



**GREAT
MIRACLES**

OF THE

BIBLE

NEW TESTAMENT

.....
JOHN
P. SCHARLEMANN

LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

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STUDY STRUCTURE

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

- 1. PERSONAL* – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P.A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
- 2. SMALL GROUPS* – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE* – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE* – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

GREAT MIRACLES OF THE BIBLE – NEW TESTAMENT

JOHN P. SCHARLEMANN

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“May the Spirit bless your study of the “Great Miracles of the New Testament.” My prayer is that through them we gain a greater understanding of God’s desire to hear and restore and resurrect us — not just as the whole people of God, but more importantly, as individual, personal children of God.”

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WE BEGIN

Miracles come in all sizes and shapes. If you have studied the “Great Miracles of the Old Testament,” you will have marveled at the way our Lord miraculously intervened in the lives of His people to deliver them from their enemies. Very rarely did His miracles involve healing and exorcism. In the New Testament, Jesus’ miracles focused on healing and exorcism. It is as if the miracles of the Old Testament, which benefited God’s people as a whole, became personalized in Jesus Christ. Now, miracles would restore the average person suffering from the most common physical and spiritual maladies.

It is probably true today that we have less awareness of those miracles, which happen to our nation and people as a whole. We tend to think of miracles existing in personal and private worlds where most of us are not privileged to journey. But, what could be further from the truth! As we consider American history, we can see the hand of God moving our nation to the world’s center stage as a beacon of freedom and democracy. Our Revolution against British taxation and the British monarchy seemed an impossible victory, considering our troops were simple, ragged farmers, while the British troops and mercenaries were more disciplined and trained in the art of warfare.

The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of our country as the French sold us millions of square acres of land for a mere ten million dollars. When the British returned in 1812, the capitol and other government buildings in Washington D.C. were burned to the ground, but the nation continued. The Civil War threatened to tear our nation asunder, but in the end, slavery was abolished. Pioneers were led across the continent by a belief in their Manifest Destiny to control North America. The Lord blessed our nation in World War

ll, affording us the development of the atomic bomb before our enemies could develop one. He watched over us as Kennedy and Khrushchev threatened each other with nuclear holocaust during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And who of us ever dreamed we would live to see the collapse of Communism? At every step in our nation's history, the miracles of the Lord have led us and protected us. How can we survey our nation's development without seeing God's hand intervening at every turn?

But, miracles come in all sizes and shapes, and in the New Testament, our Lord wished to accent miracles of personal healing, exorcism, and new life. That should not surprise us because the summit of the New Testament is Jesus' own healing from the powers of darkness, His Resurrection from the world of the dead, and His victory over the forces of sin and the devil. All the miracles of the Old Testament and the New Testament lead us to that moment in time when the Lord rose from the tomb. In that Resurrection, we were given the knowledge of eternal life in Christ. The miracle of the Resurrection overshadows every other miracle of the Bible, as surely as the morning sun overwhelms the light of the descending moon. To be sure, we read about other resurrections in Scripture, most notably, Lazarus and Jairus' daughter. Even Paul demonstrates the power to raise the dead, as Eutychus, bored by Paul's sermon, falls to his death and needs reviving. But, these other resurrections are not final. Lazarus and Eutychus would die again one day. The Resurrection of Jesus outshines all other resurrections because His was final. And the finality of that Resurrection gives to all of us the central hope of our personal futures.

There are many New Testament miracles, which point us to this granddaddy of all miracles. As the Lord went about His three-year ministry, healing and exorcising, it was as if He was battling minor skirmishes against the devil, as if the Lord and Lucifer were testing each other's strength and determination before the ultimate Good Friday contest. Satan would attempt to lead Jesus astray in the wilderness, and Jesus would demonstrate His determination to follow His Father's will. The forces of nature would be used to overwhelm and destroy Jesus and the disciples, but the Lord would demonstrate His power to tame nature itself. The demons would try to bargain with Jesus, hoping to delay their inevitable overthrow, but the Lord would send them shrieking from their victims. Jesus would show Himself to be Master not only of the spiritual world, but also of the physical, feeding the hungry to demonstrate His desire to nurture us spiritually, healing the infirm as an indication of His desire to defeat evil of every kind.

