

No One Like Jesus: Freedom At A Cost
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 61:1-4; James 4:1-7; Matthew 8:28-34

Friends, our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 8:28-34. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “When [Jesus] arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, “If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.” He said to them, “Go!” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.”

America: the land of the free and the home of the brave, according to our national anthem. Freedom was built into the founding documents of our country, even as we’ve argued who those freedoms extend to. The bill of rights details many of those freedoms – freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to practice one’s religion, freedom to assemble, freedom to right grievances through the government. We can freely travel among the fifty states. We have the freedom to pursue our goals within ethical and moral constraints.

These freedoms come at a cost. Brave Americans have died advancing the cause of freedom and defending it from those who would take it away. We know that freedom has limits – my freedom to swing my fist ends at the tip of your nose. Sometimes freedom means the cost of hearing things that offend us, things we don’t want to hear. Freedom of religion comes at the cost of your neighbor practicing a religion you disagree with. The freedom to right wrongs through the government means that there are just and frivolous lawsuits alike.

Today’s passage deals with things we fear – evil in the spiritual realm. We’ll address that. Yet that’s not what the passage is most concerned about. Instead, it’s about Christ giving freedom to two men who no longer had it, giving them the opportunity to follow Him after being freed from their spiritual captivity. But it’s also about the cost of freedom and what we are willing to give up so that others might truly live and find their freedom in Christ.

While not on the map, the region of the Gadarenes was in northern Israel, somewhere that the Jews had thoroughly assimilated with their pagan neighbors. We know that because of the pigs. Pigs are unclean by Jewish law. They weren’t allowed to eat them or handle them, and to do so made them ceremonially unclean, unable to participate in religious activities until they were ritually cleansed. For a Jew, keeping pigs was a grave rejection of God. It’s a sign that this community had distanced itself from God, and so of all places, it’s not surprising that there was demonic activity here, seen in the possession of these two men.

These men weren't necessarily the most wicked men in town. They were simply in a part of Israel that had rejected God in a very visible, tangible way. At very least, this community was trying to serve two masters, trying to please God and also please their pagan neighbors with all of their religious customs. It was an unholy bargain that would never work. One results was these two men who don't have control of themselves, who live in the tombs – another unclean place. They are so violent that people can't even pass by. They are a constant reminder of the people's rejection of the one, true, holy God.

Before we go on, I want to address this issue because it is one that causes a lot of fear. There are entire Christian denominations that focus on a spiritual world beyond what we see in the Bible, seeing angels and demons in everything. There are some that ignore the spiritual world entirely. Both are problematic. We must be aware of the spiritual reality around us, but we must also not take an unhealthy interest in it either...because Scripture doesn't.

In the Old Testament, there is very little talk of demons, though foreign gods are not gods at all but demons. Angels show up as messengers of God, but they appear very infrequently too. There is far more spiritual activity in the New Testament era because Jesus comes, proclaiming the good news of salvation and the defeat of the powers of darkness. Those powers show themselves in acts of defiance before their just punishment.

The same sort of spiritual activity occurs today in the same situations – in regions that have rejected God and turn to spiritual darkness for power, where people actually want to be possessed for the powers they believe they will have, occasionally this happens. But it also happens in places where the Word of God is proclaimed for the first time. The darkness shows itself before God's light comes and the darkness is destroyed.

As Christians, we do not need to worry about these forces. If we are a temple of the Holy Spirit, we cannot also be a temple for any other spirit. While they may still have some power in certain places and times, God has the victory over every power in this universe. As Martin Luther wrote in his famous hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, "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." We really don't need to say more.

Returning to the story...these demons speak to Jesus, and they are both fearful and arrogant. They call Him the Son of God, a title Jesus rarely used, to stir the pot. What they say is absolutely true, but they do it to cause Jesus trouble. By using His real title, they are trying to exorcise Him, to make Him leave them alone! Then they have the gall to accuse Him of injustice – of bringing God's wrath upon them before the appointed time. They accuse Jesus of coming to torment them – when tormenting is precisely what these demons are doing to the two men! Evil often accuses the righteous of doing the very things evil is guilty of doing. Passing the blame and accusing others when one is guilty is as old as Adam and Eve's sin in the garden of Eden.

