

## Sovereign over Spirits

### Matthew 8:28-34

There is an interesting story recorded in Joshua 5. God's people had just crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land and were preparing to conquer Jericho. Prior to doing so, Joshua, the leader of Israel's army, was doing some reconnaissance, and while he was scouting the land he encountered someone who was dressed for battle and ready to fight, for his sword was drawn. In the ancient world, a warrior did not draw his sword unless he was intending to use it. And Joshua deduced, naturally, that this person was in the vicinity because he was going to be engaged in the same battle as Joshua. So he asked him, "*Are you for us or for our enemies?*" (5:13).

That was a legitimate question. When a battle is imminent and a soldier is standing before you in the battle zone with a drawn sword, the question of '*who's side are you on?*' is more logical than even '*who are you?*' But the Warrior's response does *not* seem logical, for he said, "*Neither. But as commander of the army of Yahweh I have now come.*" (5:14)

What does he mean, "Neither"? If he came from Yahweh, Israel's God, and Joshua was the leader of Israel we would expect this Warrior to say, "I'm on *your* side, of course! You are Yahweh's people and I'm the captain of Yahweh's army. I have come to help *you*."

Instead, he said in effect, "The question of who's side I'm on is the wrong question. I didn't come to take sides, I came to take over! This is *God's* story, not Israel's story. You will soon find out that his hosts are going to engage the enemy and win the battle, and I'm the Captain of his hosts, and I have now come."

And the text tells us that when Joshua heard this, he fell facedown to the ground and asked him, "What message does my lord have for His servant?" The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."

Which raises the question, "Who was this person?" Many Bible scholars assert that the Captain in this story was the Lord Jesus Himself. The theological term for this is "theophany," which describes a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ on earth. In other words, the Captain was none other than the Son of God. The fact that Joshua fell facedown and that the ground was rendered holy because of the Captain's presence supports this interpretation.

And if it's true that this was a pre-incarnate revelation of the Lord Jesus, it reinforces the tenet that the Son of God has always been sovereign. From the beginning He has been actively involved in administering and supervising and securing God's plans and purposes, long before He changed His form and was born as a baby. The Son of God has always been sovereign; He has always been the Commander of the Lord's army, and every living being that has spiritual eyes—every living being that is able to see what is going on in the spiritual realm—has known this.

We will see this in the passage we are studying this morning. You will remember from last week that Jesus and His disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee when a violent storm threatened to capsize their boat. The disciples were terrified, thinking they were going to perish. Jesus, on the other hand, was sleeping in the stern of the boat, oblivious to any danger. After waking him, he rebuked the wind and the sea, and they instantly became calm, which prompted the amazed disciples to exclaim, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey Him?"

What sort of man, indeed! The answer: He's no ordinary man, that's for sure. If He can make the wind and sea obey Him, then He must be sovereign over creation, and if He is sovereign over creation there must be something *divine* about Him. And Matthew continues to affirm this divine aspect of Jesus' identity in the next story. Take a look at **Matthew 8:28-29**. *<sup>28</sup> And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. <sup>29</sup> And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"*

**Verse 28.** The region of the Gadarenes is on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, opposite where Jesus and the disciples lived. It was not a place of prominence in Jewish culture because it was a predominantly Gentile region (we will find out in a moment that a herd of pigs were being raised there, an animal that was unclean to the Jews). "Gadarenes" refers to both the village of Gadara, located about five miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, as well as to the surrounding region, which included the village of Gerasa, which lay on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This explains why Mark calls this "the country of the Gerasenes" (5:1).

No sooner had Jesus and His disciples stepped on shore than two demon possessed men met them, not to greet them, but to protest Jesus' presence in what they perceived to be *their* territory. This is probably a good time to tell you that in Mark and Luke's account of this story, only *one* demon-possessed man is mentioned. That may *seem* like a contradiction, but I would suggest to you that Matthew's purpose in relating this account is different than both Mark's and Luke's. The focus in Mark and Luke is one of the victims—how he had suffered terribly, how he had been delivered from the demons, how he felt after he had been transformed, and how he became an evangelist for Jesus.

The focus of Matthew is to reveal Jesus' qualifications to be the Messiah and Ruler of God's kingdom, and so Matthew is interested in asserting Jesus' supreme authority. He wants his audience to know that Jesus has authority over everything, including the things in this fallen world that threaten the safety and security of mankind. So earlier in Matthew 8 he asserted Jesus' authority over sickness, disease, and creation itself. In chapter 9 he is going to assert Jesus' authority over sin (9:1-8) and death (9:18-26). But in this story he is asserting Jesus' authority over spirits, specifically *evil* spirits—spirits who belong to Satan's domain—something else that threatens the safety and security of mankind in this fallen world.

Notice in verse 28 Matthew emphasizes the danger these demons posed to people living in that region. They were so violent and aggressive that no one could pass that way without the risk of being assaulted or harassed. Mark, in his account, tells us that the locals tried restraining these men with shackles and chains, but the demons were so powerful they "wrenched the chains apart and broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue them" (5:4). To make matters even more ominous, these men lived in the tombs, giving the whole scene a flavor of death, and compelling the local population to keep their distance.

