

Everyone Was Astonished

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 5)

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – October 11, 2015

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The Gospel According to Mark
Chapter 5

We continue our study of the Gospel According to Mark, and today we're in chapter 5. When I looked at this chapter I realized I preached on this entire text on February 8, in a message called "Mighty Works and Wonders and Signs." I debated whether to skip the chapter this time, but (with advice from Shirley Anne) I decided to discuss the same text again, but perhaps with a different slant.

The chapter records three of Jesus' "mighty works and wonders and signs," as Peter calls them in the Book of Acts. The first is the cleansing of the demon-possessed man in the country of the Gerasenes. The second is the raising up of the daughter of Jairus, the

synagogue president. But, in the middle of that account, a third "mighty work" occurs when Jesus heals the woman with the flow of blood. Let's begin with the first incident.

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.

When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man--and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

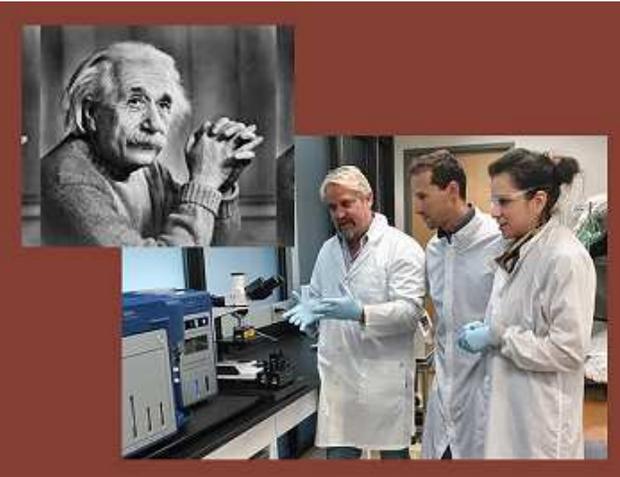
As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And everyone was astonished (1-20).



Do we believe today that people can be possessed, or inhabited, by evil spirits? Popular movies like *The Exorcist* encourage people to fantasize about such things, and the *Star Wars* series suggests the reality of the "dark side" of the Force that can influence people for evil. But do people really

believe in an evil spirit world presided over by Satan, the devil, or whatever one wants to call him? My father, who was a Methodist minister and professor, wasn't an evangelical, Bible-believing preacher. I'm sure he didn't believe in a "personal devil," although he quipped, "If there isn't a devil, somebody's certainly doing his work for him."

Since the eighteenth century the prevailing worldview of our Western civilization has been scientific materialism, which essentially says that the only things that are "real" are things that can be seen, or detected with instruments, or at least projected from mathematical equations. So people have trouble believing in the world of the non-material, about which the Bible has so much to say. They have trouble believing in God, and if that's the case how can they believe in evil spiritual forces



as well? In modern times, some Bible interpreters have even claimed that when the New Testament refers to demon possession it's really talking about psychological disorders, which specialists attempt to treat today by therapy of one kind or another. But demon possession — "that's not real," most people would say.

The ancient world also had its skeptics about the spiritual world, such as the Epicurean philosophers who held that the gods, if they existed at all, had no influence on the everyday world people actually deal with. But for most people in the ancient world the existence of the spiritual realm, including the activity of evil spirits, was a non-issue. The philosophy of

scientific materialism had not yet developed, and so it hadn't shrunken their worldview to that narrow band of phenomena that can be accessed by technology. People in the ancient world saw things in a wider perspective than people today, because our typical worldview has been drastically narrowed by the dominance of scientific materialism.

