a bit grudging; he did what he felt he had to do, or ought to do, but didn't serve God with enthusiasm or with abandon. He was too tied up with money and had let devotion to God fall back in his life priorities and ambitions.

So Jesus loved him and told him what he needed to hear and he also invited him to come and travel with Him, to be a disciple. But the man looked at the choice that Jesus gave him and chose the money, and the stuff that money can buy.

Jesus had been rejected by the people in his home town because they thought they knew Him; now He is rejected by a wealthy young man because that man wanted something else more than he wanted Jesus.

Next we come to a third kind of rejection that Jesus faced:

They were now on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with dread and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to Him in Jerusalem. "When we get to Jerusalem," He told them, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence Him to die and hand Him over to the Romans. They will mock Him, spit on Him, beat Him with their whips and kill Him, but after three days He will rise again." (10:32-34)

This is the third time Jesus had spoken to His disciples about His coming death. First, near the end of chapter 8, then again in chapter 9 and now here in chapter 10. The first prediction, in 8:31 prompted Peter to take His Master aside and tell Him to stop talking like that. The wording of that first prophecy is relevant to our topic:

Then Jesus began to tell them that He, the Son of Man, would suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the leaders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, and three days later He would rise again. (8:31)

In this case, the rejection of Jesus would be conducted by the official leaders of the Jewish religion. They were the gatekeepers, the guardians of the traditions and the laws of Moses. And early on they had made a decision that Jesus was not their man. There were many reasons for this, but at the heart of all these reasons was the simple fact that Jesus would not let them take authority over Him. He did not submit His teaching to them, nor did He accept their interpretations of the law. He wouldn't submit to the corrections they offered to Him and to His disciples about what they could or could not do on the Sabbath. He was about to ride into Jerusalem to the shouts of "Hosanna! to the Son of David!" and then throw the money changers from the temple. The bottom line for the Jewish leaders was that Jesus had to be stopped and the only way they could think of to stop Him was to have Him executed.

One of the reasons Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders of the Jewish system was that they were so put off by His power and His claim to have a special relationship with God. They couldn't accept that He was different from them, that He was able to reveal God's will in ways that they could not. They were jealous of Him and resented His popularity, and the fact that the people were much more impressed with Jesus than they were with these religious teachers.

Another reason is that Jesus' ministry represented a threat to national stability. The religious leaders thought that, if the people were to embrace Jesus as Messiah, they might soon be willing to rise up against the Roman legions that were visibly present in Jerusalem and else-where. If Rome were to become agitated, then the next step would be a brutal repression, massive destruction and the loss of the place of influence that these same religious leaders currently enjoyed. They knew that they held their positions with the obligation to do everything they could to keep the people acting peacefully towards their oppressors and that, everywhere in the Roman Empire where the peace was not maintained, the heavy hand of Roman military power was brought in to restore order and keep the peace. For Jews, that would mean the end of the Sanhedrin and, as it turned out less than 40 years later, the end of the temple. By 135 A.D. no Jewish person was allowed to live inside Jerusalem.

So, these are all rejections that Jesus faced during His lifetime: the rejection of family and friends who thought he was "just a carpenter", the rejection of a rich young man who preferred money to be his god, and the rejection by religious leaders who were threatened by Him. So all that Isaiah had predicted 800 plus years before the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus, came true as He neared the end of His ministry. He was despised and rejected -- not by all, of course, but by a growing number of influential people. He experienced those of whom He should have expected more turning their back on Him and not caring that others despised Him. But His rejection by those who felt they were better off without Him, opened the way for us to receive His grace and to know Him as both our Lord and as our brother.

Let's take a few minutes to make some applications:

1. Sometimes in life we make some bad decisions just so we can make some people around us happy. Jesus could have done that, too. He could have given in to the

demands of His family. He could have patted the rich young man on the back and told him he was doing just fine. He could have taught His disciples how to observe the traditions of the elders in areas like hand-washing and Sabbath-keeping. But His agenda on this earth wasn't to make people like Him, or to fit in with the crowd as just another nice guy with some special powers. He came to launch the Kingdom of God, God's rule among people who had hearts open to Him. If we are going to be world-changers, we need to stop worrying about what this person and that person thinks of us, and become fully committed to God's agenda for our lives. Don't be afraid; don't be intimidated, don't feel insecure about the things that God has put on your heart. You may need someone to talk things through with, someone to pray about some things, someone to give you their insight - that's all good, but don't be always looking around to see if people are approving of what you have conviction about. Seek the Lord, sincerely, with integrity, but then go for it - do what He calls you to do and say what He calls you to say.

2. Don't let experiences of rejection that you have had in the past keep you from taking risks in relationships in the future. Most of us have had those kinds of experiences, situations where we were turned down for a job, rejected as a boyfriend or girlfriend, chosen last for some kind of team, endured some unkind words when we were in a position of leadership. The task of pleasing everyone all the time is more than we can measure up to - and that's okay. What is important is to accept the fact that God accepts you, that He loves you and that He is building into your life the things that will last for eternity and make your life fruitful in the years ahead. With that kind of confidence, you can take risks, trust people who may disappoint and love people who seem to have little to offer in return - all for His sake.
3. Be careful that you are not one who easily rejects others. There are opinions and values and morals and ideas that ought to be rejected - but try not to snuff out the person when you debate the subject. I think of how easy it was for the people of Nazareth to dismiss Jesus, to write Him off, because they thought they knew Him. Who knows what saints and angels we fail to recognize just because they don't draw attention to themselves. Keep your heart open to people, and especially keep your heart open to people you disagree with, people whose faults you know, people who rub you the wrong way. If they attend the same church, then go out of your way to take them seriously, to hear their heart. God, even though He is perfect and powerful and good, has not rejected any one of us - even though He could justify doing so - and we should make sure we don't put ourselves in the position of rejecting others, especially those who also love the Lord.
4. Remind yourself that Jesus loved you so much that He willingly suffered disgrace and rejection so that you could be accepted in eternity by His Father.