

## Demonic Possession

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"In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, 'Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!' 'Be quiet!' Jesus said sternly. 'Come out of him!' Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him." -Luke 4:33-35

### How Can a Person Become Demonically Possessed in the 21st Century?

From time to time, I have received questions about demonic possession and even though I do not fully understand this subject, I thought I would share with you what I have learned. Hopefully, it will be helpful. I believe this topic warrants attention because I am convinced that demons are increasingly taking possession of people!

Human beings need a Savior because we are no match for our supernatural adversary, the devil. His tremendous powers and energies are devoted to the ruin and destruction of every human being and he is determined to lead the whole world into open rebellion against the laws of God. Because the Prince of Darkness is steadily strengthening his grip on this planet, we need to understand how he works. Peter wrote, **"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."** (1 Peter 5:8)

I find it very interesting that the term "demonic possession" is not directly mentioned in the Old Testament, but it is mentioned numerous times in the New Testament. Consider this one Old Testament text because some people think it indicates demonic torment: **"Saul's attendants said to him, 'See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, and you will feel better.' So Saul said to his attendants, 'Find someone who plays well and bring him to me. . . ' Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him."** (1 Samuel 16:15-17,23)

Years ago, this text puzzled me. How could the Lord send an "evil spirit" (that is, a demonic spirit)? Later, I discovered my perplexity was due to a problem with language. The Hebrew word "rah" translated "evil" in this passage has numerous meanings such as vexing, bad, miserable, heavy or troublesome – thus "rah" is translated evil in these verses.

However, once I understood how the Hebrew word was used, it became clear to me that the troublesome spirit sent from the Lord was actually the Holy Spirit doing His best to bring King Saul to repentance. Even though David's inspiring music would soften the king's rebellious heart so he felt better, the efforts of the Holy Spirit and David's music proved to be in vain. King Saul eventually committed the unpardonable sin and the Holy Spirit no longer spoke to him. (1

Samuel 28:6)

I believe the absence of any mention of demonic possession in the Old Testament could be due to two things. First, when the nation of Israel entered the Promised Land, they were a very healthy group of people. They had been eating angel food called manna (Psalm 78:25) for forty years and illness in Israel was rare. Second, prior to Israel's exile in Babylon (605 B.C. - 536 B.C.), the Jews measured prosperity and misfortune with a very simple formula. If a person pleased God, then God blessed that person with health and prosperity.

If a person sinned against God, then that person received a curse from God. (See Deuteronomy 28.) This simple formula was presented to Jesus one day. **"As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.'**" (John 9:1-3)

The point is that prior to the Babylonian exile, the Jews regarded misfortune as a curse from God. They erroneously believed God sent Satan to hurt or harm those who displeased Him. Ironically, this faulty concept is discussed at great length in the book of Job, which many scholars believe was the first book of the Bible to be written. Scholars generally accept that Moses wrote the book of Job during his forty years of tending sheep. The irony is that Job's three physician friends slandered God by insisting that Job deserved what he got.

At the end of the book, God spoke to Job and told him that He was angry with his friends. (Job 42:8,9) Given the fact that Job was an early book in the Old Testament, it is baffling why the Jews ultimately adopted a "prosperity theology" anyway.

After the Babylonian captivity ended, the Jewish nation became corrupt, broke their part of the covenant with God and did not receive the prosperity which God had conditionally promised through Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Israel became physically and spiritually weak.

The necessity and importance of physicians and medicine became more important and respected within Israel. In fact, the healing ministry of Jesus brought more attention to His presence, His mission and His message than anything else! I believe that illness and birth defects had become so prevalent during the time of Jesus, that some of the medical problems described in the New Testament are labeled "demonic possession" because the underlying medical problem was not understood. In other words, it is possible that some disorders, such as epileptic seizures, were probably mislabeled "demonic possession" because there was no understanding of the illness. (See Matthew 17:15-18)

Since illness and physical defects were considered to be a curse, the Jews reasoned that demons must be responsible. We see this type of thinking in this passage: **"While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.' But the Pharisees said, 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.'**" (Matthew 9:32-34)

Even though "demonic possession" may be a misnomer for certain illnesses, I do not want to diminish the fact that there were several genuine instances of demonic possession in the New Testament. Consider these two instances of demonic possession, and notice in both cases that the demon spoke: **"Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.' Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor."** (Acts 19:13–17)

In this passage, the demon challenged the seven sons of Sceva and then the demon empowered its host to attack these seven men and rip off their clothes! It's interesting that demons are always after our clothing. Keep this thought in mind as you read this next text.

"When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!' For Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man.

Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places. Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Legion,' he replied, because many demons had gone into him. And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss." (Luke 8:27-31)

These two passages (and there are several other instances of demon possession in the New Testament) indicate that demons can and will take up residence within people. The all important question is how do they do it? I believe demon possession can occur several ways. Space limits me to three:

1. If a person repeatedly and willfully violates his conscience, his sense of right and wrong will fade. In a morally confused and darkened condition, the door for demonic possession opens. Over time, the victim will be manipulated and ultimately controlled by demonic impulses. The obvious indication of a possessed person occurs when there is no longer any concern for right and wrong and the person inflicts crimes of passion that are unimaginable.
2. If a person is sexually and/or emotionally abused during childhood, studies indicate a strong possibility that the victim will grow up with thoughts and behaviors that are harmful and self destructive. These behaviors can range from self-loathing to bursts of hostility and hatred toward anyone who may innocently hurt their already hurting heart. Whether the rage is directed inwardly or outwardly, rage and frustration left unchecked can open a door for demonic possession. The battlefield is often in the mind and the devil can wield a strong influence over our minds using fantasies and hateful desires that demand a horrible and depraved fulfillment.

3. There is a subtle form of demonic possession that is not easily discernable. We tend to think that demonic possession means that someone is out of control, irrational, out of their mind, or convulsing from a seizure. The devil is clever and highly sophisticated and he also has many very brilliant demons working with him. They know that we have been given the power of choice, and in order to possess us, all they need to do is gain control of that power. Demons have a wide range of tools to break down our power of choice and they prey upon our inherent rebellion against God's laws.

For example, demons have convinced a large number of young people that substance abuse is no big deal. Methamphetamines may offer an "ecstatic experience" for the moment, but the consequences of that first incident can (and often does) turn into addiction. Thus, substance abuse can be an entry point for demonic possession. Demons have also led millions of people to believe there is nothing wrong with sexual immorality. This too, can be a door to addiction and ultimately, demonic possession.

But what about those of us who shun drugs and sexual immorality? Does the devil have a plan for us? Very few people understand the addiction that comes from materialism. When we are not able to say "no" to gratification, we have an addiction.

This is a growing problem which leads many people into bankruptcy. To avoid bankruptcy, many people make their jobs more important than God, family and health. Sadly, some people are driving themselves beyond exhaustion to get more money so they can buy more things. In this materialistic era, the love of money is an open door for demonic possession. Anything that has power over us can be used to pry open the door of our heart to Satan's demons.

We live in an age of over stimulation. We are constantly busy and our brains are constantly processing some kind of data. Consequently, our brains are imploding because of over stimulation. Billions of dollars are spent each year on psychotropic drugs because people are unable to deal with the demands of living. Harmful behaviors are causing us to lose control of ourselves. We cannot focus, we cannot tolerate silence and we cannot rest. If the devil is a formidable adversary when we are at our best, what does he become when we are at our weakest?

Jesus said, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** (Matthew 11:28-30)