When it's clear that Jesus is going to free these men from the evil that has settled in them, the demons suggest He should let them head into the herd of pigs. Jesus gives them permission. And they do exactly what you would expect demons to do. They leave a trail of destruction in their wake, taking the herd of pigs and drowning them.

This is shocking, but not surprising. It didn't surprise Jesus. There's no sense that demons are able to die, so this is just a wasteful, senseless act that is perfectly in character with creatures that would seek to disobey God and undo whatever they could of His Kingdom.

The next part seems loony. The pig herders run into town and tell everyone what's happened, including the fact that the demon-possessed men are now in their right minds. They go out to meet Jesus. And when they do, they beg Him to leave. But why? This is crazy! If these folks were faithful, they would have invited Jesus to stay as long as He wanted. Not only did He bring wholeness to these two men, not only did He bring safety to the region since these men were no longer a danger, but the unclean animals were no longer a concern. You would think they would be jumping up and down.

But they aren't. The passage doesn't tell us why they plead with Jesus to go, but a couple reasons are easy to figure out. The first is what we talked about last week when the disciples were amazed and terrified by Jesus' ability to stop the storm. Maybe they fear Jesus because He has power beyond their wildest imaginations. They know that they are on the ragged edge of Jewish society. Maybe they fear that He will bring God's wrath to bear upon them!

But I think there's something more universal and something more sinful to their plea. They want Him to go because He's cost them something. This herd of pigs probably included pigs belonging to many different families. (Sheep herders kept their flocks together in pens throughout the night, so pig herders might have kept pigs together in the same way.)

It was ungodly for them to raise these pigs, even if they didn't keep them for themselves but sold them to their pagan neighbors. Nevertheless, these pigs represented food; they represented income; they represented the livelihood of the pig herders; they might have represented sacrifices to the local pagan deities. I don't think it mattered to them that these tormented men were now free from the evil of these demons. I think they were upset because their wealth suddenly rushed down the side a steep bank and drowned because of Jesus. Instead of following Jesus and celebrating the good news, they ask Him to leave because He's spoiled their plans for worldly gain.

When Matthew was inspired to write his gospel, I believe the Holy Spirit did so in a way that the stories keep building upon themselves. Two core thoughts of this passage came up during the last two weeks, too, but here we see new angles, new perspectives. This story reinforces what came before and shows us what we've missed.

Our first key truth in this passage: *freedom is found in Jesus*. These men were bound. And unlike captives in a war, there was no possibility of escape. Their only hope was to be released from their spiritual shackles. That's what Jesus did. Fulfilling the promises of Isaiah, He brings freedom for those in captivity...whether captivity to illness, sin, or spiritual darkness.

Last week, we saw how Jesus calms the storms in life. This takes that a step further. The storms of life overwhelm us, frighten us, perhaps drown us given the right conditions. A lost job, a financial difficulty, arguments in a marriage, disappointments, and heartaches, all count as storms. But storms, we still have a measure of control over. You can still bring your umbrella. You can still batten down the hatches, haul in the nets, and fight against it.

But captivity is different. When we're bound, we can't fight it. We can attempt to break free, but if we're truly enslaved, there's no getting away. The chains that hold us tight are far too weighty to shake off. Sometimes in our captivity, we even deal with what's called Stockholm Syndrome – we begin to sympathize with our captors and make excuses for our enslavers.

Spiritually, we can be enslaved - not necessarily to some external spiritual power like these men were, but to many things we can't stop on our own. Some are obvious, like drugs and alcohol. As we've learned sadly from our modern world, sex and pornography can be enslaving. As I've struggled with, food can be enslaving. How many of us here compulsively check Facebook and immediately pick up our phones when a notification comes up, spending hours online when we're supposed to be doing something else? That's enslaving too.

