

March 26 Lesson 4 (NIV)

Jesus Overpowers Legion

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 10:1–6

Background Scripture: Mark 5:1–20 (cf. Luke 8:26–39)

Mark 5:1–13, 18–20

¹ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

⁹ Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹² The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” ¹³ He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁸ As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹ Jesus did not let him, but said, “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.” ²⁰ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Key Text

The man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.—

Mark 5:20

Jesus Calls Us

Unit 1: Called from the Margins of Society

Lessons 1–4

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How to Say It

DecapolisDee-*cap*-uh-lis.

Gadara*Gad*-uh-ruh.

Gergesa*Gur*-guh-suh.

ScythopolisSith-*op*-uh-lus.

SynopticSih-*nawp*-tihk.

Introduction

A. An Unfair Fight

Some years ago I took up historical fencing (swordsmanship) as a hobby for fun and to stay in better shape. I took to it quickly. My natural agility quickly elevated me to become one of the better fencers in our club. In a one-on-one match, I usually defeated my opponent.

One day the club decided to play a game, and I found myself fencing two people at once. I had beaten both of them individually. But it was a great challenge to fight two. Despite my aptitude and skill, I could not defend myself for long against two—and went down in defeat. Our game was an unfair fight in which I was outnumbered and lost. Today’s passage tells of a similar scenario with a very different outcome.

B. Lesson Context

Mark’s Gospel was likely written between AD 60 and 62, certainly before Matthew, Luke, or John. With Matthew and Luke, the book of Mark rounds out the Synoptic Gospels, so called because of their similar records of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Today’s text from Mark 5 is one example of the books’ shared material, with parallels in Matthew 8:28–34 and Luke 8:26–39. Differences between the accounts say less about the historical *accuracy* of the event than about the faith *perspectives* the writers brought to the details.

A somewhat perplexing characteristic of the Gospel of Mark is also on display in this account: Jesus’ tendency throughout the first half of the book to tell people whom Jesus had healed to keep quiet about the matter (Mark 1:44; 7:36; 8:30). This has been called the messianic secret.

Many theories have been proposed for this counterintuitive command to silence. One such is that Jesus did not want the people to become invested in wrong ideas about what it meant for him to be the Messiah. While the people were looking for a political Messiah to deliver them from Roman imperialism, Jesus used the time of secrecy to teach about the larger role of the Messiah—beyond Israel and its politics. Jesus also wanted his ministry to be defined as a preaching and teaching ministry more than a healing and miracles ministry (Mark 1:35–39). The constant needs of people around him and of crushing crowds looking for healing could have taken all his time if Jesus had not guarded it carefully. His preaching ministry was supported by the miracles, not the other way around. This suggests an element of crowd control (see 1:43–45).

The account of the Gadarene demoniac occurs during Jesus’ preaching ministry in Galilee. This story is in a section of Mark that contains several other accounts focusing on Jesus’ power and authority (see 4:35–41; 5:21–34).

I. Arrivals (Mark 5:1–5)

A. Jesus (v. 1)

1. They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.

They refers to Jesus and his disciples (Mark 4:35). *Across the lake* is the east side of the Sea of Galilee (see commentary on 5:20, below). This region was broadly called the Decapolis, meaning “10 cities” (see commentary on 5:20, below). Pinpointing exactly where in *the region of the Gerasenes* Jesus and the disciples landed is difficult. The region is associated with the cities Gadara and Gerasa, potentially confusing the matter. Gerasa can be ruled out because of its 40—

mile distance from the sea. This distance would prohibit the incident from playing out as recorded (see 5:13, below). A town called Gergesa has been suggested as a likely site, though its location is unknown. Gadara is the most likely location, as the city was only five to six miles from the coastline (consider Matthew 8:28).

B. The Demoniac (vv. 2–5)

2–3a. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs,

Jesus is not named in the original Greek, but context makes clear that he's the one who *got out of the boat* (Mark 4:38–41; see commentary on 5:6, below). In typical fashion in his Gospel, Mark gets straight to the action with the word "immediately" (often left untranslated in the *NIV*, as here; examples: 1:42; 2:8; 6:27, 50; 10:52; 14:43).

The man's coming *from the tombs* and living *in the tombs* were cause for instant concern. These tombs would be caves or carved into rock, forming a necropolis: city of the dead. To have *an impure spirit* indicates supernatural possession (compare Mark 1:23–27). Any Jew approaching the demoniac would consider him unclean because of his continual proximity to dead bodies (Numbers 19:11, 13, 16). Nowhere in this account does Jesus express concern about ritual uncleanness, however. Jesus' teachings about Sabbath (example: Matthew 12:9–12) and other holiness issues (example: 23:25–28) align with his greater concern for wholeness in the Lord than with outer, ritual uncleanness.

