Lesson: Matthew 8:23-34; Time of Action: 28 A.D.; Place of Action: The Sea of Galilee and the region of the Gergesenes

Golden Text: “But the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!” (Matthew 8:27).

I. INTRODUCTION. Knowing that Jesus has preeminent power over all creation can be a very comforting thought when we are faced with difficult situations in our lives. In this week’s lesson, we will learn how faith in the astonishing authority of Jesus can allow us to experience peace when chaos has overtaken our physical surroundings or even our minds.

II. BACKGROUND FOR THE LESSON. As Matthew chapter 8 opens, we see Jesus coming down from the mountain where He gave the Sermon on the Mount, followed by multitudes of people (see Matthew 8:1). Jesus was then met by a leper, a man who had leprosy. He bowed before Jesus and asked to be made whole or well. Jesus proceeded
to touch him and declared that he was now clean and told him to go show himself to the priest (see Matthew 8:2-4). Following this episode of healing, Jesus went to Capernaum and was met by a centurion who begged Jesus to just say the word and his sick servant would be healed (see Matthew 8:5-9). Jesus marvelled at the faith of the centurion and declared before all those who followed Him (mostly Jews) that He had not found such great faith in all of Israel (see Matthew 8:10). Then Jesus spoke to the multitude predicting that many Gentiles would eventually be saved from all over the world, but many Jews, children of the kingdom would suffer eternal punishment (see Matthew 8:11-12). Jesus then turned to the centurion and told him to go home and things would happen just as he believed they would. At that very moment, his servant was healed (see Matthew 8:13). Following this, Jesus went to Peter’s house and healed his mother-in-law of a fever as well as many others of their diseases in fulfillment of prophecy (see Matthew 8:14-17). Seeing the great multitude around Him, Jesus decided to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But first He tested two men about their willingness to follow Him (see Matthew 8:18-22). Our lesson begins with verse 23.

III. JESUS DEMONSTRATES HIS AUTHORITY OVER THE SEA (Matthew 8:23-27)

A. Followers of Christ (Matthew 8:23). Our first verse says “And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him.” Jesus and His disciples were in
Capernaum which was on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. Being surrounded by multitudes after He performed many miracles including casting out demons and healing the sick (see Matthew 8:17), Jesus and His disciples decided to go to the other side or the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (see Matthew 8:18). At the Sea of Galilee, this verse says “And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him.” The term “ship” most likely refers to a fishing boat since many of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen. In the Greek, the same word is used for a small fishing boat as well as a large ship that could carry large numbers of people (see Acts 27:37). In Mark’s account of this story, along with the “ship” or boat Jesus and His disciples were in, there were also several other little ships. **Note:** As we study the lessons from Matthew, we may find that the accounts Matthew writes about will have different aspects when compared to the same accounts in Mark and Luke. All three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) record some of the same events, but not all the writers include the same information about those events. Matthew tends to give the briefest or shortest accounts of some of the events than Mark and Luke do. As a result, it is important to use information from all three Gospels in order to get a complete understanding of what took place. In our study of Matthew we will also review the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke. In our study, there may be some events that may appear to be contradictory in these Gospels. But there are no contradictions in what Matthew may write compared to Mark and Luke. We must realize that different people can see the same events differently. Some will remember (or place more emphasis) certain details,
while others may leave out those same details completely. This would reveal that the Gospel writers did not collaborate when they wrote their respective accounts. It also confirms that the writer of each account had specific goals in mind that were guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (see II Timothy 3:16).

