

Capernaum

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, was raised and worked for a time in Nazareth, the home of Joseph and Mary, and then, when He began His public ministry, He moved to a town on the Sea of Galilee called Capernaum. We are told that Jesus moved to Capernaum in Matthew 4:13. This was also the home of Peter and Andrew, James and John, the four fishermen who were the first disciples that Jesus called to be with Him.

Very early on in Christian history, one house in this town was singled out for special attention. It was an ordinary house for the time, a little bit larger than most of the others, but something had happened in that house that made it different than the rest. As excavators worked their way through the rooms they found that the main room of the house had been plastered over, from floor to ceiling, sometime around the middle of the first century - in other words, within a few years of Jesus' death and resurrection. At about the same time, the household cooking pots and bowls had been replaced with large storage jars and oil lamps. During the centuries that followed, this plastered room had been renovated and made into the central hall of a church and more than a hundred graffiti were scratched into the walls of this building, including phrases like "Kyrie Eleison", "Lord have mercy" and etchings of a cross, or, in one case, a boat.

In the fifth century, a new church was built over the old one, in the form of what's called an octagonal martyrium which is an eight-sided building that the early church would sometimes erect on top of an important site, such as this one, very likely the home of a man named Peter, a home where Jesus of Nazareth once lived.

Now, let's look at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in this town that He called home for awhile:

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at His teaching, because He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the holy one of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching - and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey Him." News about Him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

(Mark 1:21-28)

Satan knew who Jesus was and he knew where Jesus was. After His baptism, the Spirit had led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and had defeated him in that encounter. That defeat was felt by Satan's servants, the demonic realm which the Bible often refers to as "evil spirits". So when Jesus walked into the synagogue in Capernaum and started to teach, the spirit that was keeping one man there in bondage

couldn't keep quiet. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the holy one of God!"

The evil powers knew who Jesus was and they either knew or strongly suspected that His presence was not good news for them or for their designs against God's purposes. The question, "Have you come to destroy us?" tells us that they suspected Jesus' agenda. When something like that happens in a service, when a demon decides to make his presence known and cause a disturbance, that presence tends to take away from anything else that was going on at the time. Jesus knew this and moved quickly to put it to a stop: "Be quiet - come out of him!" And the demonic spirit, which thrives on fear, shook the man violently and then made a horrible shrieking sound as he obeyed Jesus' command.

When it's gone, things start to return to normal - but what's normal now? The people in the congregation who have gathered for synagogue worship are stunned by what they've just witnessed. "A new teaching, and with authority!" they exclaim and then quickly spread the word throughout the region about what they had seen that day. Soon all the Galilee had heard about the preacher from Nazareth. Something new has come to our area, something different than anything we have experienced before - let's go find out about it.

There are two things that happen in this passage that stir a reaction from the people in the synagogue. The first is that Jesus teaches them and the second is this deliverance of the man who is possessed by an evil spirit. The response of the people is the same in both cases. In the first, they are amazed at Jesus' teaching because He taught with authority, not like the teachers of the law. In the second, they are amazed that Jesus can give orders to demons and they obey Him. Jesus is launching a ministry among the country folk up north from Judea, and He leaves them stunned, amazed, incredulous. They are asking, "What did we just see and who is this man who has such authority in His teaching and in commanding the evil spirits?"

Now, let's ask the question, what is Jesus doing? Remember how He started His ministry? Right before Jesus called the four fishermen, He proclaimed this good news, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." And now in the synagogue Jesus is demonstrating what it looks like when God is reigning as King among His people - Satan and his demonic forces are powerless to stand against Him. The people are amazed because they have not experienced this kind of power and authority in confronting evil spirits before. Jesus has established among the Jews of Capernaum that He is representing God's Kingdom in a powerful new way.

Well, actions like that have consequences and we read about some of the results of that synagogue encounter in the verses that follow:

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So He went to her, took her hand and helped her up.

*The fever left her and she began to wait on them.
That evening, after sunset, the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but He would not let the demons speak because they knew who He was. (1:29-32)*

Simon, who would soon be called Peter, was married and, he and his family looked after his wife's mother - we're not told if his father was still living or not. Jesus found out that she was in bed with a fever and so He went to her room, took her by the hand and helped her get up - and at that moment she was made well.

So, not only does the arrival of God's Kingdom mean that evil spirits are overcome - it also means that sickness and disease are defeated enemies. When the word about this first healing miracle gets out, the expected happens - people line up at the door of Peter's house looking for their miracle. Notice that the text says that this took place after sunset - the Sabbath Day starts at sunset of one day and ends at sunset of the next, so the people waited until Sabbath was over, then began lining up, waiting for Jesus to deliver or to heal them. And it wasn't just one or two - the text tells us that the whole town was there. There was so much need and so few resources to meet those needs, that when someone with power and authority came to town, everyone showed up to have their needs met. Jesus healed many with a variety of medical conditions and He also delivered many people from the oppression of evil spirits.

Were there still needs that didn't get met that day? Yes, and we'll see that clearly in a few verses ahead. But something wonderful had been established in that seaside town during that Sabbath and the evening that followed it. It was the breakthrough that the prophet Isaiah had spoken of centuries earlier:

In the past He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan -

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light

On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

(Isaiah 9:1,2)

All this healing and deliverance was witness to the great light that was prophesied to a people who were walking in darkness. Jesus had brought the reign of God to the Galilee and a light had dawned. And when things are going great, you can expect a surprise just around the corner and it comes in the next verses:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for Him, and when they found him, they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for You!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else -- to the nearby villages -- so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (1:35-39)

Jesus didn't seem to fully grasp the opportunity that was there in Capernaum. People had been lining up at the door to see Him and there were more of them with needs that He could meet and they were looking for Him now. Even in the morning of the day after Sabbath, when you'd think people would have other things to attend to, the disciples were able to say to Jesus, "Everyone is looking for You!" This is an opportunity for ministry like nothing else - how could you leave it and move on?

