

Evil overcome: wouldn't that be good!

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[0 : 00] So the title of the talk that I was given was Evil Overcome. Wouldn't that be good? Evil abounds in our world. Theft, violence, sexual exploitation, child abuse, discrimination, disease, disaster, death.

In many forms, uncontrollable and indiscriminate, often affecting the poorest and most vulnerable, the worst, Rohingya refugees spring to mind.

But none of us are immune and all of us are affected. In thinking about this topic, I've realised how much I try to bubble wrap myself from evil.

Avoid watching the 10 o'clock news, controlling the comings and goings of my children, limiting the use of social media, obsessively locking the doors at night.

I actually locked myself out this morning. There are all kinds of things we do to keep ourselves and our families safe from the nasty world out there.

[1 : 13] But evil cannot be kept at a safe distance. It infiltrates our homes, our lives and our families. Evil is scary and evil hurts.

Sometimes physically, but often it's emotional and spiritual. And when evil hurts, we devise ways of reducing the pain. For some, this involves various forms of self-harm.

And I'm not just talking about teenage cutting. Red wine or tramadol make a really good anaesthetic.

Grueling hours of work, a great distraction. Swinging from binge eating to semi-starvation, a way of control. Rigorous training in the gym, a way of escape.

For me, I swing from crazy running before dawn to completely hibernating under the duvet.

Sometimes the self-inflicted physical pain is easier to bear than the emotional.

[2 : 21] Evil is alive and kicking. And at some point, evil affects us all. Evil overcome really would be good. And perhaps the question some of us are asking is this.

If there is a God, what is he doing about evil? How is he intervening to end all evil? Well, in Mark's Gospel, which you all have a copy of, Mark answers this question.

He gives us an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus. And according to Mark, Jesus is God's answer to our question.

And for the next few minutes, that is who we will be looking at. We're going to focus on just one short account. And it's an account that shows Jesus is the one who has the power to overcome evil. So if you can turn it up in your booklets, I'll read it for you. It's Mark chapter 5, verses 1 to 20. And you'll find it on page 16. Mark chapter 5, verses 1 to 20.

[3 : 35] 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 anymore, not even with a chain.

For he'd 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. And he shouted at the top of his voice, What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God?

Swear to God you won't torture me. For Jesus had said to him, Come out of this man, you evil spirit. Then Jesus asked, 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, pit pigs, pigs.

[4 : 45] 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 2,000 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. And 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 own people.

[5 : 53] 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 all the people were amazed. You've got a handout on your table, so I'm going to be walking through that, walking through this passage.

Scene 1, verses 1 to 5. Uncontrollable evil resides within. Now in this account, Jesus is greeted by something that has marched out of a horror movie.

And I say something because although this is a man, he is more monster zombie than human. But this is not fiction. This zombie-like man is a real person living in a real cemetery among real tombs. He's at home amongst dead, rotting corpses. He has unbindable strength in verse 4. He is impossible to subdue.

[7 : 00] Why? Because within this corpse of a man lives evil. A whole legion of evil. About 2,000 demons dwell in this one man.

He is so characterised by evil that he is named legion after the number of demons that reside within him. Verse 9. Evil resides within.

What is this evil like? Well, evil is bent on destruction. Look at verse 5. Night and day he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

Ceaselessly, he's in pain. Trying to claw away at himself. Crying, cutting, self-harming. Either he wants to kill the evil or the evil wants to kill him.

It's difficult to tell. Evil is evil. For this man, evil is not something that is out there in your Harvey Weinstein character or whoever comes to mind. No, evil is inescapably within.

[8 : 02] He is possessed and overtaken by evil. He is helpless and enslaved. Unable to remove or subdue the evil within.

Evil overcome. Wouldn't that be good? Now, the danger for us as we pleasantly dine in Dalit great views is that we think this has nothing to do with us.

Demon possession at worst happens in deepest, darkest Africa and at best is not real at all. But that's not true. Whilst demon possession may not be in our everyday experience, and it's certainly at the extreme end of things, it is real.

