

**LUKE 8:26-39**  
**THE STORY OF VICTORY**

What would it be like to fight an inferno with a garden hose? What would it be like to see the tallest building in the world in flames, and have only a small stream of water to fight it?

What would it be like to fight hell itself, with just the garden hose of your own strength? As we journey with Jesus, meeting the people he meets as he brings his redemption, today we meet a man who is fighting the inferno of hell with his little garden hose. He is helpless and hopeless.

As we read this story, we may struggle to accept the existence of demons and the reality of spiritual warfare, but we believe the Bible's teachings and stories are true, so we believe this is a real story about a real man and a real fight. This helpless and hopeless man is losing. Then Jesus changes this man's story. This changes our story, for we live in the same world as this man, and we may find ourselves fighting hell with our little garden hoses.

**THE MAN'S STORY** begins as *A STORY OF CAPTIVITY*. Jesus arrives in an area called the region of the Garasenes. Some Jews live in this area, but most of the people are Gentiles. When Jesus arrives, he is met by a man whom Luke describes as "demon-possessed." In other words, he has a demon. As we will see, he has many demons. But while we may say he has them, the reality is that they have him. They control him.

This leads to a horrible life for this man. For a long time, he has not worn clothes or lived in a house. Instead, he dwells in the tombs, among the bodies of the dead. This would have been strange to anyone, and repulsive to a Jew. According to Jewish teaching, you were considered insane if you did four things: walked around at night, slept near graves, ripped up your clothes, and generally destroyed your possessions. This man fits the definition.

People have tried to help this man by restraining him from following his worst instincts, but they have failed. The demons have seized him again and again, and he has repeatedly broken his chains and run off into the wilderness. Normal people do not do this. Sane people do not do this. But the demons have this man, so he does this, again and again.

One writer about this story relates demonic possession to our original creation. We are made in the image of God, but in a situation like this, that image is distorted and even destroyed. In the control of these demons, the man hardly seems human anymore.

In a hard season of his life, Mark Twain wrote a letter to his sister, apologizing for some deed he had done. He said, "I am built so, being made in the image of God, but not otherwise resembling him enough to be mistaken for him by anybody but a very near-sighted person." He is saying that the way he has lived, almost no one would recognize him as a human, made in God's image. That is probably an exaggeration with Mark Twain, but it is no exaggeration with this demon-possessed man. With his captivity to these demons, he could hardly be mistaken for a man made in the image of God.

But after Jesus arrives, the man's story is not just a story of captivity. It is *A STORY OF FREEDOM*. Jesus confronts the demons, and Jesus defeats the demons.

The demons attack Jesus with these words: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" We read these words, and we realize that the demons know who Jesus is, and what he can do. But these are not words of submission. In those days and in that culture, spiritual warfare was thought to be conducted through the naming of names. In using this name for Jesus, the demons are trying to gain the upper hand on Jesus - somehow to control him, just as they control this man.

Jesus responds by asking for the demon's name. It is "Legion." This is a reference to a group of soldiers in the Roman army. So this is where we discover that this is not just one demon - this is a group of demons. This is many demons.

So the demons speak the name of Jesus, and Jesus gets the demons to speak their name. Then Jesus ends the confrontation by defeating the demons. They know he is greater than them - so they beg not to be

tortured, and they beg not to be sent into a place called “the Abyss.” This seems to be a place where spirits are confined. They want to roam some more, so they ask Jesus to let them enter into a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus agrees to this, and after the demons enter the pigs, the pigs run into the lake and drown.

What do we make of this? We wonder why the demons wanted to enter the pigs. We wonder what happened to the demons after the pigs drowned. We do not know everything about this scene, but we can be sure of this: Jesus has won the victory. The demons want to destroy the man, but instead they destroy the pigs. The man is freed. He appears to be a human being again - made in God’s image. He is soon dressed, and speaking and acting in his right mind.

Word of this spreads through the region, and fear spreads through the region. Why are the people so afraid? Maybe they believe Jesus is going to ruin their livelihoods. These Gentiles make money off pigs, and maybe Jesus is going to kill all their pigs. Or maybe they are just afraid of the power they have seen. They know how the man was, and they know how the man is, and they are terrified of this powerful person among them. For whatever reason, they ask Jesus to leave, and he agrees to leave. But the victory has been won.

