

The Fearsome Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, today's Bible reading is taken from Matthew, the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 8, and from verse 28 to verse 34.

And let's read together how Jesus heals two men with demons. And when he came to the other side, to the country of the gatherings, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way.

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 time? Now a herd of many pigs were feeding at some distance from them, and the demons begged him, saying, If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.

And 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.

The herdsmen fled, and going into the city, they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus.

[1 : 2 0] And when they saw him, they begged him to leave the region. Why don't I pray, and we'll get into God's word. Yeah, Father, whatever is going on in our minds and hearts, in our lives, I just ask that you would strip those things back so that we can see Jesus for who he is, and that seeing him, that might just renew us, give us a new joy, a new strength, a new purpose, that we would, as Bo prayed earlier, ascribe glory to you.

But Lord, we need to see you for who you are, and we can't do that for ourselves. So we ask that you would speak through your word today to each one of us where we are at to see the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Well, in Matthew's Gospel, we've been meeting the real Jesus, and he's not going to fit into any little box that we try and put him in.

He won't be domesticated. If we're going to encounter the real Jesus, we must take him as he is, as both a compassionate saviour and as a demanding king.

It's a package deal. We've got to take him as he is. In chapter 8, we've been seeing his great compassion completely restoring, not just partially, completely restoring a leper, the Roman centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law.

[3 : 0 8] These groups of people who are considered the lowest in society or even outside the people of God, that's who Jesus has compassion for. He kind of turns things around about who God loves and who is in the kingdom.

He reverses things. And he is at the same time a demanding king. He won't let other loyalties or obligations be in competition with him, even the obligation to family.

He wants total trust in him, even when the circumstances of life, like a storm, are screaming at us that we're going to perish. He wants us to trust in his person.

That is a huge demand. Compassionate but demanding. So it's not as if we need to put up with the demandingness of Jesus in order to get what we really need, which is his compassion.

So it's not like we just do a trade-off. His demandingness is compassionate and his compassion is demanding. And I think we see that in our story today.

[4 : 17] The compassion Jesus offers you will be very demanding. We're going to have to choose whether this Jesus can be trusted and invite his compassion into our lives.

It's going to be that demanding. Do we actually want it? Or will we ask him to leave our lives alone, keep his compassion far away from us?

So as we get into the story, maybe you've had something to do with the occult or with New Age spiritualism in your past with tarot cards and crystals and the like.

Others in our church family will have come from cultures where honouring the spirits of ancestors is critical to living a blessed rather than a cursed life. And then there's others in our church family who have grown up in a secular, materialistic Western culture.

And this idea of unseen realities will be hard to fathom, hard to accept. Can I briefly just say, if you're like me growing up in that secular, materialist culture and the idea of demon possession, you're kind of quite sceptical.

[5 : 39] Can I just ask you to consider whether that's because you're committed to what the Bible says or is that because of the secular belief still lingering in you? So go away and think about that one.

My main point is that the real Jesus in our story today will confront each of us, all of us from our different backgrounds. He is going to confront all of us.

Because all these backgrounds share in common a lack of awareness of the main weapon of the enemy to wreak havoc in our lives.

To understand what this weapon is, we need to recall the beginning of humanity with Adam and Eve in Genesis. God made people to be like him, in his image, to display God's character as we controlled everything in this world under God's authority.

But humanity handed over control. How? By believing the lies of Satan. Does God really want to give you the best in life?

[6 : 50] He's holding out. If you want control, then be your own God. You don't need him. Take it for yourself. There's no consequences for rejecting God to be God over your life.

These lies destroyed the character of the image bearers and ultimately brought death into the world. We handed over control to these lies.

I think the song Image captures this well with these lyrics. You spoke to the dust and you breathed life into us.

In your image, we were made to live. You gave us the world even more. You gave us yourself. In your likeness, we were made to rule. Even in paradise, mankind believed the lie.

We were king. Perfect, now perishing. Goodness unravelling. Stained by sin. It wasn't demon possession that undid humanity.

[8 : 00] It was lies. Let me give something of a cliché example to help us see how lives continue to enslave us, destroying the character of God we were meant to be and bring death into our lives today.

Picture a man who believes that he absolutely needs to be successful in his job to be validated as a man. He absolutely needs it.

What is believing that lie going to do to his character and his life? It's going to wreak havoc. Because he absolutely needs it, all other priorities are going to be out of order.

His job will be totally demanding. He must have success. Even at the cost of his own physical health. Even at the expense of the care of his family.

