

# Luke 4:31-32

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*Jesus goes to the Galilean town of Capernaum. On the Sabbath He enters a synagogue, where Jesus teaches and those in attendance are amazed at the authority with which He teaches.*

The parallel gospel account for this passage is Mark 1:21-22.

After narrating how Jesus was rejected by the people of His hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30) Luke reports:

*And He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee (v 31).*

*Capernaum* was a key Jewish *city* in the district of *Galilee*. It was situated along the middle of the northern shore of the 5x10-mile Sea (or lake) of *Galilee*. It was a Jewish town that prospered from fishing and other industries.

The name, *Capernaum*, means “Nahum’s village” or “Village of Comfort.” *Capernaum* was in a strategic location because two major trade routes ran near the town. It was smaller than the larger cities on the shore of *Galilee*. Tiberius was the political capital of the area and was located on the western shore. It could be considered a Roman city. Hippas was on the eastern side of *Galilee*, and was a Decapolis city, established by the Greeks.

Capernaum was one of a number of Jewish villages on the northern side of *Galilee*. It was a bustling town largely populated with religious Pharisees, fisherman, and merchants. *Capernaum* would be the functional headquarters of Jesus’s earthly ministry (Matthew 4:13). It seems Jesus chose a very Jewish town located in a very strategic location for spreading His *message*, but substantially removed from the political capital in Jerusalem.

The reason Luke wrote that Jesus *came down to Capernaum*, even though *Capernaum* is slightly north of Nazareth where Jesus *came* from, was because *Capernaum* was situated at a lower elevation. To travel from the hills of Nazareth *to Capernaum* on the shores of *Galilee*, requires one to literally travel *down to* it.

After Jesus *came down to Capernaum*, Luke informs us what *He* did:

*and He was teaching them on the Sabbath (v 31b).*

*The Sabbath* is the seventh day of the week in the Jewish calendar. The tenth commandment declared how *the Sabbath* was to be holy day, dedicated to God and rest from work (Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The Lord created the earth in six days, but on the seventh day He rested from His work (Exodus 20:11). Aside from resting from their work, one of the ways the Jews kept *the Sabbath* was by attending synagogue. We know from the context of Luke 4:14-15 that Jesus *was teaching* in the *Capernaum* synagogue *on the Sabbath*. The Gospel of Mark

plainly states that Jesus “entered the synagogue and began to teach” in its parallel account of this moment.

Synagogues were community centers where Jews gathered to worship God and listen to teachings from rabbis who interpreted God’s word. The synagogues were the domain of the religious party called the Pharisees. The Pharisees viewed themselves and were largely seen by the people as champions of righteousness and the protectors of Jewish law. But in reality, the righteousness of the Pharisees was fake. Instead of serving people, they manufactured an ever-multiplying web of laws designed to exploit others and make themselves look good (Matthew 23).

At this point Jesus was a new rabbi. Rabbis were teachers of the law and had followers. Apparently, *He* was invited *to teach* on this *Sabbath*. In order for Jesus to be able *to teach* in a *synagogue* *He* had to be invited to do so by the head of the synagogue. We know from Luke 2:41-52 that even as a young boy Jesus possessed amazing knowledge and insight into the scriptures. As a thirty-year-old man, Jesus would have grown even further in wisdom and knowledge. The ruins of ancient synagogues are observable among the ruins of ancient *Capernaum* as well as the nearby ruins of villages identified as Chorazin, and Magdala.

As Jesus *taught*, the people *were amazed at His teaching* (v 32). This was unlike the rage-filled reception *He* had just received in the synagogue of *His* hometown (Luke 3:28-29). Perhaps their positive response to *His teaching* (v 32) was one of the reasons Jesus headquartered His ministry in Capernaum. The expression—*His teaching*—included the ideas and exhortations *He* said.

But Luke goes on to explain why the people in this *synagogue* were so *amazed at His teaching*:

*They were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority* (v 32).

As Jesus *taught*, Luke sums up the impression of those who were present—*they were amazed at His teaching*. But the main reason *they were amazed at His teaching* was because *His message was with authority*.

Mark’s parallel passage adds “and not as the scribes [taught]” (Mark 1:22).

“The scribes” refers to those who were experts in the written Law of Moses and the Mishnah, the oral tradition. The Law of Moses are the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis-Deuteronomy). The Mishnah was the oral tradition said to have been passed down from Moses to Joshua and subsequent generations of teachers. The Mishnah was largely an interpretation of the law. Its influence expanded with the rise of the Pharisees during the Babylonian exile.

The Mishnah was an oral tradition during the time of Jesus (it was redacted and written down around 200 A.D.). But during Jesus’s day, the Mishnah was only heard and not read. This is why *He* often said phrases like: “you have heard that it was said...” (Matthew 5:27, 38, 43). In Jesus’s day, to bolster their authority/legitimacy, rabbis would often ground their teaching in what influential rabbis of the past had said and had been passed down in the Mishnah. Rabbis did this because (in their opinion) it gave their own teachings more authority and weight.

Jesus however did not seem to ground *His* teachings in the authority of either respected rabbis or the Mishnah. Remarkably, Jesus grounded *His authority* in Himself, in the words of *His* Father, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And it was this authoritative way of *teaching* as much as the teachings themselves that *amazed* the people when *He* taught them. There are many verses in Matthew where he records the way Jesus grounded *His authority* in Himself and not in other rabbis, as the scribes taught. The way Jesus grounded *His* teachings in *His* own personal *authority* was through the expression: “I say to you...” (Matthew 5:18, 20, 22, 26, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

Matthew explains a similar point (in Matthew 7:28-29), but he frequently quotes Jesus as using His self-authoritative phrase: “I say to you” before quoting the *teaching* itself because his Jewish audience would instantly understand the meaning and likewise be amazed at the authority with which he spoke as well.

Luke does not record this expression (“But I say to you”) here, possibly because he was mindful that this expression would not mean as much to his intended Gentile and Greek audience as it meant to Matthew’s Jewish audience. The meaning of this reference would be largely lost to them.

Luke’s description that the people *were amazed at His teaching* because *His message was with authority* is also a reference to when he described Jesus returning to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14). This is who the *authority* of *His message* was derived from.

After pointing out that the people in the synagogue *were amazed at His teaching*, Luke then describes an incredible miracle that Jesus performed that *Sabbath* in the synagogue. This miracle is first of many that Luke records Jesus doing in his Gospel account. This miracle will be discussed in the next section of commentary.

### **Biblical Text**

**31 And He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and He was teaching them on the Sabbath; 32 and they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority.**