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Lessons from the Demoniac of Mark 5

The Storm on the Lake

Editor's Note: This presentation was given as the Sabbath sermon during the Spiritual Warfare and the Occult in Scripture, History, and Contemporary Society Conference.

The deliverance of the demoniac begins in Mark 4:35. At the end of a long day of teaching, Jesus and the disciples got into a boat to cross to the eastern shores of Galilee—the region of the Decapolis, Gentile territory, pagan territory. Galilee was a beautiful yet dangerous lake. To the west was a plain, to the east high cliffs, and to the north was snowy Mt. Hermon. The Sea of Galilee itself is 700 feet below sea level. Air masses slide off the surrounding snowy heights and roar across the sea, warm air mixes with cold air, turning Galilee from an idyllic calm to a foaming cauldron. And in the narrative, a huge storm arises on the lake (v. 37).

Yet, the only place Mark records Jesus asleep is in the storm, demonstrating his complete trust in God! The disciples however are terrified, they wake him up and in tones of rebuke demand, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (v. 38).

Are we better than they? When the storms of life crash around us, we often accuse God of doing nothing, of being asleep at His post. Psalm 121:3, 4 reminds us that he does care, that he never fails us. He calls us to trust him, to wait on him, to let him be the Lord of our fears.

Arising from his sleep, Jesus calmed the storm with his word. There were no incantations, sacrifices or prayers, for nature is subject to Jesus, just as it was at creation. Yet, this is no ordinary storm. Jesus “rebuked” the wind—the word used by Mark for confronting demonic forces (e.g., 1:25; 3:12). Jesus speaks with a 2nd person singular imperative rather than with an iussive subjunctive, that is “you—be still!” The storm is of demonic origin. Jesus is moving from Israel into pagan territory, and the

demonic forces that control these areas are seeking to prevent his arrival. He had delivered victims of demonic control in Israel, and the concern is that he might do the same in the Decapolis.

While the disciples were afraid for their lives in the storm, now they are terrified by the presence of the supernatural (vv. 40–41). They, like many today, are better able to handle the possibility of their own deaths than the presence of God in their midst. Furthermore, according to Ps 107:23–32, only YHWH, the LORD of heaven and earth, has the power to still the seas, so the disciples ask themselves, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey Him?” Who indeed is he? And as they step ashore from the boat, this question is in their hearts. Who is Jesus? Is He really God, God with us, the Lord of heaven and earth? The answer will come very soon!

The Storm in the Man

In Mark 5:1–5, Jesus, who has just calmed a violent storm at sea, now meets a man with an equally violent storm within him. Remember that Jesus is now in the Decapolis, Gentile territory, pagan territory, and a man rushes to meet him from among the tombs. The description of the demoniac is one of the most pitiful and wretched of anyone in Scripture. The description is raw and brutal, a picture of despair.

People have tried to subdue him (v. 4), the word used for subduing a wild beast (Jas 3:7), yet even chains could not restrain him. Without control of his mind, he is inhabited, possessed, and oppressed by demons. Without rest, without sleep, day and night he wanders by himself in the mountains, howling and crying out in his despair. Without peace of mind, he uses rocks to beat himself. His body is battered, adorned with scars, scabs, bruises, open wounds, dirt and dried blood. He is filthy and unkempt, a terror to himself and to others. Without friend or family, he lives alone among the tombs. Even in life he is consigned to the land of the dead. He is a man without friends or friendship, without rest, without peace, without a home, without hope. This is ultimately where Satan will bring all who surrender their lives to his control.

The story is full of ritual uncleanness. He lives in the Decapolis—when Pompey conquered Palestine in 63 BC, he isolated this region and started building new cities to be showcases for the superiority of pagan Hellenistic culture and gods. The demoniac lives among the tombs. According to Num 19:11–14, anyone who failed to purify himself from the pollution of tombs must “be cut off from Israel.” He has an unclean spirit within him. In the region are swine herders—men engaged in an unclean occupation with unclean animals. Swine flesh was a prized food for Roman legionaries, so if the swine were being raised to feed the occupying Roman powers, it

would be doubly offensive. Thus Jesus meets a man with an unclean spirit living among unclean tombs surrounded by unclean pagans employed in unclean occupations with unclean animals, all in unclean Gentile territory.

Yet, and may God be praised, it was Jesus' decision to leave the towns of Galilee to cross the Sea of Galilee, knowing he would meet this man, just as it was his decision to leave the glories of heaven for you and for me. The lesson of this story is that there is no barrier of uncleanness, iniquity, physical or moral filth, that Jesus is not willing to move through to redeem a child of God (2 Tim 1:9).

