

The Healing of a Boy with Epilepsy
Matthew 17:14-21
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The account of the boy that Jesus healed of epilepsy is found in each synoptic Gospel account. All three place this narrative immediately after the transfiguration of Jesus (cf. Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43). Therefore, they all connect this healing with the transfiguration.

The likely connection between this account and the transfiguration can be found in Jesus' answer to the disciples' question as they were coming down the mountain. When Jesus said, "*Elijah is coming and will restore all things*" (Matthew 17:11), He looked to the coming restoration in the kingdom of God. This is in contrast to His prediction of His death in verse 12.

When the restoration of all things comes in the kingdom of God, Satan will be bound (Revelation 20:1-2). This then corresponds to the authority over the demon that Jesus exercises in the healing of the boy (Matthew 17:18). As is common with Jesus' miracles, this miracle was a precursor to the deliverance that we will all enjoy one day.

The story of the healing of the epileptic boy (Matthew 17:14-18) is followed by the question of the disciples to Jesus regarding their own inability to drive out the demon (Matthew 17:19-21). In each part of this account, there is a request of Jesus, followed by a response from Jesus. In both sections, there is an emphasis on the lack of ability of the disciples compared to the power of Jesus.

The restoration of the demon-possessed boy (17:14-18)

Matthew includes a crowd of people as a man came up to Jesus to request healing for his son. According to Mark 9:14, this crowd had gathered around the other nine disciples while Jesus, Peter, James and John were on the mountain (Matthew 17:1). The crowd included scribes who were arguing with them, either with the usual criticisms of the disciples' practices in light of their own tradition, or about the disciples' attempt to serve the epileptic.

The man who approached Jesus did so out of desperation. Luke 9:38-39 describes why he fell on His knees, "*A man from the crowd shouted saying, 'Teacher, I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy, and a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly screams, and it throws him into a convulsion with foaming at the mouth; and only with difficulty does it leave him, mauling him as it leaves.'*"

Mark 9:17-18 adds even more context to the father's difficulties, "*Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out.*" The man's only son was in such distress because of this suffering inflicted by the demon. The boy was endangered whenever he would be around fire or water. The father came to Jesus on his knees, begging Jesus, who was his last hope. He sought the disciples' help, but was unsuccessful, "*I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.*" (Matthew 17:16).

Only Matthew describes the boy as having "seizures" (ESV, NIV). The NASB translates the condition as "*is a lunatic,*" but given the father's description of the boy's condition, the best translation would be "is one who has seizures" or, using our medical term, "is an epileptic." Jesus had earlier healed epileptics in Matthew 4:24. This is the same word (SELENIAZETAI) and the NASB oddly translates it epileptics in 4:24 but lunatic in 17:15. While the literal translation of this word would be "*moonstruck,*" it is also evident that first century medicine did not have the ability to diagnose epilepsy as a specific disorder of the nerve cells in the brain. Thus, the sense of lunatic was based upon a person's behavior.

Of course, the reason for the seizures was demon possession of the boy. The father recognized this in both Mark and Luke's accounts and Jesus healed the boy by casting the demon out of him in Matthew 17:18. While epileptic seizures are a physical malady, as with other physical conditions (cf. Matthew 12:22), there are certain times when the physical manifestation is caused by an evil spirit. This is one of those times.

In Mark 9:25, Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit with "*You deaf and mute spirit.*" This indicates that the boy may have also been deaf and unable to speak. This would have created more hardship for the father, who would then not have been able to communicate with the son easily and would have to help him even more. This would be a very hands-on task whenever the boy was near water or fire. This explains more of why the man was in a desperate situation.

The ultimate source of all of our physical problems is the fall of man into sin, which was prompted by the evil one. The enemy is opposed to our well-being, "*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). While 1 Peter 5:8 certainly is primarily referring to spiritual attack, these accounts in the New Testament show that it also includes physical suffering.

