



September 2010

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WHEN LIFE IS JUST TOO MUCH

By Ron Allen

I have a friend who lives in an assisted living residence for aged persons. He is there against his will. His family made a decision to house him there where (in their words) he won't be a danger to himself and a constant worry to them. Too old to withstand their persuasions, he finds himself in a smallish room, robbed of all things familiar and outraged at the loss of his independence.

How precious to be in control of one's own life! Yet, in reflecting on the plight of my friend, I am realizing that it is very much par-for-the-course in human life, *not* to be in control. So much of what happens in our short span is foisted on us. If you live in Afghanistan, you will feel the truth of that statement. Millions of Haitians are still wandering dazed and broken amid the rubble of their homes. They know for sure, that what they call *their* life, is *not theirs* to decide.

Over the last two years the world has been engulfed by the Global Financial Meltdown. Our free markets have gone into a tailspin. Financial institutions that have stood grand and impregnable for generations have been liquidated. The social cost is vast. There is much damage. Families face eviction orders; retirees' savings have evaporated; unemployment is a reality for millions. No longer is there need for proof that we are not in control. Our life conditions are shaped by the interplay of forces too large for us. We are like bottles on a stormy sea. The two old foes—dread and alarm—peer at us. How shall we live?

In Mark's fourth chapter, the disciples are 'all at sea.' A furious squall has rushed down on them from the hills. Waves spill over the gunwales and they are in immanent danger of sinking. Jesus is there, but as they struggle desperately against the sea, they are dismayed to find that he is asleep in the stern. In fear and anger they shake him awake. "*Don't you care if we drown?*" Then Jesus stands and tells the sea and the wind to be quiet. A great calm follows.

Naturally the disciples are astounded. Looking at one another they ask, "*Who is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!*" Their question underscores the answer suggested by the events themselves. Just as God controlled the forces of evil that threatened to swallow up Israel at the Red Sea, so

Jesus acts against hostile elements about to swallow up his disciples. What is true of Israel's God is true of Jesus.

Significantly, the next episode in Mark's record of Jesus' ministry involves a man in the grip of destructive powers. The description of this person in Mark 5:2-5 is detailed and vivid:

When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.



A furious squall has rushed down on them from the hills.

This poor man lives in a stressful, manic state. People have tried many times to manacle him. Nothing anyone can do is strong enough to rein in the violent wrenching of his body. He lives in the caves where the dead are buried. Day and night his shrieking is heard. So cruelly is he hurled back and forth that he gashes himself against the rocks.

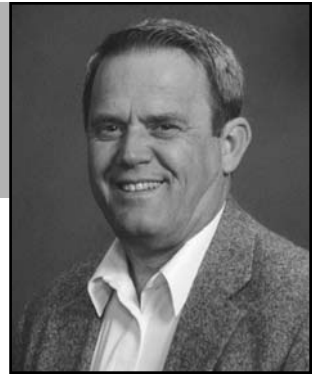
Every word about the man emphasizes his pathetic condition. The powers that possess him are degrading. The image of God in him is well nigh obliterated. Coercive

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him” (Mark 5:4).


Before he met Jesus, the Gerasene man who lived in a cemetery had been the subject of attempts to help him, on the part of his community. They sought to help him by shackling him. They probably had the best of intentions, but their efforts failed.

Strange as it may seem, we human beings—exposed to adverse influences as we often are—have a natural confidence in blunt instruments of coercion as the best means to hold malevolent forces at bay. The marshalling of sanctions, critiques, condemnations, extra regulation or strait-jacketing are the methods that come most readily to mind. When it comes to helping our fellow-battlers who fall afoul of the world’s outrageous fortune, there is an arsenal of spiritual fetters that we know how to invoke in order to get them back in order.

When a succession of disasters has rolled over your life, have you ever felt that your situation was made worse by those who set out to help you; colleagues, family, church? When you were overwhelmed by events in business, in work in marriage, were you the subject of advice that fell on you like fresh blows? When you were in hospital, fighting for your life, did anyone tell you that if your faith was strong enough you would get better? When you made a mistake and landed yourself in a moral quagmire, did your community weigh you down with chains of condemnation?

