

# Jesus' Ministry of Exorcism

📖 Luke 4:31-37

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Last time we saw Luke's introduction to Jesus' teaching ministry and its reception in Luke 4:14-30. It indicates that initially Jesus rose in popularity, but ultimately He would be rejected and killed. Luke 4:14-15 are transitional verses that show Jesus' initial rise in popularity. In verse 14, after His baptism and temptations, He returned to the Galilee, empowered by the Spirit for His ministry. His fame spread throughout all the surrounding district. In verse 15, He began teaching in their synagogues and was glorified by all. Evidently, He was a popular Bible teacher. But in Luke 4:16-30 His popularity was short-lived. In verse 16 He came to His hometown of Nazareth; and as was His custom He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath. After the reading of the Torah it came time for the reading of the Prophets and He stood to read. In verse 17, the attendant handed Him the scroll of Isaiah and He opened it on a table and unrolled it until He found the place He wanted to read from, Isa 61. He then read one and a half verses, far less than the customary twenty-one verses. What He read was, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are oppressed, To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." These verses were understood by the rabbis to be Messianic. They proclaimed what only Messiah could do. When finishing this short reading, verse 20 says He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. This meant He was ready to give commentary on these verses. All eyes were fixed on Him, in part, because He did not read the customary twenty-one verses, but also in part, because they wanted to hear His commentary. In verse 21 He began by saying, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Isa 61:1-2a were fulfilled that day; Isa 61:2b-3 were not fulfilled that day. So only half of the prophecy was fulfilled that day. And in explaining this He evidently elaborated to some extent so that in verse 22, all were testifying good of Him, and were amazed at the gracious words which were falling from His lips. Despite their amazement they were not convinced He was the Messiah because He had common origins. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" In their mind, Joseph's son could not be the Messiah because Joseph was just a common man. So His son must also be common. In other words, they heard Jesus claim to be the Messiah and they heard His gracious words which proved He was the Messiah, but they rejected that He was the Messiah. And in verse 23, Jesus knew these things and so He quoted to them a parable. No doubt you will quote this parable to Me, "Physician, heal yourself!" If one really were a physician all he would have to do was prove it by healing himself. By parallel, what

they are saying to Jesus was, "If you really are the Messiah, prove it by doing miracles here in your hometown. We heard that you have done them in Capernaum, so if you are who you claim to be, do them now and prove it to us. But Jesus knew that would not convince them. So He said, in verse 24, "no prophet is welcome in his hometown." No one famous is ever welcome in their hometown. Most people are jealous of people from their hometown who become famous. The Nazareans were the same as most people. They didn't like it that a common local had become famous throughout the Galilee so they sought to mock Him. But Jesus was who He was and He knew they were in rejection and unbelief, so in vv 25-27 He compares them to two previous generations of Israel that were also in rejection and unbelief and how God refused to send blessing upon Israel because of their unbelief, and instead sent blessing upon Gentiles. The first example is vv 25-26, from the days of Elijah there was a great famine upon all the land and there were many widows who needed help from God in Israel, but God didn't send Elijah to any of them, but instead to a widow of Zarephath. Then in verse 27, the second example is from the days of Elisha. Then there were many lepers in the land of Israel but none of them was cleansed because of their unbelief, but instead He cleansed Naaman the Syrian. The point was that now the Jews were doing the same thing that previous generations had done; they were rejecting God's chosen instrument. And just as before they missed out on blessing and Gentiles received blessing, so it would be again. The lesson of this teaching at Nazareth is that Nazareth is representative of Israel's response to the Messiah. They would reject God's offer to bless them through Messiah and so the blessing would go to the Gentiles. That's how we have come to be blessed, by Israel's negative choice. As Paul put it in Rom 11:11, "by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles." Now when Jesus said this, verse 28 says that the Jews at the synagogue in Nazareth became enraged, and in verse 29 they got up and tried to lynch Jesus and throw Him over the cliff. But in verse 30, Jesus supernaturally slipped through their grasp and went His own way, for it was not His time to die.

