

**“AUTHORITY TO GIVE LIFE”**

One of the things that you notice in reading the Bible is that there are a great many things about its world that are strikingly different than our world. The world of the Bible was primitive and pre-industrial; ours is a technological age. The economy of the biblical world was agrarian; ours is consumerist. Those kinds of differences are relatively easy to understand. But what about the fact that the Gospels contain so many accounts of demonic activity? Such things are very foreign to our experience. This is certainly true, but we should also realize that the demonic activity recorded in the Gospels even stands out when compared to the other portions of the Bible. Search the Scriptures, and you will find very few instances that look anything like the cases of demon possession found in the Gospels. By and large, this strange phenomenon took place in a focused way during the time of Jesus' public ministry. Why is this the case?

It is not because the writers of the New Testament were premodern and superstitious, and we have gotten beyond such primitive and unscientific ways of thinking, even though this is the opinion of a number of modern biblical scholars. The most famous of these was Rudolph Bultmann, who once wrote these words:

“It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless (radio) and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same

time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits.” (cited  
in *New Dictionary of Theology*, 197)

That statement might sound very sensible to those who are already committed to the philosophy of naturalism, the belief that nothing exists apart from the material order, but it does not actually prove anything at all. The fact that we have advanced medicine and technology does nothing to disprove the existence of demons and spiritual beings. In fact, when you consider some of the dehumanizing ways in which modern medicine and technology are often used, they may actually serve as further evidence that demons really do exist.

Furthermore, it is not as though the idea of demon possession and exorcism (the driving out of a demon) runs rampant throughout the ancient literature. It is true there are some accounts of these things in literature outside of the Bible, but most of these appear in passages that are clearly mythological. Outside of the New Testament, there are very few accounts of exorcisms that purport to be a record of an historical event. In an extensive study of the relevant literature, one scholar concludes that “The only exorcistic figure in the extant literature to whom a number of exorcism stories are ascribed and related in detail is the biblical figure of Jesus of Nazareth.” (Kirschner, cited in France, 101)

But why? Why is there a demon lurking around every corner in the pages of the Gospels, but not in other historical accounts or at other historical moments? It is because the Gospels report a momentous event, and event that has no parallel. The coming of Christ was a unique moment in the history of the world. Demons were running amok because of what Jesus Christ had come to do. He came to crush the serpent's head. He came to destroy the devil's work. He came to rescue people from Satan's cruel dominion. And as we see in this text, the demons knew this, at least to some extent. They knew Jesus' identity. They knew that something very bad (bad from their perspective) was about to take place. And so they circled their wagons. They did not want people to follow Jesus. They did not want to lose what they had worked thousands of years to obtain. And they were willing to take radical measures in order to keep that from happening. And God permitted them to do so, at least in some cases. He permitted them to take possession of certain individuals. And while this was surely agonizing for those who came under such demonic influence, the overall strategy proved to be a colossal blunder on the part of the demons. In the end, these cases of demon possession were used by Christ to testify to his authority as the Lord of all the earth.

This particular exorcism took place on a Sabbath day in the Galilean town of Capernaum. Capernaum was Peter's home town, as we see in the following section, and it also served as Jesus' home base during the years of his public ministry. Like other Jewish towns, Capernaum had a synagogue, a place where the people gathered to worship and to learn

God's Word. As a faithful Jew, Jesus went to the synagogue to worship on the Sabbath day. And on this particular Sabbath day, he had been invited by the synagogue rulers to expound God's Word to the congregation. While the text does not specify that an invitation had been extended, we can safely assume this because it was the standard practice at that time. And as Jesus opened up the Scriptures, the people were utterly amazed at his teaching. What was it that captivated them about his preaching? Was it his rhetorical skill or style? his use of interesting stories or illustrations? his sense of humor? No, it was none of those things. The thing that struck these people about Jesus' preaching was its authority. He taught with divine authority, like the prophets of old, who prefaced their oracles with the words, "Thus saith the LORD." Jesus' coming marked the arrival of the kingdom of God, and he preached with the authority that belongs to him as the ruler of all the earth.

It was this authority that caused the people in that synagogue service to see a sharp distinction between Jesus' teaching and that of the scribes. The scribes, along with the Pharisees, functioned as the custodians of Judaism's traditional teachings. They were responsible for the creation and preservation of the elaborate rules and regulations that so greatly burdened the people of Israel in Jesus' day. We find one example of this in their handling of the law concerning the Sabbath. They expounded the Sabbath law by declaring exactly how far you could walk or how much weight you could carry without being guilty of breaking the Sabbath by doing work. But such teachings were not from

God. The scribes did not teach with divine authority because their teachings were only human inventions, not the revealed will of God.