We may enjoy some of the pleasures of our enslavement, but those pleasures are easily overwhelmed by the sorrow and pain of realizing again, we haven't done the right thing by God or even by ourselves. Just because the chains aren't visible on our wrists and made of iron doesn't mean they aren't real. And we are foolish if we think that we can shake off those chains whenever we want.

Jesus provides real freedom from these and many more things. This isn't to ignore the freedom that Jesus provided for these men from the demonic powers possessing them – Jesus frees us from all kinds of burdens, including ones as weighty and hard to understand as what these men faced. But our burdens are different, just as enslaving, and just as much in need of Jesus with key in hand to unlock those chains.

We might wonder, “If Jesus sets us free, then why is it that some people find freedom through Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous or inpatient rehab and some don't, and faith isn't the guaranteeing factor?” It's a good question. Why doesn't every person who calls on Jesus find freedom from their issues, and why do some folks with no faith succeed?

Here is my thought, from my own experience. Jesus comes to set us free from every burden, every addiction, every weight. We are obsessive people. We trade off one addiction for a healthier one. People who succeed at weight loss become obsessed with fitness; people coming off of alcohol or drugs often smoke. It's a new pattern to replace the old one.

But the worst thing that can happen is becoming obsessed with ourselves and our accomplishment. What arrogance it takes to say, “I conquered that and I didn't need drugs or therapy or Jesus to do it”! We struggle with our captors because there's more humility left to learn. God uses struggles to keep us turning to Him. In the midst of it all, we realize that are free, free to follow Jesus utterly. We cannot keep looking back with a longing heart towards our captor. If we do that, we run the risk of forgetting how good the freedom of Jesus really is.

Today, if you are burdened and captive to something in your life, give it over to Christ. He can and will free you from it. It may not be instantaneous; the shackles may come off, but you might find you've got a long walk from your cell to the prison gates. That's OK. Speak to me about it this week, if you'd like, and I would be privileged to walk beside you as you begin that walk of freedom.

The second and final truth of the passage today: *we must be ready to help pay the price for someone else's spiritual freedom.* When we are released from the grip of sin and addiction, we are not free to do anything we want. We are freed so that we can freely serve Christ, our true master. The cost of being free is being willing to give up whatever God desires for the benefit of His Kingdom. We often look at the personal cost – with the would-be disciples a couple of weeks ago in Matthew, we saw how Jesus had nothing He could call His own. We learned that no excuse is strong enough to keep you from following Jesus here and now.

But here we see the principle in action, and people don't like it. Sure, these guys are free from this horrible situation – but all the pigs are gone! Yes, I'm glad they are OK – but I was really looking forward to bacon for breakfast tomorrow! I didn't want madmen stopping me from my morning walk – but the Greeks on the other side of town were going to pay me handsomely for that pork that's now swirling down at the bottom of the lake!

God may not put us to the test today or tomorrow, but we need to be ready to take that test. Will we make room in our home for the woman and her children coming out of abuse? Will we spend the money to help a young woman who decides to keep her baby rather than getting an abortion? Will we help foot the bill for someone to get Christian counseling to overcome their addiction? Will we sacrifice our time, talents, and funds in order that people who are far from God will come into His Kingdom? Would we sacrifice our own desires so that someone else can be free, where we don't see the immediate benefit but trust that some other child of God will benefit?

We could be like the Gadarenes and plead with Jesus to go away, to not cost us any more. Jesus knows where He's not wanted; He won't force a welcome. If we do that, it's hard to call ourselves disciples. But if instead, when Jesus needs us to sacrifice for Him we look forward to the opportunity and encourage Him to stay as He works, He will. It's amazing how Jesus would go into any home of anybody as long as He was welcomed, from the self-righteous Pharisee to the hated tax collector. That is still true today. If we call upon Him as we share ourselves for His sake, He will show Himself faithful and true.

Freedom comes at a cost. Our nation's freedom, but far more importantly, our freedom in Jesus Christ. The price is well worth paying, even we pay on someone else's behalf. Will we be willing to let our possessions and plans go in order to help someone else experience the freedom God has already given us?