

Acts 5:16

Introduction

Three weeks ago, we saw how in the New Testament, “signs and wonders” authenticate (or prove) that the brand-new announcement of salvation in Jesus is, in fact, the redemptive-historical fulfillment of all the covenants, and types, and shadows, and prophecies that had come before. Two weeks ago, we looked at the covenantal and redemptive-historical context for that specific category of “signs and wonders” which is miracles of healing. Miracles of healing “proved” the redemptive-historical reality that in the New Covenant that Jesus makes with His people—the covenant that even brings that people into existence—there are no longer any covenant curses. Jesus Himself has borne the curse of the broken Covenant of Works in our place, so that we might be healed—so that we might know God not as the one who strikes us, but *only* as our Healer in the Covenant of Grace. This week, we come to look at the redemptive-historical context for a specific category of “healing”: the casting out of demons. We read in Acts chapter five:

I. Acts 5:12–16 — Now through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people, and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Portico. Now none of the rest dared to associate with them; but the people were holding them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, multitudes of men and women, to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the multitude from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

The casting out of demons is not a minor or peripheral theme in the Gospels and in Acts. Instead, we could say that it lies at the very heart of Jesus’ ministry and of the message (the word) that He proclaims (Lk. 4:33-35, 40-41; 6:17-19; 7:20-22; 8:2; 9:1-2; 11:14-22; 13:32; Acts 8:6-7; 19:11-12; 16:16-18). Throughout the Gospels and Acts the healing of physical sickness and the casting out of demons always go hand in hand together with Jesus preaching of the kingdom. Why is this? In order to answer that question we need to go back in the unfolding story of redemptive history to the very beginning, and even before redemptive history itself begins. We read in Genesis chapter two:

II. The Kingdom of Satan

- Genesis 2:16–17 — And Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may surely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it; for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

Who is it, according to these verses, who has the power of death? It’s God alone, the Creator and Sovereign of the universe (cf. Lk. 12:5). We know that Adam did eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “and so death [spiritual and physical with all its attendant miseries] spread to all men, because [in Adam] all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). It’s God who holds the power of death and it is we who have earned the sentence of death due to our sin. And yet for all this, we

know that there was another “player” in the Garden. This other player didn’t share sovereignty with God, but was one of His creatures (albeit one who, mysteriously, had fallen into evil). This other player had no authority over Adam and Eve or over any of God’s good creation. This other player, of course, was the serpent—ultimately Satan, the devil himself.

It was Satan who lied to Eve in the garden and deceived her, telling her that she would surely *not die*, so that she took from the forbidden tree and ate; and gave also to her husband with her, and he ate (Gen. 3:1-6). It was in this way that Satan came to hold, in a derivative and secondary sense, “the power of death” with all its attendant miseries both in this life and that which is to come. The writer of Hebrews says of the devil that he “had the power of death” (Heb. 2:14). When Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and rebelled against Yahweh God, they were lusting after their own absolute autonomy, but what they ended up with was a new master—a cruel and merciless slave master who was the devil himself. And so the judgment of God (which is death) came to be personally manifested—as it were—in the devil who is, himself, a murderer (Jn. 8:44). Now the Apostle John can say that:

➤ 1 John 3:8 — The one who does sin is of the devil, because the devil sins from the beginning.

After Adam and Eve sinned, we found ourselves not simply subject to death, but existing in a new realm and under a new authority—the realm and the authority of Satan, the tempter (Mat. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5), the accuser (Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10), the liar and deceiver, the murderer (Jn. 8:44). So now Jesus can refer to the devil as “the ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31). Now the Apostle John can say that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19). Now Paul can speak of Satan as “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). There’s no “dualism” here, as if the kingdom of Satan is co-equal and co-ultimate with the kingdom of God. The rule of Satan is exercised under the absolute sovereignty of God’s rule even though it’s in every way diametrically opposed to it (cf. Lk. 4:5-7). And yet the authority and rule of Satan is real. He really does hold the power of death. He really does “devour” (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). He really is a murderer. The “works of the devil” (cf. 1 Jn. 3:8) are everywhere around us, not only in terms of sin and lawlessness but also in terms of death itself and all its attendant miseries (such as sickness and disease and all manner of physical suffering).