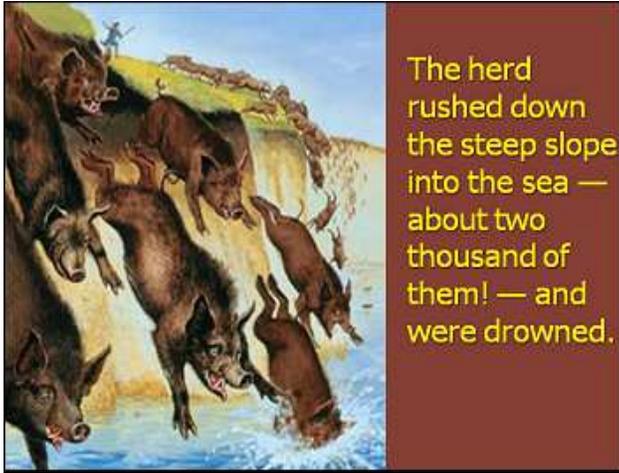
By the way, this could be changing. I get a post every day from a web site about computer technology, and recently they posted a talk by an astronomer who asserted, "our scientific approach to understanding the universe doesn't work." He adds, "We all have an image of space and time, a framework, but when we look, that space and time may have a questionable reality." This scientist doesn't know how to deal with that issue; he doesn't introduce any spiritual considerations. But I couldn't help remembering what Scripture says: "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). The shriveled-up, limited outlook that has dominated our thinking for so long may be about to give way to a wider perspective on reality.

Back, then, to the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has just stepped out of Peter's fishing boat after a voyage across the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum. Immediately (Mark's favorite word) he and the disciples encounter a man who lived in the local graveyard. Nobody could restrain him; he broke the chains placed on him, and broke the silence of the night with his piercing cries. Today most people would call this man crazy, or insane, but the Gospels make clear that he had a different problem. He had an "unclean spirit"; he was under the control of evil spiritual forces that tormented him. So Jesus



commanded the demon to leave him. He ran to him and fell at his feet, and the evil spirit cried out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

Once again we encounter Mark's "Messianic secret"; people don't understand who Jesus really is, but the inhabitants of the spirit world know only too well that the One they're encountering is the Son of God who has authority over them. The disciples, themselves, are just waking up to that truth, because they've just seen Jesus calm the storm as they were crossing the lake. The demon —



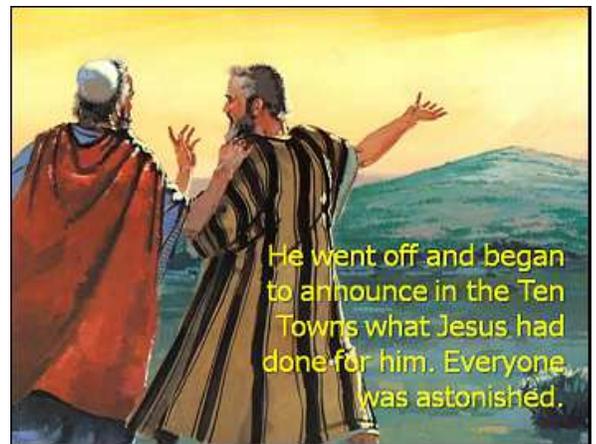
indeed, the legions of evil spirits tormenting this man — know who Jesus is, and they know their game is up. If Jesus just casts them out, they won't have a body through which to work their mischief. So they beg Jesus to cast them into a herd of swine feeding on the hillside near the lake. You all know the result; the pigs stampede down into the lake and are drowned, all 2,000 of them.

Being Jewish, of course, Jesus has no big problem with this, since the Law of Moses forbids having anything to do with pork. But the local inhabitants, who aren't Jewish, have a major problem with it. Their agricultural economy has just taken a big hit —

as if we were to go over to the Carthage area and do away with all the swine in the "piggeries," as my New England parishioners used to call them. Think of the loss to the farm owners' income, and think of the jobs lost by the migrant workers they've brought in to work for them! Those folks would have the same reaction as the Gerasenes; they're afraid, not just because of Jesus' power over evil but also because their livelihood is endangered. So instead of welcoming Jesus as the Son of God, they tell him to clear out.

This raises a question for us: **How willing am I to accept the authority of Jesus in my life, knowing that yielding to that authority might cost me something? Like the Gerasenes, would I not want to get too close to Jesus because his presence might require me to give up something I'm profiting from?**

But there's more. Jesus tells the man he has cleansed to witness to what God has done for him — and the man does so. But, Mark says, he begins to tell everybody what *Jesus* has done for him. The "Messianic secret" is starting to come out. We saw that, while the man was demon-possessed, he annoyed the neighbors by shrieking at all hours of the night, disturbing their sleep. That, I'm sure, was annoying enough, but now this Gentile man is going around telling all his neighbors that this Jew, named Jesus, has rescued him from the evil that possessed him. I don't think they really wanted to hear that — any more than the people you and I know in this community really want to hear our witness to what Jesus

