

Coming down from the mountain. Skyland. July 2005.

Within the next 24 hours - sadly in many ways - we will be descending Lookout Mountain.

There are two occasions in the gospels where the Holy Spirit links a miraculous healing with our Lord's coming down from a mountain. In the one case the healing followed what we call the Sermon on the Mount, and in the other it followed what we call the Mount of Transfiguration. Our first reading is from **Matt. 7. 28-8.4; Mark 9. 2, 8-9, 14-29**. There are many fascinating points of contact between the two incidents recorded here – particularly when we take account of the parallel accounts of each incident as set out in the other gospels.

1. Both mountains were **mountains of revelation**, where those with Him learned of His authority – an authority which exceeded that of the scribes – ‘when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as One having authority, and not as the scribes’, Matt. 7.28-29 – who relied on the wisdom and teaching of the past – who droned on and on, quoting rabbi after rabbi, rattling off precedent after precedent, tradition after tradition – eg ‘Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said ...’, ‘Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said ...’ and so on – and as One having authority which exceeded even that of Moses and Elijah – who represented the genuine prophets of God – who mounted the stage to thunder their characteristic ‘Thus saith the Lord’ – an expression we meet 360 times in OT.

But *He* was no scribe - nor was He a mere prophet. He was the Son of God - and used neither formula – He had His own and in marked contrast, He stood up and simply announced, ‘I say to you’. For example, ‘You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But *I say to you* not to resist the evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also’, Matt. 5.38-39 – with Jesus using the distinctive phrase ‘I say to you’ over 55 times in Matthew’s gospel alone! Hence the voice from the bright cloud, ‘This is My beloved Son ... hear Him’.

2. At the foot of both mountains we find that the Lord was surrounded by ‘**great multitudes**’, Matt. 8.1; Mark 9.14. At the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, when the crowd saw Him, they were greatly amazed and ran to Him, Mark 9.15. We can’t be altogether sure why they were amazed. Did some of the radiance of the Mount – when His face shone as the sun, Matt. 17.2 – did some of that radiance linger on His face? Or was it that the crowd were amazed only at His timely arrival?

To some extent it may seem strange that – given the Lord’s charge to the three apostles not to tell others what they had seen until after His resurrection, v.9 – He should have returned while His face retained some traces of the glory from the Mountain. On the other hand, I find it difficult to believe that the astonishment of the crowd would have been caused simply by our Lord having arrived at an opportune moment.

If we assume that His face still bore traces of the glory of the mountain, we might well compare and contrast this incident with that recorded of Moses in Exodus 34 – when God’s prophet returned from the mountain to confront the sin of the nation in connection with the golden calf. Indeed, I note that the expression used by both Matthew (17.9) and Mark (9.9) - ‘came (‘coming’) down out of the mountain’ – is the very expression used of Moses in Exod. 34.29 LXX – ‘when Moses came down from the mountain, there were two tables in Moses’ hand’, which continues, ‘Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him’. On that occasion, following Moses encounter with God, the skin of Moses face ‘shone’ (‘was luminous’, ‘was radiant’, ‘beamed out rays of light’, Hebrew.¹).

I said that there were contrasts – and there were at least two. First, when faced with the failure of Aaron and the people, Moses himself failed – abysmally – and shattered the tables of God’s law. But, confronted with the total failure of the nine apostles to cast out the demon, the Lord Jesus didn’t fail – and expelled the formidable unclean spirit with His word. Second, when Moses’ face shone, Aaron and children of Israel were afraid to come near him, Exod. 34.30. Here the crowd ran up to Jesus and greeted Him, Mark 9.15.

3. On both occasions, the Lord was met by a man who **knelt** before him, ‘there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him’, Mark 1.40; ‘when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him’, Matt. 17.14, and who **confronted Him with a tremendous need**.

