

9 ... and Answers

8: 26 – 9: 50

They would soon see more of his power, for when they had crossed the lake and come ashore they met a man who was raving. He was a lunatic, possessed by demons, and he lived naked among the tombs of the town nearby. When he saw Jesus he fell at his feet and shouted, “What do you want with me, Jesus Son of the most High God?” The powers of confusion and evil that dominated the man recognised the power and authority of Jesus as the very authority of God. When Jesus commanded them to leave him, they rushed into a herd of pigs, which then stampeded into the lake and were drowned. All this was too much, too much drastic wielding of authority, for the locals to cope with, even if it did leave their dangerous lunatic calm, sane and grateful. They asked Jesus to go away.

He has authority to command the elements and to command the warring psychological and emotional forces that tear a man’s soul and mind apart. A word from him brings calm, peace and healing. But that is not always what people want or find they can cope with.

Returning to the Galilean side of the lake, he was welcomed by a crowd. People were waiting for him, and in particular, a leader of the local synagogue. The man’s only daughter was dying and he begged Jesus to come and heal her. They were on their way, a thick crowd pressing eagerly around them, when Jesus suddenly stopped and asked “Who touched me?” Of course, they all denied it was them, and the disciples reasoned with him, “With a crowd like this around you, people can’t help pushing.” But Jesus knew that someone had touched him to be healed.

He insisted, and a woman came forward. She had suffered terribly from a chronic hemorage for years. And she was ashamed of it. Apart from the stigma of sin that attached to disease, this particular disease, chronic bleeding, meant she was permanently unclean. If people knew about it ...! And the physicians had not been able to do anything for her.

[At this point, the physician put down his pen, bristling. He hated this bit of Mark’s story. Mark was ruthless. He showed no understanding of the difficulties and complexities of the physician’s craft. Some diseases were incurable, and some people would insist on getting treatment, even if you told them you could do little for them. Mark, thought Lukas, showed a

positive delite in telling how the woman had spent all her money on doctors and had got no better – only worse! – as if it was their fault. He could see the hearers grinning and laughing, and coming out with all those corny jokes about physicians. Jesus’ power of healing should not be made an excuse for having a go at physicians!

[With a sigh, he sat down again. Perhaps he ought to fess up and tell the whole story. After all, he himself was writing critically about Pharisees and lawyers and all those people who had objected to Jesus. Perhaps he lacked understanding of the difficulties and complexities of a Pharisee’s or a lawyer’s craft. And yet – he was warming up again – it was a slander. He decided to press on. He’d leave it out for now, but he’d look at it again later, when he felt calmer, and see if he ought to make some mention of the woman’s medical history.]

She had touched Jesus and she had been healed. And Jesus had known in all that jostling crowd, that one touch was special. It was a touch that sought help, and help had gone out from him, to heal her. But it was not to remain a private experience, as if you could quietly get what you want from Jesus, automatically as it were, without any further implication or commitment. Jesus would speak to her of what had happened, and have her acknowledge it, and the woman, seeing that she was found out, fell at Jesus’ feet and confessed in front of the whole crowd, how she had suffered and how she had now been cured.

[There! thought Lukas, Mark hadn’t understood about this public admission. With all his smug, snide comments on physicians, Mark has missed the point of the healing. He doesn’t know patients any more than he knows physicians. He didn’t know that to be really healed – there’s healing in the soul and mind that goes much deeper than healing of the body – the woman had to speak out the truth in front of all her neibors. She had been hiding her shame for years, confessing it only to her expensive physicians, and that shame and that hiding had probably done her more damage than the bleeding. She was healed, really healed, only when she trusted Jesus enuf to come forward and publicly tell the truth. Lukas knew from experience what a liberation, what salvation, that must have been to her. Mark, of course, not being a physician, could not be expected to understand.]

So Jesus sed to her: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

He was still speaking to her when someone arrived from the house with sad news for the father of the dying girl: “Your dauter has died; don’t trouble the

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master any more.” But Jesus said to him: “Don’t be afraid. Only trust and she will be safe.”

They went on to the house, where Jesus allowed only three of his disciples and the girl’s parents to go in with him. They found the mourners already beginning their work, and when Jesus told them “She is not dead, only asleep.” They laughed at him. They knew death when they saw it. Jesus, however, took her by the hand, saying, “Child, wake up.” And her spirit returned to her. She got up and Jesus handed her to her parents, telling them to give her something to eat.