The connection between the power and rule of Satan and physical suffering is illustrated in the Gospels when we see demon-possessed individuals who are mute and deaf and blind (Mat. 9:32-34; Mk. 9:17, 25; Lk. 11:14 [cf. Mat. 22:22]) and who suffer seizures and convulsions (Mat. 17:14-18; Mk. 9:18, 20, 22, 26). The point is not that all people who are mute or deaf or blind are demon-possessed. At least the vast majority are not. Certainly, most people who have seizures or convulsions are not demon-possessed. But some are. Some were in the Gospels. Luke tells us in his Gospel about “a woman who for eighteen years had a sickness caused by a spirit, and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all” (Lk. 13:11). Jesus said that this woman had been “bound” by Satan for eighteen years (Lk. 13:16). In Acts chapter 10, Peter seems to speak not only of the demon-possessed, but also of those suffering generally from physical sicknesses and diseases as being “oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). Again, all of this is simply to say that Satan, as the ruler of this world and the original tempter, sinner, liar, and murderer, now holds the power of death, with all its attendant miseries both physical and spiritual.

Ever since the fall, there has existed a Satanic kingdom of darkness that is in every way opposed to the sovereign rule and reign of God (darkness, misery, and death versus light, joy, and life). Evil isn't something random or impersonal. It has a single, guiding will. And it was at the time of the fall—as a result of our own rebellion against God in Adam—that the whole human race became enslaved to the rule of Satan and subject, therefore, to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever. Insofar as death is the judicial sentence of God against sin, we deserve no pity or sympathy (cf. Gen. 3:16-19). But insofar as it is Satan who now holds the power of death—insofar as it is true that we as humans are “bound” and “oppressed” by the devil, enslaved to His rule—there may be room for pity, even though we're the ones who handed ourselves over to him. It's in light of these things, then, that we can stand in awe of the fact that God's first proclamation of the Gospel (the protoevangelium) comes to us in the form of a judgment oracle and a curse directed against the serpent. We read in Genesis chapter three:

III. The First Proclamation of the Gospel

- Genesis 3:14–15 — And Yahweh God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you more than any of the cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life; and I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.”

Our salvation, then, is first couched in terms of a battle that God will wage against Satan because it's the realm and dominion of Satan—the rule and authority of Satan—from which *we* must be delivered. Of course, it's evident that for us to be liberated from the kingdom of Satan who holds the power of death, then the power of death must be taken away from him and our own personal sin and guilt must be atoned for. We see the Messiah's atoning death also in Genesis 3 when Yahweh says that the serpent will bruise the seed of the woman on the heel—but even this is in the context of the war and conflict that exists between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and even more specifically between the seed of the woman (the Messiah) and the serpent himself. We see, then, that behind the unfolding of redemptive history is a real cosmic and spiritual battle in the heavenly places. Redemptive history is the story of how God has planned to attack and defeat the serpent and liberate and set free all His elect people from Satan's rule of misery and death and bring them into the kingdom of His beloved Son (cf. Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18). Do we deserve to be set free? Do we deserve to be liberated from the tyranny of Satan? To the contrary! We deserve to be left there. And yet in God's love and pity, even from the moment that we first gave ourselves over to be enslaved, He promised to set us free from this slavery to corruption and to bring us into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:21).

It's only in the light of the original temptation and sin in the garden and the original proclamation of the Gospel in Genesis chapter three that we can come to understand the casting out of demons in the Gospels and in Acts and why this lies at the heart of the message of the kingdom that Jesus and the apostles proclaim. We read in chapter 11 of Luke's gospel:

IV. Satan Bound

- Luke 11:14–22 — And He [Jesus] was casting out a demon, and it was mute. Now it happened that when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the crowds marveled. But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” ... But He knew their thoughts and said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a house divided against itself falls. But if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul... But if I cast out demons by the finger of God [‘by the Spirit of God of God’; Mat. 12:28], then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are undisturbed. But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder.”

Before Satan’s house (kingdom) can be plundered, he himself must first be attacked and overpowered. Mark recounts Jesus’ words like this:

- Mark 3:27 — “But no one can enter the strong man’s house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and *then* he will plunder his house.”