3b–4. and no one could bind him anymore, 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.

Once the possessed man lost control of himself, his community tried to step in. Though binding him *with a chain* may once have worked, the demon within (see commentary on Mark 5:9, below) granted such perverse strength that the demoniac *tore* those restraints *apart*. His strength was matched by a wildness that *no one* could *subdue*. The image is of a dangerous, undomesticated beast. The best course of action for the community was to be wary and hope the demon-possessed man would not come among them and cause harm.

5. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

A healthy person generally makes decisions that maintain his or her overall well-being. Even if another doesn't agree with those decisions, the logic behind the choices can be explained and understood by others. It seems, however, that one characteristic of demon possession is a loss of control over self-preservation. For instance, a healthy boy would not choose to burn himself or drown. But a demon within him could overwhelm him and put him in circumstances where burning or drowning were likely to occur (Matthew 17:14–18).

In the demoniac's case, he had lost so much control that even his instinct to care for himself was overridden. In his settlement *in the hills*, he was given to self-harm. No one could prevent his hurting others *or* himself. And though his crying could have been a result of cutting *himself with stones*, the Greek verb is more in keeping with an animal's cry than with human sorrow. Once again, the demon reduced the man to a beastly station.

II. Confrontation (Mark 5:6–13)

A. Pleading (vv. 6–13a)

6–7a. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

Given that this happened in “the region of the Gerasenes” (Mark 5:1, above), the chances are slight that a man off the street would know *Jesus* by name, let alone recognize him on sight. In context, it is clear that falling *on his knees* was not an act of religious veneration, since a demon would not worship Jesus. Though this posture could be used to describe worship, it could also have the more polite connotation of bowing before a king or welcoming an honored guest. Ironically, this man’s question—the result of the demon’s knowledge—answers the question the disciples posed only a few verses before: “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (4:41). Demons well know who Jesus is (example: 1:34) and are rightly terrified of their coming judgment.

In keeping with what has been described about the Gerasene demoniac (see Mark 5:2–5, above), the demon was actually doing the talking. No human had yet acknowledged Jesus to be the *Son* of God, another clue that the demon knew what others did not. The title *Most High God* emphasizes God’s absolute rule over the heavens and the earth and under the earth, including every creature within those realms—supernatural or not (Philippians 2:10; Revelation 5:13).

7b–8. “In God’s name don’t torture me!” For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

It is not yet clear how effective the *impure* spirit’s begging was (see commentary on Mark 5:13b, below). The demon was subject to Jesus and his commands, just as the waves and the wind were on the journey across the sea (4:39, 41). Jesus could have cast the demon out immediately—could even *torture* the demon (see 5:10, below). But perhaps for our edification, Jesus chose to allow more information to come to light.

9. Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”

Legion ordinarily referred to a Roman military unit consisting of approximately 6,000 foot soldiers plus a mounted attachment. While no legions were stationed in Palestine at the time of our text, Roman legions were found in Egypt and Syria during the time of Christ. They were a symbol (and source) of Roman imperial strength and power. In giving this *name*, the demons not only stated that they were *many* but also implied that they were strong. The word is used in the New Testament to refer to large numbers of spiritual forces, whether demonic or angelic (see Matthew 26:53). This makes it impossible to know how many demons were present, only that it was a huge, formidable horde.

Ancient people often believed that invoking the name of a spiritual being granted some power over that being (example: Acts 19:13–16). But Jesus needed no tips or tricks to obtain power over the demons (see Mark 5:13, below). Instead, Jesus was preparing to teach the disciples a lesson of the utmost importance: no matter how the powers of evil stacked against him, Jesus was always in charge.

10. And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

Jesus could send the demons into the Abyss (see Luke 8:31), which seems to be a place of punishment for demons preceding the final judgment (see Revelation 20). Perhaps this is what Legion was hoping to avoid by begging not to be sent *out of the area*.

11. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.

Because *pigs* were unclean for Jews to eat (Leviticus 11:7–8), their presence was a reliable indicator of a Gentile population in a settlement (see commentary on Mark 5:1, above; 5:20, below). Much as goats or sheep were to shepherds in Judea, these animals were key to their keepers' livelihood. They were acceptable sacrificial animals in pagan religious ceremonies, so they served that additional function as well.

12–13a. The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” He gave them permission,

The demons were firmly within Jesus' jurisdiction (Mark 1:39); all creation is under his rule (Colossians 1:15–20). Having come face-to-face with the Son of God, Legion knew Jesus would not allow them to remain in the man any longer. This image of the “militant” demons (see commentary on Mark 5:9, above) might remind us of the faithful centurion who compared Jesus' power to a commander's over soldiers (Luke 7:1–9). They recognized that Jesus was in complete control. But perhaps Legion hoped to linger in the unclean *pigs*; then when Jesus had left the region, they could reenter the man (compare Matthew 12:43–45) or find a new victim. With Jesus' *permission*, Legion might have thought they had succeeded in outwitting the Son of God.

