

CHRIST, CAPERNAUM, AND THE CONFLICT Mark 1:21-28

Thus far we have been studying how Mark presented the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, - His baptism and temptations. He now begins recounting the ministry events commencing with this incident that took place in the synagogue in Capernaum. The overriding feature he presents is that Jesus Christ, - the Son of God, the new King, the Messiah, - must demonstrate His power against the ruler of this world. Christ must be able to break the bondage Satan and his kingdom holds over the souls of sinners. He must have power over all the evil forces that exist ... and so Mark begins by telling us that Jesus *has* this authority.

We begin in Capernaum which is one of the highlights of visiting the region of the Sea of Galilee. It is located on the north-western shore and it is full of history. When you visit it today you will see the well-maintained ruins of the ancient town, with its synagogue said to have been built on the synagogue Jesus visited. Capernaum means "the village of Nahum", - it is not thought, however, to be with reference to the prophet Nahum of the Old Testament. Nahum simply means "comfort", so this was a "village of comfort".

It actually became the largest city on the lake because people went through Capernaum going north, south, east, and west. It had a Roman garrison. It had a customs tax office for the great volume of trade that passed through it. With all its productivity, it was a kind of Galilean Vanity Fair. It belonged to the region over which the evil Herod Antipas ruled, ... of course, he was the Herod who oversaw the executions of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Despite being such a sinful place, this was the town where Jesus set up His headquarters. It wasn't where He came from, - He came from Nazareth, but the first time He preached in the synagogue in Nazareth they tried to throw Him off a cliff. So He did much of His work in Galilee from Capernaum.

Capernaum was, - and still is, - a beautiful place. It is a very small but very pretty stony shore ... the water is as clear as crystal, - it *is* very beautiful. However, because of the kind of traffic from across the region it *was* a very sinful place because it consisted of a wide variety of worldly pursuits. It was far away from the "holy" and more strict influences of the Pharisees in Jerusalem ... and Herod's input to Capernaum wouldn't have helped its spirituality! Its sinfulness was referred to in Mt. 11:23 *And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.* ²⁴ *But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee. ... No wonder the demons wanted Jesus out of 'their' city!*

And here is Jesus from Nazareth, - a city up in the hills, 1300 feet *above* sea level, - and He comes down to Capernaum, - 690 feet *below* sea level. And, having arrived there, He entered the synagogue and taught on the Sabbath day, as His custom was (Lk. 4:16).

A synagogue in ancient times was a local meeting place. The word is also translated in Acts 13:42 as the ‘congregation’, and in Acts 19:32,39,41; Heb. 12:23 and James 2:2 as ‘assembly’. There were no synagogues in the Old Testament for there was the temple in Jerusalem. Back in those days, the priests went from the temple throughout the land of Israel, but there is no mention of any such thing as a synagogue in the Old Testament. The synagogues began during the Babylonian captivity when Israel was taken from their own land in 586 BC. Because they did not have their temple in Babylon, they met in small groups, and the Greek word συναγωγή is two words combined that simply means “bringing together”. That was how they met during the seventy years of captivity.

When they returned to Jerusalem with Nehemiah they brought the recently-formed tradition of the synagogue back with them. During the time of Jesus, for instance, according to the Talmud (Jewish Rabbinical writings that explained the Old Testament Scriptures from the point of view of the rabbis) there were five hundred synagogues in Jerusalem. They were places of instruction where the Law was read and taught on the Sabbath. During the week the synagogues often served as schools and also courtrooms. They were a very important central part of the community ... and Josephus, the Jewish historian, recorded about 240 towns and villages in Galilee and they all had their own synagogue. The ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum today wasn't the synagogue Jesus preached in, but archaeologists believe it *was* built *upon* that synagogue. It is about the size of our church hall, ... and that was where Jesus preached.

Each synagogue had to have at least ten men, one of whom was the appointed ‘ruler’, someone who organised all the activities. It had ‘elders’ who took charge of the reading and teaching of the Law ... unless there was a visiting rabbi, - like in the case of Jesus, - who would do that.

