

Why Did the Gadarene Villagers Ask Jesus to Leave?

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Date: 29 July 2018

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[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today's question is, why did the inhabitants of the Gadarene village ask Jesus to leave after he healed the demoniac? The passage in question is Mark chapter 5 verses 1 to 20. I'll read that quickly now.

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 they 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. But when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshipped 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.

And 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, and all the demons begged him, saying, Send us to the swine, that we may enter them. And at once Jesus gave them permission.

[1 : 23] Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine. There were about two thousand. And the herds ran violently down the steep place into the sea and drowned in the sea. Now 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 in his right mind. And they were afraid. And those who saw it told them how it had happened to him who had been demon-possessed and about the swine.

Then they began to plead with him to depart from their region. 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 marvelled. A number of things to notice within this passage. First of all, the condition in which the demon-possessed man is first encountered.

He's dwelling among the tombs. He's cutting himself with stones. He's literally stoning himself. And he's dwelling among the dead. He's someone who is the people of the village have tried to bind him with shackles and in chains, and none of those have been sufficient to bind him. He's always broken free.

[2 : 51] When he encounters Jesus, he runs and he worships him. And then we have the encounter with the demons that possess him. Those demons are then cast out, and they beg to be, not to be thrown into the abyss, as it were, but that they would be left within that country.

And so Jesus casts them out into a herd of pigs. And those 2,000 pigs run down the mountainside, and they drown in the sea.

Now, pigs were unclean animals. That's something to bear in mind. And also, the way that the pigs respond. That's worth paying attention to.

What are the usual accounts where we see someone going over the edge of a cliff and drowning in the sea? Those are usually stories of a single person being driven out by a village, or some scapegoating community cast over the cliff, and then as they die, the village or the community is freed, and the scapegoat mechanism has had its effect.

Now, René Girard has written quite a lot on this particular episode within the Gospels, and I think quite perceptibly at certain points. He observes the scapegoat dynamic, that within a community, when there's a breakdown of the social order, what happens is that there is one particular scapegoat or group that is cast out.

[4 : 30] Everyone focuses on this particular group, and in joining together and casting out this group, the disunity of the society is overcome, and the war of all against all is replaced by peace, as it becomes the war of all against one.

And so, the casting out of the scapegoat leads to the protection of the people. Now, Jesus talks about Satan casting out Satan, a house divided against itself.

Now, how would that actually work? One of the ways that works, Girard suggests, is through the scapegoat mechanism, where you have, instead of everyone fighting against each other, you have everyone fighting together against one particular person, or one particular group of people.

And as they're united in that particular scapegoating, as all the antagonisms start to focus upon this one particular group or person, that they become a lightning rod for all the tension, all the antagonism, all the animosity within the community, suddenly peace is forged.

And so, you have, for instance, surrounding Jesus' death, Pilate and Herod, who formerly, at odds with each other, form peace through their common assault upon Jesus.

[6 : 00] And so, peace can be formed through the scapegoat. And as Satan casts out Satan in this way, there is a sort of peace, a satanic peace that can be formed.

Now, this is important to bear in mind when we think about what's happening with the demoniac.

The demoniac has thousands of, a thousand demons within him, a multitude, a legion.

And this is not just a single demon. This is a multitude of demons. The demons also request that Jesus not send them out of that country.

Again, this is a significant detail. We have a description elsewhere, I think it's in Matthew, of the demon that's cast out and wanders away in dry places, finding somewhere else to possess.

And possesses another place and then comes back to possess the original person. That person is worse than their original state once he's brought many other demons with him.

[7 : 07] Within scripture, Christ is the strong man who casts out the demons. And this is a sort of power conflict, a spiritual conflict between spiritual powers, between Christ, the strong man who can bind the demons, the demons that none of the people of the village can bind with chains or shackles.

But Jesus can bind and overcome this strong man. And the bringing of all these demons in this one particular person is significant, as is the fact that it's the multitude of demons that are cast over the cliff or cast down the steep place into the sea.

Why is that significant? Because it's almost an inversion of the scapegoat dynamic, Girard argues, that whereas usually it's the multitude, the mob, the herd, that scapegoats the single person or single group, here what you have is the casting out of the multitude, the multitude of demons and the one man left in his right mind.

And that is a very significant event for the village. Why is this a significant event for the village?

Among other reasons, how did exorcism work within many of these societies?

