

Luke 9:37-43
The Significance of Faith

We all know that faith is key. Without faith we cannot be saved. Ephesians 2:8, “for by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” But faith is not just about the eternal. It is also about the here-and-now. It is the guiding principle by which we conduct ourselves in this life, “⁶therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord - ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:6-7).

True faith is only effective because it is not some mystical experience, but rather it is based on the truth of Scripture. True faith is invariably wrapped up in God’s Word. It is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). We can have this assurance only if we trust God will be as faithful in the future as He has been in the past. That can be difficult to remember when life seems so out-of-balance with God’s goodness and majesty, but it is still, nonetheless, true.



The ancients understood faith to have three parts. The first was *notitia* (knowledge). The second was *assensus* (assent). The third was *fiducia* (trust). The first implied that the believer knew what it was he or she believed in. The second asserted that the believer agreed that what he or she believed in was true. The third was the act of believing. It was the volitional choice of placing trust in what it was a person believed in. To simply think something was true but not act on it made no sense in the ancient world. And it still does not make much sense today.

Context

Luke presents his narrative of this event in the most abbreviated fashion when compared with the other gospel accounts. For example, he makes no comment about the discussion Jesus had with the disciples about the coming of Elijah, or the conversation between Jesus and the boy’s father. He does not describe the details of the effects of the demonic possession, or give Jesus’ response to His disciples when they ask why they could not drive out the

demon themselves. Luke had a different agenda.

In all three of the gospel narratives where this story is found, the incident is recorded to have happened “on the next day” (v. 37). We must begin by noting that after the Transfiguration, Jesus went immediately back to ministry. He did not linger in His glory. He did not rest and neglect the work yet to be done. He was always about His Father’s business. While our frail and fallen bodies need rest, and our minds need amusement, let us remember to never dwell too long in the land of the useless.

The contrast between these two scenes is striking. From the unimaginable encounter with the transfigured Christ, in a glimpse of His eternal glory, the disciples were presently faced with the realities of a fallen and sinful world. They had literally gone from the mountain to the valley. They had seen the glorified Christ, and now they witnessed the works of Satan. They had spent time with the Son of God, now they witnessed the wretched demon-possessed son of a terrified father. It is an illuminating look at the difference between this world and the next. And it is moments like this that can challenge our faith severely. It is moments like this that remind us what faith is for.

As Jesus, Peter, James, and John came down the mountain, “a large crowd” was waiting (v. 37). Mark informs us that the crowds “began running up to greet Him” (Mark 9:15). They were eager to see another miracle, or perhaps (if one is an optimist) to hear teaching about the kingdom of God. It is recorded that there were some scribes among them, and no doubt they had been arguing with the disciples who had remained behind.

The Encounter

As Jesus was managing His way through the mass of people, “a man from the crowd shouted” (v. 38). He had to shout to be heard. We are reminded of Jairus who shoved his way through the crowd to see Jesus and tell Him about his deathly-ill daughter (Luke 8:14). Parents are never more passionate than when it comes to their children. No sense of shame or propriety inhibited this father. Nothing held him back. His son was in trouble, and he would not be denied.

While both Luke and Mark record that the man addressed Jesus as “teacher” (v. 38), Matthew writes that he called Him “Lord” (Matthew 17:15). Perhaps the best explanation is that the man, in his urgency, called out to Jesus in any variety of titles trying to persuade Him to help his son. That the man understood that Jesus had power over demons is evidenced by his request, “³⁸I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy, ³⁹and a spirit seizes him” (v. 38-39). In fact, while he was trying to describe the problem to Jesus, “the demon slammed him to the ground and threw him into a convulsion” (v. 42). The father knew his son did not suffer from some physical disease or mental illness. The problem was spiritual, and he had confidence Jesus could restore him.

This is the most dramatic and powerful example of demon possession recorded in the New Testament. The father complains that when the demon attacks his boy “he suddenly screams, and it throws him into a convulsion with foaming at the mouth” (v. 39). Matthew adds that “he often falls into the fire and often into the water” (Matthew 17:15). This put the boy’s very life in jeopardy. Mark records that the demon “¹⁷makes him mute; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out” (Mark 9:17-18). These were horrors indeed.

Compounding the father's concern was that this was his "only boy" (v. 38). We cannot help but to recall other such instances we have encountered where Jesus acting on such a particular request. Jesus restored to life the only son of the widow at Nain (Luke 7:12-14). It was the only daughter of Jairus that Jesus brought back to life (Luke 9:41-42, 49-55). To a parent, there is no greater loss than that of a child. Therefore, there can be no greater earthly act of compassion than to have that child restored. Such is the compassion of Jesus.

Need we add that this is a great example of parenting. When our children are suffering from the attacks of the devil, the only wise choice is to bring them before Jesus.

The Generation

The Jews of Jesus' time believed they were very religious. Their lives were bound up in the keeping of the Law. There were ceremonies and rituals, celebrations and sacrifices, duties and obligations. The external morality of Jews was, and needed to be, above reproach. And yet Jesus referred to them as an "unbelieving and perverted generation" (v. 41). Why such a chastisement?

It would seem that the father had tried to get the disciples who had remained behind to cure his son. Perhaps he was aware that these men had been sent out to do that very thing (among other things). After all, Jesus had given these men "power and authority over all the demons" (Luke 9:1). It had been their business to further the kingdom of God in this way. Yet, the father complained to Jesus that "I begged Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not" (v. 40).

Why had the disciples been unable to cast out the demon and restore the boy? Was the demon too powerful for them? Luke does not say, but Matthew supplies more detail, "¹⁹then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not drive it out?' ²⁰And He said to them, 'Because of the littleness of your faith'" (Matthew 17:19-20). It is clear the disciples lacked faith. When encountering the terrors of the demon, their fear had been greater than their faith. They had failed to distinguish between what they were sensing, from what they knew to be true. The disciples had the authority to expel the demon, possessed the power to do so, and probably even had the experience of having successfully done so. Yet they had failed because their faith, in practice, was insufficient.

Let us clarify something. The disciples did not lack saving faith; they simply failed to believe completely all that Jesus told them. They doubted. They had not applied the eternal truths they knew to the moment. There was a gap between the truths they knew and the truths they applied. We can use this episode to be reminded that there may be faith without complete understanding. If a person's heart is right, they still may lack great theological understanding. After all, we were all babes in Christ once. None of us was born again fully mature. So let us be tolerant of those who are beginners in faith. To tolerate the ignorance of others, especially in an area where we have been given much understanding, is a great grace.

Luke records that when Jesus heard that the disciples had not been able to compel the demon to leave the boy He said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you and put up with you?" (v. 41). While He was probably speaking directly to His disciples, these words applied to all who were within hearing. Jesus was frustrated. He was disappointed. He had ministered to these men for

nearly three years and still they lacked faith. He was also no doubt frustrated with the scribes who pressed in to catch Him out in some error. And He was frustrated at the crowds who continued to follow in wonder yet not follow in their hearts. This was not a new experience for Jesus. He had addressed these people in similar phrases before:

Matthew 12:34, “you brood of vipers”

Matthew 12:39, “an evil and adulterous generation”

Mark 8:38, “this adulterous and sinful generation”

The Restoration

Yet, despite His frustration, Jesus was gracious. He told the man to “bring your son here” (v. 41). As the father obeyed and brought his son forward, the demon, recognizing the person with whom he was about to be confronted, “slammed him to the ground and threw him into a convulsion” (v. 42). This episode, by the way, eliminates any possibility that the boy was simply suffering from an epileptic attack and confirms that this was a spiritual attack. Mark recounts the desperation of the father in this moment as he pleaded, “if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” (Mark 9:22).

Jesus responded with authority and power. Recognizing that the crowd was likely causing further embarrassment to the father and was offering no help to the boy, Jesus “rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy” (v. 42). As He had done to the demons before, and even to the natural elements, Jesus commanded them and was obeyed. There was neither hesitation nor resistance offered. The demon left the boy immediately, and the young man was restored to himself.

But more than that, then Jesus “gave him back to his father” (v. 42). Again we are reminded of the personal nature of the compassion of Jesus. We have seen Him take advantage of the opportunity to fully restore others who had been healed previously. There was more to Jesus than just being an amazing miracle-worker. When Jesus healed the paralytic, He also forgave his sins (Luke 5:20-24). When Jesus cured the centurion’s servant, He also praised the centurion (Luke 7:9-10). When Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain, He personally gave him back to his mother (Luke 7:13-15). When Jesus healed the demon-possessed man in Gerasene, He also restored him to his village (Luke 8:35-39). When Jesus healed the woman who touched His cloak, He also comforted and restored her to society (Luke 8:43-48). When Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead, He also saw to it she had something to eat (Luke 8:54-55). So, now, Jesus “healed the boy and gave him back to his father” (v. 42).

Amazing Grace

As often happened when Jesus taught or performed some miracle, “they were all amazed at the greatness of God” (v. 43). What Peter, James, and John had seen on the mountain was made manifest in a small part in the healing of the demon-possessed boy. But amazement was not belief. Jesus had amazed the crowds before. The word used by Luke means to be filled with wonder or astonishment at something beyond human understanding. Yet, these people did not have saving faith. Another lesson for us to remember is that an emotional response to religion is not necessarily the same things as saving faith.

So, “while everyone was marveling at all that He was doing” (v. 43) Jesus spoke specifically to His disciples. And what He said must have shocked them. Jesus continued, “let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men” (v. 44). He once again reminded

them that He had not come to be a political revolutionary. He had not come to earth to remove the Roman oppressors and restore the nation of Israel. He was not a conqueror, but a sacrifice.

He wanted them to listen. As God, the Father had said to Peter, James, and John during the Transfiguration, what Jesus was saying needed to be listened to. It was difficult material, so it was required that it be attended to closely. It had to be not merely acknowledged, but understood. If not, it would be forgotten in the moment when it was most needed (think of Peter). To be sure, Jesus knew that the crowds were amazed now, but that it would soon change. Within a few months, these same crowds would demand His death. He knew that the same crowds that would shout “Hosanna” would later that week cry out “crucify Him.”

Jesus used the term “Son of Man” as a direct reference to the passage in Daniel,

“¹³I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
¹⁴And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

It was the same point, even close to the same wording, that Jesus used after feeding the crowds before the Transfiguration, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day” (Luke 9:22). The Transfiguration was not the sign of an alternation in God's eternal plan. Jesus was still to be a suffering Messiah.

The difficulty of this subject for the disciples was that the Messiah would “be delivered into the hands of men” (v. 44). That seemed so inconsistent with the attributes of a Messiah - of a coming king. It showed a lack of power; a lack of authority. Furthermore, who was it that had the power to do this? Who had such authority over the Messiah? Later, after the crucifixion, when the disciples had time to maturely reflect on what had transpired, they must have considered this. Surely the Jews were to blame, for as Peter would argue when confronting the Jewish crowd, “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him” (Acts 3:13). And as it says, Pilate was also to blame, as the unwitting immoral agent of the masses. And, after all, it was the Roman judicial system that allowed the crucifixion.

But these were merely the human elements in the equation. Ultimately Jesus was delivered up by the hand of God the Father, Himself. As it says in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare His own Son, but

delivered Him over for us all.” It had been planned from eternity past. While Peter acknowledged the human actions involved in the crucifixion, it was clear to him that “this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23). Within that statement is the clear understanding that this was permitted by “the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.”

The disciples, of course, “did not understand this statement” (v. 45). That could not yet comprehend what Jesus was saying. They heard the words but could make no sense of its meaning. It could hardly be expected that they would. In fact, Luke goes on to state that “it was concealed from them so that they would not perceive it” (v. 45). But who was it that concealed the information? Was it the disciples’ own ignorance? Was it Satan? Perhaps Jesus, Himself, or God the Father?

The context suggests that Luke is referencing an outside force, not the disciples’ ignorance. Though “they were afraid to ask Him about this statement” (v. 45), there seems to be something else at work here than simply their own inability to understand. As for the second option, while it is convenient to blame Satan for anything we don’t like or approve of, again the context does not justify that in this case. That Jesus is not the cause of the concealment is given from the fact that there is no indication that He was unwilling to instruct them as far as they wanted to know. That leaves God the Father as the cause. But why did God not fully reveal His plan?

That is not for us to answer definitively. We can trust that in His perfect knowledge and wisdom, He realized what the disciples could bear. He knew their minds as well as their hearts, and He knew that the crucifixion would be only fully understood and appreciated after the resurrection, ascension, and coming of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus would tell them later, “¹²I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:12-13).

Even in their lack of understanding, God was gracious to the disciples. Therefore “it was concealed from them so that they would not perceive it” (v. 45). God knew what they could bear. The issue now was for them to have faith. Faith in this world of the promise of the next. Faith that God would do what He promised. That is all He asks of any of us.

Take Aways

Like this scene, juxtaposed with the Transfiguration., our lives are caught between the now and the not yet. Faith in God to do what He has promised is the key to contentment here and joy hereafter.