Then he told them all to tell no one what had happened. If he had insisted on the woman with the hemoragge speaking out, for her own fuller healing, it was not because he sought publicity. On the contrary, he did not want people running off with tales of wonder-deeds. God had reached out in him to heal the grief of a family and give back life to a child. It is the way of God, not an investment for attention. Where he meets trust, Jesus will show who he is and what God is doing, but he will not try to establish his authority by dazzling his audience.

And yet, there is something to be told, and a vision, even a dazzling one, to be seen; only Jesus himself will give the authority for telling and God will give the vision.

Jesus called together the twelve disciples whom he had identified as his apostles and gave them authority to go round the villages doing as he had done. They would have power over demons and they would heal, and they would proclaim the kingdom of God. That new order, the kingdom of God, was breaking upon the world, and it was no longer just Jesus but his followers also who came with its power.

And they must come with faith. They must take nothing for the journey, neither a stick to lean on nor a back-pack nor food nor money. They should accept whatever hospitality was given them and stay in whatever house was offered until they left the village. Wherever they were not welcomed but rejected, they should leave, shaking the dust off their sandals as a sign of warning. The coming of the kingdom was an opportunity and a time for decision. Those who would not respond to it were cutting themselves out of the future.

The twelve disciples went from village to village proclaiming the good news and healing the sick.

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Herod, the Roman-appointed king of Galilee heard of what was going on. No doubt, like kings, presidents and governments generally, he made sure there were people whose business it was to tell him anything that was going on. Like others, he was wondering who this man might be. Some people were saying that John the Baptist had risen from the dead. (Herod had had him beheaded.) Others were saying it was the prophet Elijah come back, or one of the other prophets. Herod didn't know, and he was anxious to meet Jesus. (Successful kings, especially those appointed by the Romans, have an inborn curiosity about all the powers that appear in or around their kingdom.)

When the twelve returned to Jesus, he took them off to a village called Bethsaida for a chance to rest and reflect among themselves. But the crowds found out where he was and they followed him. He could not turn them away. He welcomed them, talked to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who were ill.

But it was an out-of-the-way place, and as the day wore on his disciples realised that something would have to be done with the crowd. They urged Jesus to send the people away so they could go and find food and lodging in the nearest towns. But Jesus said to them,

"You give them something to eat."

"Master, we've only got five bread loaves and two fish. That won't go far, unless we ourselves go and buy more food for them somewhere."

"Get them to sit down in groups of fifty," said Jesus.

Then he took the food they had, looked up to heaven, and blessed it. He started breaking it up and giving it to his disciples to distribute. The whole crowd were fed and satisfied, and when they gathered up the scraps at the end they filled twelve baskets.

The question is (and it's still a question, though pressing on now towards an answer) Who is Jesus? As I have said, one way of recognising what Luke is trying to tell us is from the way he uses and rearranges the material he has taken from Mark. At this point, he has deliberately moved the account of Jesus feeding the crowd in the wilderness right up beside the incident which answers our question. Clearly, Luke wants us to see (and we would say he is inspired to show us) that Jesus is one like Moses, teaching and leading

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the people in the wilderness. As God fed Israel in the wilderness, Jesus now looks to God (he raised his eyes to heaven) but in this case he himself blesses the food and gives it to feed the people. Jesus stands closer to God than Moses did, acting in God's place where Moses could only tell the people how to wait for God to act and to feed them.¹

We have reached an answer. There came a time when they were at last alone, Jesus and his disciples without the urgent, pressing crowds. Jesus was praying. He put to his disciples this question: Who do the people say I am? Their answers were the same as those reported to Herod: They say you are John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets come back to life.

That was all very well, but Jesus had a more important question for them: "Who do you say I am?" It was Peter who answered for them all: "God's Messiah." Jesus then told them to say nothing of this to anyone else. They must understand that the "Son of Man" (an ancient Hebrew title here applied to the Messiah) must suffer much. He will be rejected and discredited by the highest authorities, by the leading priests and lawyers, and he will be put to death. Then he will rise from the dead.

We know, because Luke has told us from the beginning of his gospel, that Jesus is the Savior-King long promised to Israel. The angels proclaimed it. His mother celebrated it. Old Simeon foretold it. But Luke knows that in the hard and mundane experiences of Jesus' life, it was not obvious. People didn't know it. The disciples didn't know it, and Jesus himself had to discover it. Telling the story of Jesus' public life, and following Mark as he does so, Luke has helped us to see that it is a question and a revelation slowly discovered in the events and deeds of Jesus' life.

Also following Mark, he is very clear that this great authority of Jesus, his "anointing" to rule, far from bringing him the ready acknowledgement of Israel's leaders, brings him into conflict with their ideas of authority and rule, with their established power and status. They will resist him, discredit and reject him. In the end, he will be killed by them.