This story of captivity and freedom is a picture of redemption. Throughout this third scene of our story, we have described redemption as rescue from sin and freedom to love and serve God again. Remember how Mark Twain realized that his sin dimmed the image of God in him? That is true for all of us. When we sin, we distort and may even begin to destroy the image of God in us. We are made to be like him, but when we rebel against him, we appear less and less like him.

Jesus comes to bring freedom to captives like us. Through his perfect life, atoning death, and mighty resurrection, he sets us free from the guilt and power of the sin that so distorts us, and he frees us again to live for God. We are made to live for him, and only in Jesus can we begin to live for him again. The rescue and freedom of this man is a picture of the rescue and freedom that is ours through faith in Jesus.

But still - there are those demons in the man’s story. How do they affect **OUR STORY**? Or is this just a strange tale from long ago that means nothing to us today? *WHAT DO WE SEE?* Do we see these kinds of demons and this kind of warfare today? Let’s think about two ideas.

1. We may not see this as much. Some students of the Bible believe Jesus’ time on earth may have been a season of unusually intense demonic activity. At the start of Jesus’ ministry, we see Jesus living in the desert and facing fierce temptation from Satan. All throughout Jesus’ ministry, we see stories like this - where evil spirits confront and challenge Jesus. We do not see as much of this before Jesus’ coming, or after Jesus’ resurrection.

This is a helpful way of thinking about this. Sometimes we expect everything to be exactly the same as when Jesus walked the earth. Certainly, much is the same. But just because we see demons all over the place during the ministry of Jesus, does not mean we will see them everywhere in our generation. Jesus came to defeat sin and hell, so it makes sense to believe that Satan and his minions joined the battle in an unusual way while Jesus walked the earth. We may not see this as much. Yet...

2. We may still see this. Satan is still real. Demons are still real. Hell is still real. So while we do not expect everything to be exactly as it was in Jesus’ day, we confess the same spiritual realities do exist, and we may see them - or at least the effects of them. Some will tell you that when they travel to other places and other cultures, they see scenes that remind them of scenes like this. Maybe, but how might spiritual warfare show itself in our culture? I want to offer two examples. I admit that I cannot prove that these are examples of demon possession, but I believe they reflect the spiritual warfare that still occurs.

The first example is what we call “mental illness.” In our scientific and materialistic way of thinking, we have defined mental illness as a largely, even completely, physical issue. From a biblical point of view, we can accept the physical element in mental illness. In a fallen world, our bodies do not always work correctly, and that includes the minds within our bodies. When you see someone with mental illness, you are surely seeing someone with a physical problem.

But is this just a physical issue? Or should we confess that there could be a spiritual element to mental

illness? Could there be a problem not just with the body, but with the heart? I believe so. An entire segment of our health care system deals with mental health. Over the years, mental health agencies have developed some effective ways to control people with mental illness. But for many of these people, there seems to be no cure. What if the problem is more than just physical? What if it is spiritual? What if, in at least some cases, the fight is not merely within the body of the person, but between the spiritual forces of the heavenly realms?

The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to every part of us. Jesus is strong to save us physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. When we see mental illness, we may be seeing an example of spiritual warfare and even demon possession.

The second example is the use and abuse of mind-altering drugs - both legal and illegal. Used correctly, many substances are very helpful. But we are sinful people, and we are drawn to abusing the good gifts of God. We see this with the destructive abuse of powerful drugs in our community and our culture.

Maybe you do not pay attention to this. Maybe this has not affected you. But it is there, it is real, and it is awful. When you open your eyes and see the destruction that comes with the abuse of drugs, you begin to wonder if they are a tool of Satan. When someone gives control to those drugs, have they really given control to demons?

When you see someone on drugs, you see the sorts of things we saw in this man. You see strange behavior. You see horrible trouble. You see a life in which the image of God is distorted and almost destroyed, because that person is not in his or her right mind. We cannot say exactly how demons fit into this, but we can say this: Satan loves this. Satan delights to see young and older people distort and destroy their lives, as they give those lives to drugs.

Once again, the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to every part of us. By his Holy Spirit, he can overcome the demonic grip of drugs in our lives. It is not easy, and it is not pretty. But Jesus is mighty to do this.