Just as we have great difficulty in discerning the role of the evil one in our spiritual difficulties, we likewise have great difficulty discerning the role of the evil one in our physical difficulties. Also, many physical difficulties result from some form of sinful or foolish behavior. Therefore, we should be slow to conclude any form of bodily problem is the result of a demon. As Christians we cannot be demon-possessed (cf. 1 John 4:4), and with unbelievers, their father is the devil and they want to do his desires (John 8:44).

The major theme of this passage is not the boy's condition but the disciples' condition. He brought the boy to the disciples and they could not cure him. Later we will learn the reason for their inability.

Jesus answers the man with very strong words, *"You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me."* This statement is certainly directed at more than the father for by generation He meant His contemporary Jewish population. Some Jews obviously believed and followed Jesus, but as a whole, they had rejected Him and were destined to bring about His execution. He spoke to the crowd that were gathered, including the scribes who were arguing with His disciples.

It is in the sense that His departure is near that He states *"how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?"* Their opposition to Him was the ultimate manifestation of their perversion. Here was another moment with a request of Him to bring healing by those who lacked full faith. This is evident by the father's words in Mark 9:21-24, *"And he said.... if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" And Jesus said to him, "'If You can?'" All things are possible to him who believes.'* Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, *'I do believe; help my unbelief.'*

Therefore, the crowd consisted of scribes, who did not have faith, a father, who wanted to believe in order for his son to be cured, and the disciples, eleven of whom had true faith. Jesus healed people who lacked faith at other times (Luke 17:11-19; John 11:23-44). While lack of faith does not preclude the work of God, sometimes our desperate state will cause us to cry out to the Lord for faith. This man is an encouraging example of asking the Lord for faith.

The father's desire for belief is in contrast to the unbelieving generation that he lived among. These unbelievers would participate in the deliverance of Jesus for crucifixion (cf. Matthew 17:22-23). The theme of faith will also be a part of the following section where Jesus says that the disciple's inability to drive out the unclean spirit was due to their littleness of faith.

Jesus ends His words by having the boy brought to Him in order to heal him. Luke 9:42 adds to the drama by describing what happened as the boy was brought to Him, *“While he was still approaching, the demon slammed him to the ground and threw him into a convulsion.”* This violent demon was then rebuked by Jesus with the words, *“You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again”* (Mark 9:25). With one last desperate act of violence, the unclean spirit threw the boy *“into terrible convulsions”* (Mark 9:26) as he left.

The result of this was *“the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, ‘He is dead!’”* (Mark 9:26). *“But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him, and he got up”* (Mark 9:27). Luke 9:43 adds the response of the people, *“and they were all amazed at the greatness of God.”* This should not be interpreted as faith inasmuch as the crowds were frequently amazed at Jesus (Matthew 7:28, 9:33; 12:23; 21:20; 22:22; 27:14). Matthew chose to omit these details with a simple summary, *“and the boy was cured at once.”*

The rebuke of the disciples’ faith (17:19-21)

The disciples came to Jesus privately to ask why they were unable to cast out the demon. They had come privately to Him also in Matthew 13:36 and 15:12 to ask questions. The pronoun “we” is emphasized in the Greek text, in contrast to Jesus’ ability. Mark 9:28 notes that they asked him this while they were inside a house. Only Matthew and Mark record the disciples’ private question to Jesus.

In comparing Jesus’ answer to their question in both Gospels, Matthew states that their inability was *“because of the littleness of your faith.”* However, His answer to them in Mark 9:29 was, *“this kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.”*

The reconciliation of these answers can be found in considering what Jesus meant by littleness. He will go on to describe faith as small as a mustard seed can move a mountain in the next verse. Therefore, by littleness, Jesus could not mean the size or quantity of their faith. Rather, He must have been speaking about the quality of their faith. While small faith can be effective, poor faith is ineffective.

This poor faith can be seen in prayer. When we trust God, we will be more likely to pray, and when we do not trust God we will be less likely to pray. It is the humility of prayer that manifests faith, rather than the pride of self-sufficiency. Because the means of the disciples having power to cast out the unclean spirit came entirely from God, it required prayer. The nine disciples evidently failed to pray and sought to help the boy in their own strength.