But when Jesus and His disciples showed up, the demons, perhaps thinking they were going to assault some more passersby, stopped short when they saw who it was, and then asked Jesus a question. **Verse 29.** *"What have you to do with us, O Son of God?"* The Greek text says it even more simply. "What to us and to you?" In other words, "What are you doing here confronting *us*? You're supposed to be on the other side of the Sea, doing your thing with the Jews. You're not supposed to show up in our territory. Not yet, anyway."

Indeed, Jesus had crashed their party. And, by the way, it was a party for them. Demons are powerful creatures and they had been flexing their muscles, baring their teeth, and terrorizing the community. They had the local population right where they wanted them—paralyzed by fear, intimidated by their antics, worried that they or their children might be their next victims.

The demons were having a great time. But Jesus crashed their party, and when He did they were astonished. Astonished and afraid, because they knew who He was—the Captain of the Lord’s army, the sovereign Son of God. And they knew what His ultimate plan was and what their ultimate fate would be because of that plan.

Look at the second part of **verse 29**. *“What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”* Up until this encounter the demons had been the tormentors. They had aggressively plied their tactics to terrorize that specific location. But even they knew their reign of fear was temporary. They knew about the One who was ultimately in control, and the One who would eventually exercise that control over the whole earth. And they knew that when He did, they were doomed. The tormentors would become the tormented.

When they said to Jesus, “Have you come to torment us before *the time*,” the time they are referring to is when the kingdom of God would be fully established on earth as it is in heaven, and we know from other Scriptures that this will be when Jesus returns to earth. The demons knew about that day. They can read, so they know what Scripture says. They can hear, so they know what prophets have said. They can reason, so they knew God was up to something when He sent His Son into this world to take on human form, so that He would do something that would ultimately end up in their demise. They also knew that their master, Satan, though clever and powerful and wily, is no match for the Son of God. The Son of God is sovereign. And He will ultimately have His way.

So the demons’ question is born out of surprise and fear. Is it *already* time for our destruction? But when they suspect that it is not that time yet, in their panic they quickly resort to another option. Look at **verses 30-31**. *<sup>30</sup> Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. <sup>31</sup> And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.”*

When Matthew says a herd of many pigs, he was making an understatement. Mark’s Gospel tells us that there were 2,000 pigs in the herd (Mk. 5:13)! We also know from Luke and Mark’s account that Jesus had asked the name of the demons. And they told Him that their name was Legion, for they were many. “Legion” could very well have been a figurative expression for the number of demons possessing the men, for we know that in the Roman army a legion consisted of 6,000 men.

So there were a lot of pigs and possibly even more demons. Why the demons wanted to go into the pigs can only be speculated. No doubt they would have preferred to go into other human beings, but Jesus wasn’t about to allow that. It’s not okay with Jesus that demons cause destruction in creatures made in His image, even if those people are pagans. But the demons also knew that Jesus could have banished them from the earth, or sent them to a place of torment prematurely. So they probably asked to go into the pigs because they knew how God felt about pigs at the time—that they were already considered unclean.

Whatever the reason, it is even more remarkable, in my opinion, that Jesus grants their request. Look at **verse 32**. *<sup>32</sup> And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and*

*drowned in the waters.*

When I say, it is remarkable that Jesus grants their request it is because, first, it seems incongruous that He would agree to do anything an evil spirit requested of Him. After all, He knows they have ulterior motives; He knows they cannot be trusted; He knows they are devious. It would seem to us that He would want to punish them for causing so much destruction in these two men's lives and families, and in the region.

And second, Jesus certainly knew the collateral damage that would occur if He granted the demons' request. He knew what would happen to the pigs once the demons entered them—He knew this was the food supply for the community, and He knew that it would cause tremendous loss for a business owner and probably disrupt the economy in the region.

But Matthew gives us no indication as to why Jesus permitted the demons to go into the pigs only to destroy those pigs. Nor does Matthew or Luke. We can assume that Jesus had His reasons, but I doubt if we will know those reasons this side of heaven.

What Matthew does want to emphasize is that Jesus has authority to order demons to do whatever He wants them to do and go wherever He wants them to go. If He wants them to be quiet they have to be quiet. If He wants them to go to the Lake of Fire, that's where they will go. If He wants them to go into a herd of pigs or flock of birds or a swarm of bees or a school of fish, that's where they will go. Because Jesus is sovereign. And Jesus knows what is best.

In my years of ministry I have occasionally encountered demons in people, and there have been a few times when God has used me (and those working with me) to expel them from people. One thing has been common in every situation. Those demons never want to come out of the people they have possessed. But they must, in order for that person to get well and to be set free. And so when it comes to the point of me telling them to go I always send them to the feet of Jesus.

The reason for that is simple. I don't have a clue about where to send them, and I certainly don't trust my judgment. But Jesus knows, and I trust Him to send them exactly where they need to go. And I've also noticed that the last place they want to go is the feet of Jesus, because they're afraid of Him. He's the sovereign One. He's the captain of the Lord's army. And one day He will send them all to the Lake of Fire where they will be tormented forever and ever.

