

PART 3 — KURSI, ON THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE, IN THE REGION OF THE ROMAN DECAPOLIS

CROSSING OVER

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Kursi

Mountain caves in this area are commonly known as the location where Jesus may have healed the demoniac.





Byzantine Church Tile

This mosaic marks the location of an ancient, Byzantine-era church built near the cave of the demoniac.



ANCHOR TEXT: Before you begin this lesson, read Mark 4:35-5:20.

KURSI

Because of sin's influence in the world, people have tended to see life in terms of two opposite sides. There's *them*, and then there's *us*. *They* don't look like *us*, sound like *us*, or share the same values as *us*. People have divided this way since the days of Adam, and they were definitely divided in Jesus' day.

Christ and His disciples lived on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, spending much of their time near the cities of **Bethsaida**, **Chorazin**, and **Capernaum** (Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13). During Jesus' ministry, this region of Galilee was ruled by Herod Antipas, son of the King Herod who tried to kill Jesus when He was a baby (Matthew 2:13).

CHRIST AND HIS DISCIPLES

LIVED ON THE WESTERN

SIDE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE

Herod didn't always follow the rules—remember, this is the man John the Baptist confronted for marrying his own sister-in-law (Matthew 14:1-12)—but Herod still tried to maintain a safe, civilized Hebrew society in spite of all the Roman Empire's cultural influences. People on this side of Galilee were good Jewish folks who ate kosher food and actively attended the synagogue.



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Across the Sea of Galilee

Kursi sits on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, opposite the Jewish region of Jesus' day.

The eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, on the other hand, was governed by Philip the Tetrarch, Herod Antipas' half-brother (Luke 3:1). Philip was more willing to make the cultural and religious compromise of embracing the Roman Empire. On this side of the sea, called the **Decapolis**, many farmers tended to pigs, animals rendered unclean in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 14:8). The cities here also housed many altars to Roman idols, violating God's express command not to worship false gods (Exodus 20:3-6).

Many Jews believed that simply traveling through this region would cause them to become impure. Nobody crossed over to this side of the water. Nobody, that is, except Jesus.

Just imagine the disciples' surprise when Jesus said, "Let us go over to the other side" (Mark 4:35). On the western side of the Sea of Galilee, Christ always had a crowd around Him—rabbis, religious leaders, and people who looked and sounded like Him. But now He left the crowd behind, got in a boat, and crossed over.

After Jesus and His disciples set sail, "a furious squall" came up against the boat (Mark 4:37). Usually, the Sea of Galilee is relatively still and calm. But because of its location—680 feet below sea level and surrounded by hills—sometimes cool air from the north funnels into the warm air over the water, causing violent and unpredictable storms. The small fishing boat carrying Christ and His 12 disciples would have barely made it in one piece to the other side! But with a simple command, Jesus stilled the storm, enabling them to reach the other side safely (4:39).

A system of caves overlooked the Sea of Galilee's eastern shore. In those days, people often used caves as tombs and crypts, like Abraham who had buried Sarah in one of the caves of Canaan (Genesis 23:19). Here, in the tombs on the edge of a town named Gerasa or **Kursi**, lived a demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1). Dwelling in the place of the dead and tormented by evil spirits, he cut himself with stones and screamed out violently in the night (5:3-5).

Everybody knew this man. The cave he inhabited overlooked a common trade road. The people there tried to chain him up so he couldn't disturb their business and their lives, but his demonic strength kept breaking through the chains (Mark 5:4). Of all the people in the world, this was the man who met Jesus and His disciples as they reached the other side of the sea (5:6).

EVERYBODY KNEW THIS**MAN. THE PEOPLE THERE****TRIED TO CHAIN HIM UP SO****HE COULDN'T DISTURB THEIR****BUSINESS AND THEIR LIVES...**

The demoniac may have frightened the local people, but he did not scare Christ. Jesus, the same One who had power to still the storm, stilled this man's restless spirit and delivered him from his demonic oppression (Mark 5:8). At Christ's command, the evil spirits fled the man into a nearby pig herd, causing the pigs to rush down the hillside into the sea (5:11-13).

After this miraculous deliverance, you might imagine a revival was about to break out in the Decapolis! Instead, when the townspeople saw what Christ did, they “began to plead with Jesus to leave their region” (Mark 5:17). In that moment, they didn’t see the freedom and new life granted to the demoniac. Fearful of this stranger from the other side of the sea, they could only see that Jesus had disrupted their lives even more than the demoniac. Who knows what else this foreigner was capable of doing?

