

Spiritual and Bodily Demonic Possession

The Bible tells us that demons on occasion have afflicted people bodily. Numerous examples of demon possession are mentioned in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the devil used the serpent's body as he came to tempt Eve (Gen. 3:1). God permitted Saul to be afflicted by an evil spirit as a judgment on him for his apostasy (1 Sam. 18:10). Jesus met many cases of demon possession during His ministry, as did the apostles (Matt. 4:24; 8:16; 10:8; Mark 6:13). Notable among them were the two demon-possessed men in the region of the Gadarenes (Gergesenes or Gerasenes) mentioned in Matthew 8:28-34. Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39 also mention the incident. A legion of demons possessed them (Luke 8:30). This demon possession was accompanied by extraordinary strength (Mark 5:3-4).

Jesus cast a demon out of the daughter of a woman from Syrian Phoenicia (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). She pleaded, "Have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession," (Matt. 15:22). Jesus also healed a boy whom Matthew describes as having seizures, but it is explained that the problem resulted from demon possession (Matt. 17:14-20). As we heard in our Gospel for today, Jesus drove a demon out of the man in the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21-28) and in his Gospel, Luke says Jesus drove out a demon that had made a man mute (Luke 11:14). There was the woman, possessed by a demon, who had not been able to stand up straight for 18 years (Luke 13:10-13). The most notable example of exorcism recorded in Acts is that of Paul's driving the demon of divination out of a girl in Philippi (16:16-18). Paul also drove demons out of people in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:11-12). It was there that the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish priest, were trying to imitate Paul and drive out demons. A demon-possessed man beat up all seven and drove them out of the house. God had not empowered the sons of Sceva to do this.

Many who were possessed against their will were believers. This is clear from the case of the woman unable to straighten up. Jesus called her "a daughter of Abraham," (Luke 13:16). It may be that the frequency of demon possession in Jesus' time was a graphic picture of the struggle between Christ and the devil and his forces. It is also clear from the many accounts in Scripture that demon possession was no pre-scientific attempt to explain illness or odd behaviour. The gospels present these accounts amid the factual, historical account of Jesus' and the apostles' ministry.

Spiritual possession was the case when people willingly turned their wills over to the devil. The Bible distinguishes between unbelief, in which the devil is dominant in the heart of a person, and a situation in which someone becomes a willing tool of the devil. Two examples of spiritual possession are Judas (John 13:27) and Ananias (Acts 5:3). Both are

examples of how the devil exacts a terrible price from those who serve him. Judas committed suicide in his despair, and Ananias dropped dead on the spot when confronted by Peter. Both went to hell. "The wages of sin is death," Paul says (Rom. 6:23).

In connection with this topic, let us remember the words of James, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," (James 4:7). Also, should God in His wisdom and love choose to allow someone to be afflicted, Paul reminds us, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Rom. 8:38-39).