

Storming The Strongholds

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[0 : 00] Turn to Luke 11 again, will you? And it's in your pew Bible on page 69 of the New Testament section.

I'm going to make the assumption that you didn't hear it when it was read the first time. Not because it wasn't well read, but because you weren't listening.

That sounds very unkind. It's kindly meant. It's what often happens in church, as you will see. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to read it, and in order that you pay very close attention, I'm going to stop in the middle of various verses, and then you have to continue to read until the next punctuation mark, when you stop, and I start again.

Are you ready for it? All right, here we go. Now, he was casting out a demon. Well done.

When the demon had gone out, the dumb man spoke. But some of them said he casts out demons. The prince of demons.

[1 : 35] While others, to test him, sought from him a sign from heaven. But he knowing their thoughts, every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls.

And if Satan also is divided against himself, for you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul.

And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, therefore they shall be your judges.

But if it is the finger of God, then the kingdom of God, when a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace.

But, when... Carry on. Sorry for that. But... When he was stronger, and he is still in him, or towards him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted, and...

[2 : 46] He tries to spoil. He who is not with me... He who does not gather with me... When the unclean spirit had gone out of a man, he passes through the waterless places, seeking rest, and finding none, he says...

I go to the earth and my house, which I came. And when he comes, he finds it... Seven... Then he goes and brings seven other spirits...

For you and myself. And they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that man... Not the worst, but the worst.

And he said this, a woman in the crowd... As he said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice, and said to him... Blessed is the woman that bore you, and the rest of the sun.

But he said, Blessed rather are those... Dear, dear, word of God, and keep it. Well done. And I want to tell you about the last verse first, so if you want to focus on that.

[4 : 02] This happens to be St. Patrick's Day, 1996, the 40th anniversary of my ordination. The bishop...

You're going to get me all emotional. Hang on a minute. But...

Now I'm gone. But... Increasingly, over the 40 years, I found myself wishing that somehow, at one Sunday evening service, Jesus himself would come in the back door there, and come up and talk to you.

Or that there would be, in the course of my life, some circumstance, in which, like Paul on the road to Damascus, I would be confronted by the Lord. That somewhere his physical presence might just be there.

And that would... And having to go back to the Bible again and again and again, and find such satisfaction as I can in that, always made me feel, surely, Lord, I don't have to work at this passage again.

[5 : 27] You could just come and explain it all to everybody. And there we would be. And there you would be. And we would live happily through eternity. And so, looking at this chapter, this verse, the one which we just read together, let me remind you what it says.

He said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you have sucked.

You see, that is about the most intimate and personal and flesh-to-flesh kind of encounter you can have, isn't it? That, the womb that bore you and the breasts that you have sucked.

Mind you, half the world's population don't know anything about what it means. But, it's there and it's extremely intimate. I mean, a child on his or her mother's breast, a woman in labor bringing forth that child, there is a bonding that takes place there that, I guess, is one of the strongest human bonds there is.

And so, it's a very, very, very powerful picture of a deeply personal relationship to Jesus.

[7 : 02] And that, it's the kind of thing that this woman longed for. And I think it's probably the kind of relationship the Catholics long for. I was brought up a Protestant, so I have to be careful.

But I, we're all together now in lots of ways. But when they say, Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, that, a kind of picture of the relationship, the kind of physical, tangible relationship between Jesus and us, that's the kind of thing we long for. And what this woman longed for, and she just said, you know, blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you've sucked. And Jesus nailed her on the spot and said to her, no, there's something far more blessed than that.

The way the world works, he says, is this. Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and do it.

That's the kind of intimacy that Jesus advocates, that, that, the Holy Spirit working in us in the absence of the physical and visible presence of the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit gives us a more powerfully intimate relationship with Jesus through the hearing and doing of the word of God.

[8 : 54] I hope you get that because that's very, very important because that's the way our life works. We gather in twos and threes to hear the word of God and to do it.

And please notice about that that the hearing of the word of God is a work of the Holy Spirit. That's why I wasn't really very apologetic about getting you to read that passage again because you may have just heard the words but whether God the Holy Spirit enabled you to hear them as the word of God or not is another question.

And that process is, I trust, still going on at this very moment that you are being enabled by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your heart to hear the word of God.

and then I think we suddenly tend to reverse the position that we have on this and to say, okay, the Holy Spirit allows me to hear it, now I will go out and do it.

