

Missed Opportunities

Daily we have opportunities to encounter the Lord; to see Him at work, to hear from Him, to be guided by Him, to be blessed by Him, and to be His instrument to serve and love those around us. Sometimes we miss those opportunities because we're focused on something else. Perhaps you can recall a moment, or even a season of life, when God wanted to do something in and through you, but you weren't willing to engage Him. Imagine your Creator, the God of the universe, showing up in the flesh to see you, and you said, "Go away!" This essay highlights one of those moments.

Mark 5:1-20, ***"They came to the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gerasenes. When He got out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met Him, and he had his dwelling among the tombs. And no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain; because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him and the shackles broken in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. Constantly, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains, and gashing himself with stones. Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he said, 'What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!' For He had been saying to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' And He was asking him, 'What is your name?' And he said to Him, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' And he began to implore Him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there was a large herd of swine feeding nearby on the mountain. The demons implored Him, saying, 'Send us into the swine so that we may enter them.' Jesus gave them permission. And coming out, the unclean spirits entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them; and they were drowned in the sea. Their herdsmen ran away and reported it in the city and in the country. And the people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the 'legion'; and they became frightened. Those who had seen it described to them how it had happened to the demon-possessed man, and all about the swine. And they began to implore Him to leave their region. As He was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was imploring Him that he might accompany Him. And He did not let him, but He said to him, 'Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed."***

Let's unpack this story to expose some of the finer details, and to draw out some important applications.

Verse 1 - *"They came to the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gerasenes."*

- Jesus and His disciples sailed from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other. As you read through the gospels, you'll see many occurrences when Jesus crossed over to ***"the other side."*** In general, the Sea of Galilee had a ***"Jewish side"*** on its west, and a ***"Gentile side"*** on its east. We know that here, the ***"country of the Gerasenes"*** is on the Gentile side because verse eleven reveals that there are pig farmers nearby, and Jews couldn't eat or even touch a pig. Additionally, there are distinctives about how Jesus ministered when He was in a Gentile region as compared to a Jewish region; these will be revealed as we get further into the passage.

Verses 2-5 – *"When He got out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met Him, and he had his dwelling among the tombs. And no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain; because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him and the shackles broken in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. Constantly, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains, and gashing himself with stones."*

- For a more detailed understanding about demon possession, see my essay titled, "Satan and Demons." Here, after they come ashore, there is a graveyard nearby and two men who are demon possessed are dwelling among the tombs. I say two men, because Matthew's account of the same story (Matthew 8:28-34) mentions the fact that there are two of them. In Mark's gospel, which is a more detailed account of this event, the emphasis is on the one man that engages with Jesus, the one who has the legion of demons in him.

- As you can see from the passage, the demon possessed man was considered a loss by his family and countrymen. They tried to protect the man by chaining him up, so that he couldn't harm himself, but despite their efforts, the strength of the many demons tore apart the chains, and the demons continued to torment the man by directing him to self-harm. The man's kinfolk could do nothing else on their own. This was very distressing for the community as day and night they had to see and hear one of their own in such torment, and to feel so helpless about saving him.

Verses 6-8 - "Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he said, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!" For He had been saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"

- The demon possessed man ran to Jesus and began loudly speaking to Him. However, this wasn't an act of will by the man, but rather the shrewd activity of the demons. This is obvious because the Gentile man wouldn't have recognized and known who Jesus was, whereas the demons are familiar with Jesus' identity and authority. What's happening here is complex; the demons are compelled by God's authority to come and give Him his due reverence, and under that authority, they're begging for mercy to not be tormented. Additionally, this is a shrewd tactic as the demons hope that in calling out Jesus' identity, they might gain some kind of upper-hand in the exchange. One of the differences about how Jesus ministers in Gentile regions, as opposed to Jewish regions, is that when He's among Gentiles, Jesus allows demons to speak freely and proclaim His identity as they do here. In Jewish regions, Jesus quickly silences demons and doesn't give them freedom to "out Him" publicly. In the same way when Jesus heals a person in a Jewish community, He afterwards tells the person to keep it quiet and not tell anyone. These are examples of what is referred to as the "Messianic Secret;" Jesus controlling the uproar over His identity as the Messiah so as to not bring about His arrest and execution before the intended time. As we see here, Jesus lets the demons speak freely, and Jesus tells the healed man to proclaim the good news to the surrounding Gentile cities.
- **"What business do we have with each other,"** said in defiance, as though to ask, "What are You doing here? You're not here for us, are you?"
- **"Jesus, Son of the Most High God"** – Even the know and believe that Jesus is the Lord. This makes their rebellion and hostility toward Jesus all the more wicked. This is also further evidence that it's not knowledge that saves you, but entrusting yourself to Jesus, which saves.
- **"Do not torment me!"** - Matthew's account includes, "before the time," as demons know eternal hell is coming.
- **"For He had been saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"** – On the surface, this statement appears to suggest that Jesus was unsuccessful in casting out the demon, having already repeated the command. But this isn't what Mark meant, as Jesus' authority is certain, and no demonic presence can withstand the command of His voice. Mark writes his gospel in a choppy way; not always in chronological order and sometimes appearing to insert bullet-point style details. Here, the sense is either that as the demons approach, Jesus had been saying what He intended to do, and the demons respond. Or, as the demons approach, they are fully aware that Jesus cast out demons in other places by saying, "Come out of the man." So, now these demons speak first with the hopes of getting ahead of Jesus' command to leave, and so the demons begin by pleading.