In many of these situations, even as Jesus describes it, demonic possession and exorcism occurred by means of displacement. So when a demon was cast out, it would possess, it would go somewhere else.

[8 : 45] It wasn't as if it was completely removed from the scene. It was just displaced from that particular person and then it inhabited somewhere, someone else. Likewise, when a demon is cast out, the demon can also come back in a worse form with others.

And so we see that the demonic possession was often a re-juggling of the presence of demons within a society. And the demoniac here is someone who is bound up with the identity of the village.

He's bound up with the identity of the village because he is probably bearing all these different...

He's the scapegoat of that community. He's the one who bears all of the demons.

He's the one who bears this legion of demons that have been displaced and possess him. Now that is a real problem for the community.

When that scapegoat is removed, the social order is fundamentally undermined. Now we can see this in various ways within our regular society, whether that's a nation or whether it's individual families.

[9 : 58] When a scapegoat mechanism breaks down, when Satan can no longer cast out Satan, suddenly we have no way to resolve our disunity, our antagonisms with each other.

There's no lightning rod that works anymore. And that's a problem. That's a real problem. It's a breakdown of the social order. Now you can see this within a family.

When there's a particular member of a family that can be blamed for everything that's gone wrong, a particular member of the family that is the scapegoat for the family, no one really has to deal with their issues that much.

They can blame that person. Or maybe it's a spouse. That spouse can be blamed for everything that's wrong with your life. All the things that you're not doing right, that they're supposedly sabotaging it.

Or you can blame them for all your dysfunctions. All of these things are ways in which other people can bear our problems for us and be scapegoats.

[10 : 59] Now the bearing of the demons of the community is something on a grander scale. It's a more serious thing. And once that person is removed, once that scapegoat is no longer viable, you have a problem because you have to deal with your own demons.

You have to deal with your own problems. You have to deal with your own tensions and animosities with each other and there's no lightning rod to deal with those for you.

The other problem for the community is here is this tremendously powerful force. This force that has possessed this man.

This legion. And drowned within the sea. This force that has kept this man in bondage. Now there's an Exodus type pattern here where the man held in bondage is set free and the pursuers are drowned within the sea.

A legion. A metaphor. I mean it's a metaphorical army. A legion of demons drowned within the sea. The pursuing Pharaoh and his men drowned within the sea.

[12 : 06] In these unclean animals. These pigs. And what you have left is a faithful Israelite. You have one who's been drawn out and delivered and then the pursuers drowned within the sea.

And the community that's left is now faced with this strong man who has defeated Pharaoh. Defeated that strong man of Satan and Pharaoh and the demons that serve him.

and this stronger man has come along and bound him and overcome him and drowned him. What do you do with that? Are you going to form a new social order?

Are you going to deal with all your demons? Deal with all your problems? Face up to your sin and your guilt and these sorts of things? Or are you going to try and just remove that power far away from you because you just can't deal with that?

It's dangerous to have that sort of power around and you've been able to manage the former power by displacing it onto this particular scapegoat figure but now the whole society has broken down that order that once was a dysfunctional order but it worked.

[13 : 22] On some level it worked. The big problems were born by this particular person but for everyone else it more or less worked and now everyone has to deal with their issues and Jesus is also this figure that once you have this stronger man around what do you do with him?

Are you going to show faith in him? You can't just be indifferent to him because this is a power that is greater than the demonic power that formally shaped that community that formally shaped it and formed its scapegoat dynamics as this person dwelling among the tombs stoning himself and then we have the alternative of the mob the herd being cast over the cliff instead and so that has all broken down what are you going to do in its place?

And the gathering response is to tell Jesus to leave. They're afraid they recognise that the foundation of their society has been fundamentally undermined and that Jesus is a dangerous person to have around.

You can't be indifferent to him you can't be ambivalent to him you have to respond to him in faith you have to build your society around him and you can't just return to the old order.

Once he's come everything has changed and that is a real problem and that I think is why the gathering villagers asked Jesus to leave after he heals the demoniac.

[14 : 53] If you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account I'll leave the link for that below and also if you find these videos helpful or these talks helpful then please consider supporting my Patreon account and I also have these on SoundCloud and on iTunes and you can see the links for that below or perhaps you are listening to these on SoundCloud or on iTunes right now.

Anyway I hope to talk to you again in the next couple of days. God bless.