But, in the end, His disciples couldn't comprehend the intent of their Lord's miracles. They believed Him to be a great prophet and miracle worker, but, with few exceptions, they were incapable of seeing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Not until the miracle of Pentecost did they finally understand the full significance of the Resurrection. Because Jesus lived, they would live, too. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit changed Jesus' disciples into men of courage and action, men determined to expend their own

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*Whether we experience an unexplainable miracle or not,
we all recognize some sort of force in this universe which has
led us to know life and love and beauty and hope...*

.....

lives for the spread of the Gospel. And with the power of the Spirit at their fingertips, they reproduced Jesus' miracles, healing, exorcising and raising the dead; preaching a Gospel of forgiveness and love. Their miracles attracted people by the thousands giving the Early Church, through the Spirit's miraculous power, a "jump-start" into the Roman Empire.

Does the Lord continue to perform miracles in all sizes and shapes today? Of course He does! Through the prayers of His people, those who are ill continue to be healed, often with the help of modern medical technology. Through foreign missionaries, the Gospel continues to be spoken in countless languages throughout the world, although those languages are learned over years of schooling rather than being immediately received. Does the Lord continue to exorcise? Through modern medicine and discoveries about the human mind, the powers of schizophrenia and other emotional illnesses are tamed.

We may respond, "Yes, our modern discoveries have given us the means to cure many illnesses, both physical and emotional, but where are the immediate, unexplainable acts of God's miraculous intervention in our lives?"

There are those who believe they continue to experience such miracles. A man with terminal cancer is suddenly free of his disease. A young boy who is drowning feels the

presence of an angel who rescues him from the water. A woman suddenly knows her friend is in danger and warns that friend before any harm is done. We hear these stories all the time; and some of us experience them. Whether or not we are blessed with the sort of miracle that has no scientific explanation, all of us can look around at God's creation and revel in the miracle of life. All of us can marvel that our Lord has taken the dust of the earth and made from it people who can walk and talk and feel.

Whether we experience an unexplainable miracle or not, we all recognize some sort of force in this universe which has led us to know life and love and beauty and hope despite the fact that our bodies are made up of atoms and electrons and protons, simple building blocks of nature that have no consciousness of their own. So, if we really wish to see a miracle beyond human explanation, all we have to do is glance into the mirror.

May the Spirit bless your study of the "Great Miracles of the New Testament." My prayer is that through them we gain a greater understanding of God's desire to hear and restore and resurrect us — not just as the whole people of God, but more importantly, as individual, personal children of God.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Dear Lord, at one time, a young father turned to You and exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” When we confront the miracles of Scripture, help us in our faith. As we marvel at the Virgin Birth, give us an understanding of its importance in our hope for deliverance from the sin that wears us down and threatens to destroy us. May we always place our trust in those things which are meant for our everlasting good. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

1. What was the penalty for sexual relations with a betrothed virgin under the Law of Deuteronomy 22:23-24?

How did Joseph want to handle this apparent violation of God's Law (Matthew 1:19), and what does this suggest about Joseph's character?

2. How did the Lord intervene to assure Joseph's compliance with His will? (Matthew 1:20-21)

How do you think the angel's appearance to Joseph was an act of deliverance for Mary?

3. Why was it important that Jesus be born in human form? (Hebrews 2:17-18, 4:14-16, 7:27; Philippians 2:6-8)

Why is it important that Jesus also be God? (John 1:1-5, 10-18; 1 John 4:9, 5:11)

4. What is “original sin”? (Romans 5:12, 15; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Psalm 51:5)

We know how “original sin” is transmitted. Why do you think it is important, for an understanding of our deliverance from sin, to know that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit?

5. At what point in Jesus' life do the following Gospels introduce us to the Savior? (John 1:29-34; Mark 1:9-13)

Why do you think the two Gospel writers omit a description of Christ's birth? (John 20:30-31, 21:25)

6. What promise did the angel give Mary about the fate of her child? (Luke 1:32-33)

How would this be a fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture? (Psalm 89:3-4; 2 Samuel 7:8-14; Jeremiah 33:17; Isaiah 9:6-7)

When do we see this prophecy fulfilled? (Revelation 1:8, 12-18; Philippians 2:9-11)

7. What prophecy does Matthew say the Virgin Birth fulfills? (Matthew 1:22-23; Isaiah 7:13-14)

8. Was Jesus an “only child”? Who were Jesus’ other siblings? (Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3)

How does Matthew (1:25) imply Mary may have given birth to other children after Jesus?