4. Again, on each occasion, the case presented to Jesus was **extreme** – first, that of a man who not only had leprosy but who, according to doctor Luke, was ‘full of leprosy’, Luke 5.12; where the leprosy had spread over his whole body, covering him from head to foot. He was not merely in the hand (as Moses temporarily, Exod. 4.6) or forehead (as Uzziah permanently, 2 Chron. 26.19). That is, this was an altogether exceptional case. Second, that of a young boy who was not only possessed by an unclean spirit but by a particularly nasty, strong and malicious spirit – the Lord’s description ‘this kind does not come out except by ...’ singled out this spirit as exceptional - this was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill demon.

5. But these were not only two extreme cases – they were two very **sad and distressing cases**. According to the Law, the leper was cut off from all social contact – forbidden to come near the habitation of his fellow-men – ‘He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his habitation shall be outside the camp’, Lev. 13.46.

As to the boy, He is the last of the three 'only' children entered in Dr Luke's casebook in chapters 7 to 9 of his gospel – 'when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the *only* son of his mother, and she was a widow', 7.12; 'there came a man named Jairus, and he was a ruler of the synagogue: and he fell down at Jesus' feet, and besought him that he would come into his house: for he had *one only* daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying', 8.42; 'behold, a man of the company cried out, saying, Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is my *only* child', 9.38.

And, on account of the unclean spirit, this only child was not only epileptic but both deaf and dumb – unable therefore either to hear his parents' words of loving comfort or to make known his own sorrows, fears or distress. 6. At the close of the first incident, Jesus '**charged**' (sternly warned/strictly admonished', Mark 1.43) the cleansed leper to **tell 'no one'** what had happened to him (the leper). Immediately before the second incident, Jesus 'charged' ('ordered', 'commanded', Mark 9.9) His disciples to tell 'no one' what had happened to Him (the Lord Jesus).

7. In both narratives, we read the word '**compassion**' – 'Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him', Mark 1.41; 'if you can do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us', 9.22. As always, His feelings of pity moved Jesus to works of love and kindness. For Him, compassion was no empty sentiment – it was a pity which expressed itself in active assistance. He was not only sensitive to feel, He was ready to act – and He was mighty to save. I note that Jesus healed the man even though Jesus would have known that, in spite of His explicit stern warning, the man would later broadcast and 'blaze abroad (spread about)' what he had done for him, Mark 1.45.

As a result, the Lord would no longer be able to enter the cities to preach there –as He desired and for which purpose He said He had come there, 'Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth', 1.38 – but was compelled to stay outside 'in desert places', Mark 1.45. Here lies a sad twist to the story in that Jesus now faced a situation not dissimilar to that which had previously faced the leper himself – 'He is unclean ...his habitation shall be outside the camp', Lev. 13.46! But although the leper's misplaced zeal was to limit and hamper our Lord's future activity in the region, He still healed the man. What a wonderful, compassionate Saviour!

8. In both cases we read of the **physical contact** made by Jesus. In the case of the leper, he didn't send him – as Elisha did Naaman the Syrian leper – to wash in the Jordan – nor even did He do as Naaman had *expected* Elisha to do, to wave His hand over the leprosy and heal it, 2 Kings 5.11. He stretched out His hand and actually touched him, Matt. 8.3. By touching an unclean leper, any ordinary person would have become ceremonially defiled himself. But at His touch nothing remains defiled. Far from becoming unclean, Jesus makes the unclean to be clean; 'immediately the leprosy left him', Mark 1.42.

And, when the boy lay, as dead, on the ground, He took hold on the hand of the boy – grasping, gripping his hand firmly.

9. In both cases, stress is laid on **the completeness of the cure**. In the one case, the leper was sent to the priest – among other things, to prove that his leprosy was well and truly cleansed – that he was a leper no more – as was Jesus normal practice with healed lepers, Luke 17.14 (10 of them). And we remember that *only God* could cure biblical leprosy - hence Jehoram the King of Israel said about Naaman – when he suspected that, in sending Naaman to him to be cured, the King of Syria was seeking some quarrel with him – 'Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends to me to recover a man of his leprosy?', 2 Kings 5.7. Hence also, the message to John the Baptist to tell him that, not only did the blind receive their sight and the dead were raised up, but 'the lepers are cleansed', Matt. 11.5. The leper was a leper no more.