The meaning of Jesus’ words is that in casting out the demon from the man who was mute, He was already plundering Satan’s house. But this must mean, in turn, that there was some sense in which Jesus had already attacked and overpowered “the ruler of the demons.” This must mean that there was some sense in which Jesus had already disarmed and bound Satan himself. When did Jesus do this? To what event in the Gospels should we look for this attacking and overpowering and disarming and binding? We know that it must have been at the beginning of His ministry because from the very beginning Jesus was already casting out demons. In Luke’s Gospel, the second recorded event in Jesus’ public ministry is His casting out “the spirit of an unclean demon” from a man in the synagogue at Capernaum (Lk. 4:33-35). And then it’s only a few verses later that Luke writes:

- Luke 4:40–41 (cf. Mat. 4:23-24) — And while the sun was setting [on the evening of that same day], all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to Him, and laying His hands on each one of them, He was healing them. And demons also were coming out of many, shouting and saying, “You are the Son of God!” But rebuking them, He was not allowing them to speak, because they knew Him to be the Christ.

This is clearly a plundering of Satan’s house. It’s a despoiling of Satan’s kingdom. But how can this be? Again, we must conclude that there’s some real sense in which Jesus has attacked and overpowered and disarmed and bound Satan already at the start of His ministry. It’s in this light that we’re to understand that famous confrontation between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness of Judea.

So often, we think of the temptation of Jesus (Lk. 4:1-13) as an event in which Jesus was mainly on the defensive—warding off the attacks of the devil. In this view, the point of the temptation is primarily—if not only—to prove Jesus’ sinlessness. But in fact, what we need to see is that Jesus

was not simply on the defensive, warding off the attacks of the devil (could this ever be the case?). Instead, He was going on the offensive, attacking and overpowering, disarming and binding.

Remember that Jesus' confrontation with the devil in the wilderness follows immediately upon His baptism in the Jordan River, at which time "heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased'" (Lk. 3:21-22; cf. Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1). It was at the baptism of Jesus that He was anointed and empowered to accomplish His messianic mission. And the apostle John tells us what this mission was:

- 1 John 3:8b — The Son of God was manifested [He was manifested in a unique sense at His baptism in the voice that came from heaven] for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

Peter will say to Cornelius in Acts chapter 10:

- Acts 10:38 — "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power [at His baptism], and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil..."

We could say that at Jesus' baptism He was anointed with the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit to do battle with Satan—to attack and overpower and disarm and bind the "strong man" in order that He might storm the gates of hell (cf. Mat. 16:18) and plunder Satan's house. What, then, should we think when immediately following Jesus' baptism, now "full of the Holy Spirit," He is led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil (Lk. 4:1-2)? The Spirit didn't lead Jesus into the wilderness simply to bear up under something—simply to "pass through [the devil's temptation] and issue from it without loss" (Vos). This is a uniquely redemptive-historical moment. This is a uniquely messianic moment. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for the achievement of a positive gain (Vos): to disarm and bind the "strong man" in order that He might immediately set about plundering His house. Here is the cosmic spiritual battle in the heavenly places unfolding in the wilderness of Judea. Here is the Messiah, the Son of God, doing battle with that "serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world"—all for our sake (Rev. 12:9; cf. 20:2). Luke draws our attention to this reality by inserting between the anointing and empowering of Jesus at His baptism and His confrontation with the devil in the wilderness of Judea a genealogy of Jesus which takes us all the way back to Adam (Lk. 3:23-38; contrast Mat. 3:13-4:11; Mk. 1:9-13). In the garden of Eden in Genesis 3, Satan came to hold the power of death and so he enslaved the whole human race as it was represented in Adam. Now in the wilderness of Judea Jesus (who is the promised seed of the woman), is disarming and binding Satan so that He might plunder His house—so that He might "free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Heb. 2:15).

And yet how is this disarming and binding happening? The temptation, for Jesus, was a part of His humiliation. For us to be tempted involves no special humiliation because we're already sinners. But for the holy Son of God to be tempted according to that true humanity which He took to Himself (cf. Js. 1:13), this "carr[ies] in itself... an element of suffering and humiliation"

(Vos). But there's another reason that this temptation was a part of Jesus' humiliation. In each one of Satan's temptations, he was tempting Jesus to lay claim immediately to His Messianic glory without the interval of suffering ("since you are the Son of God [the Messiah]"; cf. Vos). And so in each one of Jesus' responses to the tempter, He was actively choosing suffering and humiliation—ultimately, He was actively choosing death. As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

- Hebrews 2:14 — Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that *through death* He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...