The demoniac sensing that Jesus could help, ran to his feet, yet when he opened his mouth to plead for help, it was the demons that spoke (vv. 6–13). Help was so near, and yet so far. Imagine the despair he must have felt! The demons recognize Jesus' authority, and plead with him to leave them alone. They refer to him as the "Son of the Most High God" — a term used in the OT to emphasize the transcendence and power of God over pagan deities and unclean spirits (Gen 14:18; Num 24:16; Dan 3:26; Isa 14:14).

When Jesus asked what the name of the demon was, they replied that their name was "legion." A legion was the single largest group of Roman soldiers—5,000–6,000 strong. Wherever they went, communities were destroyed, homes burned down, families broken up, and killed or sold into slavery. They were a symbol of Roman might and oppression, and the use of this name by the demonic forces indicates the sheer weight and brutality of their oppression of the demoniac.

The demons cannot hope to challenge Jesus, but plead for his mercy as the only alternative to experiencing his wrath. So Jesus gave them permission to enter the herd of pigs, 2,000 strong, which immediately plunged down the steep banks, over the cliffs that surround eastern Galilee, and down into the water, where they drowned.

The story here presents a moral dilemma. The 2,000 pigs represented an enormous economic catastrophe. Many families would have lost their livelihoods, their sources of income, in this incident. Physicians have the principle to "do not harm," yet in this miracle Jesus seemingly caused enormous harm. The good done for a single demoniac results in an economic catastrophe for many families. Yet, the story reveals that in the eyes of Jesus, the rescue and restoration of a single individual is more important than any amount of wealth or physical assets. A human being is more important to God than any amount of wealth.

The local communities come to see what has happened (vv. 14–17). At the foot of Jesus sits the demoniac, now clothed in fresh clothes and in his right mind. From his eyes gleam intelligence and heavenly peace, from his lips come praise, his heart is bursting with joy and gratitude for what

Jesus has done for him. Those hands that had torn chains apart and beaten himself now rest peacefully in his lap. He who had been the terror of the region was now a man of peace. Satan had been rebuked and driven out. He had been born again and is a new creation. He no longer faces condemnation, for he is sitting at the feet of Jesus. This is what Jesus seeks for all who would follow him in faithful discipleship.

And the crowd? They see the restoration of the image of God in the demoniac, they see the dead pigs, and they are afraid. What other losses might this stranger visit upon their communities? We are often no different today. When the chips are down, many also choose pigs over people. Time and again, the weakest, the defenseless, the poor, the elderly, those without a voice, are pushed aside on the altar of human greed and selfishness. Time and again, when faced with a choice of serving Jesus faithfully or serving our financial priorities, we choose to serve our financial priorities. We want Jesus to be our Savior, but not our Lord. We want eternal life tomorrow, but deny the lordship of Jesus today over our time and talents and finances.

According to Jesus in Luke 16:10–12, if we are not faithful with worldly wealth, God cannot entrust spiritual riches to us. If we are faithful and obedient in our use of financial wealth, including returning a faithful tithe, and sacrificial giving to those in need, God knows we can be trusted with true heavenly riches. How a man uses his wallet is a demonstration of his walk with God. And so the crowd asks Jesus to leave. They do not care that he has just done what no one else can do, they only see their financial losses, and ask him to leave. Tragically, many today are no different. And while the crowd begged Jesus to leave, the demoniac begged Jesus that he might be with him. This is exactly what Jesus calls disciples to do in Mark 3:14. Disciples first and foremost are to be with Jesus, to spend time with him.

Jesus however refuses the former demoniac's request, and sends him out as the first missionary, even before he sent out the Twelve or the Seventy. Interestingly, the first missionary Jesus ever sent out was a gentile, a restored demoniac who lived among pagans. He had never sat through a Bible class, a single sermon, nor a single evangelistic series, had no degree in theology, and had only known Jesus for literally a couple of hours, yet he was the first missionary sent out by Christ!

Jesus told that first missionary to go back and witness to communities that had just rejected Jesus himself! Initial human rejection does not automatically lead to divine rejection. People change. They may have rejected the Gospel yesterday, but today their lives may be different, their hearts may be open. Share the Gospel again! In God's eyes, a first refusal is never a final refusal. While there is life there remains hope! Jesus simply instructed that first missionary to go home, and tell his friends and family

two things: What God had done for him, and about the mercy God had showed him. He was obedient to the commands of Jesus, and went around telling everyone what Jesus had done for him. The disciples' question "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the waves obey Him?" (4:41) is now answered by the parallel thoughts of 5:19, 20. Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate, and thus has authority over every force of nature and every spiritual being.

