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Amazing Jesus in Turbulent Times

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Amazing Jesus in turbulent times

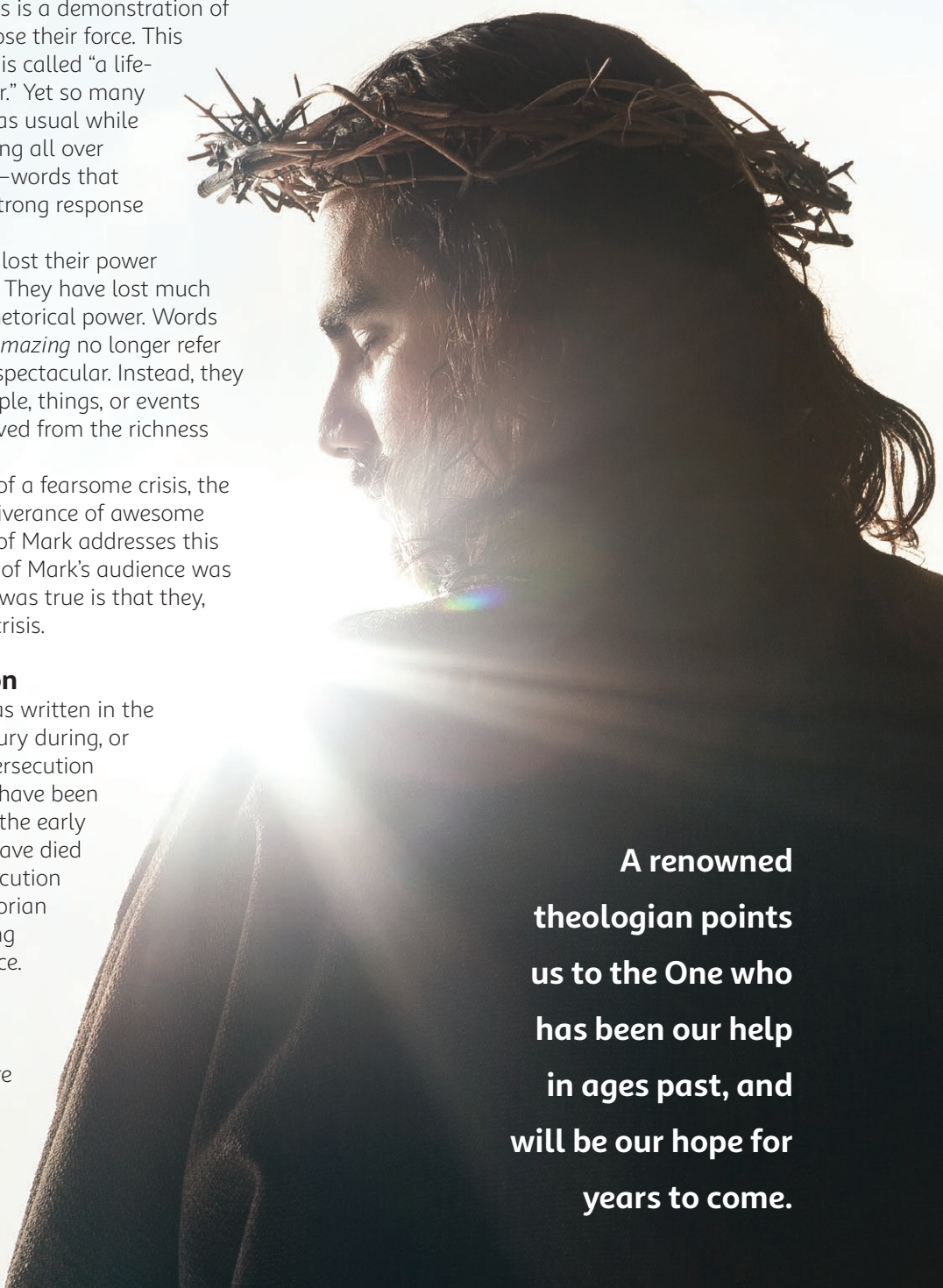
The COVID-19 crisis is a demonstration of how words can lose their force. This global pandemic is called “a life-and-death matter.” Yet so many have continued business as usual while tens of thousands are dying all over the world. *Life and death*—words that would typically evoke a strong response now no longer do.

