

Healing Those Oppressed by the Devil

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[0 : 00] Father God, we pray that you would be at work amongst us this morning as we've already prayed. Please, particularly as we look at your word together, please bring your word to us with freshness.

Please challenge us with it and please be at work by your spirit that we might be people of faith and obedience. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, I wonder how you feel about large, open, wild places.

You know, places you've never been to before, places without humans, quiet, deserted places. Well, interestingly, scientific studies have indicated that there are a variety of responses, which I guess you'd expect.

And probably most of us have seen those depicted in movies if we haven't felt them ourselves. You see, on the one hand, there are those who relish the quietness. They soak it in and such people find the wilderness a restorative influence.

It gives them focus. It improves their performance in cognitive and attention-demanding tasks, but not others. You see, on the other hand, there are others for whom large, open, wild spaces are places of fear and trepidation.

[1 : 17] Unknown places, places fill them with anxiety and places without the company of other humans drive them to despair. Quiet places, deserted places, places without other people.

They strike fear in some people. Fear of getting lost. Fear of wild animals, perhaps. Fear of bad weather, of insects, of snakes, of things unknown and so on.

Friends, which are you amongst those two groups of people? No matter which you are, how would you feel that if in one of those deserted, wild places, you added an unknown, ominously present other person?

That is, someone who had power, someone who knew you, someone who was somewhat unpredictable. This is something of what I think happens here in our passage today.

I think it presents Jesus as a somewhat ominous presence in a world corrupted by sin and caught in the grip of evil and of anti-God forces. And it's confronting.

[2 : 23] It's sobering. And it teaches us deep truths, I think, about God and about Jesus and even about ourselves. So, let's explore these few short verses.

Not many today. There's so much to learn. So, open your Bibles with me. And as I begin, I'm hoping that you might remember last week. Do you?

Do you remember that Jesus was surrounded by the crowds? And he seemed to want to get some space from the crowds. So, he did want to escape and perhaps not wild open places, but he did want to get away.

And so, he takes his disciples across the Sea of Galilee. They're threatened by this furious and ferocious storm. But Jesus, the Lord of creation, speaks.

With a word, he stills the storm and he cares for his people, even as God does in the Old Testament. And the echoes of Psalm 107 are there.

[3 : 19] Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble. And he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper. The waves of the sea were hushed.

And they were glad, that is, the people were glad, when it grew calm. And he guided them to their desired haven. Anyway, it's interesting. The desired location is given in verse 28 that they find themselves in.

It's a Gentile area, apparently. Gadara. Some relatively short distance from the edge of the Sea of Galilee. It's away from the crowds. But it's not away from a different reality that will unfold for us in verse 28 and the verses that follow.

Look at the second half of verse 28. We're told of two demon-possessed men. They come from what is an unclean place.

That is, they come from the tombs, which were probably burial places, burial caves. Friends, we've already heard Jesus encountered demon-possessed people within Matthew's Gospel.

[4 : 17] It happens in chapter 4, verse 24, in verse 16, even within this chapter. But this is the very first really full narrative of an encounter of a demon-possessed person with Jesus, or of Jesus with a demon-possessed person.

So let's make sure that we know what's going on. You see, demon-possession in the Gospels is not the same as sickness and illness. That is, it's not even a special kind of illness, not even a psychological form of illness.

No, it is the indwelling of an unseen evil spirit in a human being. And that indwelling so overtakes the human being that their freedom is compromised.

They find themselves no longer able to act freely. They're under the control of this evil power, a demon, a representative of Satan. It's very important that we hear this.

Can you see or imagine the picture that is being presented here? Here are two humans like you and me. Two of God's created beings who are under the power of satanic beings.

[5 : 24] They are inhabiting unclean places. They are humans who have been driven away from society into these dark places. Humans so overtaken by demons that they pursue all other people that come near and are violent toward them.

It's a very sorry picture, isn't it? Humans. Under the influence of the demonic. Away from fellow humans. Demons. Estranged from other people.

Even away from God, as it were. In unclean places. Estranged from God's goodness. Severely afflicted men. And look at what happens. Verse 29.

We find that the demons are very vocal demons. Very interesting. They're really quite talkative, these guys. They speak lots. And loudly they shout at Jesus using the name that he was given by God at his baptism.

What do you want with us, son of God? Effectively, they use, I think, the name that he's been given to ask him to go. It's an intriguing thing, really, because, in other words, they're trying to use his title to exorcise him.

[6 : 34] To send him away. To get him to leave their presence. And look at what they go on to say in the second half of verse 29. They say to him, Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?

