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Crisis in the Valley

Luke 9:37-43

Have you ever thought about all the conveniences we enjoy today? If you think King Solomon was rich and pampered, that was nothing compared to the creature comforts you and I enjoy: indoor plumbing with hot and cold running water clean enough to drink right from the tap, heat pumps, air conditioning, cell phones, refrigeration, planes, trains, and automobiles. Take just two of those conveniences—cell phones and air travel. 150 years ago, it took our great grandparents 6 months to travel by wagon train from the East to the Northwest, hundreds of them dying along the way whereas today it takes what? 6 hours to travel from Seattle to New York, if it's a direct flight.

And as for cell phones, the only place you could find one of these devices 40 years ago was on Star Trek, whereas today pay phones have been eliminated in many places because everybody and her brother has a cell phone in her purse or pocket now. Let's see a show of hands. How many of you are carrying a cell phone in your purse or pocket this morning? Then turn it off right now. All of these conveniences are designed to soften the blow of time, distance, and climate on the human condition, and I for one appreciate all the help I can get! But have you noticed that most of these conveniences come with unintended consequences? Cell phones give us with almost instant communication but they also put us on call 24/7 robbing us of the solitude we need and exposing our kids to dangers that parents in the past never had to worry about like all the sexting going on these days. If you aren't sure what that is, you can ask me later.

Jet travel on the other hand gets us where we want to go in just hours instead of days and weeks and months. But if you fly much, you know that also takes a toll on you —the sudden changes in climate, culture, time, food, altitude, and language!

Cheryl and I faced a few of those obstacles on our mission trip to Nicaragua in November. It was a great trip but the water left us sick for a couple of days and the temperature change was also hard to take—90 degrees when we left Managua and 40 degrees when we arrived home in Seattle. Bob and Sharon Johnson, who just returned from a trip to Bolivia, described another problem associated with air travel. They had to change planes in La Paz, Bolivia which is 14,000 feet above sea level, and they said by the time they got inside the airport, most of the people were sick from altitude sickness because our bodies just aren't designed to withstand such sudden, drastic changes. And as we'll see in today's study, neither are our souls!

Over the last few weeks, the disciples have enjoyed some incredible spiritual highs. They saw Jesus feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. By the way, the last two times I tried to say that, I reversed the numbers and said it wrong. Someone finally pointed it out to me after the service last week, and I appreciated the opportunity to correct it. Next Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was. Peter answered for all of them, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" Then last week, it was the Transfiguration of Christ in which Jesus gave His disciples, Peter, James

and John, a glimpse of His Kingdom power and glory and it changed them forever so much so that they wanted to stay on the mountaintop forever. But, then, that isn't where Jesus has called us to serve Him, is it? So this week they return to the valley where 9 disciples and a crisis are awaiting them and what a shock it must've been to their souls! Like a shower suddenly going from hot to cold! What they faced of course wasn't a change in the physical temperature, but a change in the spiritual climate. The father of a boy with a demon was waiting for them because the disciples who remained in the valley couldn't cast it out, leaving the father frantic and the crowd wondering if Jesus was as great as they heard He was.

But, then, that's no different than the crises we face, is it? The Bible says, "Through many trials and tribulations we enter the Kingdom of God." But rarely do they announce themselves ahead of time—the cancer growing inside our bodies, the car wreck waiting for us around the corner, the economy coming apart around us. The enemy's attacks are timed to strike us when we're the most vulnerable like the disciples in the valley, away from Jesus for a time, or the disciples on the mountaintop coming down from a spiritual high feeling confident and about to let down their guard. But don't do it, 1 Corinthians 10:12 warns us. Instead, "let him who thinks he stands take heed that he doesn't fall!" That's where I want to pick up the action this morning, if you'll open your Bible with me to Luke chapter 9. I want to begin with the crisis in verse 37—

1. The Crisis in the Valley

The Bible says there are 3 great enemies of our souls—the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world refers to the humanistic thinking and twisted values embraced by the world but diametrically opposed to the truth of God. The flesh refers to the sinful tendencies within our bodies that fight every effort to follow Christ. The devil refers to the super angel who rebelled against God in the beginning and has been fighting His purposes ever since. And that's the enemy we face here. Verse 37 says: "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 he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not.'" So let's take a moment to ask the question: What are demons or evil spirits?

