

Demon possession

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev J.M.Macpherson

[0 : 0 0] Let us turn now to the same chapter in Luke's Gospel, chapter 4, reading again at verse 33. Luke's Gospel, chapter 4, at verse 33.

And in the synagogue there was a man which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried with a loud voice, saying, Let us alone. What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us?

I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked them, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. When the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him and hurt him not.

And they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What a word is this? For with authority and power he commanded the unclean spirit, and they come out.

As we continue with our study of the birth and the life and the ministry and the death and the rising again of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come here in this portion of Scripture to the first instance in the Gospels of the Lord Jesus Christ casting out a demon or an unclean spirit.

[1 : 2 0] And therefore we are faced with this whole question of what is known as demon possession. Now there is a great deal of difficulty in the study of this topic, and I feel that personally I have neither the knowledge through reading and background reading, nor the personal experience in this field to be able to speak with much assurance and knowledge.

And yet we are brought in and brought bound to the Word of God. This is said before us. It is here in Scripture. And you and I who believe in the authority of the Word of God, and that all these words of men are truly the Word of God, we are commanded to study also this portion, and to consider what Scripture teaches us about demon possession.

Of course, the reaction of some as they read a passage like this, referring to Christ casting out an unclean devil or an unclean spirit, the reaction of some would be that this is just the relic of an unscientific age.

Now the people in those days believed in such things as spirits and demons. Now the people in those days, they thought that what we know to be ordinary sicknesses were actually caused by spirits and by demons.

But that in the modern scientific age in which we live, that such belief is in the realm merely of fantasy. It could be associated in the minds of those who would react in this way with what even today you can find in certain parts of the world, with regard to animistic belief.

[3 : 1 4] How often in our travels in the Andes, we used to see perhaps a strangely shaped tree, or a curiously shaped rock, and there there would be a little plate with some food, or perhaps some rags tied to the tree.

If you didn't know, you might wonder what it was. But if you did, you knew that it was the local people. Outwardly, of course, Catholic, but inwardly still worshipping the spirits, still animistic.

And you would know that this was an offering, set there to placate the demons or the spirits that dwelt inside the tree or the rock or the river or what have you.

Why, the people would say, why should the tree be so strangely shaped? Why did it not grow like other trees? Because there was a spirit. And so there is this animistic belief.

And there would be many who would say that in the New Testament it's just the same. It's these superstitious beliefs that you and I have outgrown. Well, what actually does the Word of God teach?

[4 : 24] And I think that as we look through what the Word of God teaches, we will be providing an answer to this criticism that we've set before ourselves. I think that first of all, we must remember what we saw some weeks ago, that this speaks of the existence and activity of Satan.

An incident like this, it speaks of the existence and activity of Satan. We can't limit ourselves to what are called here unclean devils or to demons or spirits.

We must get beyond these and find that there is a basic teaching that goes beyond these in the Word of God that refers to the great conflict of all the ages.

Not the conflict between East and West or between other superpowers, which are certainly real enough as conflicts, but the great spiritual conflict between God and that one who raised himself up in enmity against his creator, Satan, the prince, as the Bible calls him, of the power of the air.

Shakespeare suggests in one play that all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players. Well, if we take the biblical worldview, you will change it slightly and say that all the world is a battleground and all are ranged on one side or another as followers of Almighty God or as followers of the arch enemy of God, of Satan.

[5 : 56] Now, of course, even when we come to this, although the Bible proclaims it so clearly and so unmistakably, although we saw the contest between Satan and our Lord Jesus Christ and the temptations, there are still those, and in our own day, and found within the bounds of the Christian church, who would deny even this basic reality, who would tell us that not only are unclean spirits the relics of an outmoded age, but that the very existence of Satan himself is beyond the credibility of our present day.

