

“Even the Demons Obey Him”

Matthew 8:28-34

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In 1973 the movie “The Exorcist” came out. I was a sophomore in high school at that time and a lot of people were talking about it. I have never seen the movie, though I think I read the book. I do remember thinking this is a good thing. The movie is about casting out a demon and Jesus cast out demons. Those who watch this movie will likely become more interested in Christianity.

Well, 50 years later I would not say it really turned out that way. Yes, plenty of people are interested in the occult and demonic, but not too often does that type of fascination seem to draw people to Christianity. That surprises me a little because one of the themes in the New Testament gospels is Jesus’ authority over demons, over the kingdom of darkness.

Folks, we see that in our text today. Our journey through Matthew’s gospels brings us to Matthew 8:28-34. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would use this somewhat difficult passage to both encourage and challenge us today.

Let’s start by reading our text: **Matthew 8:28a And when he** (Jesus came to the other side, (Of Lake Galilee) **to the country of the Gadarenes,** the town of Gadara was about six miles southeast of the lake. Most living there at the time were gentiles, not Jews. **Matthew 8:28b two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way.**

The gospels of Mark and Luke have longer and more detailed account of this event. They focus on just one of the men, who would break the chains with which people tried to bind him. People were afraid of these two fellows. **Matthew 8:29 And behold they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the times?”**

The words spoken come out of the mouths these two men, but they are really the words of the demons. According to Mark, they said, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” They recognize Jesus is the Son of God, a reminder demons know theological truth, they just don’t like it. They also apparently realize that a time will come when they

experience God’s punishment, but they insist they time should be now.

Matthew 8:30 Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. Mark says there were about 2000 pigs, a big herd. The pig farmers were no doubt gentiles. **Matthew 8:31 And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.”** The demons may have feared Jesus would send them to some type of confinement in hell where they would wait their final judgment in the lake of fire. Instead, **Matthew 8:32 He said to them, “Go.” So, they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.**

I am not sure what we expect demon possessed pigs to do, but they are all now dead. We are told what happened to the demons. Some suggest they were then confined to hell, but the text doesn’t say that. This massive drowning may pre-figure the time when Satan and likely all his demons will be thrown, no into Lake Galilee, but into the lake of fire.

Matthew 8:33 The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. A wonderful thing had happened to these two men. They were free. We don’t know how long they had suffered this demon possession, but it was over. Mark tells us that at least one of them became some kind of evangelist, going around telling everyone in the region how Jesus had freed him.

Matthew 8:34 And behold, all the city (the people of Gadara) **came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.** Why? Because they had just lost 2000 pigs! And I don’t think the herd was insured. Yes, the people had just witnessed the amazing authority and power of Jesus. He commands not just diseases, or waves and wind, but also supernatural demonic beings. They had also seen two men freed from demonic power. Yet, their primary concern seems to be the money they lost.

As Don Carson says in his commentary, they preferred pigs to people, and swine to the Savior.

Okay, that is our text. What are some things the Lord is saying to us through this passage?

#1 Demonic beings are real. This is just one of numerous passages in the gospels where Jesus encounters demons. There are various references to the devil and demonic forces in other parts of the New Testament. It seems pretty obvious that the Bible teaches demonic beings are real. Throughout history, most people in most places and at most times have believed in the reality of the demonic. There are plenty of accounts of encounters people claim to have had with demons in almost every culture, including the 21st century United States.

Yet, plenty of folks read an account like this and see it as fiction. They claim belief in demons, though normal for unsophisticated people in the ancient world, does not make sense in our modern, scientific era. They insist that what was seen as demon possession, such as in our text today, were simply cases of mental illness, maybe schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. And those who embrace scientific naturalism or what is sometimes called, “scientism” insist demons cannot exist, because reality consists of only matter and energy and not any spirit beings. They might say, “I believe in science, not demons.”

However, these folks also claim God does not exist. And they often don’t mention this, their view has no room for object morality, meaning, or purpose. From this perspective it is silly to speak about things like freewill, love, or even true knowledge, because those things are just products of chemical reactions in our brains, things over which we really have no control.

In this view everything that exists and everything that happens is random, it just is. When you treat science as a religion, “scientism,” and vow to trust only what science tells us, you are heading down a very dark, empty, nihilistic path. You might not have any evil demons, but neither do you have anything that is true, good, right, and beautiful.

