

PHYSICAL- SPIRITUAL INTERSECTIONS OF LIFE

Introduction

One of the politically correct terms in use today is the word “challenged.” If a person is short, then he might be described as altitudinally challenged or height challenged. If a person is nerdy, then he might be described as socially challenged. We know or have a pretty good idea what is being described by someone who is physically challenged or mentally challenged. Someone who constantly tells falsehoods might be described as veracity challenged or even truth challenged.

Biblical Background

There are two accounts given in the ninth chapter of Luke beginning with verse 28 and continuing through verse 42 that cause me to realize that most of us are severely “challenged” when it comes to understanding and comprehending the physical-spiritual intersections of life. The account of the events on the Mount of Transfiguration in which Peter, James, and John witnessed a meeting of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus is difficult for most of us to comprehend. We can know the reality of the spiritual realm but not understand it. We tend to think in terms of a location of “heaven” (for example) as being UP there somewhere. It may be that the spiritual realm is all around us and is everywhere and can co-exist in the same space as the physical world yet, certainly is invisible to the physical eye. I’m sure you recall the account of Elisha the prophet being surrounded by the army of the king of Aram who wanted to kill him. His servant was very frightened and Elisha asked God to open the eyes of his servant and the servant looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6) The spiritual army was “there” but could not be seen naturally.

Application

After the phenomenal events on the mountain top in which there was an intersection of the physical realm and the realm of righteous spirits, there immediately followed an incident in which there was an intersection of the physical realm and the realm of evil spirits. We are not at all comfortable in discussing such events unless we view them from a historical perspective and do not consider how such phenomena can impact the life of a real flesh and blood person. Our tendency is to think that the appearance of Moses and Elijah happened only because the Son of God was there and such things are not likely to ever happen again. When it comes to the lad that is the subject of events recorded in verses 37 through 42, many will tend to think that the child had epilepsy and the people of that day did not understand about malfunctions of the brain and so they attributed such actions as being a result of demon possession or oppression. Once we have “rationalized” the events, we do not have an answer to the question, “How do such happenings impact my life or the life of another person?”

It seems that Hollywood has more to say about physical-spiritual intersections than the church does. However, a substantial part of the ministry of Jesus dealt with evil spirits that were oppressing or possessing people. It would be interesting to know what percentage of church members actually believe the literal scriptural accounts of the Mount of Transfiguration and what percentage believe the account of the boy with the evil spirit. My guess is that more believe the first (literally) and the second.

The Account

Luke’s account of the boy with the evil spirit is just six brief verses.

37 ¶ The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.

38 A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child.

39 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.

40 I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

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

42 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.

Lessons to be Learned

This incident is also recorded by Matthew and Mark. We can use those accounts as commentaries on what Luke recorded. For example, verse 37 from Luke 9 tells us that many people were in the area as the pending events unfolded. Matthew and Mark are in agreement and Mark related something about the make-up of the crowd. There were many ordinary people, the disciples and some teachers of the law. This is in stark contrast to the somewhat exclusive audience (of only three disciples) who witnessed the transfiguration a day earlier.

Why was there a difference? To answer that question, we may need to ask the question of “why Peter, James and John and not three other disciples? You may recall that Peter, James and John were there when Jesus raised Jairus’

daughter. Later on, these three also were the ones who accompanied Jesus to the Garden the night He was arrested. These were apparently being groomed for leadership in the church. They had shown maturity beyond the other disciples and were allowed to witness things others were not prepared to see. Consider what would have happened if the large crowd had seen the transfiguration. Pandemonium and Messiah mania would have erupted and “disorder” would have been the order of the day. Such a response would have been short lived and would have resulted in the people wanting to forcibly make Jesus the kings. The lesson we can learn is that it takes some spiritual maturity before God will entrust certain things to us.

We all know that Jesus came so that He could reveal God the Father to mankind. This revelation was in stages so that people would see and could discover who He is. If He had come and had openly declared, I am God, then no one would have believed Him. It was important the crowd be there to witness another bit of the ongoing revelation of who Jesus is. This would lay the ground work for future believers to be able to accept the message that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. It was also important that the teacher of the law be there so that they would have witnessed what happened and, therefore, they would be without excuse when they reject the claims of Jesus.

The events that would take place with healing the boy of the demon affliction would be confirmation that the Kingdom of God was real. In fact, in Luke 11:20 Jesus said, “But if I, by the finger of God, cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you.”

Mark reported that the teachers of the law were engaged in an argument with the disciples of Jesus. We are not told what they were arguing about but the argument was related to the boy who was in need of deliverance. When Jesus asked, “What were you arguing about?” the answer was not given by one of the disciples but by a person in the crowd. **9:38 A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. 39 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.**

Luke’s account reveals that the boy is an only child, the problem showed up suddenly and often, when it happened the boy screamed and he foamed at the mouth. When we consider Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts of this event we gain additional information such as the father knelt before Jesus as he begged for mercy for his son, the affliction caused the boy great suffering, he could not talk because of his condition, his life was endangered because of being thrown into the fire and into water, and that during the convulsions he became rigid. Putting all of this together we see a very desperate situation. You can sense the helplessness that the boy’s father felt. His only hope was what Jesus might do for his son.