The answer is (Revelation 12 is the passage to jot down if you want to study it later in detail) they're the evil angels which comprised one third of the angels in heaven, who joined Satan in his rebellion against God, then were cast out of heaven with him, and are now on a mission to steal, to kill, and to destroy every man, woman and child among us because you and I were made in the image of God, which is an image they hate with a passion! And if we're also followers of Jesus Christ, they hate us even more because what they see in us is the Spirit of Christ who is one day soon going to cast them into the lake of fire where the Bible says they'll be tormented day and night forever. So no matter what the devil promises you, don't believe him because he's not your friend. Jesus said he's the "father of lies" and that "there's no truth in him."

C.S. Lewis, author of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe and a number of other Christian classics, gave this explanation of demons in his introduction to The Screwtape Letters. He wrote, "The commonest question I'm asked is if I believe in the devil. Now, if by the devil, you mean a power opposite to God and like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly not. There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a perfect badness opposite to the perfect goodness of God. The proper question is if I believe in devils. I do.

That is to say, I believe in angels and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God and as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils. They do not differ in nature from good angels, but their nature is depraved. Devil is the opposite of angel only as bad man is the opposite of good man. Satan, the leader or dictator of the devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael.

Isn't that a helpful explanation of the devil and demons? But let me add this further warning—not all devils are the same. The Bible says some of them are much more powerful than others. For example, in Mark's account of this event, when the disciples get alone with Jesus, they ask Him: "Why couldn't we cast it out?" He says: "This kind only comes out by prayer and fasting," indicating that not all demons are the same. Some of them are much more ferocious than others. And that was true of the demon here. Just notice what it did to this boy. Luke says it made him scream, go into convulsions, foam at the mouth, and would maul him before it finally left. Mark says it also left him deaf and dumb, slammed him to the ground, made him gnash his teeth, get as stiff as a board, and fall into the water or fire to destroy him. Imagine what a shock this must have been for the disciples coming down from the mountain-top! Even more to the point, imagine how this father felt seeing his only child tormented like this day after day, month after month, year after year. Jesus asked him, "How long has this been happening to him?" His answer? "It's been happening to him his entire life!" Can you imagine that, Mom or Dad? "So I brought him to your disciples hoping for a cure, but they couldn't do anything either!" All but ready to give up his faith in God!

I wonder. Have you ever been there? I have. But don't you dare give up your hope in God because Jesus can help you no matter what kind of demon you're facing—chronic illness, chemical addiction, explosive anger, massive indebtedness, or maybe it's a literal demon battering your spirit with fear and hopelessness. That's what they do best—manipulating our spirits with all manner of self-destructive moods. So what are you going to do about it? Whatever you do, don't give up your hope in Jesus! Not only is He able to remove the problem forever, if that's what He thinks is best for you. Or if His plan isn't to remove it right away (Remember when the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, God didn't drive out their enemies all at once. He did it little by little, and why? To teach them to trust in Him as their source of courage and strength, and because if He drove out their enemies all at once, the wild animals would've come in and taken over the land, making things worse rather than better. So He did little by little. And if that's how He chooses to save you from the enemies marshaled against you, you can be sure He has a good reason for it and while you wait for final victory, He'll also give you His grace to help in time of need. There was a crisis in the valley, and the disciples failed to do anything about it, and why? That's the second issue I want to look at in verse 40—

2. The Cause of Their Failure

The boy's father says, "I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they couldn't." "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." The first question to ask is: Why did this father come to the disciples for healing? Why didn't he wait for Jesus to return and ask Him to do it? It's easy to wonder that in this day of automobile travel, fast-food restaurants, and motels at every freeway exit. But it wasn't easy then especially not with a demonized boy to look after, screaming, foaming at the mouth, and trying to destroy himself in the water and the fire! Besides why wait for Jesus when His disciples are right here in front of you!