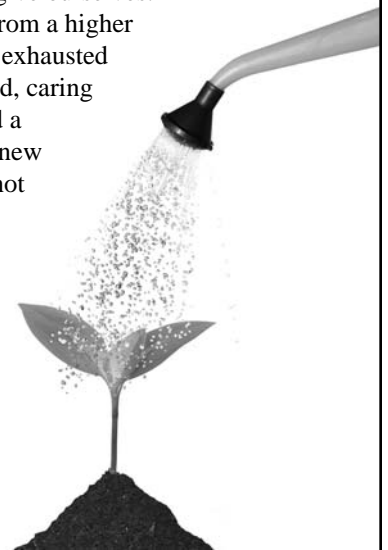
Most societies banish their failures to the fringes, away from the main thoroughfare where they can’t be seen and their cries are less piercing; where their continued distress cannot advertise our inability to redeem them.

To one of life’s casualties, Jesus brought not more fetters; not

more confinements or detentions. He brought not suggestions or warnings but good news. He brought not law, but grace. *No one had been strong enough to subdue the demoniac. What the law could not do... God did, by sending his Son” (Romans 8:3).* Not by his own efforts, nor the efforts of his friends, were the man’s tormentors conquered, but by the sovereign calm of Christ’s presence. 

There will be times in our lives when we desperately need help, because we won’t be able to do for ourselves what we desperately need done. When we are financially bankrupt, when we cannot lend ourselves the money to solve our problems; we need help from beyond ourselves. In the same way, when we feel guilty and inadequate, we cannot forgive ourselves. Forgiveness has to come from a higher source. And when we feel exhausted from the effort to be a good, caring person, from helping build a better world, we cannot renew our own strength. We cannot supply ourselves with the one thing we are out of. For that, we have to turn to God to renew our strength so that we can keep running and not grow weary.

-Harold Kushner. WHO NEEDS GOD. p.141.



GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

Good News Unlimited magazine is published every month by Good News Unlimited, P.O. Box 6687, Auburn, CA, USA 95604-6687.

Good News Unlimited is an interdenominational Christian organization proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ and his kingdom of grace. Special emphasis is placed on the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ’s righteousness alone. GNU also links the gospel to the needs of the whole person, to life-style, and preventive medicine.

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public meetings in Canada and overseas); and the dissemination of literature, audio and video material. (A comprehensive catalog is available free on request.)

Good News Unlimited is a nonprofit religious corporation supported solely by donations from those who believe in its ministries. Gifts are tax deductible in the USA and Canada. An annual review of GNU’s accounts is made by an external auditor. All regular donors to GNU may receive a financial statement on request.

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This magazine is free upon request.

September, 2010
Vol. 29, No.9

Published by Good News Unlimited

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energies brutalize him. He is *a man with an evil spirit*. People in Bible times looked on a person's body as the 'house' of his spirit. At any time a spirit other than the spirit of a person's true self might gain access to the 'house.' For example, a deaf-mute man is seen as having a deaf and dumb spirit (Mark 9). This man is not himself. He has lost control. We would say today, "Something has gotten into him."

When Jesus meets the man, he commands the spirit to declare his name. "*My name is legion,*" replies the spirit, *for we are many*" (Mark 5:9). Compelled to yield to Jesus' superior authority by naming himself, the evil spirit reveals the full extent of the tyranny to which his victim has been subjected. An array of alien forces has taken him over; his will is annihilated and turned into an aggregation of conflicting impulses.



He is the human equivalent of the Sea of Galilee after Jesus had said to it: "Peace. Be still."

Some bystanders who hear the evil spirit say, *I am legion*, recognize the Roman military term for a force of six thousand soldiers. Given that life conditions in Palestine at this time are dictated by the Roman legions, the situation of the Gerasene madman models the plight of an entire people.

In the decades preceding Jesus' birth, Roman armies marched through the region, burning, enslaving the able-bodied and killing the infirm. Imperial Rome imposed crushing tax burdens accompanied by swift and vicious retribution for default. Mass crucifixions and near annihilation of whole towns struck terror into the hearts of the people.

In this very way, populations along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee have been traumatized. Life is uncertain and frightening. At any time, a family might be thrust into homelessness or servitude or both. The Gerasene madman epitomizes the disenfranchisement of oppressed people whose lives are hostage to big players on the world stage. The destruction of the Gerasene's personality and the ruthless subjugation of a nation are all of a piece. Both are accomplished by enemies of the human spirit—which are legion.

What are your life conditions? Do you suffer from the sway of things you can do nothing to stop? Do you sometimes feel

that you are the subject of malevolent pressures which thwart your plans and dash your hopes? Do you recognize yourself in the wrecked manhood of the tomb-dweller?

Perhaps you are a farmer whose long hours of sweated toil and careful stewardship of the land is brought undone by drought, fire or flood; a worker whose years of skilled and loyal service are erased in an instant by redundancy; a wife deserted and bereft; a man just returned from a visit to the doctor with news that he has just months to live.