Verse 9 – "And He was asking him, "What is your name?" And he said to Him, "My name is Legion; for we are many."

- Whenever Jesus asks a question, it's usually for one of two purposes. It's either to get the individual to own something that he hasn't been willing to admit to yet. For example, in Genesis 3, when the Lord confronted Adam after Adam had sinned, and the Lord asked, "Where are you...Who told you that you were naked...Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Another reason Jesus asks a question is for the benefit of the audience in attendance, in order to expose a truth that they wouldn't have otherwise known. Here is one of those examples. Jesus asks the demon for a name, exposing the reality that it's not one demon that's being dealt with, but to show the disciples that a hoard of demons is in play. This shows the magnitude of the situation, and how Jesus' authority is not limited, no matter how many oppose Him.

- **“Legion”** - This is a military term, inferring rank, order, and cooperation amongst the fallen angels, of whom Satan is their head. A legion of men meant different numbers in different military settings, but it’s believed here that the number indicates a host of 2,000 demons.

Verses 10-12 – “And he began to implore Him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there was a large herd of swine feeding nearby on the mountain. The demons implored Him, saying, “Send us into the swine so that we may enter them.”

- The demons knew that their time in tormenting this particular man was over, but they want to continue to bring despair to the region. Now, the demons have one great clever scheme in mind. The demons know that after Jesus commands them to leave the man that the townsfolk will rejoice over the return of their brother. The demons also know that the Gentile community will embrace Jesus because of this great miracle. So, the demons plot to turn the hearts of the Gentiles against Jesus. The best way to make the Gentiles view Jesus as a burden is to make Jesus look like the cause of their great financial despair. Hurt them where it matters most, their wallet! This is evident by what happens next.

Verse 13 – “Jesus gave them permission. And coming out, the unclean spirits entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them; and they were drowned in the sea.

- **“Jesus gave them permission”** – This shows that Satan and his demonic hoard are on a leash, doing only what the Lord allows. God is sovereign and in ultimate control over all things!
- **“drowned in the sea.”** - Demons choose to kill whenever they can. If the demons had permission to kill people, then they’d have certainly killed the two men in the graveyard. However, Satan’s power and influence is limited. If Satan could kill men, there’d be none of us left. Here, about two thousand swine drown at the hand of the demons. The demons knew that if they destroyed the Gentiles herd of swine, that the people would turn against Jesus, since Jesus was the authority by which the event was allowed. Jesus knew full-well what the demons had in mind. The demons didn’t outsmart Jesus here. But Jesus has a greater plan that the enemy can’t thwart.

Verses 14-17 – “Their herdsmen ran away and reported it in the city and in the country. And the people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the “legion”; and they became frightened. Those who had seen it described to them how it had happened to the demon-possessed man, and all about the swine. And they began to implore Him to leave their region.”

