

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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Verse 26:

Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. And when He came out onto the land, He was met by a man from the city who was possessed with demons; and he had not put on any clothing for a long time, and was not living in a house, but in the tombs. Seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him, and said in a loud voice, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me.” For He had been commanding the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had seized him many times; and he was bound with chains and shackles and kept under guard; and yet he would break his bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert. And Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They were imploring Him not to command them to go into the abyss. Now there was a herd of many swine feeding there on the mountain; and the demons implored Him to permit them to enter the swine. And He gave them permission. And the demons came out of the man and entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. And when the herdsman saw what had happened, they ran away and reported it in the city and out in the country. And the people went out to see what had happened; and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting down at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they became frightened. Those who had seen it reported to them how the man who was demon possessed had been made well. And the people of the country of the Gerasenes and the surrounding district asked Him to leave them; for they were gripped with great fear; and He got into the boat and returned. But the man from whom the demons had gone out was begging Him that he might accompany Him; but He sent him away, saying, “Return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you.” And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him. (*NASB, Luke 8:26-39)

This is one of my favorite stories in all the Gospels. It is one my favorite stories because it is so filled with hope. I can't imagine a more hopeless situation; imagine the despair of that day after day after day! You get just a sense of what these people must have felt for the man in this story. But then he has an encounter with God in the flesh, the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world. And in a matter of moments, he was changed from a madman, a lunatic, to a missionary of the Gospel... because that's what Jesus does. That's what Jesus does. It just takes a touch of

His hand and everything changes. This story reminds us that there is no such thing as hopeless. Every day is a reason for hope. There is no one beyond the reach of God's life-changing power.

It always saddens my heart when I read the part in the story when the people came out to see the madman...in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus. But they don't know what to do with this. It so frightens them that they want Jesus to leave. "Hey, pack up your stuff and get out of here." How many people in that region do you suppose were lame? ...were blind? ...were deaf? ...were sick? ...were dying? ...were living in absolute despair? And they had Jesus, God in the flesh, right there! And instead of experiencing His life-changing power, they invited him to leave, that they would continue to live in their bondage.

There are a lot of people at Christmas just like that. They just don't get the story. They just don't understand why Jesus came. They live their lives in bondage every day and the answer is right there...but all they can think to say is, "Go away; go away."

And as Jesus returned, the people welcomed Him, for they all had been waiting for Him. And there came a man named Jairus, and he was an official of the synagogue; and he fell at Jesus' feet, and began to implore Him to come to his house; for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, and she was dying. But as He went, the crowds were pressing against Him. (Vs. 40-42)

All of us as parents have no trouble identifying with the emotion of this story. What could be worse than a twelve-year-old child dying? Jairus had heard stories of Jesus and he knew there was nowhere else to go; there was nowhere else to turn, so he went to Jesus.

And a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, came up behind Him, and touched the fringe of His cloak; and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. And Jesus said, "Who is the one who touched Me?" And while they were all denying it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing in you." But Jesus said, "Someone did touch Me, for I was aware that power had gone out of Me." And when the women saw that she had not escaped notice, she came trembling and fell down before Him, and declared in the presence of all the people the reason why she had touched Him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace. (Vs. 43-48)

For every year that Jairus' daughter had been alive, this woman had lived in agony...in a hemorrhage that would not stop--not only the battle of the disease itself, but in her culture that issue would have made her unclean, for all practical purposes, an outcast. And no one could heal her! What's implied in those words is she had tried, but no one could deliver the goods. She found one last hope in this One called Jesus. You can just imagine the scene, as she works her way through the crowd, and finally gets close enough to reach out and to touch His garment. In ways that only she could describe, she knew at that moment she had been healed - I'm sure hoping to slip back into the crowd - but Jesus knew. And when she knew that Jesus knew, she became filled with fear, and Jesus said to her, "Hey, there's nothing to be afraid of...because of your faith." What Jesus is saying is, "You understood there was nowhere else to turn; only I could give you what you need, and you believed that. Because of that you've been healed. Go in peace." That is the promise of the angels, isn't it? Because Jesus has come, "Peace on earth; there is no reason to be afraid."