And in verse 31 we come to a new section where we see Jesus cast out a demon or demons. **And He came down to Capernaum.** He had been at Nazareth, which, if you have your map of locations in Luke 4:14-9:50, is here, and after being rejected **He came down to Capernaum**, which is located here on the NW shores of the Sea of Galilee. The tour guides I've had in the land of Israel have pointed out a well-worn path that has been used from ancient times. The path is as straightforward as possible and covers a distance of 20 miles. Note the phrase, **He came down.** In those times the references to up and down in geography referred to elevation changes. The fact that He **came down** from Nazareth **to Capernaum** indicates that Nazareth was at a higher elevation than **Capernaum.** This is quite evident when you are on the ground in Israel. Constable said, "Jesus had to go down topographically from Nazareth, that stood approximately 1,200 feet above sea level, to Capernaum, that lay almost 700 feet below sea level." A further note is made that **Capernaum was a city of Galilee.** It should be evident then, that Luke's audience was not from this area, or else such a note would not be necessary. This is further support that Luke is writing to a Gentile audience. Constable said, "This notation, and the mention that Capernaum was a city of Galilee, were undoubtedly for Luke's original readers' benefit many of whom were unfamiliar with Palestinian geography."

Now **Capernaum** is the modern name for the Hebrew Kefar Nahum. Kefar means "village" and Nahum is the personal name "Nahum," a word meaning "consolation." It is, therefore, either "the village of Nahum," whether of the prophet or some other we do not know, or "the village of consolation." The two words being combined by non-Hebrew speakers and the pronunciation of the "f" sound dropped, the result was Capernaum. But the proper name and translation is Kefar Nahum and this is the name it was known by to Jesus and His disciples. It was located on the NW shores of the Sea of Galilee, which is a lake proper, not a sea, about 700 feet below sea level. It was a relatively small town, estimated to have had a population of probably less than 1,000. But it was an important town due to its privileged position economically and politically. Economically, the fishing and agriculture in that area were prominent, and the very reason that Peter and Andrew moved from their hometown of Bethsaida to Capernaum to set up the base of their fishing business. The nearby waters of Tabgha still today provide the best fishing in the Sea of Galilee due to the five springs that enter the lake at that location, warming the waters, making them conducive to plant growth which attracts fish. Furthermore, the area was well-watered and conducive to agricultural abundance, producing olive oil and wheat for cereals. The highway from Bethshean to Damascus passed through Capernaum, making it a busy travel way, connecting the lower Galilee to the upper Galilee, the Golan, Syria, Phoenicia, Asia Minor and Cyprus. Trade with all of these areas is evidenced by the coinage discovered in the ruins of Capernaum. It was also a border town, near the Jordan River which separated the territory of Herod Antipas from that of Herod Philip. As such a detachment of Roman soldiers was present to handle customs and taxation. Most of the archaeological excavations of Capernaum have taken place in the last 50 years. The chief archaeologists uncovered a village about 300m by 200m. The two most prominent structures they discovered were a synagogue, built about AD400, but obviously built upon a prior synagogue that had burned and probably dated from the time of Christ, and an octagonal church that it was later discovered had been built upon Peter's house, located just 30m from the synagogue. The near proximity of the two being evidenced in Luke 4:38 by the phrase "Then He got up and left the synagogue, and entered Simon's home." Ultimately, Capernaum was a crossroads for many travelers and became the base of operations for Jesus' ministry. Loffreda, one of the two chief archaeologists from 1968-1991 wrote this about the town later dubbed, "the town of Jesus," "Capharnaum much more than Nazareth offered to Jesus a two-fold advantage as far as his messianic activity was concerned. Firstly, Capharnaum was a crossroad of primary importance, being along the Beth-shan — Damascus highway; whereas Nazareth was a mountainous and isolated hamlet. Secondly, Capharnaum was sufficient apart from the big centers and especially from Tiberias where Herod Antipas had set his capital. In that way Jesus was able to spread his messianic message to many persons without running too soon into trouble with the political and religious leaders. In contrast to Nazareth, the population of Capharnaum was highly stratified: fishermen, farmers, artisans, merchants, publicans, etc. Lived in the same village....even the relations between the inhabitants of Capharnaum and the Romans were surprisingly cordial. It was a Roman centurion who built the synagogue for the Jewish community, while the elders of the village reciprocated in kindness and pleaded earnestly with Jesus asking him to heal the centurion's servant...from the

same community Jesus chose many of his apostles either among fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James, John) or publicans (Matthew)."<sup>1</sup>