Even his engagement with the church. And we could go on and on. And if anything gets in the road of this goal of him being successful, because he needs it to feel like a man, look out.

[9 : 07] There will not be patience. There will be anger. And the price will be paid in relationships, if not totally, then to some extent. And the image of God is replaced with a self-centered, career-driven, enslaved, brutal man.

And he isn't ruling his job. The job will be ruling him. I'm hoping that just gives a concrete picture of how lies just distort our human nature that was meant to be in the image of God.

So career might not be the problem for you. What do you absolutely need? What can you not live without that isn't true, that isn't based on what God says you need?

Whatever it is, is enslaving you. It will cause you not to display the character of God in your relationships. It will cut you off from community with God and others.

It will control you. You won't control it. If you absolutely need it, it will control you. Satan enslaves and destroys God's image bearers by feeding us lies.

[10 : 25] Here's the beautiful news in our passage. Jesus is in the business of restoring enslaved people into the character and fellowship of God. So let's pick up the story from verse 28.

After quieting that raging storm with a word, he hops into a boat and they arrive on the other side of Lake Galilee and they're in this very non-Jewish region.

So it's surprising that Jesus is even here. Two men possessed by demons met Jesus. And whatever demon possession is, we've got to distinguish it from mental illness.

There may be a fuzzy line there, but it's different to mental illness because demons won't respond to medication. Mark's account of this incident reports only one demon-possessed man, whereas Matthew says there's two.

So the fact that Mark talks about one doesn't mean that there wasn't another one there. And maybe Matthew reports two demon-possessed men because Jewish law requires two witnesses to verify something happening.

[11 : 38] I'm not really sure. That's just my best stab at that. Here's what we are told about these three things about these two men. First is they lived among the tombs.

We're all looking forward to December holidays and things, I imagine. Are you planning to go camping in the cemetery? I suppose they don't have many facilities there.

But that is the last place I would want to be at night time. They lived among the tombs. Why? They were cut off from community life.

Being cut off from community life, they were living a kind of death. And just a side point of this, it makes me wonder what today is cutting us off from community life.

The second thing we're told is they are possessed by demonic power. They looked like men on the outside, but far from exercising God's good rule, they had lost self-control.

[12 : 46] Which brings us to the third thing we know about them. They are so out of control, they are fierce. People had to avoid them. They are doing violence to other people rather than reflecting God's character of serving other people.

Their family, the community, however much they loved these men, they could do nothing to help them. They are beyond help and slave to forces beyond their power to control.

Satan's agenda is to destroy God's glory by destroying God's image bearers. Stripping men of their God-given authority over the world, their self-control. Changing their character to be violent rather than to serve.

And cutting people off from community as God intended us. And we see Satan's ultimate goal with what happens to the pigs.

He would love to see us rush into the water and drown under God's judgment rather than acknowledge God and his grace. The lies Satan feeds us, far from empty promises, he just wants to destroy.

[13 : 59] I think these men are supposed to be a visible example of what all of us are like on the inside when we believe Satan's lies.

But if you feel trapped by some sin that you just can't shake, or if you feel trapped by something controlling you in your life, then there's a lot of hope in this passage. Jesus seems to cross the lake to search out for these two men.

He has all the time in the world for people who are trapped. And everything changes when the real Jesus shows up.

So in Jewish thinking, there's three realms of reality. There's the earthly realm of authority where we exercise authority on earth.

Then there's the top tier of authority, which is God himself, absolute authority over everything. But then there's this middle layer of authority where angels and demons, they have, or principalities and rulers, the Bible might call them, unseen forces.

[15 : 11] Now the reason we have hope of rescue is because Jesus is not in middle management. And we see that really clearly. The demonic cry out, what have you to do with us, O Son of God?

Have you come here to torment us before the time? Notice how good their doctrine is. It is A+. They recognize Jesus for who he is.

He is in the top authority. You are the divine Son of God. They know their days are numbered. They know there is a judgment day when the tormentors will be tormented.

They know their days are numbered. The judgment is coming. And they know that it's Jesus who will be doing the judging. That's a really good doctrine.

Truth. And despite affirming all this truth, they still want nothing to do with him. It literally says, what have you and us? What have we got in common? We want nothing to do with you.

[16 : 17] We hate these truths. I wonder if we take seriously what Jesus has said just a few paragraphs earlier in chapter 8, verses 11 to 12.

Let me read that out. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

While the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. He will throw out those with correct theology but who don't want to trust him and love him and obey him.

Do you have a healthy fear of Jesus' top-tier authority? He's not in middle management. The demons know this.

