

Demon-Possessed Man Healed
 A Sermon by Rev. Grant R. Schnarr
 March 16, 2025

When we read the Word, it is easy to relate to those who are healed by the Lord, such as the blind or the lame, even those who suffer from leprosy, and those who are also raised by the dead. We recognize that each of these spiritually represent us, and the Lord's healing our infirmities.

But what of this man possessed by a legion of devils, breaking every bond, terrifying the people, forced by demons into desolate places, clothes torn off, replaced by gashes and scars on his body from stones he used to cut himself, howling in graveyards, sleeping in tombs? Can you relate to this biblical character? His story is not exactly like the others. In fact, the story of this man seems so sad, so dark and scary, it's hard to say, "Yes, that's me, alright!" Or even, "Yes, that can be me." But the story is there for us, and with slight variations, it is told in three of the four gospels. And we already know why, because it does reflect our lives and our own spiritual struggles, just like the other stories in the Word.

The good news about demonic possession, according to the to the Writings, is that it doesn't happen anymore. When the Lord conquered the hells, he set us free from such possession. But we are told, though we may not suffer from external possession, we can suffer from an internal obsession with evil, and as the Lord says, the more we commit sin, the more we become a slave to it, to the evil spirits' influence over us. And even if we feel we do not fall that far, on a spiritual level, we can relate to many of these things this man suffered, if we are honest with ourselves. Finally, even better news is, though this story is dark, it does end happily. It presents to us just how powerful the Lord can be in our lives, if we allow him to help us. This story shows that no matter how far we fall, no matter how desolate and empty our lives seem to become, no matter a legion of spiritual ills falls upon us, the Lord never stops caring, never abandons us, and with a word, can restore our lives.

If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.
 If I take the wings of the morning,
 And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
 Even there Your hand shall lead me,
 And Your right hand shall hold me.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"
 Even the night shall be light about me;
 Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
 But the night shines as the day.... (Psalm 139)

The Lord and his disciples met this man on the opposite shores of Galilee, in the land of the Gerasenes, part of ten Roman cities called the Decapolis. Mainly occupied by Romans and other gentiles at that time, it was not a habitat of the Jews. In its own biblical context, it was the land of gentiles, non-believers. And this is important, because the first thing the Word is pointing to is that spiritually, this takes place in the realm of our non-belief, or when we are not connected to the spiritual things of the church, not concerned with doctrinal teachings, not focused, aware of, or that interested in spiritual things. It is not that we are necessarily opposed to them. This is,

what we might call, the realm of spiritual disconnect. Unfortunately, a place where it seems a lot of people live today.

Lacking faith doesn't necessarily force us into the throes of evil, but as the Writings say, such lack of faith does not protect us from evil. Without faith, that is a belief in truth from the Word, we have nothing to prevent us from recognizing the voice of evil within, or understanding its malicious nature, or even recognizing its danger. (AC 761). The spiritual influence of hell has little resistance. The more we dwell on thoughts induced by evil spirits, the greater the allurements and the more powerful the persuasion. The more we adopt this hellish persuasion into our daily lives, the tighter hell's grip becomes.

We can see this more easily with certain evils. In fact, the Writings tell us that the imagery of the pigs in this story is representative of corporeal allurements (AC 4751:2, 1743:3). Two such evils signified by the pigs or swine being tended in the countryside, are the lust of adultery and the lust of avarice. For example, it is well known that dabbling in pornography can easily turn to addiction to pornography. In fact, the Writings use the term "addiction" to adultery and addiction to lasciviousness (HH 325, AR 132). We often think of avarice, one of the seven deadly sins, as simply greed, or an inordinate desire for wealth, but conspicuous consumption, abusing wealth, seeking identity in wealth, even hoarding or binge shopping, can find an origin in an avaricious obsession with physical things. But the obsession with evil can reach into any area of life -- an obsessive desire to control, or dwelling on incessant negative thoughts, or constant judgment of others, or ongoing fears originating from the love of self, can lead to all kinds of disorders.