In verse 31 when He arrived Luke says, **He was teaching then on the Sabbath.** This is what Jesus had been doing throughout the Galilee, and it is what we saw Him doing in Nazareth last week. It had been His custom since He was a boy to attend synagogue on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not the prescribed day of meeting for worship, but simply a day of rest from one's labors usually to be spent in the comfort of one's home. However, when the synagogue began to form over a thousand years later it became increasingly important to the community, even eclipsing the importance of the Temple itself, as the day that the community would gather for worship. The synagogue meeting consisted of cyclical readings from the Torah, interspersed with prayers, translation and commentary, and a reading from the Prophets with commentary. Jesus' teaching was particularly popular as evidenced in verse 32.

The people at Capernaum **were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority.** It's important to note the word **teaching** and the difference in Luke-Acts between **teaching** and preaching. Teaching is a very broad term referring to instruction from all portions of the Scripture. Preaching is a very narrow term referring specifically to the gospel message. In short, teaching includes preaching, but teaching is much broader. Bock noted, "Teaching [Gr. didache] in Luke-Acts is seen as a broad term encompassing much more than the offer of the gospel, whereas preaching [kerygma] in Luke-Acts [only in Luke 11:32] tends to be limited to the salvation message."<sup>2</sup> Jesus spent the bulk of His time in the synagogue **teaching**. This meant that He would instruct from all portions of Scripture, which in His time was the OT. It is interesting that Jesus did not focus on preaching, since the majority of the people in synagogue were not believers. But it shows that teaching is a tool that can be used to convince people of the truth of the word of God.

The result of Jesus' teaching is that the people **were amazed.** The word **amazed** is ἐξεπλησσοῦντο and means "to cause to be filled with amazement to the point of being overwhelmed," and can be translated "amaze, astound, overwhelm." The imperfect tense shows that it was an ongoing process that took place. As they listened to **His teaching** the impact kept increasing to the point they were overwhelmed. As such, I would translate this, **they were overwhelmed at His teaching.** The explanation given is an interesting one, **for His message was with authority.** The word **message** is literally "word." His "word" **was with authority.** In the parallel of Matt 7:28-29, this was the people's response to the Sermon on the Mount which was given near Capernaum. And the same reason is given, "for He was teaching them as one having authority." But Matthew makes an additional comment that sheds light on what teaching with authority meant. He says, "and not as their scribes." So, how did the scribes teach? The scribes did not teach on their own authority but on the authority of previous rabbi's. They would cite previous rabbi's in order to support their interpretation. These rabbi's got their authority primarily from the rabbi's that taught at the academy they attended. But Jesus did not cite other rabbi's because He didn't attend an academy. Wallace said, "Jesus' teaching impressed the hearers with the directness of its claim (with