B. Stampede! (v. 13b)

13b. and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

What *the impure spirits* experienced here was a foretaste of the defeat that Satan would experience following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Though Satan looked for victory over Jesus, what the devil experienced was an unexpected (to him) and thorough defeat (Hebrews 2:14–15). Similarly, the demons' sudden entering *the herd* of *pigs* wasn't even a partial victory, since the panicked animals immediately stampeded to their deaths. Given how the demons overwhelmed the faculties of an apparently otherwise rational person, we are not surprised at the pigs' fearful reaction.

Though we might think of a one-to-one correlation—that is, one demon per pig—clearly this is an unnecessary inference. The Gerasene demoniac had been host to Legion, a name that suggests several thousand. In theory, the numbers involved should have put Jesus at a disadvantage. However, even though Jesus seemed outnumbered, there was never any doubt about his victory in this encounter.

Because the pigs *drowned*, the demons were deprived of both a human body and the animals' bodies. This was not a final defeat for the demons, as Jesus had apparently acknowledged it wasn't yet time for their ultimate demise. But this was a foretaste of what was coming to them: banishment from the torment they inflicted on *any* of God's creation.

But the herdsmen didn't see this extraordinary sign of God's goodness and victory over evil. Instead, they only felt fear. This explains why the community asked Jesus to leave the area after this encounter (Mark 5:14–17, not in our printed text).

III. Departures (Mark 5:18–20)

A. Parting Ways (vv. 18–19)

18. As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.

The man who had been demon-possessed knew what a miracle his healing was, and he appropriately hoped to follow Jesus and continue to learn from him. And there was precedent for the man to join Jesus. When Mary Magdalene was delivered from seven demons (Luke 8:2), she became one of Jesus' most dedicated followers (see commentary on Mark 5:19, below). This man contrasts with his countrymen who begged Jesus to depart the area.

19. Jesus did not let him, but said, “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.”

In contrast to Mary's joining Jesus' traveling ministry (see commentary on Mark 5:18, above), *Jesus did not let him* join. Furthermore, Jesus' command to the man was different than we might expect. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus frequently told people to stay quiet about what he did for them. Given that we know Jesus ultimately wanted the gospel to spread throughout the world (Matthew 28:18–20), why would he tell people he'd healed to stay quiet?

Maintaining what has been called the messianic secret seems to have been Jesus' practice in Jewish regions, particularly earlier in his ministry (see Lesson Context). But in this Gentile region, Jesus' concerns were different. Perhaps because Jews had the Old Testament, and especially the prophets, to point to Jesus, the secrecy could have been a temporary measure to allow Jesus' ministry to grow in its own time. But because Gentiles did not have the Scriptures to refer to or learn from, eyewitness accounts of the Jewish teacher and healer would prepare the soil for faith to come. Though not exactly the same (partly because Samaritans did follow Mosaic law), the story of the Samaritan woman's witness illustrates the potential power of a firsthand account (John 4:1–42; see lesson 3).

B. Homecoming (v. 20)

20. So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

The *Decapolis* refers to a group of about 10 Gentile cities located east of the Sea of Galilee (with the exception of Scythopolis, which was west of the sea). Today this region is located in northwest Jordan and southern Syria. Though the cities were not officially allied, they shared cultural and economic ties as well as a desire for relative independence from Rome, which they were granted to a degree. Later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus would perform another miracle there (Mark 7:31–37). In Matthew's Gospel, Syria was named as evidence that Jesus' reputation was spreading among Gentiles (Matthew 4:25).

This man gave thanks by obeying Jesus and letting others know *how much Jesus had done for him* (see Mark 5:19, above). The cities of the Decapolis included Damascus—famous as the city where Saul (later Paul) regained his sight and became a follower of “the Way” (Acts 9:1–20)—

and Philadelphia, one of seven cities to receive a letter as described in John's vision (Revelation 3:7–13). Who knows how the former demoniac prepared the way for the gospel!

Conclusion

A. From Death to Life

We too have been delivered by Jesus. And like the *former* demoniac, we have stepped out of a life that was more like death (Ephesians 2:1–10; Colossians 2:13–15). We too are called to share the story of what Jesus has done for us, to prepare our own communities to meet Christ and come to new life (Matthew 28:18–20). No matter the legions aligned against us, Jesus is in control! All we have to do is place our faith in him, with joy and obedience.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we remember your Son's mighty power and be quick to ask for deliverance. May we as your servants show our gratitude by proclaiming to others the good things you have done for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus has the power.
Will you cry out to him?¹