Words appear to have lost their power to change and impact us. They have lost much of their descriptive and rhetorical power. Words like *great*, *awesome*, and *amazing* no longer refer to something grand and spectacular. Instead, they are often assigned to people, things, or events that are, indeed, far removed from the richness that these words convey.

The deeper the reality of a fearsome crisis, the greater the need for a deliverance of awesome proportions—the Gospel of Mark addresses this need. While the situation of Mark’s audience was different from ours, what was true is that they, like us, were in a time of crisis.

Alarming persecution

The Gospel of Mark was written in the early 60s of the first century during, or just after, the Neronian persecution (A.D. 63–64).¹ This would have been a severe time of crisis for the early Christians. Many would have died for their faith in the persecution in Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus provided a gripping account of what took place. He says that Christians, “covered with the skins of beasts, . . . were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination,



A renowned theologian points us to the One who has been our help in ages past, and will be our hope for years to come.

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

when daylight had expired.”² During this time of suffering and trial, Mark uses four different Greek words, translated as “marveled,” “astonished,” “amazement,” and “amazed.”³

The theme of “amazing” being so dominant in Mark, but not in the other Gospels, suggests that Mark received this idea firsthand from Peter, widely acknowledged to be the apostolic influence on the first Gospel.⁴ Knowing that readers and hearers grow accustomed to words, Mark employs variety. To drive home his point, Mark will use this diversity of words on 20 occasions to describe who Jesus is and the unique responses of the people to His ministry. Mark was trying to emphasize that in a time of crisis, Jesus was to be the focus of His followers.

There is no one better to contemplate in a crisis than Jesus. We will look at four occurrences of the words *amazed* and *astonished* in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 1:22, 27; 2:12; 5:20) and discover the depth and beauty of just how amazing, just how astonishing, Jesus truly is.

Amazed at His Word

Mark recounts the exorcism of a demon-possessed man as Jesus’ first miracle in Mark 1:21–27. Mark uses the literary technique of *inclusio* in that he opens and closes the miracle narrative with the word “astonished” in verse 22 (*exēplēssōnto*) and verse 27 (*ethambēthēsan*). Verse 22 reads: “And they were *astonished* at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (NKJV, emphasis added). Verse 27 reads: “Then they were all *amazed*, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with

authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him’ ” (NKJV, emphasis added).

The encounter begins with “a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, saying, ‘Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!’ ” (verses 23, 24, NKJV). Robert Gundry contends that this is a defense stratagem of the evil spirit, namely, identifying Jesus and thereby attempting to gain the upper hand in the conflict.⁵ This helps us understand Jesus’ strong response of “Be quiet!” (verse 25, NKJV), or literally, “be muzzled.”

Furthermore, sandwiched between the *inclusio* is Jesus, filled with authority and acting to deliver. In this opening miracle, Jesus acts with paradigmatic force—*paradigmatic* meaning this miracle sets the tone, or provides the example, for how one must act in the face of evil and suffering.⁶ Act decisively, no second-guessing, no debate, and no discussion. A human life is at stake!

Mark’s use of “all” in verse 27 emphasizes the universal recognition of Jesus’ power and authority.⁷ The phrase “new teaching” (*didachē kainē*) is the language of inaugurated eschatology. The prophetic tradition has reached its zenith. In fact, teaching was one facet of the new age looked for by the prophets.⁸ Jeremiah says, “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD” (Jer. 31:34, ESV). That was Jesus’ unique, astonishing authority, an authority far surpassing that of the scribes.

The scribes presented what the Scriptures and their tradition taught. In contrast, Jesus presented Himself as what the Scriptures taught. As N. T. Wright suggests, “He is somebody with authority over everything the physical world . . . and the non-physical world . . . can throw at us. This is a Jesus we can trust with every aspect of our lives.”⁹ A global pandemic presents us with opportunities to minister confidently.

Amazed at His power

The healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12) has so much percolating beneath the surface. This miracle opens up a raft of questions that the reader can raise. For the religious leaders, the genuine question, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (v. 7). For the paralytic, “What on earth is happening to me?” For the homeowner, “I wonder who’s going to pay for my damaged roof?”

This beneath-the-surface reading sheds greater light on just how amazing Jesus is. He sees the faith of the man’s four friends (v. 5), reads the thoughts of the leaders (v. 8), and knows the needs of the sufferer (v. 5). Jesus knew that what this paralyzed man needed was not just physical healing but, most of all, spiritual healing.

