

A NEW AUTHORITY IN CAPERNAUM

SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

By Doug Goins

We all want the power of God to be present and active in our lives. We desire his protection from danger. We want him to strengthen us through difficulty. We desire God's competence to be expressed through us in all of the responsibilities of life—all the different things we are called to do or to be for other people. When we're challenged by people who oppose the life of faith in us, we need God's advocacy. We echo the cry of the suffering servant in Isaiah, for the same intimacy and sense of security that Jesus had when he talked to his father:

“For the Lord God helps Me,
Therefore I am not disgraced;
Therefore, I have set My face like flint,
And I know that I shall not be ashamed.
He who vindicates Me is near;
Who will contend with Me?
Let us stand up to each other;
Who has a case against Me?
Let him draw near to Me.
Behold, the Lord God helps Me...” (Isaiah 50:7-9a).

This past week has been difficult for our family as we faced what the apostle Paul calls the last great enemy—death itself. My wife's favorite uncle, who was like a second father to her, passed away. He was very special to us. His death was sudden and unexpected. Candy and I spent the day at his bedside on Tuesday, and then I had the privilege, and yet daunting responsibility, of speaking for his memorial service yesterday. I must say that in the midst of all this we experienced God's protection, God's help, and God's provision—especially through the hours spent at uncle Irv's bedside and then later while interacting with family and guests at the memorial service and reception that followed. God comforted us. Jesus himself ministered strength to us through the scriptures, and through the fellowship of grieving together with other believers. This process happened not just through tears, but also through laughter as we remembered the good times. Ultimately, we hung on to the hope of the resurrection, of the eternal life that we can be sure of in Jesus.

This morning we are going to consider Mark 1:21-39, which takes us through a similar set of experiences in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. It includes 5 little stories—a 24-hour period in the life of Jesus—that reveal the power of God at work as expressed through his son, Jesus Christ. What amazes the people in these stories is the authority of Jesus. He demonstrates God's authority comfortably and confidently from the synagogue in public ministry, into the privacy of a home, and then back into the public arena for a very busy evening of healing, including casting out of demons. At the end, we will see him alone in the hills early in the morning talking with his heavenly Father. What will continually astound us in all five of these vignettes is the power base from which Jesus lived his life.

In addition to seeing his authority, we will be struck by his compassionate servant-heartedness, his tenderness, and his loving service to people. For the people of Capernaum, this is a *new* authority. Each scene emphasizes a different aspect of Jesus' spiritual authority. Remember from last week (Discovery Paper 4793) Jesus has already entered his second year of public ministry. Luke tells us in his gospel account that in his hometown synagogue, in Nazareth, Jesus read from a messianic prophecy (Isaiah 61)

and then declared that he was the fulfillment of that scripture. He was the long awaited Messiah. The people in his hometown reacted negatively, accused him of blasphemy and tried to murder him. But God helped him to escape and he walked 20 miles to the Sea of Galilee. It was there that he called his first four disciples to follow him—Peter, Andrew, James and John.

Capernaum, a town on the shore of Galilee, was home for these two sets of brothers. After being rejected from his own hometown, Jesus made Capernaum his base of operation for a ministry all through the Galilee region. The first six chapters of Mark's gospel focuses on that time of ministry in northern Israel.

Comprehensive authority in teaching; speaking *for* God

The first vignette is found in verses 21 and 22. Here we see Jesus' comprehensive teaching authority and his authority over religion, over the theological status quo of the time.

And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:21, 22)

First, remember that Jesus had just called his first disciples, the four fisherman, to follow him and we were struck with his spiritual authority over their lives; they immediately followed him in response to his call. Now the five of them attend synagogue worship on the Sabbath together and we see Jesus teaching the scriptures with power and authority. Mark doesn't tell us what the content of his teaching was, but he does tell us in verse 22 that he is *not* teaching as the scribes. The scribes were the teachers of the Old Testament law; they were "specialists" in all the nuances and subtleties of the Old Testament. The authority of scribes' was accepted as strictly human, traditional and historical. Mark tells us that Jesus was not teaching as the scribes so we can presume that he was not quoting human authority or speaking traditionally about keeping religious rules. Instead, Jesus was teaching and demonstrating a new spiritual authority that was directly from God.