9. Matthew, in his Gospel, uses the word “fulfill” twelve times when discussing Jesus’ relationship to Old Testament prophecy. Why is it appropriate that Matthew should be the first Gospel account in the New Testament?

10. How does the angel’s introduction to Mary compare to Jesus’ words to Mary after His Resurrection? (Luke 1:28-30; Matthew 28:8-10)

11. How would you describe Mary’s reaction to God’s miraculous intervention in her life? (Luke 1:38)

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“The Virgin Birth gives us the foundation for our understanding of the two natures of Christ. He was both God and man at the same time. He had to be God so that He could live without sin and be powerful enough to bear the sins of all mankind. He had to be man so that He could suffer man’s sinful fate of death and damnation.”

• • •

MATTHEW 1:18-25; LUKE 1:26-38

As we move to the New Covenant of our Lord, initiated with the birth of Jesus Christ, we remember the miracles of the Old Testament, which accomplished the repeated deliverance of God’s people from their enemies. The miracles of the New Testament are similar in this respect. They center on God’s deliverance, and that shouldn’t surprise us, since the ultimate purpose of God intervening in history is to win the deliverance of mankind from death and the devil, through the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus.

The message of deliverance strikes a universal code. It doesn’t matter how wealthy or how popular we may be. We may feel ourselves the healthiest, most financially secure individuals on the face of the planet, but down deep, each one of us prays to be delivered from some type of burden. When Scripture focuses on mankind’s redemption, each one of us can relate to the problems or fears in our lives from which we long to be freed. No matter what culture or background an individual is accustomed to, the Gospel message of deliverance is applicable because no matter what ethnic descent we are, or what gender, or what age we may find ourselves, each human resounds in some way or another to the thought of deliverance. That’s why the Christian Gospel is a universal message and reverberates in the lives of people from the most primitive regions of Africa to the wealthiest establishments of the developed world. We all need deliverance.

The difference we notice between the miracles of God in the Old Testament and the miracles of the New Testament revolve around the individuals who receive God's deliverance. Generally, in the Old Testament, God's miracles revolve around the protection and vindication of God's people as a whole. Although it may not be true in every case, many of the Old Testament miracles have the consequence of benefitting the aggregate people of the Promised Land. In the New Testament, we notice how many of Jesus' miracles deal with one unique individual after another. I like this change in focus. It's as if the Lord is now going to demonstrate His personal care and concern for each one of us. We are not only important as the universal Church, but we are also important as the individual child of God.

God's miraculous acts of deliverance begin in the New Testament with the Virgin Birth. Now, I find it interesting that so many scholars disbelieve the account given us by Matthew and Luke. And I can't help but wonder why, if one believes in the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead and His miracles of healing and exorcism, the concept of the Virgin Birth is so difficult to hold true as well. Yet, of all the New Testament miracles, surely, this is viewed with the greatest skepticism.

The accounts given us by Matthew and Luke underscore the miraculous conception of the Christ. We are told that Joseph, a descendant of King David, is engaged to a young woman named Mary. Engagements in Jesus' day were much more binding than engagements today. Our modern day engagements are easily broken (and should be if serious disagreements occur before marriage). In Jesus' day, one could only break an engagement through divorce. Of course, divorce was much more easily accomplished in Jesus' day. Engagements and marriages could be dissolved by the man simply writing a writ of divorce, and handing it to the woman in the presence of two witnesses. Nonetheless, the act of engagement was nearly tantamount to marriage with one important difference: an engagement became a marriage when the groom took the bride home and consummated the union. That is why it makes sense when the angel tells Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife" (Matthew 1:20).

The Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph because Joseph learned before his marriage was consummated, that Mary was pregnant. And, of course, Joseph would wonder who the father might be and why he should remain committed to a woman who, in God's eyes, had married someone else. The angel had to encourage Joseph to take Mary as his wife, realizing that the child in Mary had been conceived not with a human father, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary was still a virgin.