For example, let me quote from a well-known modern theologian. He has many commentaries to his name. And this theologian would say this, and I quote, He tells us that Christ's victory over Satan would strike a chord in minds familiar with the mythology of the Greek or Roman world, where gods came down to earth to do battle for men.

The fact that the Hellenistic or the Greek mind would see it as a fairy tale come true is no less reason for the early church using familiar pagan concepts to communicate Christian truth than for preaching the gospel to Jews in the equally mythological framework of Satan and his hosts.

In other words, we're not going to believe in Satan. We're not going to believe in the hosts of Satan. We've grown up. We've passed beyond these old-fashioned beliefs.

And this is often heard and proclaimed and preached in Christian churches. But is this what the Word of God and what Jesus Christ himself, our supreme authority, teach?

[7 : 48] When we go through the scriptures, we find that Satan, the arch enemy of God, rebelled against the Most High God, and without whose existence it would be impossible for us to explain or try to begin to explain the evil and the hostility that exists in the world today.

We find that Satan has dominion over every unregenerate person, that is, every man or woman who has not been born again of the Spirit of God.

That we are all born into this world, sadly, in the power and in the grip of Satan. And therefore, where the average person is concerned, Satan doesn't need to go to extremes.

He doesn't need to worry with demon possession. He has men and women in his control. Every man or woman who has never bowed a knee to Jesus Christ, we're told in scripture, is in the thralldom of Satan.

And it is only where Christians are concerned, where believers in Jesus Christ are concerned, that we find the full force of what the Bible calls the wiles of Satan.

[9 : 03] Satan has no need to try his devices and his wiles with those who are already his. Indeed, Satan prefers to see them going along in their quiet, unhurried, unmoved way.

He doesn't need to lead them into the realm of spirits and of demons. He doesn't need to lead them into areas of great vice, though often he does. It's a sobering thought that Satan would be just as content with a decent, church-going person who has never committed his or her life to Jesus Christ as a repentant sinner.

Satan would be just as content with such a person as with those who dabble in the greatest of vice. And surely, the words of Bishop Ryle, many of you are familiar, I'm sure, with his writings, the words of Bishop Ryle, written over a hundred years ago, are still true.

He said once that unbelief about the existence and reality of Satan has often proved the first step to unbelief about God.

Well, this is merely a background, a reminder to us that before we study the existence and activity of demons, as in this incident, we must recognize the existence and activity of Satan himself.

[10 : 32] So let us go on now to look at this incident, speaking to us about the existence and reality of Satanic spirits. Now, there's no doubt as to what the New Testament writers thought.

The Apostle Paul, he tells us that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. or let me quote it in the New International Version, against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

For the Apostle Paul, there was a great conflict and Satan with all his hosts, the spiritual forces of wickedness, in, as our version says, in heavenly places, these are, where and are, still active.

Let us notice several features. We find some of them in this incident here and in the rest of the New Testament. Let us notice some features about the Bible teaching with regard to these emissaries of Satan.

First of all, we notice their deliberate efforts to overthrow the work of God. They have a purpose. As their great chief, Satan himself has a purpose and it is to overthrow the work and the purpose of God.

[11 : 56] What God says is white, Satan and his hosts will say is black. I've often quoted a little verse. It's not great poetry, but it speaks a great truth.

Wherever God erects a house of prayer, the devil's sure to build a chapel there. And the writer actually goes on to say, and it will be found upon examination, the latter, the devil, as the larger congregation.

Their function, their purpose in life is to overthrow the work of God. And surely, it's evident as we read through the whole of Scripture that while Satan and his hosts are active in the Old Testament and right to the close of the canon of Scripture, that there seems to be an intensification of their activity during the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It would seem that Satan, conscious that God Almighty had taken action in the coming of his Son, conscious that the atoning work of Calvary was just there to be carried out, that Satan launched a great counterattack.

And so, as we read through the Gospels, we find of the temptations of Satan himself, the activity of demons, of devils, we find that there is a great attack, and that Jesus Christ himself goes on the attack against Satan and his hosts.