There are many preachers in our world today, and most of them claim to speak for God. How can we know whether a particular preacher is preaching with divine authority or not? Where can we find authoritative teaching today? Only where Jesus Christ is preached as he is revealed in the Scriptures, and only where this same Jesus is sincerely revered and loved and followed as Lord. In the words of Alexander Whyte:

“Every preacher, in the measure he preaches the truth as it is in Jesus, and puts on the Lord Jesus Christ, will be clothed with more and more of his Master’s authority.” (*The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 137)

True preachers preach Christ. And true preachers live their lives in Christ.

As Jesus’ hearers were marveling at the authority of his teaching, a man with an unclean spirit came into their midst. The name “unclean spirit” is used by Mark as a synonym for “demon,” as we can see by how he uses the two names interchangeably in the story of the demon-possessed man in chapter 5. Why is a demon described as an “unclean” spirit? Because in the Bible, “uncleanness” was a category used to describe circumstances that

spiritually contaminated a person and rendered him unfit to be in God's presence. That is what had happened to the man in this passage. The Greek literally says that he was "in an unclean spirit." This demon had swallowed him up and taken control of his personality. He had come to be possessed by something that contaminated and defiled him. It really is an awful picture, akin to the sort of thing depicted in a modern-day horror film.

Now, perhaps you are wondering how a passage like this applies to us today. It seems that the outright possession of human beings is a strategy that Satan is not really employing at this time. He is certainly still at work, as numerous New Testament passages make clear, but his approach is much more subtle. So, what does this account of exorcism have to do with us? A number of things could be said, but I want to focus upon how this text relates to a matter that does not occupy our thoughts to the extent that it should: the eternal future that lies ahead of every human being.

God created man in his own image. Man is the pinnacle of God's creation. The psalmist tells us that God crowned man with glory and honor. What a creature is man! And yet, what a monster man can become. When human beings live in slavery to sin and under the sway of demonic powers, there is a sense in which we become less and less human. And the Bible says that that is exactly what is happening to every single man, woman, and child who does not belong to Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2 says that we all who are apart from Christ walk in the course of this world, "following the prince of the power of the air,

the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” (Eph. 2:2) Apart from Christ, we are all under Satan’s power, and he is at work destroying our humanity, defacing the last vestiges of the image of God within us. This is why, in the books of Daniel and Revelation, the ungodly kingdoms of this world are described as monstrous beasts.

When man comes under the control of forces that cause him to rebel against God, he is no longer what God created him to be; he is losing his humanity. We see this in C.S. Lewis’ space novel *Perelandra*, where he describes a scientist who had come under the complete domination of a demonic power as an “Un-man.” What an apt description of what had happened to the miserable man in this passage. He had become something less than a man. This is a picture of what happens to a human being when he is completely cut off from the gracious influence of God and entirely given over to evil. It serves as a warning to us all, a preview of what we will become if we fail to enter into God’s kingdom through Jesus Christ. We need to realize how much is at stake for us. We need to see that every human life will last forever. Listen again to C.S. Lewis, in his famous address “The Weight of Glory”:

“[T]he dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare...There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal,

and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we  
joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or  
everlasting splendors.” (46)

These are the only options for each and every one of us. There is no third option. And  
there is no sitting this one out. You will either end up as an immortal horror, a being  
completely devoid of God’s gracious operations and utterly given over to wickedness; or  
you will be transformed, through your union with Jesus Christ, into a being with  
everlasting splendor. The stakes could not be higher.

And the good news is that Jesus Christ has in his possession absolute authority. He has  
the power to deliver you from everything that oppresses you, from everything that  
enslaves you, from everything that threatens you, from everything that causes you to  
stumble and fall. Apart from him, every human being is doomed to be enslaved to the  
powers of darkness and death forever. But if your life is found in Jesus Christ, then you  
can sing:

*The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;*

*His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure;*

*One little word shall fell him.*

One little word. That is all it takes for Jesus to destroy the devil and all of his work.

Jesus only had to say to that unclean spirit, “Shut up, and come out of this man,” and the demon had no choice but to obey. Jesus’ Word really has that kind of power. And if you trust in his Word, if you submit to his Word, if you cherish his Word, you will find this to be true in your life. You will discover that the Word of Jesus Christ has the power to set you free, the power to give you life, the power to make a human being truly human.