Now, skeptics will claim the concept of the Virgin Birth was something invented by the Early Church and incorporated by the propagandists who wrote the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They view this miracle as a method by which the early Christians hoped to exalt the figure of Jesus, supporting His divine origin. They may even concede that Jesus' birth was "miraculous" in the same way that every human birth is a miracle of nature. And, they will mention as support for their skepticism the fact that neither the Gospel of John or Mark, or the writings of Paul, ever mention the Virgin Birth. Of course, Mark and John were both uninterested in providing us details about Christ's birth and childhood. They were primarily interested in discussing Jesus' adult ministry. And the fact that Paul never mentions the Virgin Birth is not a very convincing argument. In the letters that we have, Paul may never have thought it was relevant to his concerns and the concerns of the early church.

There are a number of reasons why the Virgin Birth is important to our understanding God's deliverance. Matthew underscores the fact that Mary's virginity is a fulfillment of Scripture. He takes us back some 700 years to the reign of King Ahaz in Judah. Ahaz, who ruled the southern kingdom of Judah for about twenty years, ascended to the monarchy in a time of rapid decline. The Philistines were regaining their lost territory in the coastal plains. The nation of Edom, to the south of Judah, revolted and freed itself from Judah's control. Ahaz was a despicable king, indulging in pagan cults and reviving pagan child sacrifices. In fact, one of the most horrible acts described in the Old Testament can be found in 2 Kings 16:3 where we read of Ahaz: "He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites." This was not a God-fearing king!

As the Assyrian threat grew to the north, the kingdoms of Syria and Israel felt it necessary to ally themselves against their common enemy, and they wanted the kingdom of Judah to join them. Ahaz despaired at the imminent fall of Jerusalem. In one of God's most gracious acts, He chose the prophet Isaiah to explain that Jerusalem would not fall by the hand of Israel or Syria. And in order to ensure King Ahaz' belief in the Lord, the Lord told Ahaz to ask for a sign. But Ahaz felt timid about demanding a sign from the Lord, because he felt that would be putting the Lord to the test (as if he had ever feared God in the past!).

As a result, God graciously gave Ahaz a sign. "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste" (Isaiah 7:14-16). In its immediate setting, this was a prophecy that within 9 months (the time for a virgin to conceive and give birth), it would be evident to the Judeans that God was again with His people protecting them (the name of the child would be Immanuel, which means, "God with us"). By the time that child reached the age of discretion, knowing right from wrong (around 12 or 13 years), the land of the two kings dreaded by Ahaz (i.e., Syria and Israel) would be laid waste. Of course, that child would be eating only curds and honey, living off the land, because the agriculture of Judah would be laid waste.

The prophecy was fulfilled when Ahaz, in his fear, asked the Assyrians to ally with him against the Syrians and Israelites. Assyria was only too happy to oblige, soon destroying Syria and Israel and invading Judah, too (did Ahaz really think the Assyrians would stop at his borders?!). As a result, Ahaz' enemies were laid waste, but the kingdom of Judah, except for Jerusalem (remember our lesson on the "Angel of Death?"), was ravaged by the Assyrians. And so, Isaiah's prophecy proved true.

Matthew, however, shows us that the Virgin Birth was the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Even as Jerusalem was delivered from its enemies, so God's people would be delivered from sin, death, and the devil through the birth of God's ultimate presence among mankind — in Jesus Christ. Matthew sees the Isaiah prophecy as having been partially fulfilled in Isaiah's time, and completely fulfilled by the Virgin Birth. In this way, the Virgin Birth becomes yet one more piece of evidence that the Old Testament prophecy found its fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Now, some skeptics have questioned whether the "virgin" of Old Testament prophecy should be translated as "young woman." If the Hebrew word *almah* could be translated as "young woman," the argument goes, then Matthew's claim of the Virgin Birth is not so accurately predicted by Isaiah as Matthew would claim. It's unnecessary to go into all the arguments surrounding this controversy. Look for yourself. The Hebrew word *almah* is used six different times in the Old Testament, and each time the context shows it clearly must mean "virgin" (Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2: 8; Psalm 68:25; Proverbs 30:19; Song of Solomon 1:3, 6:8).

PERSONAL APPLICATION – POSSESSED!

Father in heaven, we pray for Your continued deliverance from evil. Thank You for Your sacrifice on the cross and the Resurrection, which ensures us of our eternal salvation from sin, death, and the devil. Now, deliver us from the devil's distractions as we study Your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-17; Luke 8:26-37

1. How many people are possessed in the account given by Matthew 8:28? How many according to Mark 5:2 and Luke 8:27?

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Can you think of any possible reasons why these two accounts seem to differ?