Now some of us have an unhealthy obsession with evil, whereas others of us are unhelpfully oblivious. But evil is present and real today as it ever was in history.

And the shocking truth is that this man is a visual picture of every single one of us here. The Instagram shot of you and I that we would never post.

[9 : 14] Evil is not just out there. Evil is tangled up in every single one of us. And of course that's not what we see or what we would present.

It is like the strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Beneath our polite Jekyll exterior lies something more sinister and Hyde-like.

I was in a bicycle accident last year. Now I have to admit, there are times when I have broken the law, cycling, jumped to light. I know someone on my table is going to be frowning at this point. Gone on the pavement, etc. But this was one of those occasions which was really not my fault. The woman in the Volvo turned straight into me and I had nowhere to go except face first onto the tarmac.

Broken front tooth, mouth pouring out blood, semi-comatosed. I look up to see said woman marching towards me with a string of unrepeatable expletives, expressing her fury at my rude interruption to her day.

[10 : 22] Evil was effervescing out of her mouth. And I am ashamed to admit that evil was quickly effervescing out of mine. I'd like to be able to say I don't know what possessed me.

But sadly I do. Evil is within me. Uncontrollable, unbindable, effervescing out. And perhaps you might excuse that particular incident, that outburst, as justifiable. That wasn't my fault. But let me tell you that it doesn't take an irate woman to bring out my evil hide side. Teenagers who answer back. A husband who arrives home late again. Another cold call from the insurance company. Spilt milk. They're all enough to bring out the monster inside. Don't you sometimes wish you could just gouge evil out? Evil overcome. Wouldn't that be good? Uncontrollable evil resides within. Evil is not just out there. Evil is within us all.

[11 : 30] And there is absolutely nothing we can do to escape from it. But let me show you something else from this passage. Scene 2. Jesus has power to overcome evil.

Verses 6 to 15. Now demons respond in one way to Jesus. They tremble. Jesus is way more scary than they are.

And this comes out in three ways in Mark's Gospel. Number one, demons are very vocal and very loud. Two, they understand the pecking order. And this is because, three, they know exactly who Jesus is.

And it's the same here. Verse 7. The man falls down before Jesus and cries out with a loud voice, What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?

Legion is now prostrate before Jesus, begging and pleading with him. Legion has no choice but to submit to Jesus. Like a dog who's been rampaging wildly around the open park, chasing squirrels, terrorising small children, and pooping everywhere.

[12 : 43] He's now back on his leash, firmly under the control of his master. Legion has no choice but to recognise and declare out loud who the master is, the Son of the Most High God.

Well, let's pause there a minute because there are all kinds of views about who Jesus is in Mark's Gospel, and no doubt here. There are some people who say things like, Jesus, yeah, he was a good man, great teacher, maybe he was a prophet.

That's what people who encountered Jesus said they thought about what they thought about him. But all of those views miss the point. This is not what Legion sees.

Legion belongs to an invisible spiritual realm that sees and recognises the power of an invisible God. They have a crystal clear view of Jesus, and they know exactly who Jesus is.

And they're forced to speak the truth when confronted with the Most High. They know and declare that Jesus is the Most High. He is God's Son.

[13 : 57] He is the man who is God, the one God has sent to rescue his world from evil. The one who will destroy evil.

Legion knows that. And he doesn't like it, because Jesus has the power to destroy him. Evil overcome means an end to Legion.

Legion is powerless in his presence. The demons know who Jesus is, and they shudder. Hang on, I hear you say, Jesus doesn't end all evil.

Not in this episode. He gives permission for Legion to go into the pigs. And I can hear the RSBGA saying, what about the poor pigs? And some of us are thinking, what waste of bacon?

Well, firstly, Jesus cared more about this one man than he did 2,000 pigs, which is good news for humankind. Bad news for pigs.

[14 : 57] But secondly, if it wasn't for 2,000 pigs hurtling off the mountainside drowning, I don't think you and I would fully appreciate how destructive and awful the Legion of Demons were.

This is a dramatic scene of destruction. 2,000 wild screaming pigs hurtling down a hillside to their death. That's what evil looks like. Evil is loud, out of control, and bent on destruction.