authority). A study of Jewish rabbinic interpretation shows that it was typical to cite a list of authorities to make one's point. Apparently Jesus addressed the issues in terms of his own understanding." In other words, Jesus interpreted the text as He understood it. Where did He get His understanding? From His Father. As Fruchtenbaum said, "He did not require previous rabbinic authorization. His teaching and authority came from above, from the Father (Isa. 50:4-5)."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as He taught He did not cite a long list of authorities to make His point or to support His point. Not only was it not necessary to do so, but there would likely have been no one to cite. Jesus' interpretations were not novel, but they were simply what the text taught. The illustration of this in the Sermon on the Mount is where Jesus would say, "You have heard it said....But I say to you." His teaching was not scribal teaching, nor was it delivered in the way the scribes taught. This is what caused the people to be startled over and over ultimately leading to their being overwhelmed. They never heard Bible teaching like this. To push this a little further Farrar said, "Secondhandedness, the slavish dependence on precedent and authority, is the most remarkable characteristic of Rabbinical teaching. It very rarely rises above the level of a commentary..."<sup>4</sup> As such His teaching was not dull like commentary teaching, but alive and moving the will of the audience to action by addressing the depths of the human heart. Pentecost said of the scribes that they "...would be skillful in splitting hairs to infinity, and they would be proud of their ability to lead their hearers through the endless mazes of the imaginations of preceding rabbi's, imaginations that ended in nothing or in something that was actually worse than nothing. But they would have no power, or almost none, to move the conscience toward true goodness, or to stir the love of the heart toward God and toward men."<sup>5</sup> In short, Jesus did not just spend His time going through an endless labyrinth of interpretations, but maximized His time telling them the interpretation and then making application to His hearers' lives. It is one thing to address the mind, it is another to address the will. The scribes were only able to do the former, not the latter. Jesus was able to do both. This had a tremendous effect on the people. It overwhelmed them. This teaching demonstrated that He was the true prophet of God. He spoke directly from God and for God and to men as they truly are. What He would do next is demonstrate His fulfillment of Isa 61:2a "set free those who are oppressed," in this case a man who was demon possessed.

Luke 4:33 , **In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of the unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!"** This interesting encounter has some distinctive features that require some extensive explanation. For example, the demon is referred to as a singular spirit, but when he speaks refers to himself in the plural, let us alone. So, we want to think about this and make sure we understand the language. To get some context, **there was a man** in the synagogue, and we may safely presume he was a Jewish man, and this Jewish man was **possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon**. This extensive phrase **spirit of an unclean demon** is used only here by Luke, which is the first time he mentions a demon. Later he only says "unclean spirit." To us it is obvious that a demon is an evil spirit, but many point out that the Gentiles at the time of Christ did not think that way. They viewed demons as either good or evil.

Therefore, it was necessary for Luke, writing to Gentiles, to specify that this demon was an **unclean demon**. Constable said, "Possibly Luke specified that this was an unclean demon because the Greeks thought there were good and evil demons."<sup>6</sup> The description of **unclean** was used as a synonym for "evil" by the Gospel writers. This **man** is said to have been **possessed** by this demon. Believers can be tempted by demons and influenced, but they cannot be possessed. Only unbelievers can be possessed. Therefore, this man was an unbeliever.

And while it took some time for the people to realize the authority of Jesus, the demons realized it immediately. This one even **cried out** from the man, using the man's voice box, **with a loud voice**, saying, "**Let us alone!**" This strange translation is from the Greek particle εα, which simply means "Ah, or ha!" It is a particle expressing surprise or displeasure. Obviously here, the demon is expressing displeasure at Jesus' presence. It would be like the expression when someone comes into a room that you really dislike and you say, "Oh great..." And maybe that is the best way to translate it. The demon is really unhappy that Jesus is there.

Now, it's important to understand a little about the demons. In rabbinic writings, God actually created demons on the sixth day of creation. Men could not see demons and demons could not see good angels and neither men, demons or angels could see God. Demons were viewed as being everywhere, but more common in certain locations like drain pipes, water, ruins and vacant houses. They could cause a variety of physical and mental problems. But preventative measures could be taken to avoid being possessed. You could wash them off your hands in the morning. You could eat morning bread, which acted as an antidote. But most importantly you could study Torah and recite the Great Shema and attend synagogue on Sabbath, the day that demons were particularly confined. Now all this was not biblical, but the irony of the situation is that here they were in synagogue on Sabbath, reciting Torah and the Great Shema and a man in the synagogue is possessed by a demon. So, apparently their preventative measures weren't working. This demon was there and he was very unhappy that Jesus was there.