So, there is a clear picture developing here. The people are met in the synagogue on the Sabbath, in a sinful town like Capernaum, and Jesus enters. In the midst of these people He had taken upon Himself *the form of a servant* (Phil. 2:7), in obedience to His Father's will.

Now remember, He came from the local area, - from Nazareth, just a few miles away, - and this carpenter-turned-rabbi was invited by the ruling elder to the front to speak. In the will of God, Jesus began to put into practice the purpose for why He came to this world ... And when He spoke, there was a hush across the synagogue congregation. What He said and how He said it *astonished* (v.22) the people because He, - a local Man from the hills, - spoke with such authority and power.

There was no music, no singing and no sacrifice ... *just* Jesus ... and there was such silence and amazement upon everyone gathered! It would have been 'packed' inside and out. He was quickly becoming an 'attraction' throughout the region. People wanted to see and listen and hear what He was saying and doing. He was a local phenomenon! In that place, they had never heard anyone read the Word of God the way Jesus read it. ... They had never heard anyone expound it in the way He did

Even the very way He *spoke* the truth was as **One that had authority, and not as the scribes** (Mk. 1:22). His actions *demonstrated* the truth flowing through Him. Every word He said came with power. He was the truth He was speaking to them about! He presented to them the Word of God, - those of us who are in the pulpit, if we want to follow the example of Christ, we shall only present the Word of God. It is our remit to preach the Word in the power of God. When Jesus spoke He was in charge, He was in control. He had *authority*, ἐξουσία. It is the same word that is used by Paul in Col. 2:10 to describe Him as **the head of all principality and power**.

His whole conduct as He stood there in front of the congregation ... His demeanour ... the expressions on His face ... His dominance overflowed from the deep well of His soul. Here was *the Truth preaching the truth* to these sinful people, as never they had heard it before! He spoke with Heaven's authority, as the Holy Spirit confronted that congregation.

It wasn't anything like the scribes, and how they normally stood at the front of the synagogue! The scribes were an austere group who traced their origins back to the time of Ezra ... According to Ezra chapter seven, Ezra was the first 'scribe' who read the Law and explained it to the people (cf. Neh. 8:1,4,9). So that's where the scribes claimed the source of their authority. Remember also most people were illiterate, and even if they could read they had no copies of the Scriptures as we do. So the scribes, - with the title of 'rabbi', - came each week, - on the Sabbath, - to read and to give their explanation in the synagogue.

The clear implication, though, is that *they* did not speak with any meaningful authority. They went through the custom and tradition. They quoted coldly and without any feeling from the Targum, and the Mishnah, the Baraita, the Gemara, the Halakha and Aggadah ... and all the ancient classical writings of the scribes. They prided themselves in their knowledge ... whereas Jesus read and preached from the Scriptures. Here is how Luke records Jesus conducted synagogue worship, Lk. 4:14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. ¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all. ¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. ¹⁷ And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord [*is*] upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, ¹⁹ To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. ²⁰ And he closed the book, and he gave [*it*] again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him ... They had never heard anything like Him before! He preached straight into the hearts of these people.

Yes, they were ordinary men and women, no ‘airs and graces’, simple folk that Sabbath-by-Sabbath attended the synagogue ... and Jesus preached to them the only message that has been passed on to us to preach, namely, I Cor. 1:23 we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

The pulpit is not the place to preach politics; neither is it the place to present personalities; nor is it the place to teach social ethics ... the pulpit is where Christ alone is to be preached ... No matter where you read from in Scripture, it speaks about Jesus ... and the sole authority given to any man in the pulpit is to preach Christ only. ...

And these people were ‘astonished’ and amazed (ἐκπλήσσω), the word means “to strike a person out of his/her senses by the strongest of feelings”. ... These people were overwhelmed by Jesus! They had never met or heard the likes of Him before.

Notice, however, while the people were *astonished* (v.22,27), the demons were *terrified* ... the demons panicked! ... What’s the reason behind the difference between the people being astonished and the demons being terrified? Simply this, the people did not yet know Who Jesus was, but the demons did! ...