What do we see in this area of demons and spiritual warfare? We may not see this as much, but we still may see this in our generation and in our stories. So *WHAT DO WE DO?* If you think about just those two examples - mental illness and drug abuse - you may think you are fighting hell with a garden hose. In a sense, you are. Who are you, and who am I, to win a spiritual war of any kind? By myself, am I not a garden hose, spraying a thin trickle of water before the hot gates of hell?

The heart of this story is its display of the power of Jesus over Satan and his demons. As I read this story, I should realize that I am helpless and hopeless to gain a victory in spiritual warfare, so I must call upon the sovereign power of my Redeemer, as I long for victory in my life, and in the lives of those I know and love.

I call upon this power in prayer. In Ephesians 6, we read an extended discussion of this idea of spiritual warfare. Paul writes about putting on the armor of God. He is urging his readers to hold on to the gospel truths they hold dear, as they strive to stand strong against the devil and his schemes. But when the armor is complete, Paul issues one more call: "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Prayer is the heart of spiritual warfare, and spiritual warfare is at the heart of prayer. As those who have received the redemption of Jesus, we take up this weapon with confidence - not in ourselves, but in the Redeemer who defeated the demons in this man, and who has defeated Satan in our lives. We stand strong in the fight as we cry out to the Savior who is stronger than any legion of demons.

As you think about that, does that bring you a new perspective on prayer? You may think of prayer as a rote exercise. I know I should do it, because God tells me to do it. You may think of prayer as a mysterious puzzle. I know I should do it, because God tells me to do it, but I do not know why I am doing it, or what good it is doing.

Prayer is our joining of the battle of spiritual warfare. Prayer is our confrontation of the demons of evil, in the name of Jesus, and in the strength of Jesus. We see Jesus, coming to a man who has lost almost every shred of his humanity, sovereignly commanding demons to come out of this man and away from this man. So we pray to him, asking him to sovereignly defeat the demons who presume to distort and threaten to destroy

the image of God in us and the people around us. Jesus sets the captives free. Jesus is the victor in the spiritual war - a victory he secured on the cross and announced with the empty tomb. We look to him as the victor in all of the battles that rage within us and around us - even the battles we barely recognize.

Listen to the words of writer Annie Dillard, as she ponders God's people gathered to pray: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

Maybe she exaggerates a bit, but her point is right: prayer is war! It is God's people, calling on God's Son, to be the victor who rescues from sin and frees to new life. We are fighting hell, not with a garden hose, but with the Savior who went to a garden, then to a cross, then from a tomb, then to heaven, to free those who are held captive by the devil, so they can now do the Savior's will.

What do we do? We pray. As I say that, who comes to mind? In whom is the image of God distorted and almost destroyed? You may not be able to hear the voice of demons, but you will be able to sense the effect of demons. Maybe it is an adult child - and you are fighting hell. Maybe it is a co-worker - and you are fighting hell. Maybe it is a friend from school - and you are fighting hell. Maybe it is a cousin - and you are fighting hell. Maybe it is a woman you met at a soccer game - and you are fighting hell. Maybe it is your spouse - and you are fighting hell. Maybe it is even something within you - and you are fighting hell.

Where is help? Where is hope? Only in Jesus. Only he redeems. Only he frees from sin and frees to a new life, lived in the image of God, and lived for the glory of God. If you are his, he is victorious in you, and if you are his, he will be victorious through you - as you keep on praying for his power in your story, and the stories of others. You do not need to fight hell with a garden hose. You fight hell with your prayers to your Redeemer.

In another kind of fight, stood a man named Abraham Lincoln. It is said that as the Civil War became longer and bloodier, Lincoln's heart turned to a greater understanding of the sovereignty and providence of God. As the war dragged on, Lincoln became more aware of his powerlessness over events. He knew he was fighting with a garden hose. But with this appreciation of his lack of power, he turned more and more to the power of God - in prayer. The result? Somehow, wrote a friend, "a sweet comfort crept into his soul."

This story of victory in the life of this man should bring sweet comfort to the souls of we who trust in the redemption of Jesus. He is the Victor. We run to him, confident in him to make his kingdom come, to make his will be done, and to reign victorious in more and more stories.