One of the first things we are told of this demon-possessed man is, "no one could bind him, 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." (Mark 5:3-4). Keeping in mind that this man is representative of an extreme obsession with evil, that he was unable to be bound with chains means that a person can be so taken by evil so as not to be held back by any of the usual restraints, such as fear of punishment or loss of reputation, or of losing an important relationship, or job, or anything. Keeping in mind that this story is describing a desolate state, breaking these chains means going off the rails into evil. That's an extreme, but breaking these chains can also mean, for any of us, times when we are so caught up in something less than good that the usual restraints don't seem so strong anymore. For instance, amid temptation, we can find ourselves more willing to take risks that could lead to disaster. When you start risking the loss of what is important to you, like your reputation, your status at work, your marriage, friendships and such, breaking such chains leads to dark and desolate places.

This story quite quickly turns to the harm these demons inflict on this man. It shows us what kind of literal hell we can go through in life, and how much we need the Lord. We are told that the demons had torn off his clothes, caused him to cut himself with stones, and drove him into tombs and solitary places. We may not suffer like this man, but we know the painful tactics of hell. They tore off his clothes. This is reminiscent of the story of the Good Samaritan, where thieves stripped and beat a man, leaving him half dead on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:25-37). The thieves represent these same evil spirits, the ones that attack us, and tear away the comfort of what we know. Our clothing is what truths we gather to ourselves to protect us from the spiritual elements, to keep us safe, comforted, and even give us a sense of identity. When we suffer the most grievous temptations, the evil spirits can strip us of such truths, convince us that what we always believed about life, ourselves, what we counted on cannot be counted on, and strip us into states of vulnerability and fear. Have you been there when it happens that what you thought you

knew and believed would protect you, you find suddenly that truth is gone, taken from you, no longer protecting you? This alone is spiritually devastating.

But it doesn't end there. We are told that night and day he would cry out as he cut himself with stones. In the deepest times of turmoil, the hells attack and condemn us, turning truths against us. The Writings tell us that evil spirits will try with everything they have to allure us into evil, and once they do, they turn on us, and condemn us for the very evil they just enticed us into. We may not have experienced the degree of pain that this self-mutilation represents, but we all have done something, or many things that we regret, and we know how difficult it is to simply take responsibility, and when appropriate, put it behind us to move on, to repent, change our ways, and start over. No, the hells point to those stones, those cold facts containing no forgiveness or love for self or others. They entice us to pick them up and use them for ill. We hear hell's condemnation, and we can find ourselves so distraught that we believe we have no hope, or even worse, that we *should* have no hope, that we are beyond help. These thoughts hurt us and stop us from trying. All of this can thrust us into real gloom and isolation, reflected in the man living among the tombs.

Finally, if all that isn't bad enough, we soon find out it that not one evil spirit is possessing this man, but a legion of evil spirits. Note that this is territory occupied by the Romans, and that a legion is the largest unit in the Roman army, consisting of anywhere from 3000 to 7000 soldiers. Spiritual warfare is real, and we can't even imagine what it means to be overwhelmed by such a demonic army. Let's take this concept into our everyday lives, and recognize that we can feel what seems like an invincible horde of problems swooping down upon us. The day the kids get sick for the third time in two weeks, the furnace goes on the fritz, all payments come due at once, the car inspection is late, a big misunderstanding develops at work, and worst of all, someone ate that expensive chocolate you were secretly saving for yourself. Hopefully we don't remember days like that, but we have our lists of challenges. And these are not the legion of demons, but times like these can certainly bring them on - fear, impatience, ingratitude, self-pity, anger and frustration, and so much more. It's a good time to turn to the Lord. In fact, to be facing a legion of demons represents our powerlessness over hell's influence, without divine aid.

And this brings us to the turn in the story. As we see this man, perhaps fallen in the darkness, utterly beaten in every sense, beyond hopeless, I invite you to turn your attention to another scene that is simultaneously taking place. See the Lord telling his disciples to get into the boat, to sail with him straight across the sea of Galilee, directly to this desolate place. As this man cries alone, the Lord, who sees him, who sees everything, is making a beeline right to this man. The Lord has not forgotten him, he is coming to him. He is going to save him. And we know this is also the case with us. We even know better, that even though it seems the Lord is absent, he's already there, before we realize it, pulling up on our shores of sadness and desolation. He is reaching into our darkest place to save us.

