



The Story Of Salvation
NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010
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21. Jesus and His Ministry

A short revision

The Gospels say without apology that Jesus is the Christ, the fulfilment of Israel's hopes, her liberator and one who ushered in the reign of God and who reigns triumphantly at the right hand of God. This was then and still is as startling if not incredible. He is the one promised in the Hebrew Scriptures and declared by God the Father Himself to be the Son of God, the Beloved, firstly at Jesus' baptism and again later on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Gospels declare that Jesus is *the* man of the Spirit to equip him for his ministry and for his relentless battle with Satan. He is the stronger than the strong man. Demons cry out that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God on several occasions. The centurion at the cross cried out: "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Blind Bartimaeus calls Jesus Son of David, which is another Messianic title. Peter affirmed. "You are the Messiah." The Gospel of Mark especially leaves us in no doubt that Jesus is the King of the Jews or King of Israel (Mark 15). Unlike in the Gospel of John Jesus does not reveal openly in the synoptics who he is except when answering the High Priest at his trial. Jesus refers to himself nearly all the time as the Son of Man. He is the Servant *par excellence* (Mk 10:45) and an eschatological figure seated at the right hand of the Power, coming with great power and glory.

Jesus' human credentials are not much: ordinary parents from an obscure village in Galilee. Yet this man Jesus of Nazareth of Galilee is the Davidic Messiah-King, the Royal Son of God, who dies on the cross, but is raised by God to life.

A short summary of Jesus' Ministry

Christology in the Gospels is not just titles of Jesus. The titles sum up truths which are continually being demonstrated in the Gospel by what Jesus says and does.

In Jesus we see God-in-action. His words accomplish things:

To a group of ordinary fishermen he said, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And immediately they followed him and eventually they became wonderful evangelists! Later he gave the same command to a distasteful person, a traitor, a tax collector called Levi. He too got up and followed him. For Jesus to call ordinary fishermen to be his followers was an extraordinary act, but to call a tax gatherer to follow him was nothing short of outrageous. This is sheer grace.

He commanded a demon in a man, "Be silent, and come out of him!" He was silenced and did come out of the man!

To a person with leprosy he said, "Be clean" And he was!

He said to a paralysed person, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." And, "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home." You bet his sins were forgiven and he danced all the way home! Is there anything sweeter than this word of forgiveness from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Himself?!

To a raging storm he whispered, "Quiet! Be still!" And there was a hush!

To a dead 12 year old girl he commanded, "Little girl, get up!" And she did!

Putting his fingers in the ears of a deaf-mute he said "Be opened." And both were!

On one occasion he looked up to heaven and taking the five loaves and the two fish he blessed and broke the loaves and then fed a multitude.

Jesus' every action is characterised by authority. His teaching challenges men and women to choose between believing in him or rejecting him. In Jesus we are confronted by the Kingship of God in action, and they must decide for or against him. Only a few will recognise this amazing truth happening amongst God's people Israel and will become his followers – Many oppose Him.

The Healing of the Leper

In the time of Jesus, leprosy was viewed as the classic divine punishment for serious sin and regarded as the worst of evils to afflict one (Num 12:9–10; 2 Kings 5:20–27; 2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chr 26:20). The tattered clothing prescribed for the leper in Leviticus 13:45 was interpreted in the Rabbinic commentary, the *Targum Onkelos*, as a sign of mourning, presumably for the leper's godless life for which he was now suffering punishment. So almost everyone would have classified lepers as sinners, who must appeal for mercy to be healed.

To understand the full significance of this healing miracle in a first century context, we need to be aware of the widespread belief in Judaism that only God could heal leprosy. No man could do that.¹ There is a Rabbinic saying that the healing of lepers was as difficult as the raising of the dead. They were viewed as living corpses.

The story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 illustrates that only God can cure leprosy (2 Kings 5:7). In the Old Testament only Miriam (Num 12:1–15) and Naaman (2 Kings 5) were healed of this disease. The emphasis that Matthew and Mark give to this healing story may be because the man was suffering from a form of the disease that was regarded as incurable. The significance of the healing of the leper in Mark lies in Jesus' amazing power to heal even this condition.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean (Mk 1:40–42).

