



“I shall always be ready to remind you of these things...” 2 Peter 1:21

Demon Possession

By Alex Hale

Matthew 8:23-27 recounts the time in which Jesus slept through a storm, only to be awakened by His disciples so that He could calm the waters and save them. Chumbley aptly observes, “As stormy as it was upon the sea, it was stormier on shore.”¹ Verse 28 begins an account of two demon-possessed men who were “*exceedingly fierce*,” keeping anyone from passing by them.

The Nature of the Demons

Though there is no explicit statement in scripture which speaks to the origin of demons, the text makes it very clear that demonic activity was real (see also Mt. 12:22-29; Mk. 1:23-28; etc). Some even assert that it was at a heightened level during the earthly life of Jesus.² Smith writes that during this time, “demons were allowed great freedom of activity so that God might manifest Himself through His power over them.”³

Some dismiss demons as a chemical imbalance or depression. The fact that Jesus cast these demons into a herd of swine indicates that demon possession was “not a psychosomatic disorder but an actual, objective phenomenon.”⁴ Swine do not suffer from chemical imbalances. In addition, they are extremely afraid of entering deep bodies of water. This shows that something real and objective drove the pigs into the sea. In addition, the fact that the demons know who Jesus was, are able to believe, and fear the judgment shows that they are more than diseases – they are spiritual beings which have the ability to think, speak, and act.

Furthermore, they are spiritual beings which in New Testament times had the ability to cause great damage in the lives of the people they controlled. The sicknesses they

caused included blindness and an inability to speak (Mt. 12:22), insanity (Lk. 8:29), self-harm (Mk. 9:17-23), and other physical infirmities (Lk. 13:11).

Jesus’ Power Over the Demons

They were afraid of Him. Until their encounter with Jesus, the text says that they were “*exceedingly fierce*,” terrorizing people who attempted to pass by them on the road. They lived amidst the tombs, one of the most unclean places in Jewish society. Simply put, they posed a danger, both to themselves and others. Yet these fierce terrors are stopped in their tracks at the sight of Jesus. When they ask Him, “*What have we to do with You?*” they are in essence begging Him to leave them alone.

They recognized Him for who He was. Without any teaching or prompting, they refer to Him as the Son of God. Though the religious leaders – and even at times Jesus’ own disciples – wrestled with His identity (see Mt. 16:13-14), these demons have no doubt as to who He was. They are also quick to acknowledge His power over them, indicating that He had the ability to “*torment*” them if He so chose. After this, they implore Him to cast them into the herd of swine if He was willing. Their response is consistent with a pattern that we see in scripture – the demons acknowledge the Lord and tremble in fear (Jas. 2:19).

He was able to cast them out. Earlier in the same chapter, we are told that Jesus often cast out demons (see Mt. 8:16). This marked a complete healing for those who had previously been affected by them (see Mk. 5:15; Lk. 8:35). Jesus later gave miraculous powers to His twelve apostles

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(Mt. 10:8). The apostles then were able to share their miraculous gifts, including the ability to cast out demons, with others through the laying on of hands (see Ac. 6:6-8; 8:18; 19:6).

What About Demon Possession Today?

We must understand that the full revelation of God's word coincided with the cessation (ending) of miraculous spiritual gifts (see 1 Cor. 13:8-12). This would include the ability to cast out demons. In today's world, if demons could still possess people, yet miraculous gifts have ceased, there would be no means for one to overcome the demonic power. Certainly this seeming hopelessness contradicts the hope which is offered through Christ.

In addition to this fundamental point, note the question which the demons ask Jesus in verse 29 – *“Have You come here to torment us before the time?”* Though some interpret the phrase *“before the time”* to mean the end of days, a more plausible explanation is to connect this to the language of Zechariah 13:2, where the LORD promises to *“cause ... the unclean spirit to depart from the land.”* This particular prophecy reveals several things which were to occur *“in that day.”*

- In that day there would be a fountain opened for sin (Zech. 13:1). A simple study of the New Testament helps us connect this prophecy to its fulfillment in Jesus.
- In that day the names of certain idols would be cut off from the land (Zech. 13:2). This part of the prophecy has also been fulfilled, as virtually no one worships Baal or Molech or any other false god of the Old Testament.
- In that day the prophets would be cast out of the land (Zech. 13:2-3). With the complete revelation of the scriptures, there would no longer remain a need for prophets, and so we see that this has been fulfilled as well (see Jn. 16:13; Heb. 1:1-2; etc).

Smith correctly observes, “All of these events took place in the same time period (i.e. *‘in that day’*). Hence, if we can

see that salvation is now available, the idols of old have ceased to be worshipped, and that the prophets have ceased to arise, then we can see that demons are no longer active.”⁵ Though the power of demons is limited today, Satan is still active (Jas. 1:14; 1 Pet. 5:8). We need to be concerned about our fight against him.

Response of the People

As fascinating as it is to read about Jesus casting out the demons, perhaps even more fascinating is the response of the people. In response to His power, they ask Him to leave their city! This shows us that people do not always make decisions based on good sense or evidence, but on what they feel is convenient or advantageous for them. Rather than learn of Jesus and His amazing power, they seek to avoid it entirely. I am reminded of the people in Ephesus who cause a riot when Paul demonstrates God's power over their false goddess Artemis (see Ac. 19). Chumbley summarizes the situation well, writing, “Some people are more comfortable with the demons they know than with a power they cannot comprehend.”⁶ And yet we see these two men, formerly entrapped by Jesus, left behind to share His message (see Mk. 5:19). In whose steps will we follow?

Works Cited

- ¹ Chumbley, Kenneth L. *Christ Revealed: A Commentary on Matthew* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard, 2018), 164.
- ² Pope, Kyle. *Matthew* (Athens, AL: Guardian of Truth, 2013), 273.
- ³ Smith, Lanny. “Demons and Demon Possession.” *Guardian of Truth* 32, no. 12 (1988): 355.
- ⁴ Chumbley, 166.
- ⁵ Smith, 356.
- ⁶ Chumbley, 166.