This explains how we can see the disarming and binding of Satan already at the very start of Jesus' public ministry. What we see in Jesus' response to the devil's temptations is an anticipation in principle of the work that would be completed at the cross. What we see in Jesus' response to the devil's temptations is His determination and commitment at the very beginning (His setting His face like flint; Isa. 50:7) to walk the path of humiliation and suffering and death in order that he might wrest from Satan the power of death (cf. Rev. 1:17-18). And so in this way, Satan was disarmed and bound provisionally (and really) even before the cross. In this way, the plundering of Satan's house could begin (provisionally and really) even at the very moment that Jesus entered upon His messianic task—even before that task was consummated at the cross. Already, in the days of his humiliation, Jesus could begin proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God. Already, he could begin calling people out of the kingdom of Satan, delivering them from their bondage and slavery to death. And where do we see the proof of this glorious eschatological reality? We see it in Jesus' casting out of demons and healing the sick.

V. Satan's Kingdom Plundered

In Luke chapter four, the people were all saying to one another:

- Luke 4:36b — "What is this message [word/*logos*]? For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits and they come out."

And in Luke chapter eleven, Jesus says:

- Luke 11:20 — "[I]f I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

We read in Luke chapter 9:

- Luke 9:1-2 (cf. Lk. 7:20-22; Mat. 10:5-8; Mk. 6:7, 12-13) — And calling the twelve together, [Jesus] gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases. And He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God...

In the casting out of demons and the healing of diseases, we see visible proof that the eschatological plundering of Satan's house has begun—we see visible proof that the eschatological despoiling of Satan's kingdom has commenced. Just as miracles of healing were "only" signs (proofs) of that deeper and more fundamental reality of the deliverance of *all* God's

people from the covenant curse, so also demonic exorcisms were “only” signs (proofs) of an even deeper and more fundamental reality for *all* of God’s people. The power of Satan consisted in the legitimacy of the case that he could bring against us. He was the accuser who never ceased “reminding” God that in Adam, we had all eaten of the forbidden fruit (cf. Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10). As Paul says in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 2:1–3 — [Y]ou were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all also formerly conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

We were all “sons of the evil one” (cf. Mat. 13:38). We belonged to Satan. We were his by right. And yet what has happened now, at the cross? Satan has been overruled—which is to say that he has been bound. Satan’s case against God’s elect has been overturned—which is to say that he has been attacked and overpowered and disarmed. Paul writes in Colossians:

- Colossians 2:14–15 — Having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us which was hostile to us, [God] also has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them in [Christ].

The casting out of demons was the sign (proof) of that eschatological reality that now the ruler of the demons—Satan himself—has been bound and disarmed and cast out. Jesus said:

- John 12:31 — “Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.”

And John describes the response in heaven when Jesus ascended there after His death and resurrection:

- Revelation 12:10 — “Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.”

The casting out of demons was the sign of that eschatological reality that now the ruler of the demons—Satan himself—has been bound and disarmed and cast out. Therefore, the casting out of demons was also the sign of that eschatological reality that all of us who have believed in Jesus have been “rescued... from the authority of darkness [from the kingdom of Satan], and transferred... to the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14; cf. Acts 26:16-18). We are the spoils of Christ’s victory over Satan. We are those who have been set free as the result of Christ’s plundering of the strong man’s house. In Luke chapter 10, when the seventy returned to Jesus with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name” (Lk. 10:17), Jesus responded:

- Luke 10:17–20 — “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice [in the far deeper reality that this signifies, namely] that your names are recorded in heaven.”

“Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you,” but rejoice in the far deeper reality that this signifies, namely, that your eyes have been opened (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4) so that you have turned “from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that [you] may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:16-18).

Conclusion

Satan has been disarmed and bound and cast out. His kingdom is being plundered and despoiled. And we ourselves are a part of that plunder and spoil. We’ve all been exorcised. And now John can say to us:

- 1 John 4:4 — [G]reater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

James can say to us:

- James 4:7 — Be subject therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

And Paul can say to us, echoing that first proclamation of the Gospel in Genesis 3:

- Romans 16:20 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:25-26) — [T]he God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

Here is the awesome power of Christ’s redemption of sinners. He doesn’t just liberate us from the rule and dominion of Satan, He calls us up to share with Him in His own triumph and victory—both in this life and in that which is to come.

- Ephesians 1:19–23 — [God] seat[ed] Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Let us rejoice with joy inexpressible that our names are recorded in heaven. Therefore, brothers and sisters:

- Ephesians 6:10–13 (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8) — [B]e strong in the Lord and in the might of His strength. Put on the full armor of God [truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, the hope of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God], so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and

blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.