The leprosy patient must have watched Jesus healing people or heard about his healing miracles. He was a desperate man greatly in need. How would he see himself, this Jew, this son of the covenant? He would know that he suffered from an incurable disease. He would have been told that the disease served him right. People would have implied that he must have done some terrible things in his life and deserved this judgment. He knew he was a sinner, was unclean, and cut off from his family, his community, the temple and that would mean from God Himself. Had the leper recognised that Jesus was more than a wonderworker? That he not only could heal him and cleanse him but also forgive his sins? This is not explicitly stated in the story, but to me his cleansing implied forgiveness.

He was of course breaking the regulations on approaching Jesus. He came, begged for healing, knelt and asked to be healed. His request arises out of his confidence rather than doubt in Jesus' ability to heal him.² Here we see faith in action, as no one else believed that any person could cure a leper of his disease.

But Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the leper; this is ultimate proof of his compassion for him. By doing that he goes against the regulations of touching anything unclean. For Jesus to touch the leper was really an amazing thing to do and would have horrified any bystanders,

¹ Garland, David E., *Mark, NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 82.

² Guelich, Robert A., *Mark 1 - 8:26*, W.B.C., (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 73.

since Jesus would have been made ceremonially unclean himself. It must have made an enormous impact on the unclean leper. Jesus' healing touch is then followed by a healing word: "I do. Be clean!" The wonderful outcome of the story is not that Jesus is made unclean, but that the leper is made clean!

There are numerous references in the Hebrew Scriptures of God stretching out his hand to help his people.³

Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless (Ps. 10:12).

Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand (Ps. 17:7).

You hem me in - behind and before; You have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me (Ps. 139:5).

This healing miracle points to the work of God Himself.

Healing the leper and raising the dead were characteristic of the presence of the age of salvation. Upon John the Baptist's question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers:

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22).

Healings of demonic oppression

Once in a synagogue a man with an unclean spirit cried out, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit came out of him. Those who were there were all amazed, and kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mk 1:21–27). Here we have the first of many who were healed of demonic oppression and bondage.

Another clear example of one bound by Satan is a woman in the gospel of Luke who was bent over for 18 years – unable to stand. She came to the synagogue. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But there was opposition because Jesus had cured her on the sabbath. But Jesus said, "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" Then his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing (Lk 13:10–17).

In the Gospel of Mark the central feature of Jesus' ministry is his victorious conflict with the spiritual powers. 12 times in the first 9 chapters of Mark we have mention of demons, persons possessed by demons or the casting out of evil spirits (filthy spirits) or demons crying out in the presence of Jesus and recognising who Jesus is. Mark especially emphasises exorcisms as one of the major purposes of his mission. The recurrent emphasis of the exorcism accounts is on the unique authority of Jesus. It is the demons who recognise him as "the holy one of God", "the Son of God" (Mk 1:24; 3:11; 5:7). They are unable to resist his word of command. Whatever authority the demonic forces may have had it is utterly useless against a simple word of the Son of God. The beginning of the end of Satan we saw in Jesus overcoming the temptations of the evil one in the wilderness. That event was not yet the decisive defeat, but must have been a devastating blow to the evil one that for the first time in the world's history a man could not even be tempted. The initial encounter had been lost, but it holds out promise of a decisive once and for all defeat. Luke writes of that encounter,

³ Others are: Exodus 4:4; 7:19; 8:1; 9:22; 14:16, 21, 26. See also Psalm 104:28, 145:16; Isaiah 49:2, 62:3; John 10:28; Revelation 1:17; Psalm 73:23-25.

“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Lk 4:13).

It soon becomes clear that Satan’s rule cannot survive the coming of Jesus.

In Mark chapter 3 the scribes from Jerusalem came all the way from Jerusalem and accused Jesus that his irresistible authority came from Beelzebul, the Lord of the dungheap.