[13 : 28] In the Old Testament, you'll find that there are many, of course, many references to idolatry. Even the people of God, they fell into idolatry. They worshipped dumb idols of silver and of gold and so on.

And while it's true that the Old Testament writers, Isaiah, for example, they pour scorn on idolatry. Read some of Isaiah's biting words, and he says, how ridiculous. How ridiculous to take a piece of wood that you'd burn in the fire to do some heating or some cooking and to say it's your God.

Now, while it's true that you find great scorn poured on idolatry in the Old Testament, it's also true that very often you find reference made to a sinister reality behind the idols.

Not always, but sometimes. And very often you find that idolatry is associated with evil spirits behind the idols. For example, Jeroboam, we read, ordained him priests for the high places and for the devils and for the calves which he had made.

And the apostle Paul, he tells us that what the heathen sacrificed to idols, they sacrificed to demons. Paul knew that the idol had no reality, no existence.

[14 : 48] He tried to encourage Christians to not to give any place to these, not to believe that they had any reality. But even Paul says behind them, very often you see the activity of Satan and of his demonic hosts.

And how often it is true that the characteristic of Satan and of his emissaries is to take that which in itself is good, which God has created, and to twist it for another purpose.

Think of, think of drink. We're told in the Bible that the fruit of the wine, of the vine, is a good gift of God. That it is perfectly neutral, that in itself it is good, given as a gift of God.

And yet the delight of Satan is to take what is in itself good and to twist it and to mar it and to be able, as it were, to turn it against the God who made it.

One can think the same in the realm of sex, a good gift of God within the limits that God has set down. But the delight of Satan and of his hosts is to take it and twist it and use it, the very thing that God has created against, the good and the gracious purpose of God.

[16 : 01] And one could enumerate so many activities and see how the prime purpose of Satan and his hosts is to overthrow the work and the purpose of God.

But there's one great thing that you and I can remember. And it is this, that none of these evil spirits, not even Satan himself with all his power, the prince of the power of the air, can move one finger without the permission of God.

Even their most devilish activity is not outwith the control of Almighty God. David, we read, numbered Israel.

He did it, moved by Satan. He is a believer and God should not have acted thus, but he did. And yet we're told that it was God who used the Satanic spirit.

And in spite of the sin of his own servant, God worked out his own purpose through it. Well, that is the first thing, their deliberate efforts to overthrow the work of God.

[17 : 02] But let's hurry on and notice, coming more to the incident that we have here, notice their possession of certain individuals. And we have the case here in the synagogue, there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean devil or an unclean demon.

And as I suggested, one finds this intensified during the ministry of Christ. Men and women who were no longer masters of themselves, who had been taken possession of by demons, emissaries of Satan.

Now we've recognized that there are those who would ridicule this concept. And they would say that it's just a case of illness, usually mental illness, and the New Testament writers, of course, they didn't understand.

There wasn't the advanced knowledge of medical science then that there is today. But it's not so easy as that. Because if you read carefully through the New Testament, you'll find that the Gospel writers distinguish very clearly between illness and demon possession.

One finds it here. if you look further down, you'll find at verse 40, when the sun was setting, all they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

[18 : 28] And devils also came out of many. And again and again you'll find that there are different categories. The Gospel writers say, this person was sick, this person was demon possessed.

And not only that, but you'll find that there is a distinction made between mental illness and demon possession. It won't do to say that the New Testament writers, because they didn't know the advances of medical science, thought that mental illness was demon possession.

It won't do to say that. Because if you are not going to look it up now, but the reference is Matthew 4, 24, if you want to see it later, you'll find that there's reference in the same verse to those whom the Bible terms as lunatics or mentally infirm and those who were demon possessed.

There is a very clear distinction laid before us in Scripture. Now it's obvious that this demon possession of which the Scriptures speak had its outward manifestations.