B. The frightening storm (Matthew 8:24-25).

1. (vs. 24). This verse says “And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep.” As they crossed the sea, “there arose a great tempest in the sea.” The words “great tempest” refers to a very violent storm. We might say that this was the storm of all storms. The storm was so violent and fierce that “the ship was covered with the waves.” In other words, according to Mark’s account, the boat was filling up with water (see Mark 4:37). In the midst of all of this, we are told that Jesus “was asleep.” It’s hard to imagine how anyone could “sleep” in the midst of such a storm. But this was Jesus! He was not worried because He knew His Father would protect Him under any circumstances. And in addition to that, as the Creator of everything, Jesus created the winds and the waves and had authority over them. So being tired from a long day of ministry, Jesus went to sleep. Note: Since everything that Jesus did was the Father’s will (see John 5:30; Galatians 1:3-5) and was directed by Him (see Matthew 4:1; Luke 2:27; John 8:29), Jesus could trust Him completely. So Jesus Christ “was asleep” in this storm. This was a sleep of holy serenity, and dependence upon
His Father. Jesus slept to show that He was really and truly man. His ministry made Him weary and sleepy, and He had no guilt, no fear within, that would disturb His rest. Those who can lay their heads upon a pillow with a clear conscience can sleep quietly and sweetly in a storm of difficult circumstances (see Psalms 4:8) like Peter did (see Acts 12:1-7). Jesus slept at this time to test the faith of His disciples, whether they could trust Him even when it seemed like He didn’t care (see Mark 4:38). The purpose of Jesus’ sleep was not so much to be refreshed, but it was designed for the purpose of awakening Him to address the faith of His disciples.

2. (vs. 25). This verse says “And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish.” Although the Sea of Galilee was known for being quite turbulent, this storm must have been worse than usual since Jesus’ “disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish.” Several of the disciples were fishermen and probably had experienced similar situations that were close calls with disaster. However, in other storms, being professionals they were able to overcome the circumstances. But as already noted this was probably the storm of all storms and caused the disciples to be afraid. I can imagine them bailing water out of the ship and rowing furiously to no avail. So they woke Jesus up and pleaded with Him saying “Lord, save us: we perish.” The truth is, there are many times when we face difficult circumstances and do all we can to overcome them. Sometimes we are successful and sometimes we are not. It’s during those times when are not successful in our own strength that we need the Lord’s
help. We need Him to “save us.” **Note:** Like the disciples, we must realize that Jesus is the only One who can help us. When we consider our eternal redemption, we must also realize that only Jesus can save us and redeem us from sin (see I Peter 1:18-20). The storm in this story was different from the one that Jonah faced. Jonah faced a storm because he disobeyed God and deserved chastisement. Jesus’ disciples were not being disobedient when the storm arose. This storm was a part of God’s will to teach the disciples a lesson in faith. God will allow some challenges to come into our lives for the divine purpose of strengthening our faith in Him (see Hebrews 11:6).

C. The fearful disciples (Matthew 8:26-27).

1. (vs. 26). This verse says “And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.” When Jesus woke up, He rebuked His disciples saying “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?” Jesus didn’t rebuke them for disturbing Him with their request, but for disturbing themselves with their own fears. He rebuked them for not having enough faith to rest confidently in God’s will to protect them. It may seem that Jesus was being a little harsh considering the circumstances, but the disciples had been with Jesus long enough to know who He was and that His presence on the boat provided protection. His presence in our lives is also a protective force. After rebuking His disciples, Jesus did as they had asked; He saved them (see verse 25). This verse says that
“he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.” According to Mark’s account, Jesus’ exact words were “Peace be still” (see Mark 4:39). As a result of Jesus’ words, “there was a great calm.” When Jesus commanded the wind and waves to cease, they quickly became “calm.” There was a perfect peacefulness. Notice how easily Jesus performed this miracle—He simply spoke a word. Moses commanded the waters with a rod; Joshua, stopped the waters with the Ark of the Covenant (see Joshua 3:13); Elisha, parted the waters with the prophet’s mantle (see II Kings 2:8; 2:14); but Christ instantly calmed the waters with His word.

2. (vs. 27). This verse says “But the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him.” Instead of honoring and glorifying Jesus for saving them, we are told that “the men marvelled.” They were amazed and astonished at what they had witnessed. This seems like a strange response since the disciples had seen Jesus perform many different miracles before this. Certainly they were well acquainted with the sea, but they had never seen a storm turn so quickly into a perfect calm. So they asked among themselves, “What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him.” They wondered what kind of man was Jesus that He could speak to the “winds and the sea” and they would “obey” His word. Again, this seems to be a strange response from Jesus’ disciples who had witnessed many of Jesus’ miracles. But this miracle especially impressed them. They had seen Jesus demonstrate his authority and power over sickness, demons, and physical
illnesses like leprosy, but up to this point, Jesus had not demonstrated His authority over nature. But now they had even witnessed that authority which caused them to be astonished and amazed. **Note:** Jesus’ miracle of calming the wind and the waves was designed specifically to teach the disciples some important lessons. First, this miracle taught them that difficulties provide opportunities for us to trust the Lord. Jesus was the One who had led them to the place of the storm and He would not abandon them there. He cared about them and would always be present with them. As it was with the disciples, difficulties reveal our faith or lack of it. These men needed to know that they could always trust the One who allowed the difficulties to also bring them through those times. Second, this miracle taught the disciples more about the Person of Jesus. He simply spoke and the sea became perfectly calm. Such sovereign power over nature is an attribute that belongs to God alone (see Psalms 89:9). So if Jesus could do it, He must be God. As they marvelled and asked themselves what kind of man Jesus was, the disciples realized that He was more than a man. They were coming to an understanding that their Messiah was also God in the flesh (see I Timothy 3:16). If they were going to carry His message to the uttermost parts of the earth (see John 1:1, 14; Acts 1:8), they needed to fully understand who He was. This miracle was a demonstration of His deity.
IV. JESUS DEMONSTRATES HIS AUTHORITY OVER SATAN (Matthew 8:28-34)

