

Demon Possession

What does demon possession mean and involve? Can both Christians and non-Christians experience this phenomenon? Can it be internal and external in nature? What is the biblical remedy for demon possession? These important questions will be discussed and answered in what follows. The ultimate question to be resolved is, Can Christians be demonized—that is, indwelt spatially—leading to the need for a demon (or demons) to be cast out, such as observed in the Gospels and Acts?

One writer framed the issue as follows:

Perhaps the most controversial question to be raised is, “Can a true believer be demonized?” Note that I am speaking not of demon possession, but of *demonization*. *Possession* implies ownership and total control. Christians, even disobedient ones, belong to God, not to

Satan. Thus, Satan cannot control them totally. *Demonization* is a different matter, however. By demonization I mean that Satan, through his demons, exercises direct, partial control over an area or areas of the life of a Christian or non-Christian. Can that really happen to Christians?¹⁸

The discussion about what the Bible teaches will be undertaken along five lines of thinking—lexical, biblical, historical, theological, and practical. Only then can a conclusive and compelling biblical statement be made.

LEXICAL EVIDENCE

The New Testament uses four different phrases on 32 occasions to describe demon influence on humans in the Gospels and Acts:

¹⁸ Ed Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), ix.

1. one “having” a demon (Gk. *echō*, 16 times)
 - a. Matthew 11:18
 - b. Mark 3:30; 5:15; 7:25; 9:17
 - c. Luke 4:33; 7:33; 8:27
 - d. John 7:20; 8:48–49, 52; 10:20
 - e. Acts 8:7; 16:16; 19:13
2. one who is “demonized” (Gk. *daimonizomai*, 13 times)
 - a. Matthew 4:24; 8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12:22; 15:22
 - b. Mark 1:32; 5:15–16, 18
 - c. Luke 8:36
 - d. John 10:21
3. one “with an unclean spirit” (Gk. *en*, 2 times): Mark 1:23; 5:2
4. one “afflicted” with an unclean spirit (Gk. *ochleomai*, 1 time): Acts 5:16

The first two uses (totaling 29 of 32 occurrences) refer to the same phenomenon. For example, Luke 8:27 (use 1) and 8:36 (use 2) both refer to the identical situation. In the same way,

John 10:20 (use 1) and 10:21 (use 2) both refer to the same situation. And again, Mark 5:15 employs both use 1 and use 2 in the same verse, referring to the identical situation. Every major Greek New Testament lexicon defines *daimonizomai* as “to be possessed by a demon.” The language of uses 3 and 4 imply what uses 1 and 2 explicitly mean.

The language used of demons “entering in,” “going out,” or being “cast out” is consistently employed in regard to demonized persons (Matt. 8:16, 32; 9:33; 12:22–24; Mark 1:34; 5:8, 13). If these terms mean anything, they suggest the idea of a demon actually taking up residence and powerful influence within the body of a demonized person. To understand the term “demonize” for anything else than someone who has a demon within is to misinterpret Scripture.

The term “demonized” in Scripture refers to “the invasion of a victim’s body by a demon (or

demons), in which the demon exercises living and dominant control over the victim, which the victim cannot successfully resist.”¹⁹ The elements of indwelling and the inability to resist the demon’s will are what make demonization distinct from lesser forms of demonic influence. The New Testament uses this word only in the narrow sense of demon possession. Thus, other forms of external influence cannot properly be called “demon possession” or demonization. Rather, they can be referred to as demon oppression or demon harassment. Therefore, lexically speaking, in all thirty-two cases where the Gospels and Acts speak of people involved with demons, they refer to people within whom a demon or demons reside.

BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

¹⁹ Alex Konya, *Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 1990), 21–22.

The Bible recounts 15 specific occasions where demons indwell humans:²⁰

1. Old Testament (4 particular incidents):
 - a. 1 Samuel 16:14–23: Saul
 - b. 1 Samuel 18:10: Saul
 - c. 1 Samuel 19:9: Saul
 - d. 1 Kings 22:22–23: four hundred prophets of Ahab
2. Gospels (9 particular incidents):
 - a. Matthew 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–17; Luke 8:26–37: Gadarene demoniac
 - b. Matthew 9:32–34: demon-possessed man in Capernaum (dumb)
 - c. Matthew 12:22–29: demon-possessed blind and dumb man
 - d. Matthew 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30: Syro-Phoenecian woman and daughter
 - e. Matthew 17:14–20; Mark 9:14–29; Luke 9:37–43: coming off the Mount

²⁰ See Dickason, *Angels: Elect and Evil*.

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- f. [Mark 1:21–28](#); [Luke 4:31–37](#): man with demon in Capernaum synagogue
 - g. [Mark 16:9](#); [Luke 8:2](#): Mary Magdalene
 - h. [Luke 11:14–26](#): dumb, demon-possessed man
 - i. [Luke 13:10–17](#): woman bent double
3. Acts (2 particular incidents):
- a. [Acts 16:16–18](#): fortune teller in Philippi
 - b. [Acts 19:11–17](#): sons of Sceva
4. Epistles and Revelation (none)

Are there any clear biblical examples of true believers being indwelt by demons in the above Scripture passages? A review of the biblical data quickly eliminates 11 of the 15 possibilities—only Saul in the Old Testament (3 times) and the woman bent double in [Luke 13:10–17](#) remain.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS

There are only four historical instances that can be biblically verified where the person with demon involvement might be a true believer. They are Saul in [1 Samuel 16; 18; and 19](#) and the woman afflicted for eighteen years in [Luke 13](#).