After the onlookers begged Jesus to leave and Christ went back to His boat, the freed demoniac asked if he could follow Jesus across the sea. Christ denied his request. Instead, Jesus told him, “Go home to your people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (Mark 5:19). With that, they parted ways.

Surely the disciples must have thought this whole trip was a waste of time. They came all this way, risked their lives in the storm, and now turned right back around after Jesus had one encounter with a single stranger. Sure, Christ changed this one man’s life—but it was just *his* life! Did they really need to leave the crowds on the west side of the sea just to help this one guy on the east?

The Bible reveals that this man listened to Christ. He “began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him” (Mark 5:20). What we don’t see is what happened when this man went back to his family and neighbors. They remembered binding him, remembered passing by his cave with their horses and carts, remembered fearing for their lives every time he came near. But now he stood in their presence—changed,

finally free, a brand-new person—and all he could do was talk about what Jesus had done to save him.

Christ would return to this *other side* some time later. This time, He and His disciples weren’t approached by angry farmers and merchants who wanted nothing to do with Him, but a crowd of more than 4,000 people who were eager to hear Jesus’ teaching (Mark 8:1-10). They simply couldn’t get over the transformation Jesus had done in one man’s life.

WHAT WE DON’T SEE IS

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FAMILY AND NEIGHBORS...

After this, the Bible doesn’t say much about the people in that region of the Decapolis. History helps us to fill in the gaps.

Forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Jews revolted against the ruthless Roman government. But the desperate Hebrew people were no match against a worldwide empire. Their rebellion was crushed in a few short years, and the Romans had had enough. Beginning near **Caesarea** along the Mediterranean, down to the **Dead Sea**, the Imperial army exterminated the rebels, scattered the Hebrews, and destroyed the temple in **Jerusalem**. Every Jew and Christian was either cast out or killed.