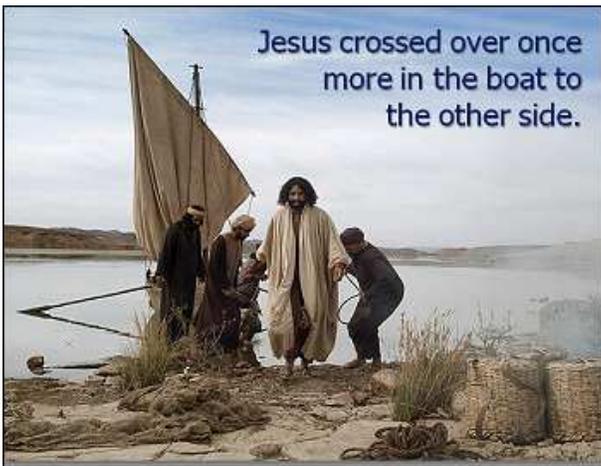


has done for us. Sometimes our witness can be annoying to others — family members, neighbors, fellow workers, people we deal with in the community. So here's our next question, and it's a big one: **Am I willing to witness to the authority of Jesus over this world, even if others are bothered by my testimony? And can I make it evident who Jesus really is, in a way that helps people respond favorably to my witness?** As I said, that's a big question, or maybe two questions, that should give us plenty of food for thought.

Now let's go back to the issue of demon possession itself. In the modern Western world, as I said, that idea sounds like a fairy tale because the world of the spirit is closed off for so many people. Nevertheless, the reality of evil itself is plain enough. One only has to recall Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot — murderers of millions — to know that evil is real. Or what about the actions of Islamic extremists, who behead unbelievers and subject women to abuse? Some of our national leaders seem to be afraid to call this evil what it is, but in our hearts we all recognize it. And it comes down to the individual level, as well, in people we may read about like Jeffery Dahmer or John Wayne Gacy. Or we may even have personally encountered someone who treated others so badly that it seemed they were in the clutch of an evil force.

Without getting weird or spooky about it, can we begin to understand that some of the evil things people do aren't just because they *want* to be nasty to others, or because they had a troubled childhood, or because they have some kind of bi-polar disorder? They do these horrible things because *something evil has taken over their lives* and shaped their outlook to the point where the pain and suffering they inflict on others makes no impression on them. If it's possible for Christians to be filled with the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the risen Jesus, then isn't it possible for non-believers to be enslaved by spirits of evil and rebellion against God? All the counseling, therapy, drugs, or incarceration that can be applied in such cases may have little or no effect if the basic problem is a spiritual problem. People in this situation have only one hope for rescue, and that's for Jesus to confront them and declare, "Unclean spirit, come out of him!" Let's ask ourselves this, then: **Am I able to confront spiritual evil in the lives of people I encounter, and to declare their deliverance in Jesus' name? Do I know how to do this, or can I learn how?**

We proceed to our next section of Mark, Chapter 5.



When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."

So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?" Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.

When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was.

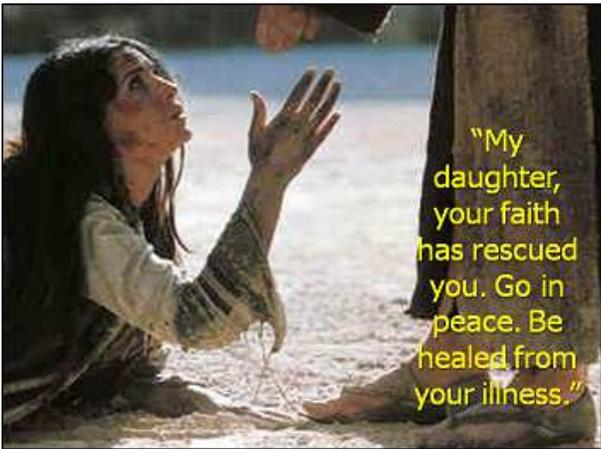
He took her by the hand and said to her, ""Talitha koum!"" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat. (5:21-43)

Here we have a story within a story. Jesus is back in Jewish territory, apparently in Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, his hometown at this point in his ministry. Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, has come to Jesus for help. His twelve-year-old daughter is gravely ill, with death apparently imminent.