Mark doesn't include as much of Jesus' teaching as the other gospel writers, but he does use the verb "to teach" sixteen different times when referring to Jesus' ministry, and he acknowledges Jesus as a teacher eleven different times. Mark has already given us a summary of the core of his message, what he called back in verse 14 "the gospel" or "good news" of God. The core message in verse 15 was, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." As we study Mark's account of the gospel, we are going to see different examples and applications of "the gospel of God" as taught by the divine authority of Jesus.

We are told in verse 22 that the people of Capernaum were *amazed* at the authority of his teaching. We already know where the authority comes from because we read about the baptism of Jesus and his being anointed in power by the Holy Spirit to be God's spokesman. But here, even this congregation in the synagogue recognized that Jesus is somebody who really does speak *for* God and doesn't just talk about God, like the scribes did. The scribes' talk was deadly in that it was dull, lifeless theologizing, and they were very cautious in wanting to maintain religious status quo. Jesus is a refreshing contrast to that. He brings the scriptures to life; his teaching is personal, real and it imparts life to the people who hear it.

Candy and I had that experience in the last few days—Jesus, the living Word, *still* speaking through the scriptures. We read the scriptures together at Irv's beside as he was dying. The scriptures were a great comfort to us all on Friday afternoon and evening. The scriptures were central to the time that we shared in the memorial service yesterday afternoon. The word of God brought insight, objectivity and comfort; it was truth that was self-authenticating, with amazing wisdom and reality. I was struck at how the

scriptures spoke into an overwhelmingly difficult situation. So, again, the good news is that Jesus, the living Word, still speaks when we allow his voice to be heard.

Command authority over evil, casting out demons

In the second vignette we see Jesus' command authority—his authority over evil:

And just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, "What do we have to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" And throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice, and came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." And immediately the news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee. (Mark 1:23-28)

The first thing to note in this vignette is Mark's sad commentary on the spiritual climate in Capernaum. A demonized man is worshiping in the synagogue and nobody seemed to notice until Jesus showed up. Until now, this man had no desire to be delivered from his spiritual bondage. Yet, Jesus' mere presence so disturbs the demon, which senses a threat to his very existence, that he cried out in fear "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" This confrontation is the first of a number of encounters that we're going to see, encounters which are essentially continuations of the initial satanic confrontation that Jesus had in the wilderness. The demon knew exactly who Jesus was, and he knew that his existence was in danger. In verse 24, the demon identifies Jesus' humanity calling him, "Jesus of Nazareth"; but then also acknowledges his divinity, "the Holy One of God."

The demon's recognition of Jesus authority is not a confession of faith, but is compelled by his great fear that Jesus will judge and condemn him to the place of final, complete destruction. In verse 25 Jesus very simply speaks two commands: "Be quiet," and "come out." There are no incantations, no complicated formula for exorcism. Satanic evil is powerless before the sovereign command of Jesus. And in verse 26, Mark tells us that the demon leaves with a cry or a shriek. It is really a death roar, very similar to the one Jesus cries out when he dies on the cross for our sin.

The people in the congregation were amazed, disturbed and alarmed, not only in response to Jesus' teaching, but also by his authority and mighty works—his authority over spiritual reality, and his authority over satanic evil.

Interestingly, the teaching and the miracle led them to wonder and marvel, but it did not lead them to *believe* in Jesus as Lord. It is as if they didn't even hear what the evil spirit had just proclaimed about him being the Holy One of God. Despite what they heard and saw, they remained blind to the true divine source of Jesus' power. No shrieking demon was going to reveal Jesus' divinity to them, as that full truth would only be revealed by the One who cries out in pain on the cross.