Go through the Gospels and you'll find that sometimes the form that demon possession took outwardly was a kind of epilepsy. With others you find there was dumbness and deafness.

[19 : 41] With others there were various degrees of insanity. And these were the outward manifestations. Now the Bible never says, and the New Testament writers never say, that where a case of epilepsy or what have you was seen, that it was demon possession.

Not at all. What the Scriptures say is that sometimes, we don't know why or how or in which cases, but sometimes Satan, under the overall permission of God, was allowed to have his emissaries possess the personality of this person or that person.

outwardly, the signs were those of ordinary physical and mental illness, but behind it there was the sinister reality of the work of Satan.

Now we should also notice in the New Testament that it was not always that the person concerned had deliberately handed over his or her life to Satan.

as we shall see in a moment that can happen. But it was not always like that. There were sometimes poor sufferers who were brought under the bondage of Satan.

[20 : 53] Our Lord speaks for example of a certain woman. You remember her arthritic condition where she was bent almost double. And our Lord says this woman being a daughter of Abraham whom Satan had bound these eighteen years.

It was not always in the New Testament at any rate the fault of the person concerned. Now there is a question that is often asked and there isn't really time to go into it in great detail but it is often asked, can a Christian, a person who is truly born again of the Spirit of God, can a Christian be demon possessed?

Now different answers have been given but just in a word I would emphatically suggest that the scripture teaching must be that this is impossible. that the Holy Spirit of God and evil spirits cannot dwell within the same life.

What concord hath Christ with Belial and what agreement at the temple of God with idols? For ye are says the apostle the temple of the living God.

Or just to put it in that very pithy sentence by Martin Luther, he says it is impossible for Jesus Christ and the devil ever to remain under the same roof.

[22 : 12] The one must yield to the other, the devil to Christ. At this juncture we're just looking at the New Testament evidence. I want to go on to the next point before we come to the present day and it is this.

We notice their recognition of the authority of Christ. Go through the New Testament and you will find that these demons in spite of the power that they obviously had in the poor sufferers that when Jesus Christ appeared they recognized that he was truly the Son of God.

Paul on one occasion in the name of Christ cast out a demon from a possessed girl and the demon said Paul I know. You remember before that there were some other Jews who tried to cast out the demon.

The demon said Paul I know and Jesus I know. But who are you? And again and again as for example in verse 34 you find the same thing. I know thee who thou art the Holy One of God.

And there's a very solemn thought here. They recognize the power and the authority of the one they hate. They hate Jesus Christ.

[23 : 24] Their whole existence is geared to overthrow the work of Christ. But they recognize who he is. They recognize his authority.

our Lord tells us speaking of certain people who knew the gospel but never responded to the gospel invitation. He said compared to you the devils also believe.

They believe but they tremble. They recognize the authority of God but they recognize it for their destruction. But now let's pass on to notice their activity in the present day.

now in the last few minutes of the study not much can be said. But we can't obviously leave it at the New Testament times.

The question is can this kind of thing happen today? Well there's no doubt that Satan is active. We accept that. We see his activity all around us. But can there be and is there this kind of demon possession of which the scriptures speak?

[24 : 29] I would make certain basic statements first of all. In the first place the New Testament doesn't give us criteria for recognizing possession.

The New Testament doesn't say you will know that this person is demon possessed when you see this and this and this and this. We're never told that. We are never given an infallible rule so that we might know if a person is demon possessed.

And therefore it can happen. I believe it does happen. But in the light of much sensationalist writing and if you're familiar with even Christian bookshops today you'll know that there is a rash of books on various aspects of demon possession and the occult and the activity of Satan and so on.

It is very possible for Christians to see demon possession where it would appear it is not present. I remember a case in a certain old people's home that we were familiar with a Christian home and there was an old lady who was very cantankerous extremely difficult wearing the patience thin of all the members of staff and a good friend of ours who was who had been reading many of these books about demon possession and so on was utterly convinced that the old lady was demon possessed.

