

Be Astonished
Part Three: His Authority Over the Demonic Realm
Mark 5.1-20

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We all like to have it together, don't we?
I'm fine. Life's fine. Everything's fine.

But at some level, we all feel like we're coming apart, don't we?
I'm not fine. Life's not fine.

Deep down, we all have a sense that things aren't quite right with us.

We are all bent – bent away from God and away from others, bent in upon ourselves.

And we are all broken – at odds within ourselves, conflicted, broken of mind, of heart, of desire, of relationship, of spirit.

And we are all bound. None of us is really free. The cycling trap of our counterproductive thoughts, our inconsistent and often inexplicable actions, our wayward desires that control us, the broken ways we relate to others, leading us to push away the very ones we want to draw near – we are more bound than free.

We are all trapped somewhere between captivity and freedom, between isolation and community, between brokenness and wholeness.

And beneath all of that, we all have the sense that this isn't the way it's supposed to be.

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This is a story of Jesus encountering a person like us.

It's the story of Jesus, finding us in our bentness and brokenness and boundness, and, rather than pulling back from us, like everyone else does, he moves toward us in love, touching us, unbinding us, setting us free, making us whole.

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The disciples have just gone through a terrifying storm on the Sea of Galilee, and the even more terrifying experience of Jesus speaking a word and calming the storm, leaving them all astonished and asking, "Who is this?!"

We join them just after the quiet has settled over the sea and a storm of astonishment has gripped their hearts.

Mark 5.1

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.

The region of the Gerasenes is on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Map of the Sea of Galilee



You can see it there on the right hand side of the Sea of Galilee.

Just like the Sea of Galilee, because of the proliferation of languages surrounding the sea, there are several different versions of the name of this region: Gerasa, Gergesa, Kursi, Gadara.

But whatever you call it, the region may as well have been the other side of the world. In some ways it *was* the other side of the world, because when you left Capernaum, which is up at the top, on the north shore, and headed east, you crossed from Jewish land to pagan land.

Later Jesus will travel up to Tyre and Sidon, and Caesarea Philippi, and down to Beth Shean, and back over to the region of the Decapolis, the ten pagan cities – all non-Jewish regions – but this is the first time in Jesus' ministry that he crosses this Jewish-world/rest-of-the-world line.

Region of the Gerasenes



And the place they go, the region of the Gerasenes, is not just pagan. It's *Roman*. Gergesa is a settlement for Roman soldiers. Just around the next neck of land is a Roman harbor, and just down the coast, at Hippus, is a Roman fortress.

Now, imagine, you are one of Jesus' disciples, all of whom grew in Jewish homes. You've probably never set foot on this land, even though you can see it from where you live in Capernaum. Why would you? This is the unclean world of pagans, where unclean pigs are eaten and ungodly religions are practiced.

But that's not all. This isn't just Gentile land. This is *Roman* land.

For the past hundred years the Romans have been the hated occupation force, subjecting the land to harsh rule.

In the air all around you as a Jewish person is the expectation of the coming Messiah, who everybody knows will bring deliverance. And of course, the deliverance that everybody expects is military deliverance from these hated Roman occupiers. Defeating them and driving them out once and for all is what the whole nation hopes for and longs for.

And now you have landed at the foot of one of their main encampments. A man begins to walk toward your boat as you land. What unfolds next will tell you much about Jesus' mission.

Mark 5.2

When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him.

Wait. A man with an *unclean spirit*? That instantly raises all kinds of questions, doesn't it?

Here are some of the questions that might be running around in your head right now:

A man with an impure spirit? How do I understand that?

Did he really have some kind of spiritual parasite living inside him?

Or was the idea of a demon just the product of the superstitious imagination of the ancient world? Was this just a premodern way of describing someone with severe mental illness?

If that's all that was going on, if this is just a premodern way of talking about mental illness or stress disorder or something like that, that leads to all kinds of questions about Jesus and his ministry and how much of what we think we know about Jesus is actually valid and true.

And if not, if this is talking about a real spiritual experience with a real spiritual being, then that leads to all kinds of other questions about reality and our own experience of it, doesn't it.

It would be easy to lose the power of this encounter between Jesus and this man if we spent the whole time addressing the issues behind the passage.

But it would also be easy to lose the power of this encounter if we didn't spend at least some time addressing those issues.

As followers of Jesus we believe the Scriptures speak with his authority, and that they speak with the same authority today that they did two thousand years ago.

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Here is a quick overview, a ten-point primer, of what the Scriptures teach us about spiritual attack and spiritual oppression.