In retrospect, we have a tremendous advantage over that synagogue crowd in Capernaum. We know the whole story and how it ends. We know of the triumph over sin and death and hell that Jesus accomplished on the cross so we can embrace the power of the gospel to free people from the grip of evil no matter what form it takes, no matter how depersonalizing it is, or how debilitating it is. We can rejoice and celebrate as Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn *O For A Thousand Tongues*, that the redemptive authority of Jesus Christ "breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free." No

matter how evil enslaves us, no matter what the bondage or obsession, there remains freedom in the good news of Jesus.

Look again at verse 28: “And immediately the news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee.” The news about Jesus that was rapidly spreading that day was not news that the Messiah has come, but was news of Jesus’ fame as Galilee’s new healer, a new exorcist.

Compassionate authority over sickness

Beginning in verse 29 we move from the public tension, the conflict of that morning, to the account of a very quiet event in the home of Peter and Andrew. This time we see Jesus’ authority over sickness as he ministered gently, compassionately and sensitively.

And immediately after they came out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Jesus about her. And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them. (Mark 1:29-31)

It is early afternoon on the Sabbath and Peter and Andrew invite Jesus, and James and John home for some rest and a meal. It is a simple scene, but what it does for us is allow us a glimpse into the lives of Jesus’ disciples. They are real people—just like us. They have homes and families. They struggle with the same kinds of difficulties that we struggle with.

Previously we considered the call of these disciples and how Peter had immediately exercised faith to follow Jesus in discipleship. It had been radical obedience, a willingness to leave everything. Here, Jesus’ saving power comes into Peter’s own home. Even though Jesus demanded total commitment, he compassionately provides for Peter’s family, meeting needs for them.

In verse 30, Peter and Andrew tell Jesus that Peter’s mother-in-law is sick. Mark’s telling of this account suggests that the message was spoken in an apologetic tone, perhaps even revealing embarrassment that they brought Jesus into a home that was contagious with sickness. Jesus’ immediate response was to go to her. The Greek text makes it clear that he responded on his own initiative. This wasn’t a necessary miracle. The fever was not life-threatening, but was very common in the marshy areas of the Galilee; it probably would have run its course in a few days and she would have recovered without incident. But Jesus’ tender response shows his heart of compassion. He touches her and restores her to health instantaneously, and then she serves them. We can assume that her gracious service came from a grateful heart.

Notice the repetition of the words “they” and “them” in the text. In verse 20, *they* had come out of the synagogue, *they* came into the house, *they* spoke to him. In verse 31, she waited on *them*. Those plural pronouns include Jesus and his disciples—all of them together. Mark is making the point that Jesus and his men are now partners in ministry, partners in the gospel.

I also want to highlight this cameo of Peter’s mother-in-law because it is easy to miss a beautiful point that Mark makes concerning her. Her immediate serving of a meal to them proves that she is fully recovered. It also shows her spiritual responsiveness to Jesus. Her service, which may seem rather menial, is not insignificant. Mark used the same Greek word (“minister” or “serve”) earlier to describe the angelic ministry to Jesus after his temptation in the wilderness. Serving is a characteristic of discipleship. Throughout Mark’s gospel Jesus illustrates this fundamental role of service. The Messiah had in fact come to serve and that they too are called to serve in following him.

Jesus' female followers seem to grasp the need to give of themselves in service much more quickly than the men do. At the end of his gospel account, while describing the scene of Jesus' crucifixion, specifically the people at the cross, Mark says: "There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him..." (Mark 15:40, 41a). Although the women responded more quickly to Jesus' loving call to discipleship, both men and women alike are called into the ministry of service. But it is a woman, Peter's mother-in-law, who is the first person in Mark's gospel to demonstrate loving sacrifice and service in response to Jesus' compassionate authority and power.