In the other case, Jesus explicitly commanded the unclean spirit to 'come out' of the boy and to 'enter into him no more', Mark 9.25. In both cases the healings weren't only instantaneous – showing that they were achieved by divine power and not by natural means – they were permanent.

10. But you probably noticed the **striking difference** between the stories. In the one, the man (the leper) implored Jesus, '*If you will, you can ...*' – in the other, the man (the boy's father) implored Him, '*If you can ...*'. Oh, we say, that was a foolish thing for the boy's father to say. But we ought not be too hard on the man. We can't altogether blame him for his doubts. Indeed, it would have been surprising if he hadn't been disappointed and disheartened by the disciples' earlier inability to help.

His original intention had been to bring his son to Jesus Himself – 'I brought my son to you', Mark 9.17, but when he found that the Teacher was absent (up the mountain with Peter, James and John), quite understandably he had approached the Lord's disciples. 'I spoke to your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not'. It is small wonder that he now asks, 'If *you* can do anything ...'.

The combined power of nine apostles was baffled by this particular demon – it is hardly surprising therefore that the Lord later directed His 70 disciples to rejoice – not that they exercised authority over the demons - but that their

names were written in heaven, Luke 10.17-20 – to base their joy – not on the power of His name on earth but on the presence of their names in heaven – not on the ebb and flow of effective service for Him – but on that which – praise God! – can never fluctuate or change. [I note that in Philippians 4, the apostle, having referred to some of his fellow-labourers as those ‘whose names are in the book of life’, immediately added ‘Rejoice’, Phil. 4.3-4 – association of thought perhaps?]

‘Bring him to *Me*’, He commanded, Mark 9.19. The question, ‘How long has he been like this’, v.21, was addressed by Jesus to the father and not to the young sufferer himself – not only because the sufferer was just a boy but because the poor lad was both deaf and dumb – and could therefore have neither heard nor answered. In effect, Jesus said to the father, ‘The question isn’t “if *I* can” but “if *you* can”! The point at issue isn’t My power but your faith. To some extent at least the cure of your boy depends, not on Me, but on you. Do you believe I can do this?’

What a predicament for the man – to be told that his son’s healing rests on his faith. He had earlier pleaded, ‘... have compassion on us and *help us*’ – linking himself with his son – but now he focuses his request for ‘help’ on himself alone and what he has been told is his greatest need - ‘*help my unbelief*’. It is as though he pleads, ‘Yes, Lord, I do believe – but I fear that my very faith is weak and defective. I desperately need You to increase and strengthen it – I need You to remove whatever remaining doubts or unbelief lurk within me, that I may secure my son’s healing’.

It was enough. Jesus addressed the unclean spirit - ‘I (the Greek is emphatic. In effect, ‘Not now one – or nine – of My disciples, but **I**) command you to come out of him and never enter him again’. And this exceptionally strong demon at the foot of the mount was no more a match for Him – no more able to resist such unmistakeable authority – than had been the whole legion of demons which had possessed and ruled the man who dwelt in the tombs of Gerasa, Mark 5.8.

These stories hold several simple, practical lessons for us :

(i) **It isn’t possible – or desirable – that we dwell perpetually in the glory of some mountain-top experience.** Our pathway of service – as that of the Master – leads us down into the valley where human need cries out for our compassion and action. Even Jesus wouldn’t stay on the mountain! In the case of the Mount of Transfiguration, love brought Him down from the place of *glory and splendour* to the place of *distress and misery* – from the place where heaven visited earth for a night to the place where the powers of darkness reigned.