In other words, they recognise that the presence of Jesus means that God's future reign has encroached into the present. The kingdom of God, it may not be here in its full and final form.

But it has, in the person of Jesus, invaded the present in him. In him, you see, the future can be seen. And that future spells an end to them, the demons.

It spells judgement and torture to those spiritual forces that are opposed to God and his purposes. Can you hear what's going on here? I'm saying these demons recognise that what many people, well, they recognise what many people in the days of Jesus did not recognise.

They recognise that the presence of Jesus is an ominous presence in the world. A presence that threatens them, that threatens their safety, their power and their security.

[7 : 43] And so they beg for mercy. They ask Jesus, this representative of God, to have mercy on them. Look at verses 30 and 31. In verse 30, we hear of a herd of pigs.

Now, as you probably know, pigs were unclean animals for Jews. And so the demons say, look, that they seek to flee from possessing human beings and driving them into unclean burial sites.

And what they do is they request Jews to send them into unclean pigs instead. Look at verse 31. The demons beg Jesus, if you drive us out, send us to the herd of pigs.

I think probably can be better translated, when you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs. And with that, we come to verse 32. Now, let me remind you, these demons have been pretty vocal up to this point and pretty loud to shouting out.

They've done all the talking. But now Jesus does his own talking. But I want you to notice the difference. He says, but one word. Go. And it is direct and immediate and effective.

[8 : 52] His authority is unquestioned and overwhelming. Look at the rest of the verse. So they came out and went into the pigs. And the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.

The pigs die, that is. There's nothing in scripture that indicates that angels or demons die in that sense. So we can only presume that the demons live on. And even after the death of these, their new hosts, the pigs, presumably they move on to elsewhere where they can continue their devious activities, perhaps by taking over some other host.

In one sense, though, it's an act of mercy by Jesus, isn't it? On these demons this time. But he knows and they know that their day will come in time. It will come at the hands of the son of God who will in his time end their activity completely.

And there will be no one else they can harass. And verse 33 tells us of the results of this. In verse 33, we read those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all of this, including what had happened to the demon possessed man.

And the whole village finds out. And verse 34 then tells us in the closing section of this passage of their reaction. Look at it. The aftermath is this.

[10 : 09] We are told that then the whole town went to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. Now, friends, I mean, you'd think, wouldn't you, that the deeds of Jesus, such deeds, such great deeds would be welcome, wouldn't they?

No more oppression of the evil one. Demon possessed men freed and no longer under torment. And when you went walking past the burial cave, no more violent assaults by them.

But not so. No, these people plead with Jesus to leave. Now, I need to tell you, we're not actually told why they request his leaving. Maybe it is they were Gentiles.

And you see, being Gentiles, they could herd pigs and earn a good income. And therefore, their livelihood had been under threat. And basically, they lost all their pigs in the water. So they wanted Jesus to move on and not take any more pigs out of the way, as it were.

If that's so, the implications are that these people considered economics far more important than freeing demoniacs from Satan's kingdom. Now, let me tell you, they wouldn't be the first people to think this sort of way.

[11 : 15] And they won't be the last, will they? In fact, in our world, economics is almost everything. I remember around about the 80s, I think it was, that every news bulletin of the ABC began reporting economic news.

And now it reports it every time. We're told how the dollar is faring, therefore how the economic situation of our country is going.

We're told that economics is so important. You see, personally, and as a country, and as a world, economics is all important. And the actions of these people, I think, rebukes us for our attitude.

You see, human sanity, salvation, and safety must always take priority over financial prosperity, mustn't it? And Jesus knew this. And we should know it and learn from it.

However, I think that that's just a sideline in all of this. I think there's a far more significant thing to notice here in this story. Do you remember how I began? We talked about wide open spaces.

[12 : 20] I got you to imagine you might be there. And I got you to ask, which one are you? I asked whether you're a person who loved them or feared them. And then I asked you how you'd feel if suddenly you became aware of an unknown, ominously present other person.

That is, and you sense that this person had power and that they knew you as someone that was perhaps unpredictable. Well, this is something like what happens here in our passage for today.

Jesus represents such a person. He's holy. He's powerful. He controls not only the physical creationists we saw last week, but the spiritual world as well.

However, what we do know is he's not a malevolent presence. He is a presence for good. Stealing the storm and saving his people. Casting out demons and saving these men.

But humans, you see, this story tells us, don't like someone or something of such power. Whether it's for good or for evil. And so they tend to shut it out.

[13 : 26] They push it away. Just like these people do in verse 34. They plead with this one who can cast out demons. And they say, please, please just leave us on our own. Go away.