Jesus is amazing because He knows our greatest need. That need is for a spiritual breakthrough, to encounter Him, and to be forgiven and restored in our relationship with God. His presence brought healing, peace, and wholeness to the paralytic.

The paralyzed man was told by Jesus to get up, take his mat, and go home. “He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This *amazed* everyone and they praised God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’ ” (v. 12, NIV; emphasis added). Those legs, once so weak and incapacitated, were now full of vitality. That mat, so often the symbol of his humiliation and defeat in life, was now carried in his arms.

In light of their friend’s personal crisis, four men believed that Jesus could make a difference in their friend’s situation. “When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven you’ ” (Mark 2:5). Faith and action united in a teamwork that brought both healing and forgiveness. A global pandemic presents us with opportunities to minister collaboratively.

Amazed at His love

Once more, we see the sovereign power of Jesus to save. “Seeing Jesus from a distance, [the demoniac] ran up and bowed down before Him” (Mark 5:6, NASB). Even though he was in the grip of Satan’s power, it was no match for the greater power—the power of Jesus. Notice “he bowed [*proskuneo*] before Him”—meaning he worshiped Jesus. Then we see two uses of the same word in verses 10 and 12, namely “beg” (*parakaleo*). Verse 10 says, “He begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area” (NIV), and verse 12 reads: “the demons begged Jesus” (NIV). It is also used of the leper of Mark 1:40, who begged Jesus to help

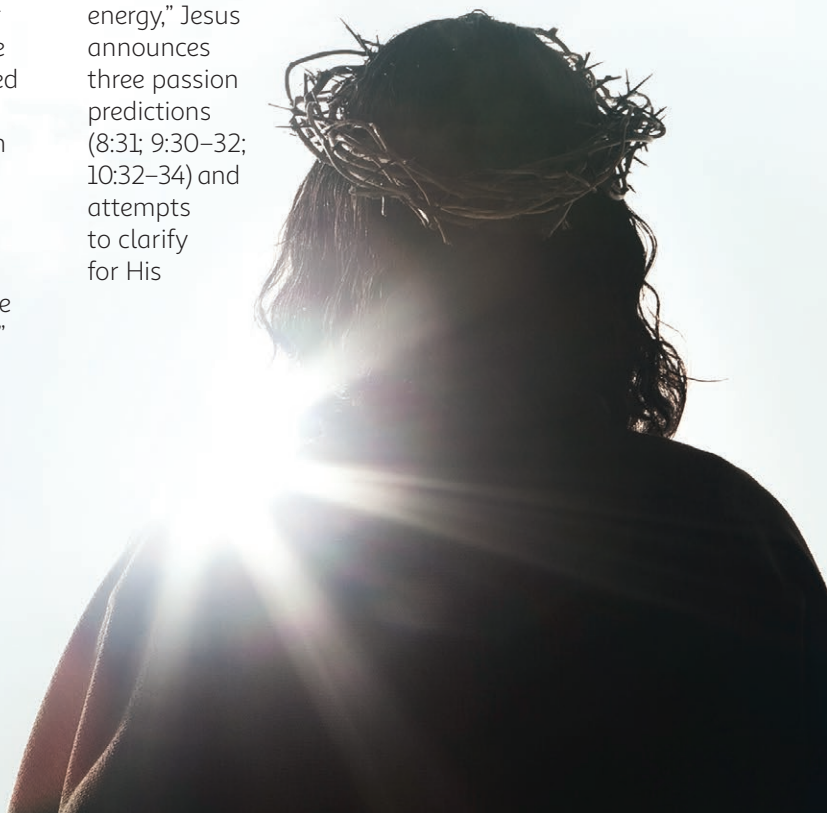
him. It speaks of desperation. Jesus is amazing because He confronts evil and, in the process, sets humans free. The same divine power that can drive out demons can also change hearts.

Mark 5:20 reads: “So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were *amazed*” (NIV; emphasis added). What led to this response of amazement from the people? The wider literary context reveals to us that the story of the changed demoniac answered a question lingering from the end of chapter 4: Who is the good soil?

The seed clearly took root in the demoniac, the least significant and least likely place imaginable. His transformed life was not of his own doing but rather solely and wholly through the power of Jesus. The demoniac is the good soil, now declaring “what great things the Lord has done” and how the Lord “had compassion” on him (Mark 5:19). A global pandemic presents us with opportunities to minister compassionately.