Now I understand that God doesn't choose to heal every disease. You're battling something. That something may alter your lifestyle dramatically. For some of you, it may even be terminal. But I do understand this: that disease is not more powerful than Jesus. I understand Jesus may not choose to heal me of my disease until Paradise, but I do know that that disease has come through God's filter, and it is not more powerful than Jesus. For reasons I cannot understand, God has made that part of my story and I can accept that. I don't believe God is up in his Heaven, wringing his hands, saying, "Boy, I just didn't see that coming. I had this wonderful plan for Bryan, and then this disease overpowers him, and the plan has been thwarted." God is so disappointed because of what might have been. I don't think it is like that at all. If I can know that no disease is more powerful than the power of Jesus, and whatever disease comes into my body, I will accept the fact that it has come through His filter, and for reasons I cannot understand, God has made it part of my story. But the disease has not won. The disease has not altered God's plan; it is part of the plan, and for that reason I can accept it.

The disciples asked, "Who is this man?" The answer is: He is the One who has the power over the storms of life. When God's asleep in your boat, there is nothing to be afraid of. The question is, "Where is your faith?" He is the One who has power over the forces of darkness, the One who has the power in a matter of minutes to break the bondage of whatever it is that holds you in chains. He has the power to change your life like no other power. He has the power over disease. There is no disease that is more powerful than the power of Jesus. But there is a problem and that is: this whole incident with the woman has taken some time.

Verse 49:

While He was still speaking, someone came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, "Your daughter has died; do not trouble the Teacher anymore." But when Jesus heard this, He answered him, "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe, and she will be made well." And when He came to the house, He did not allow anyone to enter with Him, except Peter and John and James, and the girl's father and mother. Now they were all weeping and lamenting for her; but He said, "Stop weeping, for she has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him, knowing that she had died. He, however, took her by the hand and called, "Child, arise!" And her spirit returned, and she got up immediately; and He gave orders for something to be given her to eat. (vs. 49-55)

This was a great miracle that Jesus healed the hemorrhaging woman. But then word comes to Jairus, "Your daughter is dead; there is no need to bother the Teacher anymore; let's just go home." But Jesus hears this and says, "Hey, wait a minute...wait a minute; you still don't understand who's here. This is God in the flesh. It's okay; she is going to be okay." As a matter of fact, He says, "You don't need to be afraid; this is Me; I even have the power over death." They get back home and there are mourners. For someone of a high rank such as Jairus, when a family member died, they hired mourners. These are paid mourners; that's what they do. So, Jesus informs them, "Hey, you don't need to keep mourning; you know your job here is over; she is going to be okay." And they laugh at him; "Of course she's dead."

You know I see here a lot of people laughing at the story of Christmas. They think it's silly. The story of God in the flesh to them is as silly as the story of Santa Claus himself. But I've noticed something over the years. Those people who laugh at the story of Christmas are the same people that live each day in fear; they are the same people! You see, if the story of Christmas is not true, you should be afraid, because you've got nowhere else to turn. I'd be afraid too. They were

laughing because they had no idea who was walking among them. It was God in the flesh; that changes everything! So, Jesus enters into the room of this little girl and with a touch of His hand, she is brought from death back to life. That's what Jesus does. He even has the power over the grave itself. There is, in that miracle, the reminder that Jesus even has power over death. That's the whole point: that the grave is no longer the victor. Death has not won the battle because Jesus has the power even over the grave.

“Who is this man that even the wind and sea obey him?” Well, it's the long-awaited Messiah; it's the Savior of the world; it's God in flesh. He's the one who has the power over the storms of life. When God's sleeping in your boat, what is there to be afraid of? He is the one that has power over the forces of darkness...whatever it is that holds you in bondage. He is the one that has power over disease, and even when I struggle with disease, I know the disease has not won. It's not more powerful than the power of Jesus, and I can accept that, if it is part of God's plan for my story. And ultimately, He has power over the grave, which is the promise of spiritual life today and eternal life forever.

So, remind me again: what is it in your life that is just too big for God? The question is, “Where is your faith? Is it in your bank account? ...in the market? ...in the marketplace? ...in the government? ...in yourself?” If the answer to any of those is “yes”, you should be afraid, because none of them are up to the task. But if your faith is in Jesus, I've got to ask you this morning, “What are you afraid of?” That is the whole point of Christmas: “DO NOT BE AFRAID...for unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, the long-awaited Messiah, God in the flesh!”

We understand that the Christmas story gave birth to the Easter story, where Jesus would fulfill His mission to be the Savior of the world. Then, there, Jesus, God in the flesh, would be nailed to a cross in payment for the sins of the world, that those who say, “I need a Savior,” those who say, “I need the touch of Jesus,” those who know they need the forgiveness that only God can offer, put their faith in Jesus' death on the cross, embrace Jesus' death on the cross, and say, “Yes, He did that for me, because I needed to be saved from my sins.” Experience life experience the forgiveness of sin and experience a relationship with God and the promise of Paradise forever.