A. The demonic possession (Matthew 8:28). This verse says “And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way.” After Jesus quieted the storm, they continued crossing the Sea of Galilee until they came to “the other side into the country of the Gergesenes.” The phrase “the other side” refers to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. This is where they were headed after leaving the western side (see Matthew 8:18) before they faced the storm. Now they had reached their destination which was “the country of the Gergesenes.” In the accounts given by Mark and Luke, “the country of the Gergesenes” is called the country of the Gadarenes which is the same area (see Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26). Jesus and His disciples most likely were headed to the town of Gergesa also known as Gadara which was located almost halfway down the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. On their way, “there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs.” In this region there are steep hills that come right down to the shoreline. The mountainside has caves and carved-out tombs where the demon-possessed men had taken shelter. As Jesus continued along, Matthew writes that “two” men “possessed with devils” met Him coming from the cave tombs where they lived (see Mark 5:3). In the accounts of this story in both Mark and Luke, only one demon-possessed man is mentioned (see Mark 5:2; Luke 8:27). But there is no real problem
here. Although there were two men, one may have been more violent and did most of the talking. In addition, both Matthew and Luke called these “possessed” men “devils” and Mark refers to them as unclean spirits. The term “demons” is best used because the Greek word for “devil” is diabolos and the Greek word for “demon” is daimon and is the word used in this verse. In addition, there is only one devil, but there are many demons. Note: The Bible is not clear as to who these demons were, but most likely they were once good angels who became fallen angels when they followed Satan in his rebellion against God (see Isaiah 14:12-17; Matthew 25:41; Revelation 12:7-9). But they should not be confused with the angels in II Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 who are even now chained under and awaiting judgment. Since these two men were demon-possessed they are described as being “exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way.” They were so violent that people would not travel through that area. As followers of Satan, demons are characterized by extreme violence and the destruction of everything that is good. Note: According to Luke’s account, one of the men had been demon-possessed for a long time and wore no clothes (see Luke 8:27). He was so violent that he could not be restrained even with shackles and chains (see Mark 5:3-4). When the authorities tried to chain and guard him, he broke the restraints and was driven by the demons into the lonely country side (see Luke 8:29). Night and day the crazed man haunted the mountains and the cave tombs. He would constantly scream and cut himself with stones (see Mark 5:5) being tormented by the demons living inside him.

B. The demonic confession (Matthew 8:29-30).
1. (vs. 29). This verse says “And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?” According to Mark’s account, when the men saw Jesus, they ran up to Him and fell prostrate before Him (see Mark 5:6; Luke 8:28). Suddenly the men (or rather the demons speaking through them) “cried out” or screamed loudly asking two questions. First they asked “What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God?” In other words they were asking Jesus “what do we have to do with each other? Or what do we have in common?” This question tells us two things about the demons. First, they immediately recognized the Lord as their superior because they fell down before Him (see Mark 5:6) and called Him “Jesus.” The demons recognized “Jesus” because of what they knew about Him before He came to earth in the flesh. As we said earlier (see the note in verse 28), these demons were once good angels until they followed Satan when he rebelled against God. Second, they confessed Him to be the “Son of God.” The fact that the demons confessed that Jesus was the “Son of God” does not mean that they were saved. James 2:19 says “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils (demons) also believe, and tremble.” There’s no denying that confessing Jesus as the “Son of God” is necessary for our salvation, but it takes more than that. We must also place our trust in Him as Savior (see I Corinthians 10:9-10). The demons never did that. In the last part of this verse, the demons asked Jesus another question: “art thou come hither to torment us before the time?” In other words, they were asking if Jesus had come to that region to torment
them before their appointed time of judgment. This question indicates that demons know what will ultimately happen to them. They will be thrown “into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (see Matthew 25:41). Demons do know something about their future, but they don’t know everything. Unlike God, neither the devil nor his demons are omniscient. **Note: Here is something to think about.**