Jesus had rebuked His disciples for their little faith amidst the storm on the Sea of Galilee, *“He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?’ Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm”* (Matthew 8:26). He addressed Peter’s little faith when he was sinking after walking on the water, *“Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’”* (Matthew 14:31). He also spoke of their little faith when they failed to understand the lesson of the feedings of the four thousand and the five thousand when they failed to bring bread, *“You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?”* (Matthew 16:8). The issue of their lack of strong faith had been an ongoing topic between Jesus and His disciples.

Whenever Jesus says *“truly I say to you,”* it is to emphasize what is to follow. What follows is a statement on the effectual power of faith. Jesus used two analogies, a mustard seed and a mountain. Jesus earlier noted that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the region (Matthew 13:32), and as such, represents something very, very small. Therefore, it is not the quantity of a person’s faith that is essential, but rather the quality of a person’s faith, that is, the reality of faith and who such faith is placed in. Apart from the exercise of trust in God, there is no faith (cf. James 2:14-26).

In contrast to the mustard seed, mountains represent something that is very, very large. The Old Testament refers to the removal of mountains in a proverbial sense for overcoming significant difficulties (Isaiah 40:4; 49:11; 54:10) and this theme is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament (Matthew 21:21-22; Mark 11:23; 1 Corinthians 13:2). So, this is a promise of the ability to see God’s power to work in great ways in the difficulties of life. Philippians 4:11-13 is a parallel passage that supports the truth of overcoming all difficulties through trust in God, *“Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”*

The disciples were on the precipice of a time when they would be encountering many difficult circumstances and true faith would be essential in overcoming. Jesus’ death was imminent (Matthew 17:22-23). They were months away from their own ministry as detailed in the Book of Acts. This ministry would involve arrests (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-18), persecution (Acts 5:40) and death (Acts 12:1-2). Only those with great faith would be able to walk through these challenges with perseverance.

The words of Matthew 17:21, *"But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting,"* are not found in any of the oldest and best Greek manuscripts. This is why the NASB places them in brackets with a footnote to make the reader aware of this. The ESV omits verse 21 from the text and places it in a footnote, while the NIV only references verse 21 in a footnote as being similar to Mark 9:29.

Without question, this verse is an assimilation of Mark 9:29 into the text of Matthew by later copyists. This transfer of a verse in one Gospel to another happened often by copyists seeking to provide the reader with more information. There is no reason if it were original that it would be omitted.

Furthermore, there is the addition of the practice of fasting. This is the product of those in the early church who viewed fasting as a means of increasing the chance of God responding positively to prayer. This is a manifestation of adding a work to faith in order to move God to act. This thinking ultimately led to the entire sacramental system erected by the Roman Catholic Church.

Conclusion

The Lord once again manifested His authority over the evil one, this time to mercifully deliver a boy from torment. His disciples sought to cure the boy but were unable due to the littleness of their faith. Jesus' teaching on faith is the central element of this story.

If we have faith in God, nothing is impossible, because nothing is impossible for God. However, it is critical to understand that it is not the size of our faith but the content of our faith that Jesus spoke about. If we believe that God will work if we believe strongly enough, then we are in essence placing our faith in our ability to have more faith. True faith is a simple trust in God to be fully able to accomplish His will, regardless of the circumstances that confront us.

The essential manifestation of our faith is through prayer. If we truly believe in God, we will depend on Him through prayer. We will trust Him to do His will as we have great hope that He can deal with any obstacle or difficulty that may come our way. Our faith enables us to believe that He has the best in mind and when we pray, *"the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much"* (James 5:16).

"Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6) and when we trust in our ability, we will not be delivered, but we will fail to honor the Lord. Attempts to supplement our faith with human effort only serve to eradicate faith as we trust our works, for our deeds flow from our faith. *"Have faith in God"* (Mark 11:22).