

The Boy with an Unclean Spirit

Introduction

This story takes place on the day after the transfiguration and is listed in all three of the synoptics.⁶⁹ Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John have descended from the mountain and talk back upon the rest of the nine who are standing the midst of a great crowd, with *the scribes disputing with them*, Mark 9.14. It would have been such a contrast to the peace and tranquility they had just experienced on the mountain ... in the presence of God ... and Jesus in His magnificent glory ... now as they arrive back in the village, they find themselves in the presence of consternation and dismay.

The Story

It was truly a tense situation. A father had brought his demon possessed son to the disciples so it could be removed. The nine men tried to remove the demon but failed. Can you imagine the situation? It's the perfect moment for the Scribes to discredit them and Jesus as imposters. We can imagine that the Scribes were giving the disciples their own formulas for exorcism⁷⁰ ... all the while making fun of them. They were so into what was happening that they did not see Jesus walk up. When they realize He was there they ran up to greet Him. He asked, *what are you arguing with them about?*

Then someone in the crowd said:

Teacher, I brought my son to you. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they couldn't.

Mark 9.16-18

Notice how the scribes have faded into the background and said nothing. They are enjoying the moment and desperately hoping that something else will happen to make Jesus look bad. But the emotion of the moment is real. Luke says the father of the boy desperately pled:

⁶⁹ Matthew 17.14-19; Mark 9.14-29; Luke 9.37-42.

⁷⁰ During the first century, Solomon's reputation as a magician and exorcist had been embellished. Josephus used 1 Kings 4.29 and said, "And God granted him [Solomon] knowledge of the art used against demons for the benefit and healing of men. He also composed incantations by which illnesses are relieved, and left behind forms of exorcisms with which those possessed by demons drive them out, never to return." See Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987, VIII, ii 5, p. 214.

Josephus then described the technique of exorcism used by Eleazar, a contemporary Jewish exorcist. Eleazar would take a ring containing a root prescribed by Solomon and put it to the nose of the afflicted person. The odor would draw the demon out of the nose and Eleazar would then recite Solomon's name and various incantations to prevent the return of the demon. As proof that the demon had actually been expelled, Eleazar would place a container of water near the possessed person and command the demon to overturn it as he left. "When this was done," continues Josephus, "the understanding and wisdom of Solomon were clearly revealed" (*ibid*). See Aune, D. E. "Exorcism." Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979-1988, p. Vol. 2, p. 243.

Just then a man from the crowd cried out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, because he’s my only child.

– Luke 9.38

Taking the synoptics all together, we get a clear picture of the terrible condition this young boy endured:

- The demon would *seize* the boy, 9.18, and *throw him down*.
- As this was happening, he would *shriek* loudly, Luke 9.39, and *foam at the mouth*.
- He would *grind his teeth, and become rigid*, Mark 9.18.
- The demon would thrust him into a fire or water, Matthew 17.15.
- He was *severely bruised*⁷¹ and the demon *scarcely ever left him*, Luke 9.39.
- The demon caused him to be unable to speak or hear, Matthew 17.15, 25.

The horror of the situation cannot be underemphasized.

The Disciples Fail to Cast out the Demon

Earlier in Mark, we learn that Jesus had given the disciples power to cast out demons, Mark 3.14-15; 6.7, 13. But in this case, they had failed. Why?

He replied to them, “You unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring him to me.”

– Mark 9.19

This is quite an emotional response by Jesus mainly aimed at His disciples. And He clearly identifies their failure to cast out the demon as a lack of faith. This is clearly painful for Jesus. He is exasperated. They had spent so much time with Him and yet had not developed an adequate sense of trust. Now, He will take action. *Bring him to me*, He says.

They brought the boy to Jesus. As soon as the demon saw Jesus, he began to thrash the boy, causing convulsions, foaming at the mouth, and rolling around on the ground. Jesus takes a moment to bear some of the father’s pain: *How long has this been happening to him?* It’s not that Jesus didn’t know . . . this is His way of connecting. The father replied, *from childhood*, and then further explains the desperation of the situation. The father asks, *if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us*, 9.22.

Jesus is taken back. *If?* The miraculous works of Jesus were well known, but this man was still unsure . . . maybe because of the severity of his son’s condition. To this, Jesus says, *Everything is possible for the one who believes*, 9.23. Faith is essential for accessing the power of God. The father was honest enough to know he needed more faith and said, *I do believe, help my unbelief*, 9.24.

Jesus Heals the Little Boy

⁷¹ The CSB rendering of *syntribo*, as “bruised” may not adequately describe the extent of the demon’s abuse of the boy. The word is used in the sense of breaking one’s opponent into small pieces. BDAG uses words like “shatter,” “smash,” “crush,” “beat severely,” and “annihilate” to define the word. See BDGA, p. 976.

All the while this has been going on, the crowd is rapidly growing. Seeing this, Jesus turns to the boy and rebukes the spirit. *You mute and deaf spirit, I command you: Come out of him and never enter him again,* 9.25. The demon immediately left. However, he made it as tough as possible on the boy as he did. The boy laid on the ground so still that the people believed he was dead. Jesus, compassionately, took the boy by the hand, raised him to his feet, and gave him back to his father, 9.27; Luke 9.42.

Why Did the Disciples Fail? What's in this for us?

In Mark 9.28, the disciples ask, *why couldn't we drive it out?* Jesus answered, *this kind can come out by nothing but prayer,* 9.29. Yes, the disciples had been equipped with power, Mark 3.14-15, but they needed to keep praying to keep and maintain it. Prayer is how we keep our closeness with God. If we're not praying, we're not close to God. Despite the greatness of our gifts, a lack of prayer causes us to:

- Lose spiritual vitality. Our spiritual life has been intended to be living and dynamic. It's not about the performance ... it is about offering our life its totality ... depending on Him for everything.
- Lose humility. Barclay writes that what should be used for God's glory, we begin to use for our own ... and the virtue goes out of it.

The disciples had been equipped with power, but they had failed to nurture it. In a moment when they needed it, it had vanished. We get to use our gifts when we enrich them by continual contact with God who gave them.⁷²

For Thought and Reflection

1. When does this story take place? Why do you think it is in all three of the synoptics?
2. What were the Scribes and the remaining 9 disciples doing? Why is this a particularly embarrassing moment for the 9?
3. Why do you think the Scribes went quiet as the father detailed his story? What are their motives?

⁷² Barclay, p. 253.

4. What kind of torture did this boy endure? How long had it been happening?

5. Why do you think Jesus was so upset with the disciples when He learned they couldn't cast out the demon?

6. Why did Jesus react the way he does when the father of the boy said, *if you can heal . . .?*

7. What do we learn about Jesus' compassion in this story?

8. What happened when Jesus healed the boy?

9. What did Jesus say was the problem on why the disciples couldn't heal the boy?

10. What are some applications for us from this story?