Even though these men were possessed and controlled by demons causing them great harm, the demons could not keep the men from this meeting with Jesus Christ, who ordered these circumstances in order to meet them. It was Jesus’ overpowering hand that dragged these unclean spirits into His presence, which they dreaded more than anything else. When the chains that men made for them could not hold them, Jesus’ chains could. But being brought before Him, they still protested and broke out into a rage, asking “What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God?” It is true that the demons have nothing to do with Christ as a Saviour, “for he took not on him the nature of the angels” (see Hebrews 2:16); they are in no way related to Him. But unfortunately, it is possible for a person to call Jesus “the Son of God” and still have nothing to do with Him. It is true, that demons don’t want to have anything to do with Christ as a Ruler because they hate Him, they stand in opposition to Him, and are in open rebellion against His crown and dignity. But it is not true that the devils have nothing to do with Christ as a Judge, because they do and they know it. One day He will judge them.
2. (vs. 30). This verse says “And there was a good way off from them an herd of many swine feeding.” Here we are told that at a good distance from these demon-possessed men there was a “herd of many swine feeding” or eating on the mountain (see Luke 8:32). The fact that there were “swine” or pigs eating in the area, confirms that the region of the Gadarenes was predominately occupied by Greeks or Gentiles although Jews lived there as well. Raising pigs was normal for Gentiles, but not for Jews because they were considered unclean for Jews. The law forbade them to eat or touch pigs (see Leviticus 11:7-8; Deuteronomy 14:8). So, the pigs must have belonged to Gentiles. **Note:** According to Mark’s and Luke’s accounts, after the demons asked Jesus what did they have to do with Him and pleaded with Him not to torment them, Jesus commanded the demon to come out of the men (see Mark 5:7-8; Luke 8:28-29). Then He asked one of the demons what was his name and the demon replied “my name is legion; for we are many”. We are also told by Mark that there were about two thousand pigs (see Mark 5:13). This is important to know because it tells us that there were 2000 or more demons possessing these two men since we later learn that Jesus sent the demons into the 2000 pigs.

C. The demonic request (Matthew 8:31-32).

1. (vs. 31). This verse says “So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to
**go away into the herd of swine.**” So, after the demon who spoke to Jesus told Him that his name was Legion (see Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30), here Matthew wrote “So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine.” Since Jesus had commanded the demons to come out of the two men, they pleaded with Him to send them into the “herd of swine.” These demons wanted Jesus to send them somewhere that they could continue to do mischief instead of the place of torment. If they were not allowed to hurt men by possessing their bodies, they would hurt them in their goods which were their pigs. The last thing these demons wanted was to be removed from these men and sent off into the surrounding country without a body to inhabit (see Mark 5:10) or into “the deep” (see Luke 8:31). The “deep” or abyss is thought to be a bottomless pit for the confinement of demonic spirits (see Revelation 9:1-3; 20:1-3). **Note:** It appears that in order for demons to be effective in wreaking havoc, they need to have a host body. If demons can’t find a human to possess, this verse reveals that they will settle for animals to possess. Unlike physical objects, demons are spirit beings so a lot of them can take up very little space. So, knowing this we can safely say that anyone who is demon possessed could have more than one and even thousands of demons inside of their bodies (see Matthew 12:43-45; Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2).