But that's not what it says. The Holy Spirit that enabled you to hear it is the Holy Spirit that enables you to do it and you can't separate them.

[10 : 22] If you hear it, you will do it. And if you do it, it's because you hear it. Now you know that this has split the church because some are hearers and some are doers.

But Jesus says the most blessed condition of our human life is that we should hear the word of God and do it.

we should by the grace and operation of the Holy Spirit hear the word of God. We should by the grace and operation of the Holy Spirit do the word of God so that at the end we will know that it is by His grace in our lives that we have both heard and done.

now we will pray. Our God, we want very much to hear Your word and even as You enable us to hear it into the deepest recesses of our lives, even as You enable us to hear it, enable us in Your grace and by Your mercy and through the working of Your Holy Spirit in the particular and personal circumstances of our own lives to do it.

Not in a way that makes us conscious of what we have done but in a way that makes us conscious of what You have done in us. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[12 : 07] Amen. Now, I'll go back to the beginning of the passage. All right? Here we are. He was casting out a demon that was dumb.

Now, this is a process and the fellow leading the music tonight referred to this process.

This is something that Jesus was doing. His ministry was at the pinnacle of popularity in that there was a great crowd watching him do it and he was doing this thing which was casting out a demon that was dumb.

Now, he wasn't dealing with somebody who was a physically handicapped person. He was dealing with somebody that was spiritually handicapped.

And their spiritual handicap was that they were dumb. They couldn't speak. And if you look back in Matthew 12 to this same story, you will see that there were three things wrong with this person. [13:44] One was that they were, that he was dumb, that he was blind, and that he was mad. So, if you want just to do this with me, you'll see, you remember this.

Okay, you put your hand over your mouth. You probably didn't hear what I said, but I am. That's what it is to be dumb.

You put your hand over your eyes, and that's what it is to be blind. And then I guess you just stir here, and that's what it is to be mad.

Now, in order that the word of God may draw you into hearing this properly, let me remind you that those are the afflictions which most of us suffer from.

We can't speak as we would like to. One of the great sort of evidences of new life in Christ is people speak in tongues.

[15:00] Well, somehow their ability to speak is suddenly released, and they can do it. I mean, so often you're in a position where you want to say something really intelligent, like me right here, right now, and you can't get it out, and you realize that after you've drowned everybody with words, you'd have been better to stay like this.

Dumb, you know, because unless in some way that is dealt with, you can't speak. You know how many people spend time sitting, talking to each other, how much alcohol you have to drink to get a conversation going very often.

Well, that's because of this spiritual affliction, and that that needs to be overcome by the grace of God. Just as we are blind, and we're blind to the things that God is showing us and the people around us.

We can't see them as we need to see them. And then mostly we're angry because our reason is somehow tilted so that it doesn't work right.

And so there's a lot of anger in people. So when you meet this person in this story who is dumb, who is blind, and who is angry, there is a measure in which you are hearing what happens when Jesus meets you.

[16:35] He has to overcome your inability to put into words. I mean, to stand up and say for the very first time, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, that's a very difficult thing to do until you're given grace.

So that's the first thing that you get in this story is this miracle. Now, what this does then, you see, is you begin to see a spiritual struggle that Jesus is going on with this in this person.

Now, I want you just to remember at this point one thing that's very important. And that is that Jesus tends to precipitate this kind of struggle.

Because this is a very spiritual passage. Imagine the agony of my past couple of weeks in thinking about having to talk to you, secular, sophisticated, materialist, 20th century, with it people, about demon possession of things.

It was sadly helpful, perhaps, to read the story of the massacre in Scotland, and so sophisticated a journal as the Globe and Mail asked the question, using this biblical category, whatever could have possessed him?

[18:21] you see? That's what Jesus is talking about, somebody who was possessed by a demonic spirit, that put his mind out of whack, blinded his eyes, and he wasn't able to speak, and Jesus healed him.

Well, that immediately produced three kinds of response. There were those who were like children at a magician's show, and they thought, isn't this wonderful?

Do another trick. That was their response. That's what the magician does. He does wonderful things, and people, they have no idea how he does it, but it's a trick of some kind, and they like him to do another one.

So, that was the first level of response. The second level of response to what Jesus did was the committed enemies of Jesus, who were deeply opposed to him, were following him around the country to try and in some way inhibit the impact of his ministry to the people.