And yet this destructive power is no match for Jesus. He is the one who has driven the demons out and off the mountainside. Jesus has power to overcome evil.

And then the camera moves around in verse 15 and we see Legion completely restored. The one who had had the Legion is now sitting there clothed and in his right mind.

The monster zombie has been restored to a right-minded man, settled, freed, clothed, and human again. This is a new profile picture.

[16 : 03] This is the one you do want to post. Here is a person who is no longer ruled by a destructive master. He has been freed, rescued, and restored. Evil has been overcome.

Now if the monster zombie was a picture of what we are like when we're ruled by evil, then here is the picture of what we look like when Jesus has rescued us from evil.

We are more settled, more free, and more human than we could ever imagine. We're not immune from evil in the world, nor immune from evil rearing its ugly head at times, but certainly not ruled by an evil, destructive master who is bent on our destruction.

And here we have a foretaste of what God's people will look like in his new world, where there is no more evil ever. And if this was a fairy tale, here the camera would zoom out.

But it's not the end of the story. Look what still happens. Verse 15 says, When they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed, and in his right mind, they were afraid.

[17 : 24] People were afraid, not of the monster zombie, but of the restored, right-minded man who had taken his place. Why are they afraid?

Evil overcome. Isn't that good? Isn't that what we all want? But here's the truth. The kind of power needed to overcome the legion of evil was terrifying, supernatural power.

Jesus did this. Jesus is more scary than legion. And if Jesus did this to legion, what will he do with the evil in me? And all the eyes were on Jesus.

The scary nature of Jesus is that Jesus has power to overcome evil. He has the power to completely turn life around and free us from evil within.

And this leads to responses. Scene 3. There are two begging responses. Go away or let me follow. Now we've seen legion begging already.

[18 : 28] Now it's the people who are begging. And look what they want. Verse 17. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

Go away, Jesus. Get out. Your power's too scary. We are safer without you. In fact, we preferred things when Legion was his good old evil self. And we still had our pigs.

We don't want you in our life. Evil overcome. No, no, no. We are at home with evil. We can work around evil. We do not need you. Leave us alone. Go. And of course, Jesus leaves.

He is not welcome. He is rejected. He is leaving. But then there's another response in verse 18. The man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.

Here is the man who knows the huge relief of being rescued from an evil tyrant of a master. He knows that Jesus is the one who has rescued him through a merciful act of God.

[19 : 30] Jesus, the Son of the Most High, has power over evil. Jesus is the new master that he begs to follow. And that's the right response to what Jesus has done for him.

Now, we've whizzed through. That's not the end of the story. It's only a snapshot of one of the many powerful things that Jesus did while he was on earth. And if you read through the rest of Mark's gospel, you would discover how Jesus brings an end to evil forever, how he pays the price for evil at the cross, and how he conquers evil and death at the resurrection.

This does not mean that Christians are immune from evil in this world. And it does not mean that evil vanishes from their thoughts and words and actions. But it does mean that when Jesus returns, evil will be overcome forever.

And those who are following Jesus will be with God in his new world, free from evil forever. But those who reject Jesus now will be given no entry when he returns, but rightly cast out forever.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this. God rescues us from the dominion of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. We cannot subdue evil.

[20 : 58] We cannot disentangle ourselves from evil. We cannot gouge it out. Self-harm, the red wine, the latest health regime, or whatever distraction technique that we put in place, these things, they do not remove or resolve the problem.

We need rescue. And Jesus is the one that God has sent to do this. He is the only way to receive welcome into his new world, free from evil forever.

Now, if this is true, this is amazing good news. And whilst you're free to walk away, I'd like to encourage you to explore this further. Mark's Gospel is a really good place to start.

Take this home. You can probably read the whole thing in about an hour. And then you can also have a think about the question that you've got on the bottom of your page, on the sheet. The question says, Do I believe I'm helpless in overcoming evil within myself?

I need Jesus to rescue me. So have a think about that. And have a think about any questions that you have, that you still want answering, whether it's from this passage, or anything else about evil.

[22 : 11] Who, who, who, who, who.