Complete authority over demonic communication

The next scene takes place at sundown and shows us Jesus' complete authority, not just over evil and sickness and suffering, but also over demonic communication:

When evening came, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. And the whole city had gathered at the door. And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was. (Mark 1:32-34)

The Sabbath had ended at sundown and Mark tells us the whole city, including people in the neighboring areas of Galilee, have surrounded the house and are pounding on Peter's door. The language is very vivid. There are sick people and demon-possessed people who are brought to Jesus, as the new healer and exorcist in town, based on the report from the synagogue that morning. They don't recognize him as the "Holy One of God," but as a miracle worker. Even though the people bring issues of pain and suffering, not repentance of sin or belief in the good news of Jesus Christ, Jesus heals them anyway out of love and compassionate concern for their suffering. He casts out demons because they have no right to dominate and control human life or to cause misery and suffering. Jesus ministers late into that evening, and presumably at great personal cost.

To appreciate the personal toll this must have had on Jesus, consider the story in chapter 5 about Jesus healing a woman with chronic bleeding. Mark tells us that this woman came up behind Jesus to touch him and be healed. Upon merely touching Jesus' robe, he immediately felt the power go out of him so there was clearly a great personal cost involved in Jesus' ministry of healing. Given all the work Jesus was doing on this particular Sabbath, it was probably a draining experience—physically, emotionally and spiritually.

In verse 34, we are told that Jesus "did not permit the demons to speak," that he silenced demonic testimony to his deity, to his Messianic identity. Such statements by these demons, even though accurate, are nothing more than simply statements of empirical fact. The recognition of the presence of Christ by the demons does not signify moral or spiritual transformation. It is merely a grudging acceptance of God as an unwelcome reality.

Again, earlier this week as Candy and I drove to Fresno, unaware of how sick and close to death Uncle Irv was, we prayed for his healing and recovery. At some point in our lives there are situations in which we cry out for God's physical, healing touch. People who desire healing today are very much like the people of Capernaum. Often we are more interested in asking Jesus to heal us and make our lives better than in accepting Jesus' true purpose and surrendering to him. But Jesus, in his own ministry and teaching, constantly downplayed physical healing. It is of greater importance for men and women to be

spiritually healed. That can only occur as we invite Jesus to become Lord of our lives, as he saves us from sin, as he saves us from eternal death.

Contemplative authority over distractions, human urgency

In these verses, approximately 16 hours have transpired in one Sabbath day of Jesus' life. We've seen his wisdom and power in sharing the scriptures. We've seen his calm availability in difficult situations. We've seen his heart of compassion in healing a demoniac, Peter's feverish mother, and then all the sick and demonized people that came to him that evening. One thing we have not seen in Jesus is any sense of impatience, urgency, drivenness, or panic. He stays calm and focused throughout the whole day. How does he do it? We see the answer in next few verses. Again, we see the authority of Jesus, but this time it's prayerful, contemplative authority over distraction from his primary calling and mission. It's authority over the tyranny of the urgent:

In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. Simon and his companions searched for Him; they found Him, and said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." He said to them, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for." And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons. (Mark 1:35-39)

You would think Jesus would have a right to a full night's sleep after such a busy, demanding Sabbath. But the text tells us that he awoke early, probably as early as 3 a.m., to go to a place in the hills to be alone with his heavenly Father.

