

Spellbound: Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

by [Ray Rhoads](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

In the days before every district superintendent carried a cell phone, driving the charge conference circuit was a great opportunity to listen to the radio. My favorite station was NPR. More than once I found myself totally enthralled by a broadcast story. Sometimes I would pull into my own driveway but be unable to get out of the car because I was a prisoner of a story. I sat on the edge of my seat, my hand ready to turn the car key, unable to move. Maybe it was the story about the little boy caught in a moral dilemma: he needed to tell his mother the truth about a neighborhood crime, but could not betray a confidence. What would he do? I had to hear the end of the story.

Maybe that's the kind of rapt attention those first-century synagogue worshipers in Capernaum experienced as they listened to Jesus preach. The Greek word Mark uses here (Matthew and Luke use the same word) indicates that the listeners were both fascinated at what they were hearing and outraged. What was Jesus preaching?

Mark provides an answer. Although we cannot put too much trust in his order of historical events, this scene probably did occur close to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In Mark 1:14 we have Mark's summation of Jesus' preaching—the time is fulfilled and the reign of God is at hand, so repent and believe this good news. This scene may provide us with the context for understanding the response of the Capernaumian worshipers. They were fascinated because they had never heard such exciting words from any other synagogue preacher, while at the same time they were outraged because they knew that these words were challenging the status quo—*their* status quo.

One day I was standing in the sun-drenched synagogue ruins at Capernaum, one of my favorite places in Israel. Although today the synagogue is in ruins, enough of the structure remains to convey an image of what was there 20 centuries ago. I let my mind take me back to the event Mark describes and tried to feel what the original hearers must have felt listening to Jesus' spellbinding words. A little archaeological knowledge and a good guide book made the experiment possible.

There are several accounts of Jesus preaching in synagogues—even in Nazareth—and they often indicate a response of violent hostility and astonished amazement. My imagination began to work as I recalled some texts. What did Jesus preach that brought such an impassioned response?

Maybe, I thought, he told the parable about God being like a forgiving and welcoming father who had two very different kinds of sons: a younger son who “squandered his property in loose living” and an elder who worked the father’s fields. Might this story have been for some hearers a “driveway moment,” one of those experiences that held them spellbound as they realized its parallel in their lives?

Maybe Jesus addressed their sense of injustice, their memories of torture at the hands of Roman soldiers, or their longing for peace and stability. Perhaps he declared that those who make peace would be blessed, and would even be called God’s children. Could this really be true?

Maybe he recruited disciples. According to Mark’s chronology, Jesus had recruited Andrew, Simon, James and John—one-third of the Twelve—just before he attended synagogue worship. He needed more recruits. Maybe for one or several of his listeners, this was a driveway moment.

Maybe someone questioned Jesus about the new age he described, and thought that this new rabbi was wrong to be destroying common assumptions. For example, what are the relationships in heaven like? Jesus shatters the perception that heaven is earth, only written larger and bolder. God is not God of the dead, but of the living! *But what about the dead?* Jesus’ hearers must have thought with indignation.

Maybe Jesus spoke the daring words, “Your sins are forgiven,” and shocked the sensibilities of the literalists. Imagine the intensity of the moment if he spoke in response to a specific situation, a recognizable crisis in his listeners’ lives.

Some people, of course, did not hear Jesus because they could not or would not have attended Sabbath worship. Surely there were shepherds in town that day, some street women, perhaps even a tax collector or unlearned peasant farmers. What did they hear? Although they were not bold enough to walk into the synagogue, these persons probably knew something of Israel’s hope and consolation, and were probably aware of the promise of another prophet like Moses. They too were desperate for a sign from God, who would send redemption (Ps. 111).

We might think of this driveway moment as a synthesis of the events that had proceeded this particular moment. Each hearer of Jesus' words was a concatenation of episodic experiences. The religious community attempted to define these experiences for the people. I can imagine how many of the people resented this, and rejected and ultimately fought against being defined by others. What alternative was available to them? How could they live otherwise?

Now they were hearing a word through which they were experiencing a new understanding of themselves. They were experiencing release. They were being redeemed!

In what seem like never-ending encounters with the scribes, Jesus denounces these men who were preoccupied with questions of what people ought or might do to be able to live faithfully before God. They were his enemy.

Jesus purges the scribal bedevilment that infects them and us, making us fear freedom and giving us a sense of nothingness and powerlessness. He tells us we can choose to live free and close to God. Jesus speaks the word of life. His living word from God bestows on us freedom to live as God intends.