Jairus is an important man in Capernaum. I've seen the ancient ruins of the Capernaum synagogue — actually, one that was built for the same Jewish community a few centuries later — and even the ruins are impressive today. I'm sure Jairus, as a "big man" in this congregation, wasn't normally the type to go around begging uncredentialed local teachers for help. But he's desperate, and word about Jesus has spread through the whole territory. At his appeal, Jesus starts for Jairus's house and the little girl whose life is in danger.

But as they're going they get interrupted. In the crowd following them there's a woman who's been suffering from internal bleeding for years. No doctor has been able to help her; in fact, her condition has worsened and all her money has been used up. But she's heard the word about Jesus, and she believes that if she even touches the edge of his clothing she'll be healed. So as Jesus passes by she reaches out, brushes her hand against Jesus' garment — and immediately knows that the hemorrhaging in her body has stopped for good.

Preachers often take this event as an example of how our faith in God is a critical factor in whether or not we can be healed of our diseases. That's because of what Jesus says to the woman afterward: "My daughter, your faith has rescued you. Go in peace. Be healed from your illness." Faith for healing is important, but there's more to it than the woman's faith. And sometimes the Gospels tell us that Jesus helped people because he had compassion on them. But Mark's account doesn't mention that Jesus felt sorry for this woman.



"My daughter, your faith has rescued you. Go in peace. Be healed from your illness."

In fact, Jesus doesn't even know she's there till she reaches out to touch him. Then he knows. How? Because, as Mark tells it, "Jesus knew at once, inside himself, that power had gone out of him. He turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" The older translation says Jesus knew "that virtue had gone out of him." It wasn't just by this woman's faith that she was healed, or because Jesus felt sorry for her. She got healed *because of the power, the virtue* that flowed from the person of Jesus, even through his clothing. As the apostle Paul says, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Colossians 1:19). And that fullness dwelling in one man, the Lord Jesus, has power to heal other people.

Now let's suppose this poor woman was living today and had a serious illness of some kind. What do you think some of her Christian friends — even, perhaps, her preacher — might be telling her? Or what might she be telling herself? "Oh, I know the Lord has put this illness on me for some reason —



One of the synagogue presidents, a man named Jairus, arrived.

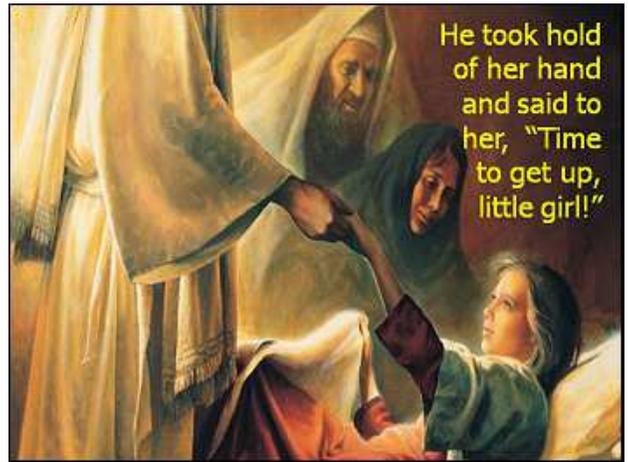
to teach me a lesson, to help me grow stronger, to teach me patience, to encourage my faith in the face of suffering, or for some reason known only to God. I guess I'll just have to endure it, because God wants it that way." Did Jesus ever tell anyone *that*? Does he ever say that sickness comes from God?

I know people sometimes bring up Paul's "thorn in the flesh," as he calls it, assuming it was some kind of illness or disability the Lord expected Paul to just accept. Give me a break! A man who accomplished what the apostle Paul did, while enduring shipwreck, beatings, imprisonment, and countless other privations, was hardly a sick man. Paul says his "thorn in the flesh" was "a messenger of Satan to harass me," the devilish opposition to the message about Jesus that he was preaching. And God's grace was sufficient for Paul to push forward in spite of that opposition. No preacher should use the example of Paul to claim that *God* puts sickness or other difficult circumstances upon you. Those things come from the evil one. God says, "I am the LORD, your healer" (Exodus 15:26), and we need to get in agreement with the Word of God. The Father wants you to be healed, and *Jesus wants you to be healed!* And he has the authority to heal you, as he healed this woman with the hemorrhage. Here's our question: **Whatever else I may be doing about any illness I'm dealing with, do I also have faith that Jesus can heal me, because I know he wants me to be well?**

But we're only halfway to Jairus's house, so let's go there and see what happens. While Jesus is still speaking to the woman, some people rush in with a sad message for the synagogue leader: "Don't bother this Teacher any more. Your daughter's dead." (Nothing like being blunt about it!) But Jesus doesn't let this stop him. He turns to the alarmed Jairus and says, "Don't be afraid. Just believe."