After all, why would Jesus give them the power to do it if He didn't want them to use it? That's back in Luke 9:1—"And He called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases." So they had the power, they had the authority, and they had a track record of doing it in the past. So why couldn't they do it now? Jesus said it was because of their unbelief. "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long must I put up with you!" Luke gives us the Reader's Digest condensed version of this story, but I wanted more than that. So I went to Matthew's longer version, and it adds this: "Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why couldn't we cast it out?' He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you.'"

And the point is this: The only thing that demons respect is our faith in the person and promises of Christ. You can quote the Bible all day long and say all the right words, "I command you to depart from me in the name of Jesus!" But if they sense that you don't really believe in the Cross and Jesus, they won't yield to you, because it's our faith behind the words that carries with it the authority of Christ, and the authority of Christ is the only thing the devils respect. And let me add that's also the only thing that pleases Jesus. Listen again to what He says when the disciples fail to believe in Him. He laments, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long will I remain with you and put up with you?" That's sorrow, frustration, and disappointment you hear in His voice! And even as I read that, I wonder: "How often does Jesus feel that way about you and me and our failure to put our faith in His promises, even when we can't understand it all with our minds? Because that's what pleases Him the most! Some of us are used to playing it safe, studying every angle, and eliminating every risk before we make a decision, rather than praying, asking the Holy Spirit for guidance, and once He gives it to us, stepping out in faith, no second guessing ourselves. James says we have to ask in faith without any doubting if we want God to hear us. Let me ask you. When was the last time you did that? Or maybe I should ask: Have you ever done that? Paul asks the question in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not with Him freely give us all things!" The answer is: He wants to. He wants to answer our prayers and meet our needs, but it takes faith to touch the heart and move the hands of God. "For without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." Now let me ask the follow-up question: What is faith? And the first thing we need to know is that faith isn't a feeling of excitement we conjure up to make this or that happen. That isn't going to move any mountains for Jesus.

I remember thinking that as a new believer, that if I had enough faith, I could make anything happen even without a clear word from the Lord. I'm embarrassed to admit it now but on one occasion I actually tried to summon up the faith to move Mt. Rainier about 30 miles to the north. I'm sure the people of Buckley and Enumclaw are glad I wasn't able to do that. Nor is that what Jesus is saying here. The Bible is full of figures of speech, and this is one of them. It's a figure of speech called hyper-bole, overstating a fact to make a point. You may have noticed I did that myself a few minutes ago when I said we have motels and restaurants at every freeway off ramp. Is that accurate? No, but you knew what I meant. I was overstating the case to make a point, and the point Jesus was making is that even faith as small as a mustard seed is enough to accomplish great things for God if it's faith in the right thing.

I love this illustration from the Navigators. It pictures a nervous man afraid to walk across the ice for fear it'll crack beneath him and he'll drown in the freezing river below. But, of course, he isn't in any real danger because the ice in front of him is at least a foot thick and certain to hold him. Like the father in our story, his little bit of faith is more than enough to carry him across to the other side. But this crazy guy with the big bucket of faith is about to break through the ice and drown because the issue isn't how much faith you have; it's who and what you're putting it in, and if it's Jesus and the Word of God, you have nothing to worry about it. The future is secure. But if all you're doing is putting your faith in faith, you won't be very happy with the outcome. Those of us who are following Jesus live by faith, we pray by faith, we marry, we raise children, and we go through times of crisis by faith, and one day we'll even die by faith. So if there's anything we need more of not only to endure, but to also enjoy the abundant life Jesus promises us, it is faith! But the fact is: We aren't very good at it. Unbelief was a problem for the disciples, and it's a problem for us as well. But it doesn't have to be. You can make a choice this very moment to start living by faith, and how? Well, that's the third fact I want us to look at now—