We all have that thing deep in our hearts that says, “There's got to be more than this. There's got to be a world where there is not pain, and there is not suffering, and there are no more wars. We have to have been made for something more than this.” And the answer is, “Absolutely yes,” ...made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross. And He offers it to you as a gift. I have to tell you, if you trust Jesus as your Savior, your future is more wondrous than you could even imagine today. So, I ask you the question, “What are you afraid of; what are you afraid of?”

Fear not for unto you was born that day in the city of David, a savior, the long-awaited Messiah, God in the flesh. Jesus. If the story of Christmas is true, I've got to tell you, there's nothing to be afraid of.

Our Father, we are thankful for the story of Christmas, that gave birth to the story of Easter, which is the story of salvation. Lord many, many, many of us have experienced the life changing touch of Jesus and our lives have never been the same. Lord, remind us again this Christmas season that if Christmas is true, everything changes. And if our faith is in Jesus, there is no reason to be afraid. Lord, for those who have never experienced the life changing power of Jesus, may this be their day. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Arnie: Bryan, you talked about fear today. When does fear cross the line from being a good thing - a necessary reaction - to becoming a destructive thing in our lives?

Bryan: Yeah, fear isn't bad. As a matter of fact, fear's necessary when a threat is legitimate and it's imminent. So, I like the rattlesnake illustration. If I'm walking down a path hiking somewhere, and there's a rattlesnake in the path, that should scare me. That fear keeps me from getting bit. But if that pushes to where now I'm afraid there's a rattlesnake in my car, and there's one in my office, and there's one in my bed, and there's one in my house, then all of a sudden I've pushed that to an extreme, to where I'm paralyzed and I can't function anymore. So, is the fear reasonable? Is it legitimate and is that threat imminent? But the other one is that there's lots of things in the culture to be afraid of that I can fear, but what can I do to change that? And if I can't do anything to change that, then I need to think about, well, what's God's part and what's my part? Otherwise I just get paralyzed by a lot of things I can't change or control.

Arnie: So, Bryan, I can agree with you theoretically, that because Jesus has come, there's no reason to be afraid. I get that. But we see in our research, Christ-followers that you would think would be really strong, have these great fears about the future.

Bryan: So again, there are lots of things that legitimately concern us, but my question is always, how does worry fix that? How does being fearful change that? To me, it's just a waste of energy. Our hope is in Christ, it's in the world to come. And no matter what happens in this world, that's going to be true.

Arnie: I'm old enough to know of a time when the birth of Jesus was the story of Christmas, and Santa was just a fun tradition, but it seems like now it's flip-flopped over the years, and now Santa and the Grinch and the general goodwill of mankind is the theme, and the birth of Jesus is just a fairy tale tradition.

Bryan: Yeah. So, I think that is right, and I think it's symptomatic of a secular culture. So, we can complain about that all day long, but you're just fighting the symptoms of a secular culture. And those symptoms are going to be endless; but better, just still see it as a great time of year to reach out to the people around us. The issue is still there that people need Jesus, and it's a time of year when people are often willing to talk and listen.

Arnie: So, do we boycott the stores that say, "Happy Holidays", instead of "Merry Christmas"?

Bryan: You know, I hope not. You know, I really feel like as Christians we need to stop fighting, stop trying to power up about all these things. We're going to lose; we're a minority now in our country. What we do need to recognize is, that Christmas is a very hard time for lots of people, and it's an opportunity to love and to care, and I think it is an opportunity to share the love of Christ with people.

Cara: That reminds me of what we studied from First Peter. It's our good conduct and our good deeds that speak, and they allow us to share Christ in this culture.

Bryan: Absolutely. There's no shortage of pain at Christmas. And so, go to the pain. There are practical ways we can help, and especially think in terms of relationship. It's fine to put money in a kettle; it's a good thing. It's fine to drop off a package, but the better opportunity is this chance to meet people, to build relationships, to meet neighbors. There's something about Christmas that just opens up doors in a kind of unique way.

Cara: For reasons we can't always understand, God allows heartache and disease and death to be part of our story. But you reminded us that none of this alters God's plan. In fact, it's part of His plan. Can you explain that a little more?

Bryan: Yeah. So, I'd be the first one to say there are lots of questions and things we don't understand. I've lived that out myself. But I do understand God has allowed this. And just because I don't understand the reason, doesn't mean there isn't a reason. So, you look at what Paul talks about in Philippians Chapter One, and even being put in prison is an opportunity to advance the Gospel. So, it's a really good question to always ask, "How can God use this circumstance in my life to somehow advance the Gospel?"