So in verse 34 the NASB translation says that the demon said, **What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth?** But the Greek says, "What to us and to you?" It doesn't have much meaning in the English because it is a Hebrew colloquialism that was taken over into the Greek. Basically it meant something like, "Why are you bothering us?" Or "Leave me alone." In this context, the demon is saying, "Leave me alone." He doesn't want Jesus there and he is afraid that Jesus will interfere with his activity.

So far I would translate the demon as saying, "Oh great...leave me alone!" The demon then says, **Have You come to destroy us?** The reference to **us** is a reference to the demon and the man. The demon is proposing that the only way for Jesus to cast him out will result in the destruction of the man. Exorcisms often resulted in the possessed individual dying. In time we will see that when Jesus does cast this demon out, Luke makes the remarkable statement that there was no harm. Thus, the miracle will include not only the casting out, but the casting out with no harm.

Lastly the demon says, **I know who You are—the Holy One of God!** The demon testified before the entire synagogue that Jesus was the Messiah come from God. Constable said, “The demon testified to Jesus’ messianic and divine character.” It is interesting to note that this demon knew that His name was **Jesus**, that He was from **Nazareth**, that He was coming to **destroy** them, and that He was the **Holy One of God**. Constable said that by saying this openly in the synagogue, “The demon testified to Jesus’ messianic and divine character.”

But in verse 35, **Jesus rebukes him, saying, “Be quiet...”** But why, if the demon was testifying to who He really was, the **Holy One of God**, did Jesus not accept the testimony? Why did He insist that the demon **be quiet**? There are a number of explanations for why. Constable said, “Jesus may have silenced the demon to prevent a premature movement to recognize Him as simply a political Messiah.” The fear here is the fear in John 6:15 when Jesus perceived that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king. It’s possible that if the demon was allowed to continue speaking the people would have pushed for Him to become a political king. This would have only caused friction that would have resulted in His premature death. Fruchtenbaum thought Jesus rebuked the demon for more practical reasons, saying, “He accepted no testimony from demons, probably for the simple reason that they do not make good character witnesses.”<sup>7</sup> I don’t know what the exact reason was, but these are both legitimate reasons.

In any event, in verse 35 Jesus’ authority is evident. He **rebuked** the demon, commanding him to **be quiet and come out of him!** He did not use a special incantation as Jewish exorcists did. He simply spoke. Fruchtenbaum said, “Not only did He teach authoritatively, but He also cast out demons with authority....He did it with a simple word and not with any of the formulas used by the exorcists of Judaism.” At this point we read **And when the demon had thrown him down in the midst of the people, he came out of him without doing him any harm.** The demon obeyed Jesus, but he did so reluctantly. One last time he threw the man to the ground. The parallel in Mark 1:26 says that the unclean spirit threw him into convulsions and cried out with a loud voice. But interestingly, Luke notes that, **he came out of him without doing him any harm.** Usually an exorcism caused great harm to the person possessed, often even causing death. This was the meaning of the demon’s statement in verse 34, “Have you come to destroy us?” In other words, you can’t cast me out without destroying the man. But Luke makes the remarkable statement that even though the demon threw the man to the ground causing convulsions, there was no lasting **harm**. The interesting thing about the statement is that Luke was a medical doctor. His special interest in the physical body is a resounding testimony to the power and authority of Jesus Christ to protect this man from harm during what is described as a violent exorcism.

In verse 36, again the people expressed **amazement**. However, the word used here is different from the one in verse 32. In verse 32 it was a word that meant “to be filled with amazement to the point of being overwhelmed.” But this word is θαμβοοσ, which means “a state of astonishment brought on by exposure to an unusual event,” and can be translated “amazement, awe.” They had seen an unusual event, a miracle. For a miracle to be a miracle it must not be ordinary. It is that fact alone that makes the extraordinary. It is not that they cannot be