3. The Cure for Unbelief.

The first half of the answer is grace and there's no better place in the Bible to see it than in the prayer of this father. To do that, I want to read Mark's account of this miracle and there what we hear the father saying, after pouring out his heart to Jesus and telling Him all about the things his son has suffered, he says: "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us, Lord." And very gently, Jesus corrects him, "If you can? All things are possible to him who believes!" And now he worries that he's put his son's healing at risk as a result of his doubt, so he hurries to add, "Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief!" Isn't that beautiful and heartbreaking? I also love his humility and honesty, and Jesus does too. Jesus knows what's in our hearts and now the father realizes that He knows, but he makes no excuses or denials. He admits, "You're right, Lord. My faith is small. But what I do have I'm willing to put in you!" And if that's you—if your faith isn't big, it may be no larger than a seed of mustard, but what you do have, you're willing to put in Jesus, let me encourage you, "That's enough! That's all He's asking for, because faith itself is something that comes from Him, and He can always give you more."

Do you know Ephesians 2:8-9? "For by grace are you saved through faith (never underestimate the importance of faith and the greatness of God's grace)...for by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God (Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying that even the faith you need to believe in Jesus comes from Him, not from you)...for by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one can boast." Isn't that good of God? Yes, He requires faith to save you and to answer your prayers but He doesn't require a lot of it. It doesn't have to be any bigger than a grain of mustard as long as it's in Him! And then without any fanfare whatsoever, it says, "Jesus rebuked the evil spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit,' he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.'" Talk about grace! Not only does He heal the boy instantly and completely just as if he'd never had a demon but notice that contained within His words of healing is also the promise that he'll never to deal with this again. And so Luke says (Luke 9:42), "Jesus healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God." And so am I! What about you? In response to faith as small as a mustard seed, Jesus saves a boy from a demon that's been tormenting him his entire life, He gives him back to his father who's able to hold him and talk to him in a normal way for the first time in years with the promise that they'll never have to deal with this again. That's grace, and that's also the first part of the cure for unbelief.

But you say, “What if I’m still not feeling it even after I’ve called out for His grace?” What you need is the second part of the cure, and that’s prayer. And for that, I read two more verses from Mark’s account.

Verses 28-29 say, “When he’d entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn’t we cast it out?’ And he said to them, ‘This kind only comes out by prayer.’” Some ancient manuscripts add, “by fasting.” And the point is: The only way to please Christ and defeat the devil is by faith and the only way to grow in your faith is to spend time in God’s presence in prayer and that’s also grace! It’s a gracious thing to spend time alone with your Creator and Savior humbling yourself in His presence and letting His Spirit encourage you from His Word. That’s the only way to build your faith and I find the best way to do that is to start is with a short passage of Scripture reading it over and over till it reaches my heart like Psalm 131, “O Lord, my heart is not proud nor are my eyes haughty, nor do I concern myself with great matters or things too difficult for me, but I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me.” And then I insert my own name into the passage, “O Gary, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.” Of course, the faith and the answers don’t always come right away because one of the ways God stretches our faith is by making us wait a little longer than we want, which is why it’s important to give yourself plenty of time in His presence. When you first began to follow Christ, many of the answers to your prayers came quickly because God was encouraging your faith, but spiritual growth requires us to persevere in prayer.

Jesus likened it to a widow who brought her case before an unjust judge who wouldn’t listen to her at first but because she kept coming before him day after day, he finally gave in saying to himself, “Though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I’ll see that she gets justice, so she doesn’t wear me out with her coming,” and Jesus said if an unjust judge is moved by our persistence, “then won’t your Father in Heaven who loves you give you justice when you cry out to Him day and night? I tell you, He will see that you get justice quickly, but when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” And I want Him to find it in my heart, don’t you? So let me finish by saying: If you’ve been praying and praying for some great need in your life and the answer still hasn’t come, and you’re tempted to give up, don’t—unless the Spirit of God convicts you that you’re praying about the wrong thing—stay right there in His presence, humbling yourself under His mighty hand, and He will exalt you in His time, casting all your cares on Him, knowing and believing that He cares for you. And because it’s a holy moment when God’s people bow their heads together in prayer, I want to give you an opportunity to pray—