

Meeting with Christ

Mark 5:1-20

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Introduction

Other than the gospel events themselves (Christ's death and resurrection), perhaps no stories show us more of our Savior Jesus Christ than His personal interactions with sinners. Throughout the gospels, we see Christ dealing with individuals, gently meeting their needs and skillfully guiding them to faith in Himself.

My personal favorite of these interactions is found in our text in Mark 5. While this demon-possessed, wild man may seem very different from our typical conversion experiences, I believe this story actually lays out the four things that happen every time someone has a meeting with Christ.

We will discover in this text a divine appointment, a divine confrontation with sin, a divine transformation of the whole person, and a divine assignment.

What is our purpose in reviewing the conversion process this morning? When I was one of the pastors at a church down South for about nine years, one of my favorite parts of the ministry was listening to personal conversion narratives. Every time I heard someone explain how he or she came to faith in Christ, I was reminded of my own story and was given additional reasons to rejoice in God my Savior. As you see what Christ did for this man (actually, Matthew tells us two men met Christ on the shore that day, but, like Mark and Luke, we will focus on the more prominent of the two), review in your mind your own story. Every person in this building today has or needs to have a testimony of meeting with Christ. I hope you either walk out rejoicing anew in what Christ has done for you, and you find yourself desperately wanting to meet Christ yourself.

Second, this story should leave all of us as believers yearning to share our stories with others.

First consider how this man's conversion resulted from a divine appointment.

I. A Divine Appointment

In Mark 4, we learn that Jesus was teaching the multitude on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, as He often did. The centerpiece of the day's teaching was the Parable of the Sower, in which the Son of Man goes forth spreading seed so that some can believe and bear fruit.

Possibly to escape the crowd, He and the apostles boarded a fishing boat and crossed the lake. While out on the lake, a squall came up. The Sea of Galilee is known for having such storms, and this one must have been bad because it frightened even these veteran fishermen. The apostles awoke Jesus, who was sleeping through the storm, and He rebuked the wind and waves and calmed the sea. His rebuke of their fear is intended to show them that they still have not figured out who He is. They may go down in a squall—they probably had relatives who had done so—but *He* won't.

Chapter five begins with Christ and the apostles landing on the southeastern shore of the lake, near a town called Gadara (6 miles from the shore). It was evening when they started across, so it is no doubt dark when they arrive.

Gadara was an area dominated by Gentiles, called the Decapolis. Christ rarely went to Gentile areas. We know of a couple of trips through Samaria, which wasn't exactly Gentile, and of a brief stop in Sidon. In two of these forays into non-Jewish territory, He met the needs of a specific non-Jewish person while there (the woman at the well—He must “needs” go through Samaria; and the Syro-Phoenician woman—giving crumbs to the dog). Perhaps, Christ chose this particular spot on the eastern coastline because He had someone particular in mind to meet. Christ's summary of His mission was that He had come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

No one gets saved apart from a divine appointment. God masterfully orchestrates events to bring sinners into the presence of the gospel.

As part of the sermon this morning, not only will we see the testimony of this unnamed Gadarene, but I want to share additional testimonies to illustrate my points.

Testimony 1: H. W. (Hanmer William) Webb-Peploe, one of the great British preachers of the late 19th century, contributed his testimony to the *Fundamentals*, a series of publications produced by Fundamentalists between 1910 and 1915 that proclaimed the nature of conservative Christianity. His story went like this:

Webb-Peploe grew up in a Christian home but resisted becoming a believer himself. He was planning to go off to university and did not want to commit to a particular view of the world until doing so. As he was about to enter Cambridge, he was invited by a friend to spend the night at the friend's manor house. The friend was wealthy, so Webb-Peploe found this invitation hard to refuse. He discovered upon arriving, however, that the friend had invited him over in order to lead him to the Lord. He was shaken by the conversation, but the next morning he determined to put it behind him.

Trying to escape thinking about the previous evening's discussion, he went the next day to some horse races—the only time in his life he ever did so. He chose that venue because he didn't want to see any Christians. As he approached the gates, which were closed because a horse race was in progress, a young man handed him a piece of paper and asked him to read it. Thinking the young man needed him to read it to him, he glanced down and discovered the words, "Reader, if you died tonight, would your soul be IN HELL?" Terrified, he simply turned and ran for all he was worth the six or seven miles to the tutor with whom he was to stay until he entered Cambridge.

While at the tutor's, he heard of a young farmer in the neighborhood who had experienced a remarkable conversion and was aggressively evangelizing the area. He therefore made every effort to avoid running into this farmer and succeeded for a day or two. But on the third day, he ran right into him. The first words out of the farmer's mouth were an invitation to come read the Scriptures with him.

Webb-Peploe was amazed that three times within a week, God had sent three different young men to confront him with the gospel. God had "sicked the hounds of heaven" on him, if you will. He agreed to read the Scriptures with the young farmer and was shortly afterwards converted.

It was a divine appointment. It always is.

