

Why should we study pigs?

The great majority of Jesus' earthly ministry was in Israel and among the Jews who did not keep swine or eat pork (Lev. 11:7). However, the Synoptic Gospels show that the Lord and his disciples crossed the lake to the country of Gadarenes where there were many Gentiles and a huge herd of about 2,000 swine. This is the largest number of animals all in one place ever mentioned in the New Testament.

What is unusual in this story?

The Lord Jesus often cast out demons, and the first miracle in Mark was such. (See 1:21-28.) The number of demons involved here in chapter five, however, is huge (5:10), and this is closely associated with the large number of pigs. Mark seems to emphasize Jesus' power and authority through this since his account is much longer than those in Matthew and Luke.

What is the most unusual aspect of this strange but true story?

Only here, were demons allowed to enter into animals. Since large pigs can be dangerous, anyway, what damage could a huge herd of demon-possessed pigs have caused? Thankfully, they suddenly ran down the steep slope and into the lake where they all drowned. Partly this was because pigs are prone to panic, but undoubtedly it was also because Jesus thereby prevented the swine from becoming true monsters. Thus Jesus showed kindness to the local people rather than to the pigs. Obviously, people were more important.

What were / are the swine like?

As unclean animals which under the Law (Lev. 11:7) were not to be eaten, the pigs were somewhat like the demonic in the story and the unhealthy teaching of false teachers (1 Tim. 4:1-3). The eating of pork is now allowed (1 Tim. 4:3-5), but it must be cooked thoroughly, and having a large numbers of swine in a given area can lead to serious health problems for the community and beyond. So in various ways, pork is not the best meat. Neither are frog legs, and the heaps of dead frogs in Egypt and Exodus 8:14 were somewhat like the dead pigs. 5:13.

More positively, the death of 2,000 swine prepared the way for the gospel to be proclaiming to Gentiles by the former demoniac (5:14-20) much like the feeding of the 5,000+ opening the door for the gospel to the Jews. (See John chapter six.)

How should we apply this study?

Though the unclean pigs were removed by Jesus, the main point of the Mark 5:1-20 passage is not about diet and health. It is about respecting and trusting in the authority and incomparable power of the One who overpowered a legion of demons. Only God in the flesh could have done such a great miracle. The many dead swine helped draw attention to Jesus' greatness.

What did they do with all the dead pigs?

Did they have a huge barbeque? Probably not, but regardless, such things are unimportant. Yet, we do know that the former demoniac went home and told his friends and others throughout the Gentile dominated area what great and compassionate things Jesus had done for him (5:18-20). The final focus was on the Lord, and all marveled.