And they were ready when this was done with the kind of crowd control mechanisms when they cried out to turn the wandering people away from Jesus and give them a solemn and religious warning and say, he does this by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of darkness.

[20 : 12] It's, you see, that's a powerful thing to say. And they were there because they wanted to turn the crowd away and they continued to be there wherever Jesus was ministry to try and undermine the ministry that he had.

God, just as there are no doubt people here who are prepared to undermine the ministry that Jesus may be having in your life.

Now, I don't want to get you all paranoid by saying that. It's just the way it happens. I don't want you to look around at the people around you either. But that's what takes place.

And they kept after Jesus until they had brought him before Pontius Pilate. They kept after him about that. And you see, we hear a lot today about all religions being the same.

And I think all religions are the same. I think all religions are profoundly embarrassed by Jesus Christ. And that's the sense in which they're the same.

[21 : 34] And even that great institution, the church, shows that it is constantly embarrassed by Jesus Christ. And they attacked him in this way.

they wouldn't challenge the demon who was in possession of this man. But they would challenge the one who cast the demon out, that he was in his right mind.

So, the third group of people are the people who asked for a sign. Do you see it in the text there? That they wanted Jesus to show them a sign.

And it's they sought from him a sign. It's in verse 16 if you want to find it. So that he, these people were always there.

And there are no doubt people here tonight who are looking for a sign. and in the absence of that sign being given, they will go on looking for another one.

[22 : 55] And even if there was a sign given to them, they would want another sign. If you want to read about signs, you should read in Exodus, where it's the story of Pharaoh who wanted a sign that God was on the side of the children, of the Hebrew children.

And so Moses gave them sign after sign after sign after sign, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened and hardened and hardened and hardened, and no sign would convince him.

people who look for a sign whose spiritual life is a lifelong search for a sign that will leave them utterly convinced.

People who spend their lives looking for that sign end up, as these people did, standing at the foot of the cross, saying, maybe leave him, maybe he'll come down from the cross, and then will believe. They just, I mean, this religion of signs doesn't work. And as you know, Jesus is going to say to them, the sign is the person who hears the word of God and does it.

[24 : 20] That's the sign you should be looking for. And that's how you yourself become a sign to the unbeliever. Well, that's what Jesus did with this.

Those are the three people that responded to this miracle that Jesus performed. So Jesus went on and then told them a story.

And the story was about the two kingdoms. If you look at the text and the RSV at least, you'll see that there's two kingdoms that come into conflict here.

And if you look in verse 18, you'll see that if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?

Then if you go down to verse 20, where Jesus quotes the Old Testament and says, if I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

[25 : 30] And so Jesus says, this is not a case of me in the name of Beelzebub casting out demons, because that wouldn't make any sense.

Satan against Satan doesn't make any sense, because Satan has some sense of the solidarity of his kingdom. Jesus is coming, representing another kingdom.

And so he comes to this man, comes to this situation and explains that to them. And then he goes on and tells them about Satan's kingdom.

And if you look there, you'll see the description beginning in verse 21. Satan's kingdom, Jesus characterizes as a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace.

In other words, there's a solidarity to the kingdom of evil. There is a peace which belongs to the kingdom of evil. It's a peace which is like that which is imposed on you by a maximum security penitentiary.

[26 : 54] I was ordained in Kingston 40 years ago today and there is a maximum security penitentiary in Kingston. And one of the really surprisingly fruitful things about that is that there was

a number of men in there who in the ordered life of the penitentiary became quite responsible citizens.

It was being free that drove them nuts. But there was that peace which belonged to being on the inside of a maximum security penitentiary.

There is a peace which comes from taking drugs. I understand it's fairly temporary.

I mean all the drugs I take are by prescription but there's others. And there's that kind of peace.

And so Jesus says this is the picture of Satan's kingdom that he is fully armed. Remember how Paul tells us that we have to be fully armed in the sense that we are to take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit and the breastplate of righteousness and all those things.

[28 : 12] We are to be fully armed against Satan. Satan is fully armed against the intrusion of the kingdom of God. And that intrusion takes place in the next verse when you see Jesus says when somebody stronger than he assails him and overcomes him he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides the spoil.

And so what Jesus is doing the way Jesus describes his earthly ministry is not that he is in cahoots with Beelzebub using the power of evil to cast out evil but that he is in the business of spoiling the kingdom of Satan to set people free from the tyranny of that kingdom.