The phrase, "secluded (or lonely) place" in verse 35 is the same word for "wilderness," which Mark used earlier to describe the place where the forerunner, John the Baptist, would proclaim to the people the coming of Jesus. The same word is also used to describe the place where John was baptizing people, including Jesus, and then again where Jesus spent 40 days being confronted by Satan in temptation. It's the place where God and Satan do battle over spiritual reality—over life and death, over eternal life. This scene of Jesus being alone with his Father recalls the passage quoted at the beginning of this sermon from Isaiah where a messianic servant is seen conferring early in the morning with his Father:

The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples,
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.
He awakens Me morning by morning,
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.
The Lord GOD has opened My ear;
And I was not disobedient
Nor did I turn back. (Isaiah 50:4, 5)

Jesus' authority and strength came through prayer. Note that Mark makes a connection with Jesus' power over illness and evil with prayerful seclusion; being alone with his Father. That is a consistent pattern with Jesus when you read the gospels: he prays alone, he prays at night, he prays at times of crisis and before big decisions; he prays all night before he chooses the twelve disciples to be apostles; he prays alone at night after the execution of his cousin, John the Baptist; and lastly, he prays at night in the garden of Gethsemane, agonizing with his Father over what is to come. Here, when he turns to his Father, the crisis is the clamoring, shallow and superficial response of the people of Capernaum. Their only interest in him is how he can heal them and what he can do to make their lives better.

In this lonely, wilderness-like place Jesus meets temptation as revealed in verses 36 and 37. The text

says that Peter and his companions hunt Jesus down. They barge into his time of prayer and confront him, challenging him, saying, “Everybody is looking for you!” in a demanding tone. They want him to return to the scene of yesterday’s personal triumphs to where he now has this tremendous following—“Let’s go back and pick up where we left off last night.”

This is not what Jesus had in mind when he called these men to follow him. We see, for the first time in Mark’s gospel, but certainly not the last, that the disciples don’t understand his mission. The people in Capernaum are looking for him because of the miracles, not because of his teaching and message. But here, the disciples also have been swept up into the frenzy, wanting to accommodate the recent surge in popularity.

Today, this might look like creating a popular Christian attraction, with healing services and perhaps a Christian band to open the service. On the extreme would be a Capernaum healing theme park, and at the very least the establishment of a charitable non-profit, *The Capernaum Project*. We are much like the disciples, desiring to capitalize on recent popular uprising, to quickly pick up where they left off and wanting to make it better, stronger and more effective.

Jesus’ resolve to move on to other towns comes from understanding his ministry: “I came to preach the gospel of God” (v. 15). Jesus’ purpose was not to heal as many people as possible, but to speak truth, to confront them with God’s claim on their lives. For Jesus, truth-speaking took priority over physical healing. But his confident authority in making this decision to move on and continue his preaching didn’t come from him. It came from his heavenly Father. In chapter 5 of John’s gospel, the crowds are challenging him, “By what authority do you say these things?” as they challenge his authority to heal, to perform miracles. They go so far as to say that it must be Satan at work through him, how else could he drive out demons? Yet, in John 5:19 Jesus himself offers this explanation for his work of miracles:

“Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel.” (John 5:19, 20)

Jesus stresses this because he wants his disciples to understand that we live out our Christian life in exactly the same way he does. In the intimacy of the upper room during the last Passover meal the night of his betrayal, he tells his disciples:

“Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (John 14:12, 13)

We can live our lives with the same power and authority that Jesus demonstrated in Capernaum and throughout Galilee. Through the Lord we too can respond with contemplative authority to the normal demands of life and to the extraordinary crises we may encounter. The emotional and spiritual resources to cope with life must come from our reliance upon his work within us. The power to live the Christian life doesn’t come from us trying to do our best for God. It comes only from him. He is the One who empowers us moment-by-moment as we follow him, as we listen to him, and as we grow in obedience to him. As Jesus said, the Father is at work in the Son, and the Son is at work in us.

That is why Jesus was alone with his Father in the wilderness. He was praying for direction and he was praying for empowerment as he planned to go to these other towns in the region to minister. What was

true for Jesus is certainly true for us. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing. And although God knows all of our needs, praying for them changes our attitude from complaint to praise, and enables us to participate in God's personal plans for our lives. That's why Jesus prayed and that's why we are called to the same kind of intimate dependence on our heavenly Father.

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Mark 1:21-39

Fourth Message

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