2. (vs. 32). This verse says “And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and
perished in the waters.” After Jesus commanded the demons to come out of the men, Jesus then allowed them to do as they had requested and said “Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine.” The demons came out of the two men and entered the bodies of the “herd of swine.” Remember, Mark 5:13 says that there were about two thousand pigs present and every pig was inhabited by one or more demons. Then “the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters.” The entire herd of pigs, at least two thousand, immediately charged down the steep slope to the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee and plunged right into the sea and drowned in the waters. These pigs, now possessed by the demons, demonstrated similar behavior of the two men who had been possessed. These demons, whose only desire was destruction, drove the pigs to dive into the lake below where they all died. There is no record as to what happened to the demons. Let me say this: giving the demons permission to do as they requested in no way means that Jesus approves of evil. He is sovereign and does what He wants to, when He wants to and how He wants to (see Psalms 115:3; 135:6; Daniel 4:35). **Note:** We might wonder why Jesus didn’t just destroy these demons or send them to the bottomless pit? It was because the time for that had not yet come. Jesus healed many people from the destructive effects of demon possession, but He didn’t destroy the demons because it wasn’t time yet (see Matthew 25:41; II Peter 2:4). The same question could be asked today—why doesn’t Jesus stop all the evil in the world? The answer is the same; His time for that has not yet come. But you can bet your bottom dollar
that it will come!  The book of Revelation reveals the future victory of Jesus over Satan, his demons, and all evil (see Revelation 19:11-21; 20:1-3, 7-15).

D. Deliverance from demons (Matthew 8:33-34).

1. (vs. 33). This verse says “And they that kept them fled, and went their ways into the city, and told every thing, and what was befallen to the possessed of the devils.” The phrase “they that kept them” refers to the men who were in charge of the herd of pigs. They ran into the city “and told every thing, and what was befallen to the possessed of the devils.” In other words, the herdsmen reported all that Jesus had done including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. The fact that these men “fled” from the scene indicates that they were terrified at what they had witnessed. Certainly they had never before seen anything like an entire herd of pigs going crazy and plunging into the sea to their death.

2. (vs. 34). Our final verse says “And, behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus: and when they saw him, they besought him that he would depart out of their coasts.” Immediately after hearing the news from the herdsmen, “the whole city came out to meet Jesus.” When the crowd arrived where Jesus was, they saw the formerly demon-possessed men sitting quietly, fully clothed and in their right minds, but instead of them rejoicing over the men’s deliverance, the crowd was afraid (see Mark 5:15). Undoubtedly it was only their curiosity that brought them out to see Jesus. It appears that that was all they
wanted from Jesus because “when they saw him, they besought him that he would depart out of their coasts.” The people should’ve been overjoyed at the wonderful thing Jesus had done for the two men. They were no longer demon-possessed and the people no longer had any reason to fear them. But unfortunately, the people were more concerned about the economic loss of the herd of pigs than the miracle Jesus performed. Maybe the crowd was afraid of an even greater financial loss if Jesus stayed there for a longer period of time. Some readers of this account have questioned what right Jesus had to allow the demons to inhabit animals that didn’t belong to Him. We must remember that Jesus is the Creator and Lord of the universe. Therefore, He owns all things, including that herd of pigs. As the Psalmist said “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (see Psalms 24:1). What Jesus permitted to happen was not wrong, for He had full right to do as He pleased with the animals. Jesus’ casting out of the demons and giving them permission to go into the herd of pigs affirms His Messiahship and sovereign authority. Note: The great tragedy here was not the perishing of the pigs, but rather the deplorable attitude of the people. They were more concerned for the temporal welfare of their animals than for the eternal future of two demon-possessed men. Let us not be shortsighted like the people of Gadara. The eternal future of people is far more important than the things we own. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is more valuable than anything that this world has to offer. Sadly, there are a great many people who prefer their swine to their Saviour, and therefore come short of Christ and
salvation by Him. They want Jesus to depart out of their hearts, and will not allow His word to have a place in them, because He and His word will be the destruction of their lusts—those swine, if you will—which they prefer to hold onto and feed. And as a result, Jesus will rightly forsake those who like the people in Gadara, say to Him “depart from us” by saying to them, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (see Matthew 25:41).

V. Conclusion. The idea of authority is a concept that most if not all people understand. Parents have authority over their children, teachers have authority over their students, and managers have authority over their employees. But unfortunately authority can be abused. We all have witnessed people who have allowed power and authority to go to their heads. Even church leaders are not exempt. In this week’s lesson, we have seen how Jesus demonstrated His astonishing authority over nature and also over demons. The natural unconverted mind rejects God’s authority and lordship in any form. But we must accept the astonishing authority of Christ over us and bow the knee to Him now or face bowing the knee to Him in the judgment (see Philippians 2:9-11).
Sunday, February 10, 2019: “Astonishing Authority” Commentary

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