

17. The Gadarene Demoniac

They are called by many names in the Bible: sometimes evil spirits, sometimes impure spirits, sometimes principalities, powers, or rulers of the darkness of this age. Very often, we call them “demons.” They are probably the same beings that Muslims refer to as “djinn.” There may be several sorts of demonic spirits, but they are all allies or servants of Satan, the enemy of us all. Like Satan, they try to pull men away from God, to turn our devotion away from our Creator and to enslave us.

Although invisible, they work among men in a variety of ways.

According to 1 Timothy 4:1, they are at the root of the false teachings which lead people away from the true Christian faith. “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.” 1 John 4:1 also associates false prophets with spirits who are not sent from God. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” These demons do not manifest themselves as such when they inspire false doctrines. They hide, and they disguise themselves as angels of light (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Demons also hide behind idols and fetishes which, according to those who worship them, are very useful to people. In Deuteronomy 32:16-17, Moses reproaches the Israelites for their unfaithfulness toward God. He says, “They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to demons, not to God, to gods they did not know, to new gods, new arrivals that your fathers did not fear.” In the New Testament, the apostle Paul takes up the same idea. In explaining why Christians must never knowingly eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol, he says that the power behind idols and fetishes is actually a demonic power.

“What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not

want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's Table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?” (1 Corinthians 10:19-22)

The Bible recognizes the existence and power of demons. They even do miracles to seduce men and draw them away from God. It speaks, for example, of the appearing of an ungodly one which will be “according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:9,10).

The demons also manifest themselves in possession. What does it mean to be possessed? Possession does not have to do with a person committing certain sins which would supposedly be the specialty of particular spirits. For example, some think that a person who lives in sexual sin may be “possessed” by a spirit of fornication. Or a person who lies often would be possessed by a spirit of lying.

John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles of Christ—all of them told sinful men to repent. This means to make a firm resolution to abandon one's sins to do the will of God. Consider, for example, the instructions that John the Baptist gave to tax collectors for the Roman government:

“Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what is appointed for you.’ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, ‘And what shall we do?’ So he said to them, ‘Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.’” (Luke 3:12-14)

Neither John nor Jesus nor any of the apostles ever said to a sinner, “You are possessed with a spirit of greed. I will cast it out.” Or, “you have demons of adultery, fraud and anger. We're going to proceed with your deliverance.” Instead they said, “Repent,” or, “Go and sin no more.”

Demonic possession was not a condition of which a person or his circle of acquaintances were ignorant until a preacher or prophet told them about it. Nothing in the Bible suggests that possession was like an illness that had to be detected or diagnosed by a doctor.

In a case of possession, the evil spirit enters the body of a person and takes control of his life—either at certain moments or permanently. In certain cases, it can be seen that the spirit speaks through the mouth of the person it possesses. The personality of the possessed person is suppressed, and the voice which is heard is that of the demon.

The Bible does not attribute sins to demon possession, but it sometimes speaks of powers the possessed might have, such as superhuman strength or knowledge of the future. It also speaks often of suffering or physical infirmities inflicted by evil spirits. Luke 13:10-17 tells of a possessed woman who was bent over and could not stand straight for eighteen years. Another possessed person, a young man, was deaf and mute, and the demon would seize him at times and throw him into the water or the fire (Matthew 17:14-18).

A particularly dramatic case is found in Mark 5:1-20. Jesus crossed the sea or lake of Galilee and during the crossing demonstrated his power over the forces of nature by calming the storm. During the account that follows, we will see his power over spiritual forces.

“Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones.

“When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. And he cried out with a loud voice and said, ‘What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son

of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me.’ For He said to him, ‘Come out of the man, unclean spirit!’ Then He asked him, ‘What is your name?’ And he answered, saying, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ Also he begged Him earnestly that He would not send them out of the country.”

“Now a large herd of swine was feeding there near the mountains. So all the demons begged Him, saying, ‘Send us to the swine, that we may enter them.’ And at once Jesus gave them permission. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine (there were about two thousand); and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned in the sea.

“So those who fed the swine fled, and they told it in the city and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that had happened. Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. And those who saw it told them how it happened to him who had been demon-possessed, and about the swine. Then they began to plead with Him to depart from their region.

“And when He got into the boat, he who had been demon-possessed begged Him that he might be with Him. However, Jesus did not permit him, but said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.’ And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled.”

What is the lesson that we can take from this passage? Some people say that we must not eat pork, that it is an impure meat since the demons entered those animals. That doesn't make sense at all. The pork that you might eat today did not come from animals that were possessed for a few moments two thousand years ago. Besides, it was some time after this event that Jesus said, “Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus

purifying all foods?” (Mark 7:19,20. Also see 1 Timothy 4:3,4).

But what is the lesson to be seen here? It is that Jesus has absolute power over evil spirits. Many times Jesus cast demons out of possessed people, and he did it with a simple word. He did not need to use holy water, rosaries, images, candles or recitations. He didn't need to cry out for hours. Each time, he gave a simple order, and the demon did not have a choice. It obeyed.

On this occasion, the man was possessed by many demons. They were called “Legion.” A legion was a division of the Roman army that was comprised of about 5,000 men. Despite their number, the demons could not resist the will of Jesus Christ when he told them to come out of the man.

Jesus continues to have full power over demons. Ephesians 1:21,22 tells us that God has caused Jesus to sit “above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not

only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.” This Jesus has promised to remain with his disciples until the end of time.

For the faithful Christian, there is no reason to fear the power of demons. Whether by witchcraft or possession, demons cannot do harm to those who are in Christ. Jesus has stripped them of this ability. The one who, with a simple word, delivered the Gadarene man possessed by a legion of demons is perfectly capable of responding to the prayers of his servants today who are dealing with demons. He hears them and protects them. The apostle John tells us, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4) From the time of our baptism, Christ lives in us through the Holy Spirit. So there is no room in us for an evil spirit.