One demon *cried out* (ἀνακράζω, ‘screamed’) on behalf of the others, - only one of them was given leave by God to speak, - they weren’t all permitted ... just one, and he ‘cried out’, v.24 *Saying, Let [us] alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.* They were terrified because they knew Who Jesus was! They were the only ones who knew Him in that synagogue! They knew the mighty power He possessed because they had known Him since they dwelt in Heaven as holy angels before they rebelled. They had known Him when in eternity they stood around His throne ... before they had followed Lucifer into rebellion. ... They knew about the Lake of Fire that is their eternal destiny. They know that one day this same Jesus Christ will cast them into Hell forever, - yes, they knew *exactly* Who Jesus was! By the way, here is the first testimony in the Gospel of Mark to the identity of the Saviour ... and it comes from a demon!

... And what terrified them? That is a simple question to answer ... it was the truth! The devil and his kingdom are enemies of the truth of God. He hates the Word of God for He knows it is infallible, inerrant, inspired and awesomely powerful. ... And the devil is so intent on suppressing and perverting the truth today. He fills the minds of law-making institutions with laws that legislate against His truth. He places into pulpits men and women who do not know the truth and they lead many astray. He has flooded the nations with his lies and deception, and it often seems as if we are back *in those days [when] there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes* (Judges 21:25).

The Truth of God flies in the face of the devil and his demons that spread false doctrines and false religions. The devil and his demons *hide* in religion. They use it as a breeding-ground for more lies and deceit to draw people away from God, and from the truth Who is the Lord Jesus Christ. We are warned that Satan comes as an angel of light and he works in churches and he disseminates his error from pulpits, - many of Paul’s epistles are testimony to the harm the devil was doing among God’s people, as he attacked the truth. ... The demons had developed such a false system of religion that was sadly so successful throughout the land, and it was holding people captive.

And so it continues today ... One of the most beautiful buildings you could ever visit is the ornate splendour of St. Peter’s in Rome. When you come through the massive entrance you have a great statue of the apostle himself. People are bowing down before it with tears in their eyes, they are kissing its feet, they are lighting their candles, and they are praying in an almost trance-like state ...

The idolatry is overwhelming! It is so sad. Satan is as an angel of light to the poor people who are blinded to the truth by his deceit.

Similarly, you enter the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and all the faithful are praying on their mats facing towards Mecca. ... Once again, a doctrine of demons. Demons *thrive* in false religion! ... You enter the area in Jerusalem of the Western Wall, - the last remnant of King Solomon's temple. ... And you see the saddest sight of God's ancient people having been turned away from worshipping Him in the manner presented by Moses and the prophets ... the "god of this world" has blinded their eyes to the truth ... and he had similarly blinded the eyes of the congregation in Capernaum because sitting amongst those dear people were the very agents of Hell! ... Demons began in Heaven where they were created as angels ... but they were cast out and sent into this world ... They know about God, and they know about His Son, and they know about His glory and His power ... but sadly, their cunning deception thrives in many religious establishments throughout our nation and our world.

It is not a popular thing to say, but they are busy, and they are getting busier because they know the time of Christ's return is drawing closer. On that day when Christ comes back to this earth as King and Judge, He is going to take them along with their master Satan, and He is going to cast them into the bottomless pit, shut them up and bind them ... He is going to put a seal on them so they will not deceive the nations for a thousand years! That is the power our Saviour possesses ... and He is about to 'take on' these demons in Capernaum! ... Satan is a liar and a deceiver, and He is out to do battle with God's people and God's purposes. He wants to catch the unsuspecting out and kill their eternal souls ... and these people in the synagogue in Capernaum were caught in his grip.

The people in the synagogue, of course, didn't know the demons were there, ... that's because the demons were covering and hiding themselves ... but that is how they do their evil master's work. They don't walk around with horns sticking out of their heads, or with a fork in their hands, and a long tail. And something else that is very important ... This account in Capernaum shows us that demons go to church ... in fact, they *thrive* in churches! Satan and his angels are transformed as 'angels of light', - ... like the Flatterer in *Pilgrim's Progress*. He pretends to belong to the people of God, while all the time he is working hard to draw them away from the Kingdom, using his religious trickery. ...