But to the rest it was quite obvious that it was simply our temperament or personality as she got older she got more cantankerous and so there is the danger of seeing demon possession where it is merely the normal activity of Satan with which we are all familiar.

[26 : 10] And then secondly surely it's fair to expect that where the gospel is preached and believed where it's well known where many have accepted it surely it's fair to believe that demon possession will not be the problem to the same extent that it was in these New Testament times where Christ came with his first assault on the Gentile world.

Martin Luther said in one occasion when I was a child there were many witches who bewitched both cattle and men especially children but now these things are not so commonly heard of for the gospel thrusteth the devil out of his seat.

Now I had quite a long quotation here I'm afraid I'll have to leave it out but I'll summarize it. There was a missionary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church who went to China and Korea in the last century a Dr.

Nebius and he was fine Christian brought up in the same tradition as you and I in Reformed churches and he believed firmly that this talk of demons was no longer relevant that in Christ's day there were but today no it was just a relic of a barbarism and a superstition that no longer had a place.

When he went to China and Korea he discovered that there were cases that were grave and serious and as he studied them and as he wrestled in prayer and as he faced the problems of these men and women he came to recognize that Satan and his emissaries were not dead and that the demons were active and he wrote what is still perhaps the classic on the subject a book called Demon Possession and Allied Themes and in our society.

[28 : 00] Giving due place to all that I have said giving due place to the various arguments that would limit belief in demon possession can anyone deny that Satan and his emissaries are active.

Don't we know haven't we read of churches in our own land dedicated to Satan? Don't we know of the activities of witches and spiritists, mediums?

Don't we know that although in much of spiritism there is doubtless what we would term jiggery pokery and though there is doubtless a whole realm of parapsychology that we will come to understand better as medical science advances.

Don't we still know that there is a sinister reality and the demons and the activity of Satan and evil spirits are at work behind many of these manifestations?

Read, though I don't approve of all the books that have been written, but read a book like Doreen Irvin's From Witchcraft to Christ and read of what happens in this country of ours in the realm of demon and spirit activity and let us come back to the word of God and recognize that he forbids all such activity and that Satan is real and his emissaries are real and that our only safety lies in a personal trust in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 26] And I close with this, the final point that we notice, and it is their submission to the power of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke with authority.

Come out, he said. Hold thy peace and come out of him and the demon came out. This was not a mere exorcism.

It wasn't just driving out a demon. Remember the story we were told of the man who drove a demon out of his house, we're told, and he swept it and cleaned it and made the house beautiful, but he put nothing in its place.

And we're told that the demon went around looking and he found seven others, worse than himself, and he came back and they saw the house all empty, beautiful, clean, but empty. And the whole teaching of the word of God is that it is not enough to reform our lives.

It is not enough to throw overboard some vice. We may have some problem, we may have some temptation that we yield to. It is not enough to reform. It is not enough to cast out a real demon or this type of demon.

[30 : 32] There must be a new ownership, a new mastery, that of Jesus Christ. And that is a call with which we close this morning, that we would come in the midst of a world where Satan is active.

Come in submission to Jesus Christ, who has all authority and all power. And whatever may lie ahead of us, whatever activity of Satan, whatever temptations, whatever vices may raise their head, Christ has power and is all powerful.

Let us pray. O Lord our God, we recognize that we have not fully investigated nor understood all the teaching of thy word.

And yet we pray that what we have read and what we have considered together would be burned in upon our hearts by thy Holy Spirit. May it please you to forgive anything that may have been said amiss or not in total agreement with thy word.

Grant that we would forget what is merely of man, but that we would remember what is truly of God. And may each one of us recognize the spiritual danger in which we stand, that we would come with our needs and our sins and our problems to Jesus Christ and crown him Lord of all.

[31 : 58] We ask it in his name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.