Recently, there was a television special on the life of Jesus and several theologians (of various persuasions) would comment on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. There was a professor who could be classified as liberal who maintained that the Biblical account of the birth of Jesus did not really happen the way it was recorded. He claimed that it was just a story that was a parable. When you think about it, he is half right. My guess is that every events happened and that every event is, indeed, a parable that teaches us something. If the events surrounding the lad in this story is a “living parable” we should be asking, “What does it teach us?”

The condition of the boy is a picture of the world that is lost and without Christ. Humanity is the only part of creation that was made in God’s image (my only child). After the fall in the Garden of Eden, mankind was under the control of “the prince of this world” or the devil and people would do rash things when they were “seized” by the evil influences in their lives. Real communication falls by the way side as greed and selfish interests screams out to have its own way at the expense of everything else. The convulsions of humanity find expression in senseless wars and rampages by individuals and these things seem to be happening more often than less and the demons within destroy not only the victims but the perpetrator also.

40 I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

All three accounts of the story agree that the disciples were not able to bring about the deliverance needed to help the child. We could conclude that certain problems of humanity will not lend themselves to what mankind can do even if they follow Godly prescriptions. Later the disciples would participate in a “mission” tour and they would report that even the devils were subject to them in Jesus’ name. The basic problem of “sin” could not be dealt with by religion and ceremony or by exercise of the will or even good works, it would take intervention of God Himself.

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

At this point, Jesus was addressing the father of the child, the crowd and the teachers of the law who had been giving the disciples a hard time about their inability to heal the boy.

"O faithless and perverse generation" was never used of the disciples and did not apply to them. They often appeared to be men of little faith, but not faithless; nor were they rebellious and stubborn (perverse). This characterization better suited the Jewish nation. These same words were spoken about the children of Israel thousands of years before in Deuteronomy 32:5

How long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? Jesus had been with these people for three years

and had come many wonderful and miraculous works among them and they still were unbelieving. He was warning them that such a time in which they were privileged to live was coming to an end. However, Jesus was willing to “do it again” and he said “bring your son here.”

42 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.

The forces of evil do not easily give up in their mischief though they know they cannot win in the end. We can learn from other accounts that demons recognized Jesus for Who He was and the demon in this boy was intend on doing as damage as he could before being cast out. The result was that the boy was cast to the ground (low point) in a convulsion (upheaval). If this story is a parabolic teaching, then we see that the events surrounding the Passion of Christ brought an upheaval that took the Jewish people to a low point in their behavior in that they rejected and crucified the Son of God.

This last ditch effort of the demon did not prevent deliverance and healing of the boy and the last ditch effort of Satan to stop God’s plan of salvation in having Jesus crucified did not work either.

SUMMARY

When we come down from the mountain top experiences, the practical problems of the world await us. The fact that we live in a fallen world that has come under the control of the devil, gives ample opportunity to demonstrate the power of the Kingdom of God. There are many areas that we need to reclaim for Christ. As the disciples discovered, these do not all readily yield themselves to solutions.

We must avoid oversimplifying the work of the Kingdom by reducing everything to a formula or method. Many times, the disciples had witnessed Jesus cast out demons, and later they would be on mission and they would return rejoicing in that they had ability to cast out demons. However, in this case, it didn’t work! The basis of all our relationships and “what God will do” through us is “faith.” When we operate out of a method and not out of faith, then we see failure. Some versions add a comment that the particular type of demon could not be cast out except through prayer and fasting. One might then conclude that a disciplined life of pray and fasting should lead to our having additional faith. However, we must be careful to NOT think we have discovered a method (pray and fasting) to “obtain additional faith.” Ritualistically praying and fasting will not increase our faith. The solution to that opportunity is a never fail formula and it is simply “trust and obey.”

Epilogue:

Mark’s Gospel gives much additional information and is worth considering in light of a parabolic interpretation of these events as they relate to God’s dealing with lost humanity. From Mark Chapter 9 we see.

21 Jesus asked the boy’s father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered.

How long has humanity been lost? Since the early days following creation.

22a "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

The devil came to steal, kill and destroy.

22b But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

God can do anything (everything) and it is by His mercy that He helps us when we turn to Him (repentance)

23 "If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Few things amaze God: the refusal of man to believe in spite of all that God has done is one of those things.

24 Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

After repentance, belief must follow for one to experience God’s salvation. Belief is not easy since it involves the spiritual realm and we are so conditioned to only spiritual reality.

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

The crucifixion of Jesus was carried out in public and in that act, He disarmed and defeated the devil. The salvation that Jesus provides for us assures us that, as Christians, we will not be possessed by the devil.

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He’s dead."

We must die to the things of the world system that are under the control of the devil.

27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

The source of our new life is from Jesus who lifts us up so we can stand and function in our right mind.

APPENDIX - COMPARISON OF THE TEXT IN LUKE, MATTHEW AND MARK

Luke 9:37-42

Matt 17:14-20

Mark 9:14-29

37 ¶ The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.

14A ¶ When they came to the crowd,

14 ¶ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. 16 "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked

38 A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. 39 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.

14B A man approached Jesus and knelt before him. 15 "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water.

17 A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18A Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid.

40 I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."

16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

18B I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

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

17 "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me."

19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

42 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.

18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered.

22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

23 "'If you can?'" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead."

27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

20 He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."