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

In reply Jesus uses language of kingship. The charge that he is in league with Satan is hardly common sense. His attacks on the kingship and power of Satan can hardly owe its success to satanic inspiration! It would be a disastrous if there was internal dissension in a kingdom. Kings rule by the exercise of uncontested authority, and Satan is pictured as such a king. But the nature of Jesus’ challenge to Satan’s kingship is not that of a rebellious underling, but of a rival king intent on conquest. John wrote: “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil”. It is Jesus’ purpose to tie up the strong man and so to dispossess him. In the action of Jesus’ word and deed God’s kingship is being asserted over that of Satan. “A revolution is taking place and a new government is being installed” (R. T. France). From Mark’s gospel alone we see that mankind’s situation was so dreadful that without the coming of Jesus, mankind would be doomed. John saw that “the whole world lies under the power of the evil one” (1 Jn 5:19).

There is no better account of people trapped in Satan’s clutches than that of the Gerasene demoniac. It clearly describes Jesus as the stronger than the strong man, who is plundering Satan’s household. Just before this story in the gospel of Mark, Jesus and his disciples cross the lake when a fierce storm is whipped up at nightfall. Even for the experienced fishermen the storm is beyond they have experienced in extreme weather conditions and they become panic-stricken and fear for their lives. In contrast we see Jesus sleeping peacefully on a cushion and woken up by the terrified disciples. Mark simply tells us that Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and with a simple word, “Peace! Be still” the wind ceased and the waves turned into dead calm (Mk 4:35–41). His command to the wind and water closely resembles his word to the demon in the synagogue of Capernaum (Mk 1:25). It appears that Jesus is addressing the elements as though they are demonic. This after all is no ordinary storm and the numerous demons lurking on the other side of the lake may be behind it. The incident on the lake demonstrates Satan’s evil intent to destroy Jesus. In a clash of the two kingdoms Jesus foils that attempt on his life and of his disciples in utter tranquillity and simplicity and authoritatively over what appear to be the forces of nature.

He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

That incident is the stilling of raging winds and waves. The story of the demoniac in Mark 5 is about the stilling of a raging bull of a desperate man.

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:38).

Mark gives a graphic description in great detail of the deplorable state of this man. He is an extreme example of demon possession. He is not merely odd or slightly disturbed. He is beyond human help and totally out of control and intent on destroying himself. He walks around naked and is utterly anti-social, incapable of living within society. This is certainly no ordinary possession! He shrieks day and night. This may reveal that something is left of the poor man's humanity. Is he crying out all the time because he knows he is utterly caught in the demons' clutches and cannot get away from them? Anyway he lives in utter misery, pain and isolation. The townspeople treat him like a wild animal and he behaves like one. No one was able to tame him. Mark tells us twice that they tried to subdue him, but even when they were able to bind him hand and foot with chains he was able to wrench them apart, indicating the extraordinary super-human strength of the demoniac. The situation is desperate. Twice Mark writes that he lives among the tombs, which are haunts for evil spirits; he lives among the dead, not the living and is as good as dead himself.

This story demonstrates that the function of demonic possession is to distort and destroy the image of God in man, to deface humanity and destroy life. How Satan hates human beings in the image of God. He will do anything and everything to make us un-royal, un-kingly and un-priestly. The detail of the herd of swine destroying themselves bears out this fact. But it demonstrates the even greater power of Jesus and the authority he has over evil forces. He is the stronger than the strong man who has already bound Satan and his kingdom of evil forces and therefore is able to subdue the man without needing to bind him with chains. All Jesus said was "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And suddenly we see a man sitting at Jesus' feet completely at peace and free! The great calm that came over the sea at a word of Jesus is matched by the great calm that governs this man.

From various Scriptures it would appear that the main purpose for Christ's incarnation was to destroy evil. In the action of the king of the kingdom of God we see the beginning of the good news of that happening. Christ is the liberator of man.

We must, however, not see the overthrow of Satan merely in terms of the ministry of casting out unclean spirits, how prominent this may be in Mark's Gospel. Satan spreads his activity and power more widely than that. It is his business to prevent the message of God's kingship from being heard or understood. Mark also tells us that it is Satan who "immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown" (Mk 4:15).