explained by any other mechanism, only that they are out of the ordinary. The people recognized His authority and **they began talking with one another saying, "What is this message? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out."** The Greek translated **What is this message?** is difficult to translate. The literal translation says, "What is this word?" The word translated **message** is *λογος*, which can have a number of nuances including; command, report, prophecy, preaching, question, statement, etc..... Here it means something like, "What is happening?" They had seen exorcisms, but they had never seen anything like this. Jewish exorcists used special incantations to accomplish the exorcism of a demon. Jesus used no incantation. He simply commanded. They explain, **For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out.** Who was this that had authority over the demonic realm such that with a simple command the demon would obey. Wallace said, "The phrase with authority and power is in an emphatic position in the Greek text. Once again the authority of Jesus is the point, but now it is not just his teaching that is emphasized, but his ministry. Jesus combined word and deed into a powerful testimony in Capernaum." The central issue becomes "Who is Jesus?" And the answer is becoming apparent; He is the Holy One of God. And the people would be increasingly forced to come to a decision regarding His person and His work. Who was He and how was He teaching and doing these things? The parallel in Mark 1:28 says that Jesus brought "a new teaching with authority." This was something utterly unique; He commands the demonic realm, they don't resist Him, they obey Him.

The results were verse 37, **And the report about Him was spreading into every locality in the surrounding district.** Obviously, the word spread quickly throughout the area. The parallel in Mark 1:28 says it "spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of the Galilee." The news went throughout the Galilee. How could it not? Something stupendous had happened. Included in the report would be the demon shouting out that Jesus was the Holy One of God. There may have been questions about the legality of exorcism on Sabbath, but that a noteworthy miracle had taken place was known by all. That sets the stage for the next event at Peter's house, just 30m from the synagogue, a place known today, you can go there, you can see it with your own eyes and you can relive the many events that happened at Capernaum in your own imagination.

In summary, after Jesus was rejected in Nazareth He traveled 20 miles down to the Sea of Galilee, to the city of Kefar Nahum, a city with the apt meaning "village of consolation," where He would carry out His ministry of consolation. On Sabbath He was teaching them in the synagogue. In verse 32, they were overwhelmed by His teaching because He did not cite one single previous authority but spoke on His own authority a message which came from His Father's teaching Him morning by morning. The teaching was like nothing they had ever heard. In verse 33 there was a man in the synagogue who was possessed by a demon; sheer irony because demons were prevented by Torah reading, gathering at the synagogue, reciting the Shema and meeting on Sabbath, and yet here was a demon in their midst. The demon cried out with a loud voice, verse 34, "Oh, great... Leave us alone, Jesus of Nazareth." Have you come to destroy me and this man? And proclaimed, "I know who You are—the Holy One of God." The demon knew well who He was. But verse 35, Jesus rebuked the demon, saying, "Be



quiet, and come out of him!" And the demon came out reluctantly, throwing him to the ground and causing convulsions, and yet Luke the doctor reports that he came out without any lasting harm. In verse 36, the people were amazed and they began talking with one another saying, "What is happening? What is this new teaching? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out." This was something utterly unique, something they had never seen, someone who had power over the entire demonic realm. And in verse 37, "the report about Him and what was said and what He had done was spreading throughout the Galilee."

In conclusion, what can we learn? First, demons can and do possess people. They can and do speak through people. We don't know all the ins-and-outs of how or why a demon gains access to an individual, but we do know that they can only possess unbelievers (1 John 4:4). And when they do they can gain access to their vocal cords to speak through them. We also know they can cause them to convulse, seize and experience intense mental and physical anguish. Second, Jesus has absolute power over the demonic realm to cast them out. Demons may have been coaxed out through exorcists in the past, but Jesus exercises absolute authority over them. The reason He cast out demons was to demonstrate that He was the Messiah and could establish the kingdom. The kingdom is a time when all demons are ostracized for the thousand years. Jesus is capable of casting them all out and locking them away so that they cannot possess men and do evil. This time is still to come. We await it with great expectation. In the meantime, the battle continues.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislao Loffreda, *Recovering Capernaum*, 68-69.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Bock, *A Theology of Luke-Acts*, 119.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Jewish Perspective*, Vol II, 142.

<sup>4</sup> Farrar quoted by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 189.

<sup>5</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 144.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Jewish Perspective*, Vol II, 143.