But Jesus had been up since it was still dark and had been talking to His Father and His Father had told Him that He should preach to some other villages as well, that it was time to move on. Now, don't you wonder why the Father would have told Jesus to move on past the needs of people who were sick and demonized and go somewhere else? Let's look at this for a couple of minutes and decide if that strategy would have met the objectives that the Father had for Jesus' ministry.

1. It would have changed Jesus' ministry from "the Kingdom is coming near you", to "Come to Capernaum to see the Kingdom at work". We humans tend to think about place. Just in the past 20-30 years, we've thought about God's activity being in places like Brownsville in Florida, or Toronto Airport Vineyard or in Kansas City. And so we go to those places to experience God, to receive blessing from Him, or maybe just to see what the whole thing is about. We read in Matthew's gospel that news about Jesus spread all over Syria and that people brought others to Him who were demonized, who were suffering severe pain, who were paralyzed, who were having seizures, and He healed them ... and that was when Jesus was traveling throughout Galilee. Imagine if He had set up shop in Capernaum and just healed people from that place - it would quickly change from being, "I'm coming to you" to "You need to come to Me". It would change Jesus' message from "The Kingdom of God is near", to "The Kingdom of God is in Capernaum".
2. The second thing that strikes me about this strategy is that it changes Jesus' ministry from being about revealing the Father, communicating the character of God, His grace and compassion, to being about providing a supernatural health care system for those who could get to Galilee. The focus moves from being about God's power at work in Jesus to being about the needs of people, of every person. And what happens when people are healed, when they start to feel better? Some people, like Peter's mother-in-law, get up and start serving. But others simply move on with their life, grateful to be feeling better, but not grateful enough to change their lives, to start living for the glory of God instead of living for their own comfort or happiness. Like the ten lepers that Jesus healed on one occasion - when they realized they had been healed, only one of them came back to say thank-you to Jesus. The rest just wanted to move on with their lives. I remember hearing someone speaking once about the challenge of receiving divine healing. While it's wonderful to be feeling better, there is a sense of obligation that comes from the knowledge that the God of Creation has touched your physical body and made you well. What are you going to do with that? How is it going to change your life from now on? Some people are extremely uncomfortable with this realization and want to run away from it.
3. The third way in which the Capernaum Strategy would change Jesus' ministry is that it would become "big and impersonal" rather than "intimate, relational and informal". You could see the disciples trying to fix the place up to deal with long lineups. You

could see them meeting to discuss how to better facilitate food services and bathroom breaks, getting people to share personal testimonies that they could use in their advertising campaigns, and all sorts of things that wouldn't be necessary if Jesus was just walking through places like Nazareth and Nain, Cana and Chorazin.

The point of all this is that we value success, the big accomplishments, making the splash. Jesus valued the people and the opportunity to both heal them and to begin to build relationship with them. He didn't come to this earth to make everyone physically well and cleaned up from demonic activity and then leave them as if they were "good to go" for the next few hundred years. These are ongoing areas of need. But what healing people provided was an opportunity to show God's power and God's compassion to people who were in a place of desperate need. It was a door-opening event that prepared people to receive God's presence in all the other areas of life as well - in areas of sin, in broken relationships and in the big need people had which was to know God and to worship Him with whole hearts. The goal wasn't healing - the goal was advancing God's Kingdom, but healing made a way for that to happen, not just in the lives of those Jesus healed, but in the lives of the many family and friends and onlookers who witnessed the power of Jesus' ministry.

Let's take a look at some application points to end up:

1. When we pray for healing or for deliverance for people, we are praying for something that is on God's heart. The gospels repeatedly tell us that Jesus was moved with compassion when He was about to heal a person, so when we pray out of compassion, out of a desire to see someone made well, set free, we are praying in line with God's character and Kingdom will. The results are up to Him, but the willingness to pray is always a good thing.
2. The second application comes out of Jesus' encounter with the evil spirit in the first story we read today and that is that we follow Jesus' example. Notice that Jesus didn't allow the demons to speak because they knew who He was. Why not let them tell the world who He was, then? Because His identity and His ministry was not dependent on the testimony of lying spirits who could never be trusted, even if they did know who Jesus was. His ministry was based only on the Father's approval and the Father's testimony about Him. The application is that we should never be in awe of Satan's power or the presence of demons in someone's life. We should take authority in the Name and through the blood of Jesus and command the evil spirit to keep silent and to leave. Silence robs them of the chance to instill greater fear in the hearts of those present.
3. The big application from this passage is that we aren't trying to copy the game plan the world has set for us - the plan of bigness that we tend to equate with "success". Jesus wasn't about building the empire, building the big ministry center in Capernaum, but about hearing and obeying the call of His Father ... on a daily basis. The Father called Him to the little people, the small towns and villages of Galilee. He called Him to minister to people who were despised, like the woman at the well in Samaria, and with people who had been rejected, like Levi the tax collector. He called Jesus to bring the Kingdom to people, with a message of hope, with the power of healing and deliverance and with the kind of compassion and grace that brings

freedom and forgiveness. That's our ministry, too. We are called by God to love people, not people in general, but specific people, the ones God brings into our lives. We're called to share good news, to heal the sick, to repair broken hearts and lives through the love and grace that we have been given. Jesus tells us the same thing He told His disciples: "Freely you have received, freely give." It's not about proving that we're better or smarter or more successful than somebody else, but that we are willing to love the ones the Father gives us, in Jesus' Name, and for His sake.