This incident is different from the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage. This time, the faith of the participants plays a more important role. Jesus sends the whole crowd away and takes with him only his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John. They've been with him in his travels and they've seen what God can do through him. They've seen him heal Peter's mother-in-law, and raise up a paralytic, and deliver demon-possessed people, and now heal this woman who touched him. They *expect him* to be able to raise the dead to life.

When they get to the house the hired mourners are already there, wailing away, and when Jesus tells them the little girl isn't dead they laugh at him. But Jesus goes to the little girl's bedside and takes with him not only his three disciples, but also the girl's parents. He takes the biggest stakeholders in this matter. The parents of course, are the ones most personally involved. But the disciples have a stake in it, too. They've given up everything in their former lives to follow Jesus, and if this little girl doesn't come back to life they'll have to face the fact that it was all for nothing, their high expectations were unfounded. Our faith, what we *expect of Jesus*, makes a difference in what he's able to do for us. If we expect nothing from Jesus, we may get nothing from him. If we expect him to change our lives by healing our bodies, reprogramming our thinking, giving us a new outlook on life, transforming us into people who move in the power and authority of the Spirit as "partakers of the divine nature" — if we expect Jesus to do these things it's much more likely that it will happen than if we just yield to low expectations and resign ourselves to the way we are. So: **What are my expectations of Jesus? Do I fully expect him to do what he says he can do, and wants to do, to make my life what it ought to be?**



So Jesus takes the little girl by the hand and simply says, in Aramaic, *Talitha koum* — “Girl, get up!” And she gets up and walks. What Mark says next sounds odd to us: Jesus “commanded them over and over not to let anyone know about it.” Why not — shouldn’t people know that the healing power of God is present in this man Jesus? As we’ve mentioned before, Jesus has come with one central message: “The kingdom of God is here.” His healing ministry is part of the appearance of the kingdom. But if people start focusing exclusively on his ability to heal diseases and come to regard his ministry as just a traveling clinic, they’ll miss what he wants to tell them about the rule of God that’s beginning to appear in their midst.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ “mighty works and wonders and signs” are part of the gospel of the kingdom, the revelation of Jesus the Messiah. And they don’t stop when Jesus is raised from the dead and returns to his Father. At the end of Mark’s Gospel he tells his followers, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; . . . They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:17-18). Jesus didn’t heal people as some kind of ethereal, disembodied spirit; he healed people as a flesh-and-blood man — as the New Testament affirms — and he gives the same power to other men and women who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

We don’t read in the New Testament that Jesus’ healing, cleansing power ever stopped working, nor has it stopped in the centuries that have passed. The living Jesus heals today, through men and women who trust and obey him — as thousands the world over have testified. Healing doesn’t come only through the prayers of some special person, or as the result of some particular sure-fire prayer formula. Nevertheless, prayer does get answered and miracles still occur, and because Jesus has been raised from the dead we ought to live in constant faith — not just hope, but faith and expectation — that we will see and experience the power of Jesus at work in our lives and the lives of others we deal with. Personally, as your pastor for this season of time I want nothing more than to see this church become a sanctuary of praise and healing, where people come to meet with God and to witness the “mighty works and wonders and signs” of the Lord Jesus in our midst.

As we close, let’s review our questions raised by Mark, chapter 5:

- Am I willing to yield to the authority of Jesus, even if it costs me something to get close to him?
- Do I dare to witness to the authority of Jesus over the world I live in, even if that sometimes bothers other people?
- Can I confront spiritual evil in the lives of people I know, or learn how to declare their deliverance in Jesus’ name?
- Do I know that Jesus wants to heal me, so that I have faith that he will do it?
- Do I fully expect Jesus to do what he says he can do to make my life what it ought to be?

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