What happens next can have varying interpretations. The demon possessed man sees the Lord coming at a distance, and runs to him, and falls down on his knees before him. Some say this is representative that even the devils are under the Lord's reign, which is true. But today, instead of focusing on the legion, focus on the human, the man who is still in there, trying to survive. Was it the devils who initiated running and falling down before the Lord, like some sort of trick, or use of reverse psychology? You'd think they'd see him and run the other way. But perhaps it was the man himself who mustered the courage and gave it everything he had to break into a run and fall before the Lord. It would make some sense. The Greek word that is used to

describe the man falling on his knees is “proscuneo” which means to express humility and devotion. Literally - it means to worship. The same word is used when Herod asks the wisemen to tell him where the baby Messiah is, so he may come and “worship” him. It is contrary to reason that the demons would fall down to worship the Lord, but it makes sense that, even though demon possessed, the human inside was able to get there.

In times of real trouble, can we recognize that the Lord is right there, there to save us. Even when seemingly overwhelmed by our personal demons, we can pull ourselves away from those self-imposed tombs, and break into a run toward our Savior. Even in all the confusion and turmoil, we can fall before him in humility, and receive his help.

The demons, still present with the man, ask the Lord if he is there to torture them. Why, because the evil always blame the Lord for their problems. In this case, we can see evil for what it is. The Lord torturing them? They are doing a pretty good job of torturing themselves. But when we turn to the Lord, let’s face it, we can ask, “What do you want from me, Lord?” Or “Why is this happening to me?” The spiritual sense can be interpreted in different ways, but it is clear, the Lord came for one reason, to save us from this enslavement.

Often what people remember the most about this story is that the Lord gave permission for the legion of evil spirits to enter the herd of swine, which they then drive into the sea. As modern-day folks, we may wonder why those little pigs, or maybe those big pigs had to suffer like that. Was that fair? Did the Lord do that? Many harsh things happen in the Word that reflect something very different in the spirit. Here again, we need to look at this story from a biblical context, and then to spiritual meaning. Pigs or swine were considered unclean by the Jews, dirty, profane, not to be cared for and especially not eaten. They are a symbol of what is wrong. The demons entering the swine nearby, and rushing into the sea symbolizes that evil, lusts, their appetites, delights and everything about them, are cast into hell. Or as we know from the work, *Heaven and Hell*, that they cast themselves headfirst into hell. We see evil for what it really is, once we receive the Lord’s help in our lives, and it leaves us as it falls into the abyss, never more to torment us. So we are told, “(The removal of sins) may be compared to the demons sent into the swine, which afterward immersed themselves into the sea, (which here) means Hell.” (TCR 614:8)

When people from town heard the report from those who tended the pigs, they went out to see for themselves what had happened. And this is a scene to remember. When they came to the place, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there at Jesus’s feet, clothed and in his right mind. They were so stunned that they became afraid. Clothed -- finding the comfort of the truths which once again protect us. In his right mind - imagine the relief, the peace, the clarity of our mind and heart, cleanses from evil. And he was sitting at Jesus’s feet, again, a symbol of worship in life. It means, “making to live again. ‘To sit before Jehovah’ is to be with Him, and so, it also means willing and acting from him.” (AE 687)

When Jesus finally gets back into the boat, the man asks if he can come with him. Jesus says, ““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.” (Mark 5:19). In other words, for us, keep it real. Focus on what you have and can do *in this world*. You have so much to contribute. And your life will make a tremendous difference for others. That’s what he is telling us. So the man went home, actually he went to all the ten cities of the Decapolis, and spread the news of just “how much Jesus had done for him.” The story ends with these marvelous words, “And all the people were amazed.”

Life can get really hard. In fact, this peculiar story teaches us that life can be a literal hell. But no hell is too powerful for the Lord. Even legions of the dark forces of the spiritual realm fall before him. See him on the shoreline of your life. Go to him. He is there for you, for all of us.

“The Spirit of the LORD *is* upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to *the* poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to *the* captives
And recovery of sight to *the* blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,
Bound in affliction and irons....
They cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
And He saved them out of their distresses.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
And broke their chains in pieces.
(Psalm 107:10-14 portions)

Amen