My point is that I choose to believe what the Bible says, not what scientism says, and thus I believe demonic beings are real.

#2 Though demonic beings are real, many of the things people believe about demons are built on speculation and superstition, rather than what the Bible teaches. C.S. Lewis once said, *“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel and excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”* I sometimes paraphrase it, “People tend to either believe in the devil not at all, or too much.”

Here is what often happens” The Bible mentions the devil and demons on numerous occasions. However, scripture doesn’t really tell us a lot about them, at least not as much as we would like to know. Many folks start with a natural curiosity, which I suspect may be amplified in some way by the devil himself, and this can become an unhealthy curiosity, which leads to speculations, all kinds of speculations.

Now there are something about demons the Bible at least implies and wo which most Bible teaches agree. Demons are fallen angels. The consensus among evangelical theologians is that angelic beings were created by God before the earth was made. They were good and served God. At some point, an arch angel named Lucifer, also known as Satan or the devil, rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven.

Many believe a third of the angels joined in this rebellion. Where does that Bible say that? Well, Revelation 12 describes Satan as a great dragon, and **Revelation 12:4 says His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.** Yes, the Bible sometimes describes angels as stars. However, that verse is all we have that indicates a third of the angels have been expelled from heaven and became demons. And when we are given minimal information and details, there is fertile soil for speculations to grow.

We really don’t know a lot about the power and abilities of Satan and his demons. As spirit beings they are certainly able to do things those of us in physical bodies cannot. However, they are created beings, they are not God.

Thus, they are not all-knowing, all powerful, or able to be in multiple places at once.

Satan may be able to travel very quickly, but he can only be in one place at a time. Thus, it is very unlikely he is in Chisholm, Minnesota this morning, though it is certainly possible one or more demons, and one or more of God's angels might be.

Two books by Frank Perretti, "This Present Darkness," and "Piercing the Darkness," were very popular among evangelical Christians in the 1980's. I certainly enjoyed reading them. There was very little, if anything in the books that contradicted what the Bible teaches.

But they were full of speculations about what demons are like and what they do. Speculations by themselves are not evil, as long as you remember that is what they are, speculations, and do not confuse them with spiritual truth, the truth God reveals to us through His word, the Bible.

#3 A Christian can not be possessed by a demon and be in need of exorcism. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that can happen. A literal translation of the Greek word in verse 28 would be that there are "demonized" men. Sometimes that word is translated possessed, other times oppressed by a demon. I have heard that a Christian cannot be possessed but can be oppressed. However, nothing in the Bible indicates that distinction.

Often it is said that since a Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, a demon cannot dwell in that person. I suspect that is true. **1 John 4:4b** says, **Greater is He that is in you (the Holy Spirit) than he that is the world (the evil one, the devil).**

However, a more convincing argument to me that Christians can be demon possessed is simply reading the New Testament, specifically Romans through Jude. In all these 23 God inspired letters or epistles, written by the apostles to 1st century Christian, there is zero mention of anyone being possessed by a demon and no instructions about how to exorcise a demon from someone. Zero.

Yes, in the four gospels and the book of Acts, Jesus and the apostles encountered unbelievers who were "demonized." But there is no indication any believing Christian was suffering in that way. And again, the letters of the apostles Paul, Peter, John, etc., have not one word on instruction about casting a demon out of someone. That is

significant. And I think it indicates Christian can not be demonized, meaning either possessed or oppressed by a demon.

Now, I suspect you have heard stories that indicate the opposite. I have no desire to argue with you. I would simply note that what the Bible says is more authoritative, more reliable, and matters more than our experiences. And I would add that it is certainly possible for a professing Christian to be demonized if that individual is not a genuine believer in Jesus, because then he/she is not truly born again or indwelt by God's Spirit.