Amazed at His sacrifice

Scholars have generally acknowledged Mark 8:27–10:52 as “the theological nerve center” of this Gospel.¹⁰ Once more, Mark will use an *inclusio*, namely, the word meaning “way or road” (*hodōs*) in 8:27 and 10:52, to delineate this discreet section of the story of Jesus.¹¹ In these chapters, which are charged with “outbursts of predictive energy,” Jesus announces three passion predictions (8:31; 9:30–32; 10:32–34) and attempts to clarify for His



disciples the nature and substance of His mission.¹²

In this final passion prediction, we see Mark's intentional use of the word *amazed*. "Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed [*ethambounto*]. And as they followed they were afraid. Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again' " (Mark 10:32–34, NKJV).

The phrase "going up to Jerusalem" echoes the Old Testament language of pilgrimage (Ps. 122:4; 24:3; Isa. 2:2, 3). The disciples were amazed because Jesus was going ahead of them to Jerusalem, even after all He said in the earlier passion predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:30–32). The misunderstanding of the disciples is a major theme in this Gospel (Mark 8:32, 33; 9:11, 32; 10:35–39).¹³ However, verse 32 might be a subtle hint of the disciples beginning to understand just a little of the mission of Jesus.¹⁴

The verse informs us that, "as they followed they were afraid." The declaration of their fear is preceded by the solution to their fear. To the extent that they continued to follow Him, the same Jesus who, in the midst of the storm, said, "Peace, be still" (Mark 4:39), would accompany His disciples during a crisis of uncertainty and anxiety that would impact the whole world. A global pandemic presents us with opportunities to minister calmly.

Astonishing victory

God's kingdom in Mark's Gospel comes with the power to do things that human beings cannot do on their own: the power to support, transform, help, and encourage the human soul in every given situation. It transforms and challenges us to perceive the truth that God's kingdom best takes root in the marginalized, the outcasts, those seemingly most insignificant. God's kingdom is real here and now, regardless of the challenge.

In story after story, Jesus emerges victorious over the forces of evil (Mark 1:21–28); over the fractious conniving of the religious leaders (Mark 3:2; 6); over the fear of human beings (Mark 5:1–20); and, yes, even over death (Mark 16:1–8).

We learn that Jesus is amazing because of what He says and how He says it, how He cares, and because of what He does.

While uncertainty and fear grip our communities across the globe and we try to find the right words to depict what is happening, let us remember that God invaded human time and space in the person of His Son (Gal. 1:4). Jesus walks across the narrative stage of Mark's Gospel and demonstrates that His victory over all that the kingdom of darkness can throw at Him and His children is, truly, amazing.



- 1 Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 12.
- 2 Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals* 15.44, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html>.
- 3 All verses are from the New King James Version. See "astonished" (*éklessomai*) in Mark 1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18; "amazed" (*ethambēthēsan*) in Mark 1:27; 10:24, 32; 9:15; 16:5, 6; "amazement" (*existasthai*) in Mark 5:42; 16:8; and "marveled" (*ékthaumázo*) in Mark 5:20; 15:5, 44; 12:17. Due to the constraints of this article I will not be discussing the notion of "feared" or examining each occurrence of the term "amazed." For a historical analysis of the development and use of the concepts of "amazed" and "feared," see Timothy Dwyer, "The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 128 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). While I am indebted to Dwyer for developing the use of this word group in Mark's Gospel, this article represents fresh thinking on this topic.
- 4 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 155–182.
- 5 Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 76.
- 6 Exorcism is a major feature of the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. See Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–30; 9:14–29. The disciples also engage in exorcism as part of their mission. See Mark 3:15; 6:7, 13. For a complete discussion, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 100.
- 7 Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 89.
- 8 R. T. France, "Mark and the Teaching of Jesus," in *Gospel Perspectives*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham, vol. 1, *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1980), 101–136.
- 9 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part 1 (Westminster, UK: John Knox Press, 2002), 94.
- 10 Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 34B (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 3–4; David E. Garland, *Mark*, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 321.
- 11 M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, *The New Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 37, suggests that the motif of "way" is used in Mark 2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3; 11:8; and 12:14.
- 12 Gundry, *Commentary on His Apology*, 425.
- 13 Frank J. Matera, "The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter's Confession," *Biblica* 70, no. 2 (1989): 153–172.
- 14 France, *Gospel of Mark*, 412.