- **“reported it in the city and in the country. And the people came to see”** – Supernatural events demand a response. A significant showdown had just taken place; Jesus in a battle of wits against a legion of demons, a naked and self-mutilated man freed from Satanic bondage, and two-thousand swine run off a cliff into the sea to their death. Quite the afternoon! Certainly, something to come and investigate for yourself if you’re in the area. When Jesus shows up, significant things happen.
- **“clothed an in his right mind”** – It wasn’t just that both men had the demons cast out of them, but Jesus restores people to a right and good place. The Lord saw fit to see that they were well clothed, so as to restore their dignity. Jesus healed any physical harm they had endured and brought them to a place of sharp mindedness; not leaving them in a state of mental exhaustion or emotional distress from the ordeal. When God heals and frees, He heals and frees wholly; physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually. The man is indebted and entrusts himself to Jesus, as we’ll see in a minute.
- **“frightened”** – The townsfolk were not frightened of the men who were now calm and right-minded, although the people had been frightened of them before. They were frightened of the display of power that Jesus had wielded over the demons, and they didn’t know what to make of Jesus. Recognizing Jesus’ power and authority over the spiritual world, perhaps they feared He might condemn their wickedness.
- **“Those who had seen it described to them how it had happened”** – The details left the people amazed, confused, and terrified. Surely they said, *“Who is this man, and what are we to make of him?”*

- ***“implore Him to leave their region”*** – Letting their emotions govern them, they implore Jesus to leave. This is where their encounter with Jesus becomes a huge MISSED OPPORTUNITY! The people weren’t sure who Jesus was, but instead of asking questions, they fell right into Satan’s trap. This is what the demonic hoard wanted. The crowd focused on the loss (herd of swine) instead of focusing on the gain (their restored brothers). Consider this, in panic the people reacted and assumed that Jesus was the cause of their financial crisis. They would have been wise to take a moment, used some critical thinking skills, and ask, *“Sir, who are you? You clearly have power and authority to do what no man can do. Tell us, by what authority are you able to command these demons?”* Here is a classic example about the need to respond instead of react; to be governed by intellect and not emotions. I believe the crowd could have asked Jesus to restore the herd of swine, even double it, and He would have! Can you imagine if they’d have said, *“Sir, you have the power to say, ‘Come’ or ‘Go’ and the demons listen to you! You have the power to release captives from bondage! Can you restore our herd back to us? Do you have that authority as well? If so, please bless us and even double our herd. You’ve been good to our brothers, now be good to us and bring 4,000 swine out of the water!”* I think Jesus would have been honored to oblige this type of request. But sadly, Satan knows how short-sided we are, and being focused on the loss, they couldn’t see the blessing of the Lord in their midst.

Verses 18-20 – “As He was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was imploring Him that he might accompany Him. And He did not let him, but He said to him, “Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.”

- ***“As He was getting into the boat”*** – Jesus doesn’t force His way, and He obliges their request to leave. At first glance we might say, *“Oh no, that’s just what Satan wanted, to see Jesus leave the region and not stay and minister there.”* Yes, that’s what Satan wanted, but the Lord still had a plan to minister to the region.
- ***“the man who had been demon-possessed was imploring Him that he might accompany Him”*** – This man had encountered the Lord in a real and life-changing way. Jesus had set him free! Of course the natural response would be to entrust yourself to Jesus and follow him. This was the decision the man had made in his heart; Jesus was his Master now. This is the greater response that the countrymen neglected to reach.
- ***“Go home to your people and report to them”*** – Not all who were healed by Jesus were called to continue to walk with Him, as some are immediately sent out. As I mentioned earlier, unlike Jewish people that had been healed, Jesus doesn’t tell the man here to remain quiet, but being a Gentile-convert, He sends him to spread the news to all who would listen. Jesus would reach the region, but He’d do so by sending the first missionary into the Decapolis (a ten-city Gentile region on this side of the Sea of Galilee). Satan’s goal was that this area wouldn’t hear about the good news of Jesus, but Jesus would have the victory. In obedience, the servant of the Lord did as he was told, and he delighted in telling all who would listen about the great things Jesus had done for him, and how Jesus had shown him mercy. It was mercy, because the man had indulged in Satanic practices and was deserving of being under Satan’s grip. Mercy means to not get what we deserve, and the man deserved the torment he’d opened himself up to. This is a warning to not dabble in Satanic and cultish practices or games. Thankfully for this man, God is loving and His mercy is abundant!
- ***“everyone was amazed”*** – We don’t know the count of those that turned to the Lord in faith, but Mark records that people were clearly moved by the testimony of the man who was freed.

There are many applications from this story, but the one I’ll direct you toward is this; Satan wants you to focus on what you’ve lost. Doing so will become a missed opportunity for you to focus on Jesus!