The Cosmic Storm

So, as we reflect on this narrative in particular and the witness of Scripture in general, what do we proclaim as born-again disciples of Jesus Christ regarding demonization? The Scriptures teach that behind the scenes of earthly affairs, invisible, supernatural forces for good and evil are engaged in cosmic warfare for the allegiance and control of every human being (Eph 6:12). The Scriptures teach the existence of a literal, personal devil, once called Lucifer (Isa 14:12) and now named Satan, who was once the highest ranked, most beautiful angel in heaven (Ezek 28:15). The Scriptures teach that Satan experienced a moral fall and took one-third of all the holy angels with him into rebellion against God (Rev 12:4), and that at the conclusion of that first war in heaven he was literally and physically ejected from heaven, eventually coming down to planet earth (Rev 12:7–9). The Scriptures teach that Satan and his fallen angels (demons) continue to this day in waging ruthless war against the Kingdom of God and all that is good and worthwhile in the universe (Rev 12:13–17).

The Scriptures teach that during earth's final days, Satan will send forth three demonic spirits who will delude and control the overwhelming majority of the powers and inhabitants of our world to fight against God Almighty (Rev 16:13) and persecute God's faithful people. The Scriptures teach that Satan will bring about an overpowering delusion at the end of time to deceive, if possible, even the very elect of God and those who do not love the truth (2 Thess 2:9, 10). The Scriptures teach that fallen angels tempt fallen humanity (Eph 6:12), make attractive to us sins of commission (1 John 3:4), sins of omission (Jas 4:17), taunt and torment (Luke 8:29; Mark 1:26). The Scriptures teach that the forces of evil that weigh down humanity are so powerful that we, in our own unaided humanity, cannot hope to successfully withstand the forces of evil (Eph 6:12).

The Scriptures teach that in the first Christmas story, the arrival of the Kingdom of God set up a direct confrontation with the kingdom of Satan, and the forces of darkness have never ever been able to extinguish the Light of the World (John 1:5). The Scriptures teach that "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). In Jesus' first sermon at Nazareth, he declared that he had come to "proclaim

release to the captives," that is, to deliver the victims of satanic harassment and possession (Luke 4:18). The Scriptures teach that while "our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12), those rulers (fallen angels) can never separate born again Christians from the love of God ("For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" [Rom 8:38, 39]).

The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ has never lost in an encounter with Satan or one of his fallen angels. Christ triumphed in the first heavenly war, and Satan was cast out of heaven. Christ triumphed over Satan in the wilderness, and Satan departed from his sight. Christ triumphed over Satan's fallen angels while he was on earth, and the demons were cast out, without fail. Christ will triumph over Satan in the final conflict between good and evil, and Satan will be cast into the lake of fire to be eternally destroyed (Rev 20:10).

The Scriptures teach the Good News that Jesus Christ is the Savior of humankind (Phil 3:20). Yes, Jesus was the most gifted teacher in human history, but he did not come simply to teach, he came to save! It is precisely because the evil we experience today has a satanic origin that we simply cannot overcome it by better Christian education, better parenting skills, carefully nuanced church resolutions, or local church programs. Our greatest enemy is not ignorance, poverty, social injustice, or environmental degradation, and our greatest need is not education, economic growth, social reform, or environmental rejuvenation. No. Our greatest enemy is evil—a personal, malevolent being named Satan, and our greatest need is a personal, loving Savior. Without a Savior we are all irretrievably lost. That Savior is Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures teach that because Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8) and because he has been given "all authority in heaven and earth" (Matt 28:18); therefore, "He is able for all time to save those who approach God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). In the fullness of time, God so loved the world that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, the One who was anointed with the Holy Spirit and God's power, to free us from the dominion of the devil ("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]). Later, the entire community of disciples was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and thus filled with heavenly power, the early church proclaimed

the Good News, demonstrating it by healing the sick and casting out evil spirits.

Jesus was clear as to why he came to earth: “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). He came not merely to teach lifestyle ethics, but to deliver all people from personal, malevolent evil! Jesus taught all to pray each day, “deliver us from evil/the evil one” —and the fact that people can pray this prayer with the promise that God will indeed “deliver us from evil/the evil one” is Good News indeed! This is Good News for us, our loved ones, and all those we minister to!

Conclusion

Jesus’ instructions for the demoniac are also for us today—to go and share what God has done for us! Many are afraid to witness for Jesus today, fearing the conversation will move into difficult theological waters. But Jesus never commanded the first missionary to instruct others in systematic theology. He told him to share what God had done for him. And we today are called to share what God has done for us.

This is the most powerful form of witness, simply because it is unanswerable. People may dispute your theology, but they cannot deny your personal experience with God. So we are called to ponder afresh what God has done for us, his leading, his protection, and his provision.

Today we should also ponder afresh our true spiritual state, our sins and sinfulness, and the mercy God has shown us. Our homes and our lives should also be hymns of praise to Jesus Christ because of his mercy to us, for all he has done for us, for all he is doing for us, and for all he will do for us.



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