#4 We, as Christians today, are engaged in spiritual warfare against the devil and his demons. However, the battles are not fought the way some folks think. Instead of casting out demons, here are some things we are called to do. **1 Peter 5:8b,9A Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith.** And **James 4:7** says, **Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.**

How do we resist the devil and his demons? I think the apostle Paul's instructions in Ephesians 6 are very helpful. **Ephesians 6:11,14-18 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.**

Folks, the puritan pastor William Gurnall, wrote a three volume, 1240-page commentary on these verses titled, "A Christian in Complete Armor." In other words, there is a lot I could say about his passage. But today, I would just note that Paul's instructions for spiritual warfare are really truth, righteousness, the gospels, faith, salvation, the Word of God and prayer. That, folks, is how we are to defend ourselves from the forces of evil. I believe that is essentially how we resist the devil. Another way to put it is, be a faithful disciple,

follow Jesus where He leads and trust Him each step of the way.

Oh, there will likely be times when you feel like you are being tempted or harassed by the devil or one of his demons. Again, since Satan can only be in one place at a time, I suspect you are much more likely to encounter a demon.

When that happens, your best strategy is probably not to throw an ink bottle at it as Martin Luther did. Rather, put on that spiritual armor, focus on the Biblical truth of who you are in Jesus Christ, pray for the Lord to give you spiritual strength to resist temptation, and like Jesus, use the sword of the Spirit, God's Word, the Bible, to fill your mind with truth.

#5 The devil and his demons want us to sin, want us to rebel against God, but they cannot make us do that. If Joe is struggling with a habitual sin or addiction, such as pornography, there will often be someone who says, "Oh, Joe must have a demon of lust," and sometimes, the idea that this demon needs to be cast out. However, that is not how the Bible describes our struggle with sin. "The devil made me do it," is not in the Bible.

Rather, we have these words from God, in **James 1:14,15 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.** The devil and his demons cheer us on as we sin, but it is our own desires, KJV says, "his own lust," NIV "Our own evil desires," that causes us to sin.

If Joe is struggling with a pornography addiction, he likely doesn't need a demon of lust cast out of him, but through the help of the Holy Spirit he needs to overcome his own evil desires. And if Joe has trouble remembering where he put his car keys, he probably doesn't need a demon of forgetfulness cast out of him, he just needs to take better care of his keys.

Incidentally, if you want to get better understanding and insight on how we may be tempted by demons, C. S. Lewis' classic, "The Screwtape Letters" is still a great resource.

#6 Those who are not believers in Jesus Christ can be demonized, possessed, or oppressed by a demon. Jesus encountered two men like that in our text today. There are plenty of stories out there about people being demonized and you maybe even have encountered someone in this condition. Let me share a few thoughts.

First, this is outside my area of expertise, these are just my thoughts.

Second, when someone is demonized in the New Testament, it seems to be obvious this is their condition. It is unlikely you will go out on a date with a gal who seems perfectly normal for the first couple of hours, and then will discover she is demon possessed.

Third, be careful not to confuse mental illness with being demonized. I think plenty of people struggling with even severe mental illness are not demonized in any way. However, sometimes there does seem to be a connection. One pastor, who dealt with a lot of people who were demonized, said this: "Multiple personality disorder, when someone believes he/she is more than one individual is different from demon possession. However, every case of multiple personality disorders I have encountered, also has involved demonization." Do not confuse mental illness with demonization, but don't assume there cannot be a connection.

Fourth, if you encounter someone who seems to be demonized, I would suggest you pray for that person, rather than address the demon. The latter might be what an exorcist would do, but asking God for help, especially when we are not sure what to do, is never a bad choice. Because....

#7 Jesus is Lord over every demon. That is the big lesson in our text today, and I don't want you to miss it. Jesus simply utters the command, "Go," and that legion of demons leaves those two men and goes into the pigs. Demons go wherever Jesus tells them to go.

So why are there demons out there tempting and harassing us and even possessing some people? I don't know. Other than the Lord has a reason, a purpose, for allowing them to do so during this time. 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 1:6 tell us that some rebellious angels, have already been imprisoned by God, awaiting judgement. In the end, however,

I believe that Satan and all his angels, will Revelation 20:10 be thrown into the lake of fire, an eternal punishment from which there is no escape.

Until that time, we should rejoice that Jesus has defeated the powers of darkness, Satan and his demons. We should follow the Lord's instructions of resisting the devil, by using the spiritual armor He provides to us as believers in Jesus. And we should live not in fear, but in confidence, hope, and joy, because Jesus is not only risen indeed, but He reigns today in heaven as King. And one day soon, whenever soon is, He will return to this earth to reign as King of kings, and Lord of lords.