1. There is a spiritual realm, an unseen spiritual dimension to existence that is as real as this touch-and-taste sense world of physical matter but is unseen. It's like a spiritual force of gravity, invisible, but always pulling on us, always impacting us.
2. As human beings, God created us with a spiritual nature, a part of us that is made for that spiritual realm. We are both physical and spiritual beings, having both body and soul, and as spiritual beings we are susceptible to being impacted by the spiritual realm and by the spiritual beings who inhabit it.
3. In addition to creating humanity, beings who are both physical and spiritual, God also created a race of purely spiritual beings; they are called angels. Angels exist to serve God and to serve the people he created.
4. Some of those angels rebelled against God – those angels are called *demons*. They are also called unclean spirits or evil spirits.

The gospels take demons seriously. So does Jesus. There are 70 references in the gospels to demons, evil spirits, and unclean spirits.

5. The chief of these fallen angels is the Devil.

The Devil is called a number of different things in the gospels, and each of those names and titles reveal something about his mission of hate. He is called the accuser, the tempter, the adversary, the enemy, the thief, the destroyer. Clearly his mission is to seek to undermine and undo what God in love is doing.

The gospels also take Satan seriously. So does Jesus. The Devil is mentioned more than thirty times in the gospels.

6. All angels – good and evil – seek to influence the human experience. Good angels, in service to God, seek to bring humanity into the spiritual riches that God has for us. Demons, in service to the Prince of Demons, seek to rob humanity of the riches that God has for us.

7. As beings who are both physical and spiritual, we are susceptible to those spiritual influences. It's crucial that we determine which we will cooperate with and which we will resist. As Gordon-Conwell professor Richard Neuhaus says: "We are spiritual beings created to be cultivated spiritually - if we are not cultivated spiritually by the Holy Spirit, then the evil spirits will seek to cultivate us."

8. Sometimes evil spirits can impact a person from within, like mice that infest a house and need to be exterminated. The Bible doesn't use the language of a person being "possessed" by an evil spirit. That was Luther's language. It just speaks of "having an evil spirit." The unclean spirit attacks the person and seeks to control them from within.

Other times evil spirits can impact a person from outside, hammering away at them like a hail storm. Scripture speaks of the evil one prowling after a person, oppressing them from without.

But for followers of Jesus, these evil spirits do not have the last word. He does. That's because Jesus and Satan are not equals. Jesus is God. Satan is a being created by God. Jesus has power and authority over all the principalities and powers in the spiritual realm. As John tells followers of Jesus in I John 4.4, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

9. The relationship between mental illness, physical afflictions, and spiritual attack is complex and not easy to unravel. Our struggles as human beings can have multiple sources, and while there is often an overlap of physical, emotional, and spiritual issues, we can't say that all emotional and physical problems are merely spiritual problems. Nor can we say that all spiritual problems are really just physical or emotional problems.

10. Can we expect full healing and full release from spiritual oppression in this life? Maybe. Maybe not. But it's not up to us. It's up to the King.

It's important that we remember that healing in this life is a *sign*, not a promise. It is a sign of the presence of the King and the inbreaking of the Kingdom. The healing that is promised, the healing we can be certain of, is the healing by which we will be made right when we go to be with the Lord for eternity.

Jesus the wonderworker may choose to heal us and free us miraculously and completely in a moment in this life, if that is what best puts his power and authority on display in our lives.

But Jesus the wonderworker may choose for us to experience the wonder of his sufficiency even when we haven't experienced full healing and freedom, and to put his power and authority on display as we experience growing peace and freedom and rightmindedness in this life and wait for full healing in the life to come.

If you're curious to learn more, I recommend listening to a panel discussion hosted by Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, called "Spiritual Warfare and Deliverance," which just came out a couple of weeks ago on YouTube. I think you'll find it biblical, thoughtful, and helpful.

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So . . . with that, back to our passage.

Mark 5.2

When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him.

This man's existence is absolutely horrible. If the Jewish people think life under the Roman occupying forces is bad, look at this man's life under his spiritual occupying forces.

Mark 5.3-5

This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had 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.

Can you imagine the torment inside this man's mind and heart? Driven into isolation by fellow human beings who are afraid of him and want nothing to do with him? Hounded

from within? Crying out in pain? In such deep torment that he is cutting himself as a way of trying to make his pain go away?

Mark 5.6-8

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

The demon recognizes Jesus immediately. Driving the man forward, he runs to Jesus and falls at his feet.

“Falling on your knees” was a term that was used for bowing on your face before a king as a way of acknowledging his authority over you. This is the first of many fascinating hints that show that even though this demon is acting independently of Jesus, and responsible for his own actions, he is ultimately under the authority of Jesus.

Jesus says – he doesn’t pray, he doesn’t ask for someone else’s help – he *says*, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

The demon screams through the man at the top of his lungs: “Jesus, Son of the Most High God.”

Here in this pagan land of countless gods and goddesses, the demon has not the slightest hesitation in naming Jesus as the Son of the One who is higher than them all.