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah and Ruler of God's kingdom because He has authority over all things, including Satan and His demons. He also wants us to know that the exorcism of these demons is evidence that His kingdom has come. Later, He records an incident in chapter 12 in which Jesus said, "*If I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come*" (12:28). Jesus has begun invading Satan's strongholds, taking back more and more territory from Satan's kingdom, until He ultimately obliterates His kingdom on the Day of Judgment. That is Satan's ultimate fate, and He knows it.

So, we know that evil spirits are terrified of Jesus' power and authority, but how did the *people* in this story react to it? Matthew does not record the reaction of the two men, but we are told in the other Gospels that at least one of the men responded with praise, adoration, and gratitude. He begged Jesus to let him become one of His disciples. But Jesus told him to go home and tell his family and friends how much God had done for him, which he did. And we are told that everyone marveled (Mk. 5:19-20).

But not everyone had a positive reaction. Look at **verses 33-34**. ***33 The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-***

*possessed men. <sup>34</sup> And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.*

Why? Some have suggested that they were angry with Jesus because He had destroyed the pork business in the community. But we are told in Mark's Gospel that they begged Him to leave because they were *afraid* (5:15). Luke says, "They were seized with great fear" (8:37).

One might think that they would have asked Jesus, "Who are you," and then celebrated Him for overpowering the demons who had been terrorizing the community. One might think that they would have asked Him to stick around to make sure those demons didn't come back.

Instead, they were so afraid of Him they begged Him to leave their area immediately lest they have to witness any more dramatic displays of God's power.

Why? Because they didn't know Jesus. More specifically, they didn't have any kind of relationship with Him so they didn't know if He was for them or against them. But they feared that He might be against them and that He might display that supernatural power in a way that could harm them or destroy them, just like the pigs.

That is not an unusual reaction to Jesus' power and authority. Just before Peter became a disciple, when he saw Jesus display that supernatural power in a miraculous catch of fish, he said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). When someone is exposed to the power and authority of the Son of God, and you are not sure if he is for you or against you, it is natural to be afraid.

But I want to declare boldly, on the authority of the Word of God, that if you have put your faith in Jesus (you believe He is the Messiah, Son of God, and God's provision for you to be forgiven of your sins, restored and reconciled to God) then you have nothing to fear. Because, we are told in Romans 8, that God is for you. And if *He* is for you, then who can be against you? The answer is no one! You are thoroughly safe and secure, and nothing can separate you from His love.

Paul goes on to say, <sup>37</sup> *"...In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And so if we ever have to encounter demons we don't have to be afraid. We ought to be wise and humble. We ought to recognize our absolute dependence on the Lord. But we don't have to be afraid, because Scripture tells us that "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4) The same Holy Spirit who directed and empowered Jesus now resides in followers of Jesus, and He is a divine Being with the same power and authority as Jesus. God our Father is sovereign, Jesus our Savior is sovereign, and the Holy Spirit is sovereign.

What is more, if we do encounter evil spirits in this world, He has given us every provision we need to stand against them. Paul admonishes us in Ephesians to "Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (6:11). That spiritual armor is sufficient to protect us from his attacks, and enable us not only to stand our ground, but to defeat Him.

But there is one other thing I want to emphasize by way of application. This story highlights Jesus' power and authority over yet another aspect of this fallen world that threatens the safety and security of mankind - evil spirits. Powerful, destructive, malicious

evil spirits who can terrorize entire communities. And yet those spirits cower in the presence of Jesus. Those spirits have no choice but to do what He tells them to do and go where He tells them to go. Because He is the sovereign Son of God.

And that sovereignty applies to every circumstance of your life as well. You may not be pestered by demons, but maybe you are plagued by doubts, fears, heartache, worries, disappointments, uncertainty about the future. I plead with you, look to Jesus. He is the sovereign Son of God. He can do anything. Nothing is hard for Him, and, as Scripture often reminds us, His arm is not short. In other words, His arm can reach all the way into your mind, and heart, and circumstances, and deal with whatever it is that is troubling you. Look to Jesus. Not only is He a powerful Savior, He is a willing Savior.

## **Sovereign over Spirits** **Matthew 8:28-34**

**Main Idea:** Since Jesus is the sovereign Son of God demons must submit to His authority.

Demons Inside Two Men (28)

The pitiable victims (Mark 5:5)

The demons' haunt

The demons' ferocity

The futility of restraints (Mark 5:3-4)

The fear of the people

Demons Encounter Jesus (29-31)

Their approach

Their question

Their ultimate fate

Their assumption (to be cast out)

Their request

**Demons Possessing Pigs (32-34)**

Jesus agrees to the demons' request (32a)

The whole herd perishes (32b)

The frightened herdsmen's testimony (33)

The desire for distance from Jesus (34)

Application: When encountering demonic forces, followers of Jesus have nothing to fear  
"Greater is he (the Holy Spirit) that is in you, than he (Satan) that is in the world"  
(1 John 4:4)

"Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6:11).