He introduces a form of worship that contradicts the holiness of God ... that confronts the spirit of reverence required in the presence of the Almighty. He ‘chips away’ at God’s Word, and introduces doubt and confusion about what it says. ... But here, Jesus exposed the demons *and* He demonstrated His power over them! In fact, according to I John 3:8, [For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.](#)

And here is something we need to be concerned about and to take note of ... The demons do not attack Jesus during His ministry, instead they attack the souls of sinners. ... Yes, the demons attack the people through their insidious chicanery, but the demons cannot attack Jesus! Nor can they hide from Him ... and His presence even terrorises them. They despise His authority, - they can’t stand it ... but they can’t stop it! They can’t stand *Him*, Christ! And that is why the preaching concerning our Saviour and Lord is the most powerful message we can articulate to a lost world. ... And it is the same message we must preach wherever we go! In Jesus we have the only sacrifice for our sins, - He became our Substitute who paid the penalty for we don’t have what is necessary to pay it ... and also, He demonstrated His power to destroy the grip of Satan and His demons in order to rescue us. “He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.” The truth of God *crushes* the lies of Satan. We have already seen it in the temptations ... the devil is no match for Jesus ... And what does that mean to you and me? It means, [Rom. 8:37 in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.](#)

And what it also means ... on the other hand, is that to neglect this truth is to open ourselves to the possibility, - even probability, - of being deceived by the devil. “Oh, it will never happen to me!” ... That’s what Peter said before he denied Jesus! ... And something else, when you don’t present the truth of God you are ‘having a hand’ in condemning sinners to eternal bondage, [Rom. 10:14 How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?](#) The forces of Hell have a deadly fear of the truth, - they hate the Gospel and they hate the Word of God ... They don’t want it preached ... Why? ... because the devil has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts (Jn. 12:40). Men by nature hate the Bible for it teaches them what they don’t want to hear. They hate the liberating message of the Gospel of God’s work of salvation ... and they despise the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ that He is the only Saviour from sin. ... The devil doesn’t want to hear any of it!

So, that is the background to what was happening in Capernaum. The battle is on. The Kingdom has arrived because the King has come ... More than at any other time throughout history, to meet the pressure of Jesus' presence, the devil increased his activities ... as he will do, - and is doing, - in these present days preceding the Lord's return. The demons didn't want to expose themselves, - they wanted to do as they always had done ... work quietly and deceitfully in the background but they couldn't avoid Jesus.

We are on the victory side! ... Even in these days when our message is proving so difficult to 'get across' ... the gates of Hell will *never* prevail against the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ! ... *Be sure of it!*

"Jesus! the Name high over all, In hell or earth or sky; Angels and men before it fall, And devils fear and fly." ... Isn't it good to be saved? Just think of it though, you would never have reached out for Jesus if He had not reached out in grace for you first! You are His because of Calvary, - He purchased you to be His own on the cross. That was where He shed His blood to purchase you.

What if you are like these religious people in the synagogue at Capernaum? He is being presented to you but as yet you don't know Him. We are not here preaching a religion or a philosophy ... we are preaching a relationship and a Person, no less than the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have not as yet believed, believe in Him today. But it is not even enough to believe either, - the devil believes, and the demons believe, but they fear and tremble because their place is already reserved in the Lake of Fire in Hell. They will *never* believe, but you *need* to believe *and to run to Jesus*, confessing your sin and crying out to Him to be saved ... and He will pick you up *out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay* (Ps. 40:2), and He will set your feet upon the rock of His salvation ... and He will give you a new song, - a good old-fashioned *redemption* song!

Time has gone and yet, - praise God, - we are still in the day of grace. May God bless our study of His Word today, and may He achieve all His purposes among us for His everlasting praise and glory! Amen.