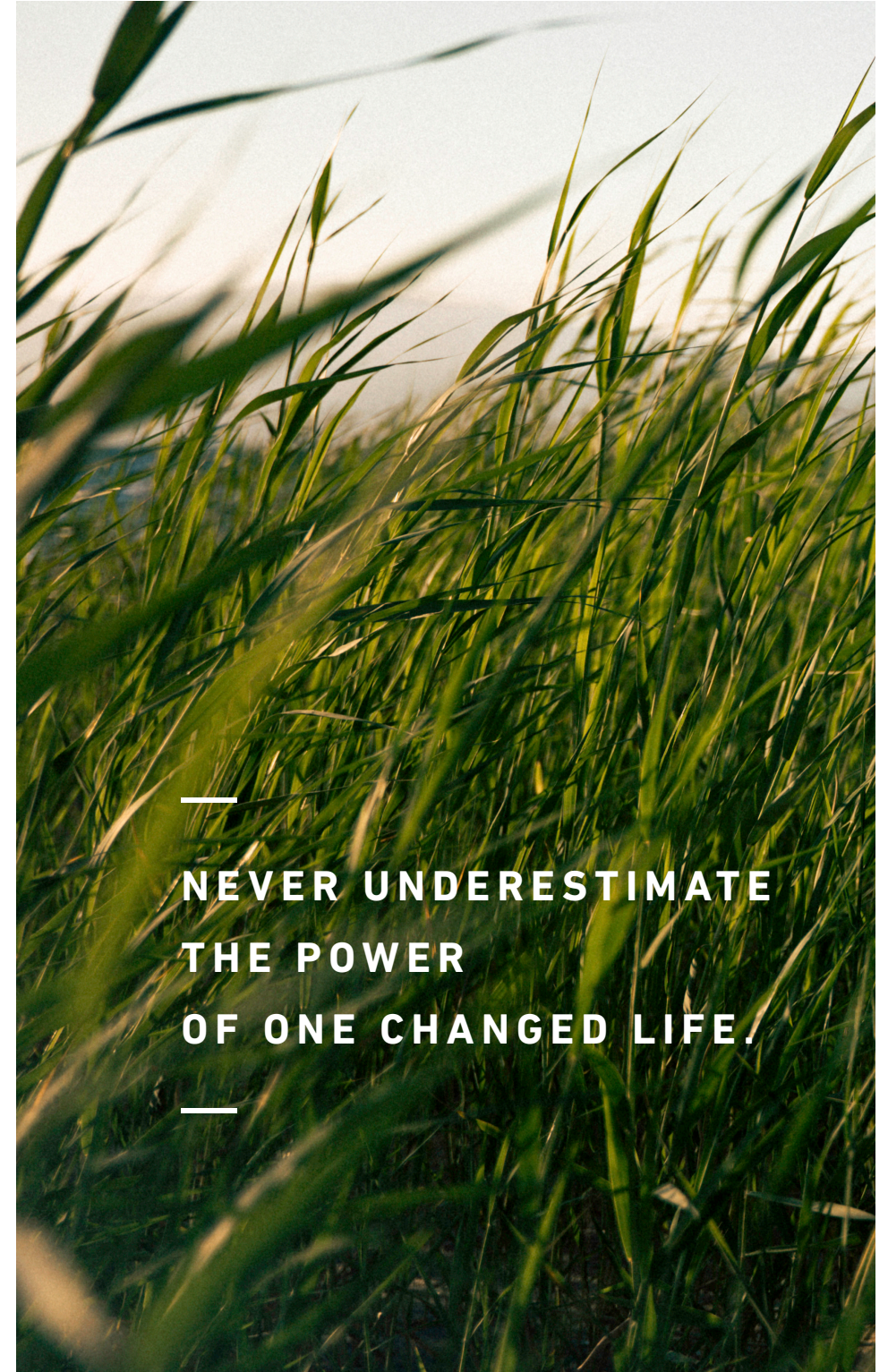


However, one community survived: the people on the *other side* of the sea. This community of faith, born out of the testimony of one man who had a life-changing encounter with Jesus, became the primary Gospel-proclaiming presence in that region for 300 years and more, sending missionaries and church leaders into the surrounding cities.

Why did this happen? Because Jesus knew that the Gospel—the good news of His grace and salvation—is meant to go out to people who aren't like us, people on the *other side*. History was changed and

thousands of lives were transformed, all because Jesus said, “Let us go over to the other side” (Mark 4:35).

How many people are on the *other side* of our lives, sitting in their own tombs, crying out in the middle of the night, and longing for something more? People all around us are waiting for someone—even someone who's not like them—to bring them the hope that only Jesus gives. Who will take the Gospel to them, if not us? And who can imagine the impact if we do? Never underestimate the power of one changed life.



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**NEVER UNDERESTIMATE
 THE POWER
 OF ONE CHANGED LIFE.**
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5th-Century Monastery
Built in the shadow of the demoniac's cave, these ruins represent the Christian community that sent out many missionaries and church leaders into the Byzantine period.



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- ¹ The Sea of Galilee was a dividing line between the Jewish west and the Roman east. How would you define the *other side* in your life?
- ² What would it look like for you to take the Gospel to people who aren't like you?
- ³ Jesus and the disciples encountered a storm on their journey. What are some obstacles, discouragements, fears, and challenges you've faced when going to the *other side*?
- ⁴ When Jesus got out of the boat, the demon-possessed man living in the burial caves ran to meet Him. What things have you noticed tend to hold people in bondage? Was there a time when you felt trapped in a cave?
- ⁵ After healing the demon-possessed man, Jesus told him to "Go home to your own people and tell them everything the Lord has done for you" (Mark. 5:19). Centuries later, that community became the main Gospel-sending presence in the region. Can you give a personal example of one changed life that has affected countless others?
- ⁶ What is one conversation you need to have with someone this week? How can you more actively share the Gospel?

🕒 EXTRA INFO

One of the reasons the community around Kursi survived the Roman Empire's extermination and expulsion of the Jews was its location on the *other side* of the Sea of Galilee. Another reason was that the Romans did not associate the Decapolis with the stereotype of the rebellious Hebrews. God used these two things—the things that marked these people as untouchable—to save their lives and give them the space where they could spread the Gospel and impact history.

In Mark 5:9, the demoniac called himself by the name of "Legion," referring to the army of demons that oppressed him. Stationed in that area of the Gerasenes were a number of Roman legions, including the legendary Tenth Fretensis. The Tenth Legion was the same group of soldiers who put Caesar Augustus on the throne, and their mascot was a pig—a boar with tusks.

When Jesus cast the legion of demons into a herd of pigs, He wasn't just displaying His power over evil spirits. This was also a statement that Jesus' Kingdom is greater than any empire of our world. His power was proven not only in His own life, but also in the lives of the community of Christians that formed in this region. Their Gospel-spreading influence outlasted the crumbling Roman Empire and stands as a testament to Christ's power today.