They recognise this. They've got no choice but to recognise this. They are not peers in some cosmic tug of war. If you see the narrative of the world as good versus evil, then please know it is totally rigged.

[17 : 35] It is not an even contest. It is totally rigged in Jesus' favour. The demons beg.

That's all they can do. They can beg. Send us into the pigs. And hear the utter authority of Jesus at this point.

We only hear one word from Jesus in this story. Go. Go. And 2,000 pigs, Mark records, immediately rush down a bank and drown.

Go. If you're not afraid to be in the presence of that kind of power, you should be.

And the two men are totally restored from the inside out. No need for a follow-up consult. It's a glimpse of heaven.

- [18 : 45] When all of Jesus' people will be fully restored into the likeness of God, free from sin, free from temptation, reflecting his character, joining his community again, ruling over creation rather than being ruled, totally renewed.

It's a glimpse of what we're looking forward to. And we have a taste of this already. Have you noticed that one of the fruits of the Spirit, I've found this perplexing for many years.

One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is self-control. So to be filled with God's control creates self-control. I've found that perplexing for a long time.

Why is that? Because if we're not ruled by God, we are ruled by created things, whatever we absolutely need. But when we're ruled by God, it gives us our self-control, what we were actually made for.

We have a taste of this freedom already, but the fullness is yet to come. Jesus' compassion is to restore people from the inside out back into the image of God.

- [20 : 05] And he does this today by the degree to which he replaces lies with the truth of who he is in our hearts. But there's a question in my mind, it might be in yours.

Why would Jesus allow the demons to go into the pigs? Why would he allow that? It's not that the pigs needed a physical host to dwell in. It would be strange if they needed a physical host to dwell in, that they would just kill the host immediately.

That doesn't make sense in my mind. I don't think we can be sure why the demons even ask this. Maybe they ask it, if we can't destroy the image bearers themselves in their character, at least let us destroy their livelihoods.

Let us do damage to their property. Maybe that's what's going on. So why did Jesus, like 2,000 pigs? He's just smashed the pig economy in that region.

This would have an impact on their livelihoods. We're not told why Jesus gave his permission. I don't think he needed visible proof of the exorcism.

- [21 : 21] He didn't need to prove himself. I don't think it's because Jesus doesn't care about animals. It was a Christian who started the RSPCA. The Bible's clear.

He loves all his creatures. I don't think it's because pigs were unclean in Jewish thinking, because since Jesus lived the perfect light, he declared all food clean, all animals clean.

So my answer is, I don't know. I'm really not sure. I don't think we can be sure why Jesus allowed this destruction. Here's what we do know because of it, though.

King Jesus' highest priority is to restore people spiritually and relationally from the inside out. He will prioritise restoring people with his truth, with his character, even if it costs other things, even if it's a high cost of good things.

It's his highest priority. He is so compassionate that he prioritises what is top priority, the restoration of people. It could be very costly to do that.

- [22 : 39] So how will you respond to this kind of costly compassion? I think it leaves us with a choice of whether we're going to invite this Jesus, this kind of compassion into our lives, or whether we want him to leave us alone.

This is too costly. Please, I don't want your compassion. And I think we see, as we heard in the kids' talk, we see this choice with the city of people.

The herzmén, they come, they evangelise, they report what goes on to the city, and notice their emphasis in verse 33. They could have said, come see, they were meant to be looking after these pigs.

Maybe they should have gone, it wasn't us. They didn't defend themselves saying what happened. They didn't say, whoa, check out this strange circumstance. Their main thing was, look at the demon-possessed men.

That was their main message. Look what happened to these men. They're restored. And so the whole city, we're told, come out to meet Jesus.

[23 : 47] And when they saw him, what could they have done at that point? They could have asked Jesus, wow, please come.

We have a hundred other people who need your help. Come in. What do you need to do in my life? What can you do for me? Or, who are you?

You are obviously someone wonderful. Tell us more about who you are. That's not their response. In the presence of such power that they know they can't control.

If we invite him in, he just took out 2,000 pigs to heal two people. What else could he do? The risk is too great.

They can't control it. What else might we lose? These people would rather save their bacon, so to speak, to keep the trappings of their livelihoods, than have Jesus come in and save them from the inside out.

[24 : 55] They would rather keep their bacon than have other people saved, restored. Leave our lives alone, please.

We beg you. And really sad, chapter 9, verse 1, Jesus got into a boat and left. That's a really sad verse.