It makes no difference who you are; your very humanity locates you amid a host of individuals who, for one reason or another, find life beyond their own control. They know for certain that their true position in the world is one of palpable weakness. They feel outmaneuvered and outgunned by repeated assaults against their very being—which are legion, many.

The man besieged by an army of alien spirits stands before Jesus. The scene quickly changes. Jesus commands the evil powers to leave. They obey. Jesus is too powerful for them. Then, just as there is a comprehensive description of the man's sorry state before Jesus comes, now there is an equally complete and beautiful summary of his new situation:


When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed, and in his right mind (Mark 5:15).

No longer torn, harassed and naked, he who before had been an island of misery in an ocean of chaos is now a paradise of harmony and serenity. He is the human equivalent of the Sea of Galilee after Jesus had said to it: "Peace. Be still."

What is your life? Does this Jesus who quells the raging sea, and puts to flight the pestiferous horde—does he interest you? Does he not seem marvelously competent; sufficient for the kind of life yours is?

The story of the Gerasene madman is a summons to faith. Jesus is more than adequate for the events and powers that play upon human existence. Where Jesus is, all is well, and all will be well.

*I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless,
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting; where grave thy victory,
triumph still if thou abide with me.*

-Henry F. Lyte. 

Among all my patients in the second half of life, that is, over thirty-five, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given their followers, and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.

-C.G. Jung. Modern Man in Search of a Soul.

THE MARK OF CALVARY

By Desmond Ford

Life is hell for most of us at some time or another, and sometimes for prolonged periods. Thus Calvary's pain can never be irrelevant. Recognizing the cross is in some sense a divine act, it must therefore be highly sacramental—an outward sign of something beyond itself—a pattern of universal reality.

The very shape and outline of the cross is suggestive of anguish, for while it imitates the form of man, it contradicts his two strongest instincts, the desire for action and the yearning for rest. There, man stretches out his arms to meet no soft embrace, no kind of reciprocating pressure; there his feet are made fast in the stocks, the iron enters into his soul, yet there transfixed, he is there transfigured, and he finds on Calvary his true Tabor. (Dora Greenwell. *Colloquia Crucis*. London, 1899)

How often we use the term 'excruciating' to describe what we or someone else feels. The term, of course, means suffering like that involved in crucifixion. No one in this world can avoid crosses in daily living. A world like ours, governed by inviolable law, inevitably gets in our way with considerable frequency. As John Bright has reminded us:

The redemption of man entails a cross... to be sure we have no intention of abandoning the cross. We enshrine it in the stained-glass window. We bow before it in prayer. But we want no part of it. We are possessed of the notion that the cross is for Christ, a once and for all thing of the past tense with little relation to the destiny of the militant and victorious church. Indeed, we feel it to be the business of church and religion to keep crosses far away, so our faith in the crucified Christ becomes some sort of charm to protect us from life's adversity. But there is a sense in which no true Christian can in any case escape the cross. It needs no great catastrophe, the path of life is dotted with crosses which men must bear.

The question is not if we should bear them, for bear them we shall, but only what sort of crosses will they be to us. Will they be the Christian cross or a thief's? Will we find in them dumb, brute agony, or the stuff of redemption? (The Kingdom of God, p. 279)

Unless we are first clear as to the meaning of life—why are we here and where are we going—for life's sorrows there is neither sense nor meaning. How you and I think of death makes all the difference to how we live. Only in Christ does human life find meaning.... All the gifts of this life are the result of Christ's cross. Thus everything that we know that is good—life itself, food, drink, the air we breathe, the clothes we wear, our loved ones and friends—all are stamped with the cross of Calvary which bought them. Therefore we own nothing. We are but the stewards of the gifts of his grace, and all should be used to his glory. To live as though we were our own is to live as atheists and to die as fools.

-Desmond Ford.
KALEIDOSCOPE
OF DIAMONDS.
Pp, 119-123.



... the path of life is dotted with crosses which men must bear.

What is the difference between a person who relies only on himself and a person who has learned to turn to God for help? Not that one will do bad things while the other will do good things. The self-reliant atheist may be a fine, upstanding person. The difference is, the atheist is like a "bush in the desert." If he has only himself to rely on, then when he exhausts his internal resources, he runs the risk of running dry and withering. But the man or woman who turns to God is like a tree planted by a stream. What they share with the world is replenished from a source beyond themselves, so that they never run dry.

-Harold Kushner. WHO NEEDS GOD.
pp. 138, 139.