2. What are the symptoms of demon possession as indicated by these accounts?

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Look up "schizophrenia" in the encyclopedia or dictionary.

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Note any similarities between schizophrenia and demon possession.

.....

Why might it be difficult to believe the man suffered from what we call "schizophrenia"?

3. How would you compare the demon of Luke 8:28 with the demons in the following references?
The demon exorcised by Christ at Capernaum (Mark 1:24):

.....

The demon in the young boy of Mark 9:17-27:

.....

The evil spirit which possessed King Saul in 1 Samuel 18:10-11 and 19: 9-10:

4. Who did the demons believe Jesus to be?

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How were the demons more aware of Jesus' identity than His own family? (John 7:1-5; Mark 3:20-21)

5. What did the demons fear Jesus would do to them?

How should the followers of the Lord treat their enemies? (Romans 12:14-21; Proverbs 25:21-22)

6. What was the name of the demons and what does this suggest about their number?

How is this numerical claim, supported by the reaction of the pigs?

7. What was the Jewish opinion of pigs in Jesus' time? (Leviticus 11:7-8; Deuteronomy 14:8; Acts 10:9-14)

8. Describe how differently the demon possessed man behaved after his exorcism.

9. What did Jesus ask the demon possessed man to do once he was exorcised?

How does this differ from some of Jesus other miracles? (Mark 1:40-44, 3:7-12)

Can you think of a reason why Jesus' request would be so different when it came to this miracle? (Luke 4:23-27; John 4:43-45)

10. If you were to name some individuals in our world who appear to you to be demon possessed, who would they be and why do you think they might be possessed?

• • •

“The Messiah has indeed come, and by His presence, a New Age has begun. This New Age will not find its fulfillment until the Second Coming of the Lord. At the Second Coming, the devil and his legions will be imprisoned forever.”

• • •

MATTHEW 8:28-34; MARK 5:1-17; LUKE 8:26-37

One of Jesus' most intriguing miracles occurs when He enters the land of the Decapolis, east of the Sea of Galilee. This was a land largely inhabited by Gentiles, so its residents were not followers of Jewish law. It is at this place and at this time, that Jesus confronts the power of the demonic and engages in a spiritual skirmish, which foreshadows the end of time. However, the significance of this cosmic struggle may not be apparent at first glance.

When Jesus and His disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee to its eastern shore, they confronted at least one man with an evil spirit. Now, interestingly, Matthew describes two different men possessed by spirits, but Luke and Mark only refer to one. The number involved is not an important detail in the story. Luke and Mark may have heard there was only one man, while Matthew, being an eyewitness, remembers two. In any case, at least one possessed man comes wandering out of the tombs to meet Jesus. Now, the “tombs” were considered the favorite haunts of demons. People believed demons enjoyed inhabiting the area by the tombs more than many other places. These “tombs” consisted of a number of caverns in which people would bury their dead. Horrifyingly enough, it was also a place where the poorest of the poor would find shelter. The living lived with the dead.

The manner in which the demonic possession manifested itself is particularly terrifying. Mark tells us that the man would constantly cry out in the hills and cut himself with stones. Luke tells us he no longer wore any clothes. Those around him had attempted to bind him so that he couldn't hurt himself or others, but they had finally given up

because his possession had empowered him with the strength to break his iron chains. Now, throughout Jesus' ministry, our Lord would encounter numerous opportunities to exorcise demons, but this individual presented a particularly difficult case because he had been possessed for a very long time, and his possession exhibited such wild behavior. He would be difficult to "control."

From a distance, the possessed man sees Jesus. He hasn't had the opportunity to meet the Lord before, but the demons recognize Jesus. Clearly, the demons fear for their safety. They lead their host to the shore, forcing him to fall before Jesus. And the demons call out, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Isn't it interesting that many people in Jesus' day, as well as many people today, cannot recognize Jesus as the Son of God? Yet the demons did! They knew exactly who Jesus was. And they shuddered. Their question has been echoed down through the centuries by those who confront the Lord. "What do you want with me Lord?"