So how will you respond to this great and costly compassion of Jesus? Will you invite him in or would you rather him leave you alone? When June McMurray, Don's late wife, when she prayed to grow in her gentleness and humility to be more like her Lord, who she loved, soon afterwards she was diagnosed with motor neurons disease.

So after the shock of the diagnosis, her and Don could accept it and even thank the Lord for it.

That's a lot of trust in Jesus' goodness. They trusted the compassion of their Lord, knowing that the Lord prioritised internal renewal.

[26 : 21] The external will come. They believed that strongly, but they knew that the priority was the internal renewal and they were able to thank the Lord. I don't think we need to wait for these kind of life or death situations to examine ourselves about what we want Jesus to have compassion in our lives over.

I think Scripture encourages us to look at whatever situation we're in and look beneath the surface to see how is the Lord working working, to replace lies with truth, to know him more, to grow in his character, to be set free from what enslaves us.

Let me give a personal example of just this past week. This past week, many of you might relate to this. I really wanted, I think, above all things, to have harmony in my family.

In case anyone's worried, Emma and I are doing fine. I just want to give that caveat. But I wanted harmony in my family. I just wanted peace. I had a choice at that point.

What do I pray for? Do I pray for that surface level peace? Or do I invite the Lord in? Come. Do whatever restoring work in me and in my family that you need to, even if it's going to be costly.

[27 : 44] Do you hear the choice? Come in. What's that going to mean to my family? For you to do that costly work? Or, Jesus, just give me peace.

Peace and quiet, like harmony. So, what is it for you at the moment? It's going to be different for all of us. Whatever circumstance you're in, what is Jesus doing beneath the surface?

I think coming out of lockdown is a good time for us to be reflecting. How is the Lord trying to set us free? From the things that we've been clinging to as, I absolutely have to have this.

How has he been exposing those things during lockdown so that we can be free in the knowledge of his love for us and in serving him? Lockdown has affected us all in different ways.

I'm just going to throw out some options for us to consider. Perhaps it's where you find your identity and self-worth. Like, during lockdown, you can't achieve much.

[28 : 46] You can't do much. You can't be successful as easily. So, maybe if you've been trying to pin your identity and worth in what you can achieve, has Jesus been calling you to go, no, no, no.

Come, follow me. Here's my calling for your life. Here's the purposes I have for you. This is where you will find identity. Maybe it's security and protection.

We all know at this point we can't protect ourselves. Protecting our children. We're being called, find your security in me, but not in circumstances.

In me is the Lord of all things. Perhaps it's what we do with our leisure and recuperation. Recuperation. Are we being controlled by our leisure rather than controlling our leisure?

Could we be longing more for the rest, the true rest? When I had my week off, I think I thought, oh, a week off is important. My body needed to be refreshed.

[29 : 57] That's fine. But something I think the Lord was teaching me was, you need to look forward to that eternal rest. That's when you'll have rest. Are we looking to leisure to give us that deep rest that only the Lord will give us when he returns?

So I just invite us to be reflecting on that. He wants to set us free. This is compassion, but it could be costly compassion. And when you pray for your loved ones to come to know the Lord Jesus and be saved, are you praying that, knowing that it could come at great cost to their lives?

Are you willing to pray that? So how will you respond to this compassionate saviour and demanding king? His highest priority is to set us free from the inside, to set others free from the inside.

It might come at great cost to other things, but we can trust him because he's suffered with us and he has borne the greatest cost for the lies that we have believed.

He's taken the greatest cost. We can trust him. We can follow him. And we can trust him because we have a glimpse in his ministry of the end result.

[31 : 24] These two restored men, the cleansing that happens to all the healing that happens, all the restoring of the world, we get a glimpse of the end result.

It's going to be worth it. The cost now is not worth comparing to the weight of glory to come. So will you trust him and invite him in to do that costly restoration work into the image of God?

for you and others? Or would you rather King Jesus leave his compassion far away from you? If you'd rather not risk your bacon and you ask Jesus to leave, be warned, he might just give you what you want.

Will you pray with me? Let's finish by praying. Father, if I look at my own heart's desires, they're conflicted and I've got to admit that I don't actually know what I need, what will give me life, what will give me the freedom and joy that my heart craves.

I don't actually know or I can't create it for myself. So I pray, Lord, that you'd help us to see Jesus and how powerful he is, how loving he is, that he puts top things first and help us trust that he knows what's best for us.

[33 : 13] Both individually as families, as a church family, help us to invite you in to do that work, not only for ourselves but also and especially for those who don't know you yet.

Maybe we be willing to accept that cost knowing that you are trustworthy. So I pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.