II. A Divine Confrontation

We return to the dark shore on the southeastern coast of the Sea of Galilee (archaeologists believe they can identify this spot, based on the nearby tombs, a steep place for pigs to descend, and a modern town at the spot believed to be Gadara).

Consider this situation. As Christ and the apostles disembark from their boat, they are met by a wild-eyed, naked, bloody lunatic, perhaps dragging chains behind him. Pretty terrifying stuff.

Furthermore, this was at the end of a long day of teaching (remember that Jesus had been sleeping through a storm a few minutes earlier). I've always imagined the apostles seeing the man running toward them and suggesting to Christ that they find a different shore. But this is exactly where Christ wants them to be.

Consider this man. He was demon-possessed. According to Luke, he had previously lived in the town, but was now living in the tombs, having been driven out by the Gadarenes (caves that are used as tombs have been found near the modern town of Khersa, about two miles from shore).

Why did this demon-possessed man make the two-mile hike to meet Christ at the shore (comparing verses 2 and 6, we see that the demoniac saw Christ landing from far off and ran to meet him on the shore)? This is a divine appointment. It is obvious that the demons would not have led the man there. But Christ is much more powerful than demons.

Other people had not helped him. In fact, they tried to bind him with chains. Perhaps, he had been dangerous. He was certainly extremely strong (it's mighty hard to break an iron chain, but that's what verse 4 says he did).

He led a really miserable life. He wore no clothes (Luke 8:27). The demons had destroyed his sense of shame. He cried out – in pain? For help? To frighten others? Perhaps, all of the above. He cut himself. The demons enjoy inflicting pain and destroying their victims.

But the confrontation that unfolds is not merely between Christ and the man. This man is possessed by demons.

Consider these demons. It's clear from verse 8 that Jesus spoke first. He said, "Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit."

The demons replied, "What do you want with me?" Cf. 2 Sam. 16:10; 19:22 (in both of these passages, King David is speaking to Abishai, who wants to act contrary to David's wishes). The expression is a Hebrew idiom that essentially means, "We have nothing in common—leave me alone!" The demon then says something rather amazing: he invokes God's name so that Christ will not torture him.

The demon's name was "Legion." A Roman legion consisted of about 6000 troops. Obviously, there was a big crowd of demons in this man. Nevertheless, they recognized that they had no chance against Jesus (this is one of the thousands of implicit proofs of Jesus' deity in the Scriptures. If a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness ever comes to your door and tries to convince you that Jesus is not the eternal God, let me assure you that these demons knew better. They outnumbered Jesus thousands to one and yet cringed in fear before Him).

They repeatedly beg Jesus not to send them "away out of the country." Luke is more specific. They begged Him not to send them "out into the deep." The word translated *deep* is the word that we transliterate *abyss*. This is the word used in Revelation 9:1-2 & 20:1-3 of the "bottomless pit." Some demons we know are bound in chains in darkness awaiting final judgment (Jude 6). Legion is asking that they not be sent to the same place. Jesus had the power to do so.

Why did the demons want to go into the pigs on the hillside, and why did Jesus allow them to do so? The text doesn't say explicitly and so interpreters have to fill in the blanks. Here is what I believe.

These demons had firsthand experience of the people of Gadara. They knew how much these people loved their pork industry. They also knew they were going to lose the man they had long inhabited. But they didn't want the whole town to turn to Christ, as the town of Sychar had after the woman at the well was saved. So they decided to destroy the pig herd, figuring that the people would place more value on the pigs than on the delivered man.

But why would Christ then give permission? Was He duped? There are at least two reasons.

On the one hand, Christ permitted the destruction of the pigs as an illustration to these people of what demons will do when given a free hand. This poor man wasn't sick or deranged; he was controlled by demons. The destruction of the pigs is proof that he had a spiritual need, and he is proof that Christ can meet any spiritual need.

Perhaps, even more significantly, Christ allowed the demons to enter and destroy the herd of pigs because He wanted the Gadarenes to choose between Him and the pigs.

When someone meets Christ, there is always such a confrontation. A person is saved only when he turns from idols to serve the living and true God.

Testimony 2: A friend of mine was reared a nominal R.C. but rejected religion and studied psychology at a major university. He was easy to get along with but immersed in a wicked lifestyle. His philosophy was to live and let live.

So when campus missionaries visited his dorm room, he politely listened to the gospel but made no commitments. One of those missionaries was burdened for him and got permission to come back the next week. Week after week, this visitor read the Scriptures to my friend, never really seeing any change. This went on for months, but my friend was thinking through what commitment to Christ would involve.

Finally one night, the man who had dedicated himself to seeing my friend saved, came and presented the gospel once again. He then left, thinking again that the man would not admit the truth of the gospel.

But the man believed. His eyes were opened: he saw his sinfulness, the truth of the Scriptures, and the way of salvation through Christ. He then spent the whole night weeping, thinking about his mistress, his habits, his life's goals—all would change. But Christ was drawing him to salvation, and my friend exchanged it all for Him.

Every meeting with Christ is a meeting of a *sinner* with Christ and so involves a confrontation. Granted, we are saved *in* our sins—we make no

changes to our lifestyles in order to be saved; but we are also saved *from* our sins.