Peter needed to learn that it is equally ‘good to be here’ at the foot of the mount – among the needs of men – as it is to be on top of the mountain – in the presence of the glorified Lord. It is interesting that Luke uses the very same word to describe what astonished the men at *the foot* of the mountain as Peter uses to describe what had astonished James, John and himself at *the top*! – ‘they were all amazed’, Luke says, ‘at the mighty power (the magnificence, the majestic greatness) of God’, Luke 9.43; ‘we were eyewitnesses of his majesty (magnificence, majestic greatness), 2 Pet. 1.16. The Lord’s true majesty was as evident in His humble service for the needy as it was in the honour and glory which He received from the Father on the holy mount, 2 Pet. 1.17.

(ii) We too **need to pray with the confidence** – not ‘if you can ...’ – but ‘if you will, you can ...’ – armed with the assurance that He is indeed ‘able to do (ie He ‘can do’, same word) superabundantly beyond whatever we ask or think’, Eph. 3.20.

(iii) From the unwelcome effects of the leper’s disobedience, we must learn that **the commands of our Lord must be obeyed at all cost.** Jesus wanted to avoid becoming known simply as a miracle worker. He had come to fulfill His mission of sacrificial suffering before being publicly proclaimed as Messiah. The healing of lepers was one of the messianic signs of which John the Baptist was reminded when in prison, Luke 7.22. The crowds were always ready to apply to Jesus their commonly held view of the Messiah as a military or political deliverer. The cleansed leper’s disobedience to Jesus’ word – however well-meaning – therefore frustrated Jesus’ work rather than advanced it. The Lord’s ways are always best – and ultimately all disobedience to His word (no matter how plausible) will lead to loss.

(iv) Alas, **the disciples’ failure at the foot of the mount reflected badly on Jesus** – leading the boy’s father to question even *the Lord’s* ability. It is sobering to reflect that it is by *my* actions and conduct that men measure and judge *the Lord*.

(v) And let us never let the failure which we find in others of the Lord’s people cause us to doubt the Lord Himself – His power, love or whatever. Let us determine to **press beyond our disappointment in other Christians** and to focus on the Lord Himself – who never fails or disappoints.

(vi) From the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, we learn that **faith and prayer are necessary to sustain our God-given gifts and our service for the Lord.** Clearly, the disciples were part of the ‘unbelieving’ generation of which Jesus spoke, Mark 9.19. In reply to the question, ‘Why were we not able to cast it out?’, Matthew reports Jesus’ words, ‘Because of your little faith’, Matt. 17.20, while Mark draws attention to the lord’s comment about the

need for prayer, Mark 9.29. It seems to me that their poverty of faith manifested itself, not in any *lack* of expectation of success but *because* of their expectation of success – hence their surprise and their question.

Earlier, they had been given authority over the demonic world and they had exercised this authority on many occasions, 3.14-15; 6.13. It is likely that, on the basis of their past successes, they had taken it for granted that the power somehow now lay in themselves and that they would always be successful. They therefore felt no renewed sense of dependence on God – neglecting to pray earnestly to Him for His blessing and power. Without renewed trust in God and without prayer, they failed – and failed miserably. We too must ever remember that neither our spiritual gifts nor our past effective service can ever substitute for prayer and for constant conscious dependence on God and His power.

May the Lord help us to take away some of these lessons with us when the time comes for us to come down from our Lookout Mountain retreat tomorrow.

Thank you for giving me the privilege of joining you for this year's conference. In at least one sense, I descend this mountain a different person - in terms of my secular life, when I came up I was in the employment of the Welsh Assembly Government, and when I go down I will be a man of leisure - speaking loosely - speaking *very* loosely! When I hit the UK, I have four meetings fixed in my first week home!

But the big question which faces me today is whether or not I leave this conference a different person *in terms of my spiritual life and walk with God*.

Footnote

¹ The Hebrew word translated "shone" is unusual and is related to the word translated "horn," meaning "rayed", Thomas Constable. See also NIDOTTE, nos. 7966 and 7967, and TWOT, no. 2072.