And that's how Jesus describes his ministry there that he had come to do that and to establish his own kingdom.

And then he goes on to say this he who is not with me is against me he who does not gather with me scatters.

And what he means by that is that in terms of these two kingdoms there is no neutrality. In our world we think that there is a vast area in between them where we can live our lives happily and then maybe join one or the other later on in life or acknowledge our membership in one or the other later on in life.

[30 : 02] But Jesus says right here and right now there is no neutrality. There is one or the other. The kingdom of the strong man who is Satan or the kingdom of the stronger man who is Jesus Christ.

And if you think you're in a neutral position let me assure you that according to Luke 11 there ain't no such place. And you perhaps need to look at your hearts again to examine that.

Well then Jesus goes on and talks about the unclean spirit. And this again you see I mean one of the things about this passage that really troubles me it talks about I mean it troubles me in terms of trying to communicate it with you trying to talk to you about it or you talk to me about it is it talks about the kingdom of Satan the kingdom of the strong man the kingdom of the stronger man it talks about Beelzebub the prince of demons and now it goes on to talk about demon possession and how it works and it's all highly spiritual.

Now you see again in our sophisticated modern world we don't see things that way we see psychological disorders and mental instabilities and all sorts of explainable things and we give people one out of ten instead of nine out of ten saying that they're not that good but then again they're there but you see what is happening is that Jesus is opening up a whole realm that we're unfamiliar with which is the spiritual realm and how does he do this well he does it simply by being Jesus if you take Jesus seriously you become aware of a whole vast domain of reality that you knew nothing about previously when Jesus moves into this crowd then the evil spirits are challenged then the thoughts of people are challenged then the deepest level of where people live is challenged then the side that you're taking between the two kingdoms is challenged it's all it all makes you aware that you are a spiritual being and that the essence and heart of your existence is what happens here and so

Jesus goes on to explain this to them when he says when the unclean spirit has gone out of a man now this this seems to be a picture of self-reformation you know and it's a terrible terrible picture because what it means is that you throw out the old tenants you paint the house you put all the door frames straighten up all the door frames put on all the storm windows re-shingle the roof cut the grass dig up the gardens and everything's lovely but there's no tenant in the house there's nobody who really possesses it and so the evil spirit whom you kicked out he comes back and he comes back now not willing to compromise any longer he comes back and takes possession that's what the seven spirits worse than himself means that they take possession of this house and you see that's the terrible

[34 : 02] I mean this is a terrible blasphemy against religion because so much religion is centered around our putting our houses in order and becoming really keen about something and really committed to something doesn't matter what all religions are the same you know and that's the theory we have we become really committed until suddenly the former tenant who had been put out now comes back and takes possession of what had belonged to him and this you know this this has particular application for Christians or for professing Christians at least because very often we grow out of our Christian faith we come become wiser than the scriptures we become more knowledgeable than God we become more devout than the hypocrites that go to church all those wonderful things happen and Hebrews warns us that if you were given the precious gift of repentance repentance brought you on your knees before

Jesus Christ asking for forgiveness and receiving that forgiveness and if you turn away from that you won't find a second place of repentance it won't happen all that will happen is that the tenant in your house has gone and returns with seven spirits more wicked than himself and claims possession of your life and that's the somber thing the somber note on which Jesus ends this address to the crowd he's warning them about the fatal consequences of their playing around with religion of hiding behind their devout search for a sign or of hiding their malicious and hateful intent by supposing that they are giving real religious leadership and saying it's by Beelzebub that he casts out demons or maybe they're more innocent people who just wonder and delight at it all and think how wonderful it is to have him perform miracles and when's he going to give the next one all that can happen you see but the consequence of that happening is that that you get into the place where you neglect the gift of repentance that you are given and you go in your own way and in your own strength and in your own wisdom and you turn away from the grace and mercy of God and you turn away from that position which I described at the beginning that your life here on earth has to have at its center a hearing of the word of God granted you by Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit and a doing of the word of God made possible by the indwelling Holy Spirit in your life accomplishing the purposes of God in and through you and so that's why Jesus is very disturbing for us and it's why in this passage he doesn't leave us much place to hide from the reality of his kingdom and the reality of our compromises with the kingdoms of this world
Amen God God for God for God for God God for God him.
God for God he God for him God for God ever my might come by I, God have him my