

Exorcism And Demon Possession #1

The subject of exorcism has fascinated people for centuries. In our modern day, Catholic priests all over the world claim to exorcise demonic spirits out of the human body, as well as many Protestants and other spiritual individuals. In order for an exorcism to take place, a demonic spirit must be present. This statement leads us to several questions, all of which can be answered through a detailed study of God's word. While undoubtedly demons at one time freely roamed the earth, is this still the case in our present day? If demons still possess humans today, do exorcists cast out demons with the authority of God? Do exorcisms work?

The History Of Evil Spirits

From a historical standpoint, possession of evil spirits has been around as long as civilization itself. Ancient Mesopotamia believed and recognized bad fortune, diseases, and all other sicknesses as the work of evil spirits prevailing in a person. Ancient Babylonian priests carried out the ritual of melting a clay statue in the figure of a demon to disconnect the evil spirit from the body. The Persians, Greeks, Hindus, and even the Romans all looked at demon possession as real, having spiritual leaders and rituals to cast out these demons.

From a biblical standpoint, the mentioning of demon possession has a far shorter history than the world perspective. The Old Testament mentions nothing of "free will" demons attaching themselves or possessing human beings. The only mention of any kind of spirit occurs with the case of Abimelech (Judges 9), and Saul (1 Samuel 16).

Abimelech was the son of Gideon, the great judge who defeated the Midianites with only 300 men (Judges 7:7, 21; 8:30-31). It was coveting of power that led Abimelech to kill all of his brothers save one, that he could become ruler. The Lord sent a "*spirit of ill will*" ("*evil spirit*," KJV, ASV) upon Abimelech and the people of Shechem. This was not the Lord tempting Abimelech (1 Corinthians 10:13; James 1:13-14), but rather allowing Abimelech to pursue his own evil desires. This made the people of Shechem rebel against him, and he ended up dying as he had lived -- a prideful man (Judges 9:53-55).

King Saul had disobeyed the Lord on two occasions, both of them cost him his right to be king and his kingdom (1 Samuel 13:11-14; 15:10-26). It was during this time that the Lord sent a "*distressing spirit*" upon Saul causing him to be swallowed up in his own grief (1 Samuel 16:14-15).

The nation of Israel under the Law of Moses was forbidden to have anything to do with pagan spiritists or diviners (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27). This is why the exorcising of demon-possessed souls does not show up in Jewish history until around the 1st century A.D. The *dybbuk* is considered a demon possession which causes a person mental illness, and changes in their personality.

Unclean Spirits Of The New Testament

The dawning of the New Testament era brought with it a new wave of demon possession across the lands of the Bible. This shows an interesting contrast between the times that demon possession pops up and the purposes God has for mankind. All during the 400 years of silence (the time period which God had no verbal interaction with man), no possession of demons are mentioned in the secular history of mankind within these lands.

When the time for Christ to come into the world approached, God allowed spiritual things to take place, and demon possession was one of them. It is interesting to find that nearly all of the mentions of demons possessing people happen within the three year span of Jesus' life covered in the Gospels. Only three instances occur outside of the Gospels: Peter cast out unclean spirits from the people surrounding Jerusalem (Acts 5:16), Phillip in Samaria as he preached the gospel (Acts 8:7), and Paul did it twice during his travels preaching the gospel (Acts 16:16-18; 19:12). This is to show the point that demon possession was not random, but was planned and calculated so that the Messiah would be glorified through the miracles He would perform.

Consider the whole purpose for God to work miracles through man to begin with; it is to prove a message that was spoken (Mark 16:20). When we answer the reason why Jesus cast out these unclean spirits in this particular point of time in history, we understand the reason for demon possession in the first place. Jesus cast out demons from people so that they would know He was the Messiah (John 5:36). Consider His first time casting out an unclean spirit, from the man in the synagogue at Galilee. As Jesus cast it out, He had to rebuke it because it was testifying of Him as the Son of God. After this spirit had come out, many people were curious of Him, and this was exactly the point! The people wanted to know by what authority Jesus did this, what doctrine this was, and who this man is?! Such a reaction was exactly what Jesus expected. In many other instances this is also the case (Matthew 4:23-25; 8:29; Mark 3:11, 22; 5:7-8, 20; Luke 4:41). So God's whole purpose of allowing demon possession in the times of the first century was to prove Jesus was the Messiah, whether by Jesus Himself, or later by His apostles and disciples.

If Jesus gave this power to His apostles and disciples (Matthew 10:1; Luke 10:1, 17), does this mean that everyone could possibly have this power also? No greater example exists in answering this question than that of Sceva and his sons (Acts 19:13-17). Practice of magic and incantations was common in the days of the first century, and the Jews were no exception. Ephesus in particular was a popular place for magic, shown with the vast number of people coming and confessing of these deeds (Acts 19:19). Jewish practitioners of magic were highly esteemed, as they only were known to have the correct pronunciation of the sacred name of God. The ancients misunderstood this and looked to it as a prestigious magical incantation. The priests especially were looked upon as higher, being they had closer contact with God. However, the account with Sceva's sons shows quite the opposite as far as what God thinks of them. As these exorcists looked to use the name of Jesus as an incantation, seeing the effectiveness Paul had with it, were overpowered by this demon and humiliated along with it. The name of Jesus was not to be misused, something these men learned firsthand! Not everyone using the name of Jesus is going to have success, but only those who carry with it the approval and authority of God! These sons found themselves in the same circle as Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:20-21). If an exorcism is going to take place, then it must first have the power of God, and second the authority of God. This does not happen by merely saying the name of Jesus, but only happens to those to whom it has been given!

So we see that the Bible teaches that the possession of evil spirits were very few and far between in the Old Testament times, and served a very pointed purpose when Jesus walked the earth. In the next article we will examine if exorcisms can properly be carried out today with the authority of God.

Scott Vanderwood