Which leads to the third point ...

III. A Divine Transformation

In verse 15 of our text, the people from town discover the demoniac. As the gospel writers often do, Mark shifts here to the present tense. While a common occurrence in Greek narrative, this shift may have the effect of giving vividness. It is as if we are there on the shore with Christ and the former demoniac.

Look at the changes! He is now sitting. Verse 4 had said no one could “tame him.” The word means to “subdue or bring under control.” But Jesus conquered him.

Second, he is clothed. Someone in Jesus’ entourage gave up his clothes for him. The primary changes Christ effects are in the inner man, but He is concerned about the whole man. He wants us to look like we have been transformed.

Third, he is in his right mind. The word translated *right mind* is used four times in the NT in addition to its use in this story (in Mark and Luke). Rom. 12:3; 2 Cor. 5:13; Titus 2:6; 1 Peter 4:7. In each of these, it is translated in the KJV with the word *sober* and refers to disciplined thoughts, self-control. In other words, for the first time in his life, this man could control his own thoughts, and through Christ’s power he was thinking correctly about things. What a deliverance!

Commenting on this passage, Calvin writes, “Though we are not tortured by the devil, yet he holds us as his slaves, till the Son of God delivers us from his tyranny. Naked, torn, and disfigured, we wander about, till he restores us to soundness of mind.”

Testimony 3: Elias Keach was the son of Benjamin Keach, a major figure among British Baptists in the late 17th century (arguably the greatest 17th-century Baptist theologian). However, his son Elias hated being a preacher’s kid and rejected his father’s teaching.

At age 19, having saved some money, Elias went to America to seek his fortune and escape his father’s shadow. Passing through the Philadelphia area, he came upon a small group of Baptists meeting in Pennepack (now a northern suburb of Philadelphia) These Scotch-Irish immigrants were Baptists but had no pastor. This was common in the colonies. When they asked him his name, he made the tactical error of admitting that he was the son of Benjamin Keach. Excited, they asked him to minister among them.

Elias decided to play a joke on them and agreed. Knowing one of his father's sermons by heart, Elias began to preach it to these people.

In the middle of his sermon, the Holy Spirit convicted him, and he broke down and began shaking uncontrollably. Concerned for his health, they asked him what was wrong, and he confessed his deceit. He himself was converted, saved in the middle of his own sermon!

Trained by an area Baptist pastor, he started five assemblies in the Philadelphia area and left an impact felt a century later. He returned to England in 1792, was reunited with his dad, held wonderfully successful meetings in London, and died at age 34 of tuberculosis.

When Christ meets a person, He intends to transform the person.

Finally, having seen the divine appointment, the divine confrontation, and the divine transformation, consider the divine assignment.

IV. A Divine Assignment

The herdsmen fled to town, and soon a bunch of Gadarenes showed up. Notice how verses 15-17 support the reconstruction I suggested earlier. Mark says they saw the man who had formerly been possessed; they saw Christ; and they saw their pigs—their livelihood—drowned in the sea. They had a choice to make.

They chose the pigs and rejected Christ. Like the rich young ruler, they were not prepared to part with all they had to follow Christ.

What a contrast with the delivered man! As the Gadarenes begged Christ to leave their shores, the new convert begged Christ to let him stay with Him. This is a very good sign that someone has the real thing: a true convert wants to spend time with Christ, with Christ's Word, with Christ's people.

After all, why would he want to stay with the Gadarenes? What had they ever done for him? In Gadara, he would now be a stranger and a pilgrim, having embraced what they scorned. He was like Paul, who desired to depart, which is far better.

But Christ had mercy on the Gadarenes, even though they rejected Him. He sent the healed man back to them, to tell his family and friends about the Lord. This was his commission, his assignment.

And he went with great theology. Notice that Christ says, "Go tell them the great things the Lord—by which He means God—has done for you." The man goes and tells everyone what Christ has done for him.

Testimony 4: Let me share one more brief testimony. I know a man whose parents were both converted when they were teenagers. By the time the man was born, they were a very godly couple and had him in church when he probably should have been in the nursery.

He heard about heaven when he was in first grade in a Christian school, back when Christian schools were not yet popular, and he got saved. He attended Christian school for the rest of his schooling, went off to Christian university, married a godly girl, and has served in various Christian ministries ever since.

Whose testimony is that? That would be mine.

What a boring testimony!

But what is true of me? My meeting with Christ in chapel when I was six years old was no accident. It was an appointment. Christ found me just as sinful as this demoniac, confronted that sin and launched a lifelong work of transforming me into His own image. And He gave me an assignment: to share my story with everyone I can.

Conclusion

How about you? Could you add your testimony to this sermon? Do you remember when God made that appointment with you, confronted you in your sins, and launched the process of transformation?

Are you grateful for Christ's gracious power exercised on your behalf?

If we are believers, Christ has sought us, confronted us, transformed us, and commissioned us. Are we telling others of the great things He has done for us? How are we doing with our assignment?