Was Saul a true believer? For the sake of this discussion, it is assumed that he truly trusted in God's grace for salvation. As evidence, note the eight times Saul received the accolade "the LORD's anointed" ([1 Sam. 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16](#)). Also, Samuel told Saul that in death the two of them would be together ([1 Sam. 28:19](#)).

Since Saul at least appears to have been a believer, it can be asked, was he indwelt by demons that needed to be cast out? The following language describes the way in which the "evil spirit" affected Saul:

1. "tormented him" ([1 Sam. 16:14–15](#))

2. “upon you” (1 Sam. 16:16)
3. “upon Saul” (1 Sam. 16:23)
4. “upon Saul” (1 Sam. 18:10)
5. “upon Saul” (1 Sam. 19:9)

None of these phrases suggest that the evil or harmful spirit existed *within* Saul. In every instance, the text speaks about *external* torment. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew language has the perfect-tense word (*bo'*) that would certainly have been used if Saul had been indwelt. But it was not. However, this is the very word Ezekiel used when he said, “The Spirit entered into me” (Ezek. 2:2; 3:24), in a clear case of indwelling by the Holy Spirit.

With respect to the woman bent double in Luke 13:10–17, no one can question the fact that she suffered for eighteen years because of a spirit (Luke 13:11) identified as Satan (Luke 13:16). But was she a believer? Those who say yes do so because Christ referred to her as “a daughter of

Abraham” (Luke 13:16). They suggest a parallel with Zacchaeus, who, on becoming a believer, was called “a son of Abraham” by Jesus. But a closer look at Luke 19:9 paints a different picture.

Salvation came *because* Zacchaeus was “a son of Abraham” and *because* “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus came to save his people (the Jews) from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Zacchaeus didn’t become a “son of Abraham” as a result of salvation in the sense of Galatians 3:7, which says that “it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” Rather, he was a Jew—also known as a “son of Abraham”—and because Jesus came to save his people, he drew Zacchaeus to saving belief. Zacchaeus had always been a “son of Abraham”; only later did he believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

Likewise, the woman in Luke 13, a daughter of Abraham, was an unbeliever who had been bound by a physical infirmity from Satan and

possibly demons. She received release from her torment through the ministry of Jesus. She experienced resident evil not as a believer but as an unbeliever.

Thus, there is not one instance in Scripture where Satan or demons resided within a true believer and needed to be expelled.

THEOLOGICAL FACTORS

The New Testament Epistles never warn believers about the possibility of demon inhabitation, even though Satan and demons are discussed rather frequently. Nor do the New Testament Epistles ever instruct believers about how to cast out demons from either a believer or an unbeliever. It is biblically inconceivable that a true believer could be indwelt by demons when the Bible presents no clear historical example and gives no warnings or instructions for such a seri-

ous spiritual experience.

At least five other theological factors confirm this conclusion:

1. The thrust of [2 Corinthians 6:14–18](#) precludes thinking that the Holy Spirit and unclean spirits can cohabit in true believers—even temporarily.
2. Salvation, as described in [Colossians 1:13](#), speaks of true “deliverance” from Satan and transference to the kingdom of Christ.
3. The following passages, when combined together, make a powerful statement that refutes the idea of demons indwelling Christians:
 - a. [Romans 8:37–39](#): We overwhelmingly conquer through Christ.
 - b. [1 Corinthians 15:57](#): God gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - c. [2 Corinthians 2:14](#): God always leads us in his triumph in Christ.

- d. [1 John 2:13–14](#): We have overcome the Evil One.
 - e. [1 John 4:4](#): The greater power resides in us.
4. The sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit protects Christians against demon invasion ([2 Cor. 1:21–22](#); [Eph. 4:30](#)).
 5. The promise of [1 John 5:18](#) makes the idea of demon invasion an unbiblical concept and an impossibility for a true believer.

PRACTICAL CONCERNS

There can be no question that demons do at times reside within human beings. Otherwise, there would be no need to cast them out ([Gk. *ekballō*](#)). Scripture also affirms that when demons indwell human beings, they frequently debilitate the human host. Demonic residency has resulted in physical problems such as epilepsy ([Matt. 17:14–18](#)), blindness ([Matt.](#)

12:22), deafness ([Mark 9:25](#)), and the inability to speak ([Matt. 9:32–33](#)). When the demon is evicted, the physical problem also departs, and the person is healed.

Having understood these things, can true believers be indwelt by demons with a need for these demons to be evicted? After a complete study of the appropriate scriptures, the answer is no. Demonization ([Gk. *daimonizomai*](#)) refers only to unbelievers in whom a demon resides. The Bible concludes that the deliverance of a Christian from indwelling demons is an oxymoron.

The Bible stands supreme as the unique source of divine revelation about the spiritual world of Satan and demons. Clinical and counseling experiences will never be equal to Scripture and should never be used to draw conclusions that are not first clearly taught in the Word of God.

The Bible convincingly reveals that true believers cannot be inhabited by Satan or demons. However, they can be tormented, oppressed, and harassed externally, even to a severe degree like Saul (or centuries later, like Paul, who was allowed to endure a satanic thorn in the flesh, [2 Cor. 12:7](#)). Should demons actually be found to indwell a person, this would be evidence that he or she lacks genuine salvation, no matter how strongly that person or a counselor or a pastor or even a demon argues otherwise. If one encounters a truly demonized person, then he must recognize the strength of the enemy, appeal to God in prayer (see [Jude 9](#)), and use the power of Scripture ([Rom. 1:16](#))—especially the gospel—to deal with the situation.