

THE LORD HEALS THE GADARENE DEMONIACS

Matthew 8:28-9:1

By Archpriest Peter Olsen

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In the Life of the Elder Joseph the Hesychast¹ we read about an incident concerning a monk named Fr. Alexios who was possessed by a demon. Alexios became possessed while he was a young man working with his father as a barrel maker. Medical science could not help him, so he decided to become a monk. For a time he stayed with the synodia² of the venerable saint Elder Joseph the Hesychast³ at New Skete. Whenever the demon overcame Fr. Alexios, his voice changed to that of a woman who was a prostitute. She would utter all kinds of profanities and blasphemies. The fathers always say the Jesus prayer⁴ when they are working. Once, while working with the Elder Ephraim⁵, Fr. Alexios also said the prayer, and the demon at once flared up inside of him. He became violent and started kicking everything. The demon started shouting and blaspheming, telling Fr. Alexios to “Shut up! Stop that muttering! Why do you keep saying the same words over and over again? Quit saying those words. You make me dizzy. I’m fine inside you—why do you want to disturb me? I’m going to tear you to pieces!”

The demon hated the prayer. Just hearing the name of Jesus said out loud tormented and burned him. We see this repeated many times in the Lives of the Saints when demoniacs were exposed to the prayer and the sacred name of Jesus. Elder Ephraim advised Fr. Alexios to ignore the demon, to be patient, and to concentrate on the prayer. Fr. Alexios asked, “Father, should I say a prayer also for the one inside me, for God to have mercy on him as well?” At once the demon seized him, lifted him up, and slammed him down. “Shut up! Shut up I told you. What are you saying? What do you mean “mercy”? Not mercy! I don’t want mercy! No! What have I done to ask for mercy? God is unjust! For one little sin, for one proud thought, He banished me from my glory. It’s not our fault; it’s His fault! He should repent, not us! Get mercy far away from me!”

The Elder Joseph always received Fr. Alexios with great love and compassion, and the young man was always calm when he was with him. The Elder commented that those who suffer in this life like Alexios are perhaps going through their hell here. But woe to those who will not repent so that God may chasten them compassionately in one way or another in this present life. Fr. Alexios stayed for a while with the Elder Joseph and his synodia and then left, considerably improved.

What you heard was a genuine example of contemporary demonic possession. I would like to clarify that mental illness and demonic possession are *not* the same thing. It is extremely important that we all understand this. There was a time when people believed that all mental illness was demonic possession. Today, however, we understand that there is a drastic difference between the two; that they are not the same thing. Psychiatry, albeit a relatively modern medical practice, has made great strides in leaps and bounds in helping those for whom there did not exist any viable means of treatment. Mental illness is no longer a hopeless illness, but can be treated by competent professionals using a variety of techniques — psychotherapy, pharmacology, and others means as well.⁶ On the other hand, this does not mean that genuine demonic possession does not exist. I can give you examples of genuine mental illness that, sadly, were misunderstood and believed to be demonic possession. The poor people who were misdiagnosed due to ignorance suffered greatly because their mental illness went untreated.

The demons cannot enter into us of their own volition. We must invite them in. We invite them in when we sin and do not repent. Christians are constantly engaged in an invisible warfare with these dark powers (Ephesians 6:12).⁷ Our weapons are humility, obedience, repentance, prayer, fasting, Confession, and Holy Communion. Other powerful weapons are

almsgiving (“mercy giving”), and showing kindness and love to others. As long as we “fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12), then we need not fear the demons ~ they will have no power over us. In particular, saying the Jesus prayer is a very special and powerful weapon in our struggles, but this will be a topic for another time and for another sermon. May the Lord help us all in our good struggles and lead us to victory on that final day when the Lord will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant; ...enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23).

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1. “My Elder Joseph the Hesychast,” by Elder Ephraim, Saint Anthony’s Greek Orthodox Monastery, 2013. See pages 592-596.
 2. Synodia - a small brotherhood of monastics under the spiritual leadership and guidance of an experienced spiritual father or Elder.
 3. Hesychast - one who practices undisturbed prayer in stillness and seclusion from the world in order to achieve union with God.
 4. Jesus prayer - The prayer “Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me” which is constantly repeated. Usually said using a prayer rope. Also simply referred to as “the prayer.”
 5. Elder Ephraim - the youngest member of the Elder Joseph’s synodia. Former abbot of Philotheou Monastery on the Holy Mountain, he went on to found seventeen monasteries in North America. He reposed in 2019 and was the abbot of St. Anthony’s Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona.
 6. See “Shrinks: The Untold Story of Psychiatry” by Jeffrey A. Lieberman and Ogi Ogas, Little Brown Spark, 2015.
 7. See “Unseen Warfare” by Theophan the Recluse, SVS Press, 1997.



Elder Joseph and his synodia. Elder Ephraim is first on the right.