I've often wondered during my years in the ministry why so many people run away from the Word of God. It's all good news, after all. It shouldn't send individuals into fits of fear and yet, this seems to be a common response. Why is that? The message of the Gospel is earth-shattering news, changing forever the way we look at death. We learn that the Son of God has sacrificed Himself for the purpose of giving us eternal life. This news should be one of joy and hope. And yet, it's often viewed as threatening and disruptive. I believe the Gospel is so stunning that people are afraid they will come to believe it, and their lives will change. Their priorities would have to be reordered. Their understanding of how they behave would have to be reevaluated. And their familiar lifestyle would be threatened. To many, the prospect of radical change, whether it's the result of good news or bad, is frightening. Many would rather walk away from the Gospel than let it change their comfortable condition. When one encounters the risen Lord, after all, one is forced to ask, "What do you want with me, Son of God?" Our natural, sinful response to an encounter with God is often the same as that of the demons.

The next question fearfully asked by the demons shows us the devil's perspective of the Lord. In Matthew, the demons asked Jesus, "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" The understanding that the Lord would "torture" the demons is an interesting one. We, who are God's children, can't conceive of Christ being a "torturer." Again and again, He shows Himself to be a God of life and love, someone who is preparing an eternal home of joy and peace for us. That is our perspective. To the demons, Jesus is the "torturing Christ." He will cause them agony. He will condemn them to the Abyss.

Have you ever wondered why someone like Adolph Hitler could be so adamant about his cause, how monsters like Stalin or Mao Tse Tung or Timothy McVeigh could be so callous about the lives of others? From their perspective, you see, life, love, and selflessness are painful. Revenge, pain, and chaos feel good. It is said that Saddam Hussein enjoyed the chaos of warfare. That's what demonic possession does to a human being. The individual begins to see good as evil and evil as good. That which builds up and edifies is considered

the enemy, but that which destroys and hurts becomes an ally. When we are walking as children of the light, the perspective of the damned seems incomprehensible. But always remember, to those who are children of the devil, we appear equally “crazy.” I believe that is why the Lord must condemn to hell those who reject Him. From the perspective of the damned, hell is to be preferred to the presence of the Lord. In a way, eternal separation from God is what the damned desire.

The other part of the demons’ question is as interesting as the first. Matthew relates the question, “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” In other words, the demons are aware of their ultimate fate. They are aware of their eternal destiny in the “fiery Abyss,” as Revelation describes it. They fear the moment of their eternal exile has arrived and they wish they could be given more time. They are aware of the fate awaiting them, the destiny described by John in Revelation 20:10-11: “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

Jesus then asks for the name of the demon. You’ll notice the demon doesn’t reply with a name. He replies with a number. “Legion,” he says, “for we are many.” Now, we couldn’t understand the struggle for power in which Jesus and the demons were engaged if we didn’t know a little about the folklore prevalent in Jesus’ day. It was commonly believed that in cases of exorcism, the exorcist could gain power over a demon by speaking its name. By the same token, a demon could gain control over the exorcist by speaking the exorcist’s name. Knowing that background, do you begin to understand why the possessed man ran to meet Jesus, spewing His name as fast as he could? “Son of God! Son of God!” Not only were the demons recognizing Jesus’ identity, they were attempting to gain possession of Him! But, Jesus does not submit. Instead, Jesus asks for the names of the demons. And they dare not give them to Him for fear of coming under His control. Instead, they provide Jesus with a number: “Legion!” which means “thousands.” Actually, in the Roman army, a “legion” consisted of five to six

thousand men. Thus, the number of devils possessing the poor man was exceedingly great.

But, were there actually thousands of demons within the man? Or were the demons exaggerating their number in an ongoing attempt to overwhelm Jesus? We don’t know for sure, of course, but we do know that the possessed man had lost his identity and surely felt as if there were innumerable entities, which had taken control of his life and being.

Luke tells us that the demons were terrified Jesus would send them to the Abyss before their time. They begged Him not to send them to their final place of judgment. Instead, they wished to be exiled into a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside. Remember, this isn’t the land of the Jews anymore. The land east of Galilee was predominately Gentile, so it wouldn’t be unusual to see individuals raising swine. For the Jews, of course, this would be unimaginable because they had been commanded by God to view pigs as unclean and inedible. Jesus did as the demons asked. They were driven from the possessed man into the herd of pigs, whereupon the pigs stampeded into the sea and drowned.