While we in western culture tend to focus on how sons are different from their fathers, making their own choices, charting their own course, being their own man, the understanding of sonship in the ancient Near East was very different. It was assumed that what was true of the father was true of the son as well.

The demon recognizes immediately that this is no normal human being. This is nothing less than the Most High God in the flesh.

Mark 5.9-10

Then Jesus asked him, “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.

“My name is Legion.” The demon reveals himself as not just an occupying enemy, but as an occupying *army*.

A legion was the largest unit of soldiers in the Roman army, and each legion could total as many as five or six thousand men.

But the point of the name isn't just that there are a lot of them.

Legions were powerful and ruthless military units. They trained and fought together as a single war machine, and their weight as the occupying force was felt everywhere in the land. The spiritual equivalent of *that* has set up camp inside this poor man.

Mark 5.11-13

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 impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

As if there isn't already enough mystery in this passage, we come to a part of the story that is especially mystifying. Why into the pigs? And why did the pigs dash into the sea? And what happened to the demons when the pigs drowned?

We don't know. The Scriptures don't answer any of those questions. Based on Jewish teachings about demons from the time of Jesus, it seems likely that the demons wanted to go into the pigs as a way of continuing their existence rather than being destroyed. The pigs, suddenly inhabited by the demons, were startled out of their wits and ran to their deaths. And when they died, the demons died with them. At least, that's our best guess.

But remarkable as all of that is, that's not even the most remarkable part of the story.

Mark 5.14-15

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.

Here is a man whose existence had become absolutely horrible. Everyone in the region knew of him. He was notorious. Naked, bleeding, hopeless, abandoned by human beings, inhabited by spiritual beings, deranged with inner pain, howling like an animal, cutting himself in a mad attempt to make it all go away, he had been reduced to an existence that was less than human.

And now here he sits, calm, clothed, composed, in the company of others, his mind and his body at peace, his eyes glued on the one who had spoken the word that set him free.

The townspeople see him sitting there, together, whole, at peace. And their response? They are *afraid*. One meaning of fear in the New Testament is the sort of awe that overcomes you when you have just experienced something for which there is no human explanation.

Mark 5.16-17

Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

It's too much for them. They are overwhelmed by this experience of the power of God before them. They can't handle the implications of the Most High God standing there on their shoreline. So they ask him to leave.

And Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, the Word through whom all things came into being, the One to whom these men and women owe their existence, honors their request. He has finished what he came to this region to do. He has confronted the occupying army he came to confront, and has driven it out of the life of at least one suffering man. Now he turns to set free the next suffering man, or woman, or child.

He calmed the storm around them. Now he begins to calm the storms within.

Mark 5.18-20

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 and 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.

The man Jesus healed wants to join with the others and become one of Jesus' followers. But Jesus reminds him of the joyful and costly truth that it isn't just for ourselves that Jesus comes into our lives and breaks us out of our captivity and sets us free and makes us whole and gives us peace.

It is as much for those he has placed around us as it is for us – it's for our neighbors, those God has placed around us during our brief time on earth before we enter eternity, that they too might come to know him as we have.

"Go, tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."

The Singer, by Calvin Miller, is a stunningly beautiful allegory of the ministry of Jesus. I like to reread it every year during Holy Week.

In the story, the world is under the sway of the World Hater. Jesus is the Troubadour, the Singer who comes into the world to set the it free with his song of love.

One day he comes upon the Madman, who is inhabited by the Crowd. His life is a hellish torment.

The Troubadour comes to the man and sings his song of love.

Miller writes:

“With love that knew no fear, the Singer caught his torment, wrapped it all in song and gave it back to him as peace.”

The Madman is a madman no longer. Set free from the dominion of the World Hater, his name is changed to Anthem. His life restored and given back to God, he now goes about the world singing the love song he learned from the Troubadour, God’s love song to the world around him.

Their response to Jesus? Overcome by fear, they send Jesus away.

But moved by what this man has to say of the work of God in his life, and in awe of the change they see in him, their fear changes to awe, they are amazed and drawn toward the Jesus who has set him free.

Prayer

The king is in the room. He has pulled up on the shore. He comes toward you in love, to meet you in your bentness and brokenness. Jesus is present to meet us in our bentness and in our brokenness and to touch us and give us his peace, to meet us in our boundness and to bring us into his healing and freedom.

He invites us to come and fall at his feet, bowing before the King of Kings.

Do you hear his invitation?

Do hear his power and authority over your interior?

Is there any part of you he doesn’t yet possess?

He invites us to come and sit at his feet, that he might touch us and teach us.

Do you hear his invitation?

Do you feel his touch on your life?

Let him untie you and set you free.

He invites us to stand and turn and face this world, and laying his hand upon us, he sends us to go and tell our story.

Do you hear his invitation?

Let him make himself known through you.