They cannot bear his presence. Can you hear what this passage is saying? The demons knew it. They saw his person. They felt his presence. They knew it was a promise of the future.

They knew it was a portent of their own end. And they feared. And these people, though, they saw the person of Jesus. They saw his impact.

The impact of his presence. And they sensed it was costly and fearful to be in it. To have his presence. And so they said, please, just leave. These Gentiles did what God's own people, the Jews, had done.

And would do. They were not willing to receive someone capable of freeing them and others from demons. And Jesus does move on. Look at chapter 9, verse 1.

[14 : 29] He steps back into his boat. He crosses over the lake. And he comes to his own hometown. He comes home. You see, in time, his own people, the Jews, will find his presence too hard to handle as well.

They too, you see, will attempt to cast him out of their presence. And they'll do it very physically by nailing him on a cross. They'll do the same to his disciples after him.

They'll do the same to Paul in the book of Acts. Can you hear what I'm saying? Please hear me. God's intentions for humanity are good. They are good for Jews.

They are good for Gentiles. And they are good for all. And they're good for you and good for me. And yet, wherever the news of Jesus comes, it will often be unwanted and received negatively.

Those who hear it will often want to shut him out. They will shut their ears or push him away. And God will allow them to do it.

- [15 : 34] He will allow humans to reject his authority and to exclude themselves from his mercy. Friends, we know, don't we, that we know deep down that the presence of Jesus will change us if we let him in.

These people knew it. They didn't want it. They pushed it away. And the result was that God left them to their own devices. We don't hear much more about them. But we get a glimpse of what being left to your own devices is about in Romans chapter 1, where God rejects its creator, not Jesus, but their creator.

It says, and Romans 1 tells us that although what is known about God is plain for all to see, humans suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness. And when confronted with God, they neither glorify him as God or give thanks to him.

The end result is that God gives them over to the impact of their sin. And it further corrupts and defiles them. And their conduct becomes shameful. Their minds, Paul says in Romans 1, become depraved.

And they sink further and further into depravity. Friends, how much so, if that's what you do with the creator, how much more so if you reject the son, the savior, whom God the father sent to save us from bondage to sin and evil.

- [16 : 45] Can you hear what I'm saying? Please don't send this one away. I think this passage has presented Jesus as someone who is an ominous presence in the world, corrupted by sin and caught in the grip of evil and anti-God forces.

He is indeed, though, a means of grace and forgiveness and change. But he is also a very significant threat.

You see, if you accept him, everything will change. You will change. Your marriage will change. Your attitude to your children will change.

Your attitude to your parents will change. Your selfishness will be threatened. Your finances will come under threat as well. And you will be humbled. And your life will come under the command of God.

And all that you are and all that you have will be at his beck and call, if you hear him rightly. But you know that we often fear that ominous presence of Jesus.

- [17 : 57] And many of us cannot let him invade our lives. Even many of us who come to church will not let him come into our lives. We cannot let him invade our lives like this.

W.H. Alden summarizes this attitude. He has some wonderful words for it. He says this. We would rather be ruined than changed. We'd rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die.

Let me say it again. We'd rather be ruined than changed. We'd rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die. Friends, what will you do with God's ominous presence in his world in the person of Jesus?

What will you do with this Jesus who comes as God into our world? What will you do with him who challenges you to a life of commitment to him? What will you do when he invades your life and demands all of you and your all?

Well, this morning I want to plead with you to take him in. Not to do as these people do and to shove him out. You see, he gives you this choice and it doesn't just happen on day one.

- [19 : 11] It happens on every day of your Christian existence. He gives you this choice. But let me warn you. It is better to be freed by him than to be left to your own devices, free from his influence.

It is better to be freed by him than to be bereft of him in a world beset by demons and dominated by humans set on independence. It is better to be in his company.

These men knew that. They knew what it was to be freed. And so can we. Let's pray. Our Father, we know that when your son comes into the world, he is an ominous presence, even an ominous threat to us.

That as he threatens to invade our lives, there's something of a pushback from us at times, knowing that if we accept him, everything will change. Everything will change. Father, we know that we would rather be ruined than change.

But Father, we know this is not good for us. We know you send your son into your world for our good. And Father, we know that it is better to be freed by him than to be left to our own devices, free from his influence.

[20 : 41] Father, we know that to be left to our own. To be left on our own. Is to be bereft of him in a world beset by demons and dominated by humans set on independence.

And we know that's an ugly world. But Father, please drive us to the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us not to push him away. Help us to take him on. And then to take on the challenges that he sets before us.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen.