

Getting Back the Son He Lost • Luke 9:37-45

The birth of a child is an occasion for celebration and hope. It's a clean slate waiting to have a wonderful new life written on it. The only limitation is the parents' dreams and Mom and Dad are dreaming the very best. They imagine that the very best of their lives will be only the beginning for their child and that this son or daughter will avoid the mistakes they made and will soar to heights the parents could never have reached. It is a dream for health and happiness, of good and godliness, the best and the very best. Even the worst fears can be dreamed away.

Rarely do parents imagine the worst or think of evil that could some day take over their child's life. In those moments when a baby is brand new who would think that evil could some day control the life of this beautiful newborn baby? What parent envisions sickness and sin, disease or depravity? But the hopes of too many parents turn into heartbreaks because of a disability, disease, disorder, delinquency or even death.

One day there was a man in the crowd near Jesus who had held his boy when he was a baby and had dreamed the dreams that any father has for his son. But those dreams were being shattered and his son was slipping from his grip by a combination of nightmares that were afflicting his son.

The story is told in the biography of Jesus in Luke 9:37-45. It follows right after the mountaintop story of Jesus' supernatural glory being revealed to his three closest disciples. It seems that Luke wanted to present a sharper contrast between the heaven-like glories on top of the mountain and the harsh realities of ordinary life here on earth. Here's what happened:

The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into

convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

"Oh, unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here."

Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Here was a father who was so desperate that he shouted from the crowd that had gathered to see Jesus. When he shouted he begged for help. Public begging is not the first action of a parent in need. It is more like a final act of desperation. Pride was gone. Embarrassment didn't matter. For this man that day secrecy was abandoned. He needed help and Jesus was his final hope. He didn't know where else to go. Time was running out.

This father quickly described his desperate situation. The problem was with his son, an only child. It's not that children matter less in larger families, but for this man all his hopes and dreams were wrapped up in this one boy. In a society where God's blessing was measured by the num-

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ber of children, this man was fearful of losing the only blessing God had given to him.

For some unexplained reason a demon had taken over his son's life. Sin was in control. The son was out of control. And this was more than evil in the sense of "bad things". This was a demon with intellect and supernatural powers and horrors that he brought into this family's life far beyond any father's ability to make a difference.

Fathers are always supposed to make things better. But there was nothing this father was good enough or strong enough to do. It must have torn at his heart to see his boy ravaged by evil and not be able to help him.

Nowadays we don't talk much about evil spirits or demons. At most we relegate them to Halloween folklore or horror movies. It is considered primitive and unsophisticated to believe that demons exist. In fact, many would think it terribly uneducated to attribute medical maladies to demon possession.

It is ironic that Americans currently believe more in angels and less in demons because when you read the Bible demons are presented as being as real as angels. They are the good and evil counterparts to one another. It is true, however, that demonic activity in the Bible is comparatively rare and centered in specific time periods and circumstances.

As for me, I believe demons are real and that we are in an ongoing spiritual battle against evil. However, I disagree with those who believe there is a demon around every corner or under every bush because that seems to relieve us all of human responsibility for things we do that are wrong and the sin that is in our own lives. But I readily admit that we are engaged in a spiritual warfare that is as real today as it was in the time of Jesus.

The evil spirit caused violent seizures in the child's body. Not only does Luke describe his condition but so do Matthew and Mark. He convulsed. He foamed at the mouth. He became rigid. He sometimes fell into fires or into water. So apparently this father was on constant call to save his son from being burned or drowned. The condition was both chronic and progressive. The father explained to Jesus, "*It scarcely ever leaves*

him and is destroying him."

When all else failed the father went to Jesus. But Jesus was on a prayer retreat on top of a mountain and was unavailable so the father begged Jesus' disciples to help his son. They tried to help, but it didn't work. We have to read between the lines to imagine what happened. No doubt the father told the disciples exactly what he told Jesus. Then the disciples spoke words of exorcism to try to remove the demon. But nothing happened. They may have been surprised because they had done this before and it worked. But not this time! This was a tougher demon or they didn't do it right or they just didn't have the spiritual power to get the job done.

Have you ever had someone come to you with a seemingly impossible prayer request? I have. I have had people ask me to pray for huge personal needs. I have prayed with them and for them and without them. Nothing happened. It's a sad feeling. It's even worse when I have prayed other times for other people and it worked, but this time nothing works. It's sad because the person who asked for help assumed that I had more influence with God than they did. They assumed my prayers would make a difference, that I could do it even if they could not. I know what those disciples faced because I have been there . . . "*I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.*"

There is a pointed and practical spiritual lesson here for every Christian. Go directly to Jesus! There are too many desperate fathers and mothers today who are going to dead saints, to Mary, to pastors and other Christians when they can go directly to Jesus. The truth is that saints can't cure. Mary is not God. Pastors and priests are helpless to handle life's greatest difficulties. It is far better to go straight to Jesus.

Why is Jesus better? Jesus said that we are all too short on faith and too full of our own sins to handle life's greatest conflicts with evil. In Jesus' own words he said, "*O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?*" That's why it's always best to point people in need to Jesus. When all others are too weak, when all others fail, when

all others are helpless go to Jesus who said, “*Bring your son here.*”

That father’s heart must have soared with joy and hope at those words, but a terrible thing happened as the father brought his son to Jesus. The evil spirit seized his son again. He could not have been more than a few yards away from Jesus. The demon must have recognized who Jesus was and saw what Jesus was going to do. He knew he was a goner. He had only moments left. His power and evil could not withstand Jesus’ power and good. So he grabbed hold of this child one more time and threw him to the ground in a convulsion. Luke uses the same word the Greeks used in athletic events when a boxer pummels an opponent until he drops to his knees and is flattened on the ground or in a wrestling match when a person is pinned by an opponent.

There is a lesson here for us. It is a lesson about evil. Evil always seeks to damage and destroy. It always takes every opportunity to hurt and to destroy. Even when evil is about to lose, it fights to the end for a person’s body and soul. Just as good hates evil so evil hates good. Sin may first disguise itself as attractive. Sin may start slowly. In the beginning it rarely goes by names like addiction or adultery or death. But let there be no doubt, sin never easily lets go. Sin never quickly surrenders. Sin always fights to the last second.

In the next moments came the clash of powers between good and evil, between Jesus and the demon, between heaven and hell: “. . . *Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.*”

In one miracle there were three great changes: spiritual; physical; relational. Spiritually, “*Jesus rebuked the evil spirit.*” He confronted and defeated this demon. It was a power struggle and Jesus won. He kicked the demon out of this boy

once and for all. But did that mean that he was physically cured and would experience no more seizures? Apparently not because Luke, who was a physician, made a distinction between spiritual healing and physical healing saying that Jesus rebuked the evil spirit and then healed the boy.

What would have happened if Jesus had just met his needs spiritually? Would he have continued with his seizure disorder? Apparently he would. But Jesus did both. He met his needs spiritually and physically and relationally, for Jesus gave him back to his father.

This may be a bit confusing because earlier we noted that the father must have been with this child 24 hours a day trying to protect him from seizures, from fire, from water. In fact, at that very moment the father’s hand was probably on his son’s shoulder. But the truth is that you can live in the same house with somebody and not be connected. You can be with somebody 365 days

a year and 24 hours of every day and be as distant as if you were a continent away. Physical proximity does not mean that the relationship is what it is supposed to be. And so in some ways the most wonderful part of the story is that Jesus gave the son back to his father so

that they could have the kind of relationship God meant for them to have.

All were amazed at the greatness of God. This was so supernatural that there was no other explanation but that God had done it.

My mother had a long-time friend who was losing his eyesight. After many years of reading his Bible every day for hours at a time the loss of his eyesight was especially difficult for him. At one point I suggested that he get audiotapes so he could listen to the Bible even though he could not read it. He couldn’t see well enough to drive so his license had to be surrendered. Although he received multiple opinions from different oph-

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thalmologists the results were always the same. Nothing could be done to halt the degeneration and certainly nothing could be done to restore the eyesight. He would soon be completely blind.

My mother, the man's wife and other friends committed to pray for God to intervene. It seemed an impossible request. Then one day my mother told me the amazing story that his sight had quickly and amazingly returned. He could read again. He returned to the Division of Motor Vehicles, took and passed the tests for a new driver's license and began driving again. God had given him back his sight. Not the doctors but God. In the words of Luke 9:43: *"And they were all amazed at the greatness of God."*

The story in Luke ends with a short paragraph that seems mistakenly out of place, almost like an editorial mistake. It says:

While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Jesus said it, but they didn't get it. They were afraid to even ask him what he was talking about. Jesus was talking about his future. He was talking about going to Jerusalem to be crucified and die in the really big battle against sin and evil.

The boy's problem was great. Jesus' miracle was awesome. But they were nothing compared to the cross. The cross was what really mattered. The cross was the place where Jesus would meet sin and Satan and human destiny head-on. Instead of dealing with the assaults of evil one person at a time, Jesus would represent us all on the cross and win forever. The cross was the reason he had come. That is what the Gospel is all about.

But they didn't understand—at least not yet. On the other side of the cross they would finally get it. On the other side of the cross they would fully believe. On the other side of the cross they would truly become Christians.

What does this story from Jesus' life tell us today when our sons are sick, when evil seizes our lives, when no one seems to have the power to help? Here are lessons for us to learn:

- There is no problem you cannot bring to Jesus.
- Jesus can help when no one else can.
- Evil never gives up easily.
- Jesus wants to intervene in our lives spiritually, physically, and relationally.
- The main message is not our immediate crisis but the cross.

Perhaps in spite of all of this you are still not sure. You sort of believe, but not entirely. You think Jesus can help you but you have some doubts. There is an interesting part of the dialogue between Jesus and the father that Luke left out but which appears in Mark's telling of the same story in Mark 9:23-24. The father asked Jesus if it was possible for him to help and Jesus answered, *"Everything is possible for him who believes."* Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

If I read him right, he's saying, "Jesus I believe; I really do. I believe a little, but there is a lot that I don't believe. Will you help me with the part where I don't believe? Will you take the little that I do believe and build on it and change my unbelief into faith?"

I don't know what battle against evil you are facing. I can't meet your needs. But I can point you to Jesus. If your faith is short, tell him you do believe and ask him to help you with the rest. Tell Jesus: *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."*

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