Did Jesus have “mercy” on the demons? Consider that in Jesus’ day most of the Hebrews believed the “sea” was the gateway to the Abyss. That’s why in Revelation 21:1 when the Lord is creating a new heaven and a new earth John says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.” The Abyss is now removed from the presence of God’s new creation.

Understanding the sea as a symbol for the gateway to the “Abyss,” we can view how appropriately Jesus’ exorcism concluded.

The demons are driven into “unclean” animals that, in turn, stampede into the Abyss. Jesus has had no mercy whatsoever for the demons. As a matter of fact, He’s played a cruel trick on them. Their wish was granted. They were exiled into the pigs. But then the pigs stampeded into the “Abyss” anyway! No Jew who was familiar with

the concept of unclean animals and the imagery of the sea would be ignorant of Jesus' accomplishment.

Of course, the Gentiles may not have fully understood the significance of Jesus' miracle. Indeed, although the Jews saw tremendous symbolism in our Lord's exorcism, the Gentiles were fearful for their property. I mean, some poor farmer had watched his herd of swine self-destruct before his eyes! Many others, having learned of the miracle, feared for their own herds. They wanted Jesus to leave.

To be sure, many of them marveled at the transformation of the wild, uncontrollable, demon-possessed man. Luke tells us he dressed himself and sat at Jesus' feet. His behavior was completely civilized. He was in control of his being once again. This in itself was cause for amazement, but hardly was it a basis for fear. The fear arose from the possibility that Jesus, the Jew, might make a habit of sending demons into pigs, impoverishing the regional farmers!

Luke tells that the exorcised man wished to become a disciple. He wanted to follow Jesus throughout his Lord's ministry. But, Jesus had different plans. He told the man to go back to his family and the people of his village to share with them the glory of Jesus' miracle. He was to boldly go and proclaim the healing power of the Messiah. And so, the wonder of Jesus spread throughout the region east of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus frequently asks those He has healed to remain quiet about His miraculous activities. Particularly, in the Gospel of Mark we hear Jesus command those He has healed to remain silent. Theologians have been so impressed by the frequency of Jesus' commands that they refer to it as the "Messianic Secret." So why, after Jesus has come to the land east of the Sea of Galilee, does He change His attitude and command the exorcised man to preach loud and long about Jesus' miracle? In the land of the Jews, many would interpret Jesus' activities as signs of the Messiah. And they would be right. Many Old Testament Scriptures predicted and described the Messianic powers displayed by Jesus. But, most Jews had misinterpreted the mission of the Messiah. They believed the Messiah would come to deliver the land of the Jews from the

Roman Empire, and that He would establish an earthly, materialistic kingdom. Jesus wished to restrain the furor that would ensue from this wrong perception until the time of His arrest and crucifixion. He knew that if the Jews began misunderstanding Jesus' role at this early stage, He would be arrested and killed before the time dictated by His Father. But, when He ministered in the land of the Gentiles, He didn't have to fear such misunderstanding.

The miraculous exorcism we read about in this week's lesson is a difficult one for many scholars. They will often define "possession" as mental illness, perhaps schizophrenia, rather than admit that some outside entity could gain control of an individual's very soul. They will claim the man truly felt possessed, even though he was merely mentally disturbed. The pigs were startled by the madman's behavior and so stampeded over the cliff. Even if we view this miracle from a psychological standpoint, it makes sense to us. We know there is a connection between spiritual illness and physical and emotional illness. When Jesus heals the spirit, He often heals emotions as well. If this man were schizophrenic, the miracle would be no less wondrous, considering that most schizophrenia cannot be treated by the wonders of modern medicine. But, such a rationalization doesn't come to terms with the reality that whatever was inside the possessed man was able to travel through space and inhabit the pigs. Mental illness isn't transferred in that manner. The account of the Gospel writers seems to suggest entities, which can indeed inhabit and possess.

The most important message of this miracle is discovered in the words of the demons, "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" The Messiah has indeed come, and by His presence, a New Age has begun. This New Age will not find its fulfillment until the Second Coming of the Lord. At the Second Coming, the devil and his legions will be imprisoned forever. But, the arrival of Jesus in the Decapolis announced the beginning of the end for the kingdom of darkness. The skirmishes had begun. The war was initiated. And the devil's power would soon be destroyed by the "bomb" dropped on Easter morning.