We must pause and take on board what Luke is telling us, because it doesn't accord with our usual interpretations of Jesus' death. If Luke had thought, as many Christians do, that Jesus died to deflect from us the punishment incurred by our sins, he would have had to say something quite different here. Instead of directing our attention to Jesus' conflict with the authorities, he would have had to say something like this: "The Son of Man

¹ Exodus 16

must suffer and die to take away the sins of the people. That is the sacrifice required by God. In that way justice will be done, the righteous anger of God will be appeased and those who trust in me will be saved.”

But that is not what Luke says. It is not what any of the gospels say.² It is not what Jesus said.

Jesus is the Savior; and he is the Savior as the Messiah and Lord. The two dimensions stand intimately together. We might imagine a Savior who gets us safely into his own other world, but there is no such thing as a Messiah who rules in another world. The Messiah is the one who is coming, the one who brings and establishes God’s rule into this world of ours and its history. That is what he is anointed and sent to do: and in that he is the salvation of this sorry world.

It is in his role as Messiah that Jesus will suffer and die, because the leaders will reject him as Messiah, rejecting his implementation of the rule of God. His death will be at the hands of the legitimate authorities, the present leaders in Israel. There is no suggestion that it is something required by the anger of God: it will be the result of that resistance which power, the established powers in Israel, will make to the coming of God’s authority and rule in Jesus.

The kingdom of God, the rule of his appointed Messiah, is and will be resisted by those who have power. It is not to their liking, and we have already seen why: it challenges the assumptions and traditions on which their power is based. And there we have a clue as to why the Church has turned away from this revelation. For much of its history, the church has been the holder of power, anxious to turn its possession of the story of Jesus into power for itself. Its leaders have never been keen to face what the gospel says about power and its role in the death of Christ. And even now, when it lacks the power it once had, it would rather carve out and protect a religious sphere of power, as its own proper territory, than confront, from a position of weakness, the sin of power as it is now embodied in our nations and their leaders.

And what of those Christians who don’t have power, who are not leaders in their church or their nation? For us, it’s far less risky to embrace a doctrine that focuses everything on our individual sins and tells us we are saved

² It is closer to what Paul says in his interpretation of the death of Christ, an interpretation to be considered seriously (tho not within the scope of this present book) as having its place in Christian faith; but that interpretation becomes heresy when we allow it to override and even exclude what the gospels tell us.

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because Jesus paid the price of them (which is true) but leaves out the clear teaching of the gospels that the outcome of our individual sins is global sin, the national and institutional rejection of God; that it is humanity as a body that extracts the price, thru its leaders, thru its systems of power, demanding the death and discrediting of anyone who would expose its evil, or bring to bear on it the lite of God's kingdom.

To embrace the whole of the gospel would pit us against the very institutions of power on which we depend for our security. Their anger, if we opposed them, would be fearful, and mitily effective. If we were to claim that it is the power-structures of the world, the very systems we ourselves have built and nurtured, that demand the death of Jesus, the world would crucify us.

Jesus knew it. He sed to them all, "If anyone wants to come after me, they must set aside themself, and take up their cross every day and follow me. Whoever wants to preserve their life will lose it, and whoever is willing to lose their life for my sake, they will save it."³

It is clear to Jesus that not only he, but anyone who wants to follow him must put their life on the line by accepting an authority which the organized powers of the world will not tolerate. Taking up the cross was an act forced upon a condemned criminal, and a criminal without class or honor at that. It was the typical punishment of brigands and slaves. We do wrong to trivialize this warning of Jesus. He is not talking about the little trials and "crosses" that come in life's daily irritations, telling us to bear them humbly and in good spirit.⁴ He is talking of the constant, therefore "daily", challenge that our lives must be to the systems that wield power in our societies, (and even in our churches) telling us to be prepared for the systems to retaliate, to condemn and punish us as rebels and criminals. He is warning us that to follow him we will have to go against the trend, incurring the wrath of those whose job it is to keep society "on message".

It's not what we want to hear. We want the death of Jesus to be unique to himself: an act of salvation that no-one can repeat; and we want it to be only that. But Jesus' death has its place in the history of salvation as a crucial step in establishing his authority to rule the world as God's anointed. While none of us can be that authority and do what Jesus has done, all of us who accept that authority and follow him will find that the world reacts to us as it reacted to him.

³ Luke 9: 23 - 24

⁴ I would not belittle the generous custom of accepting life's little irritations and difficulties as our daily cross, to be borne for Jesus' sake. It is entirely in the spirit of his teaching. But it is not what he is talking about here.

We happily dream of “giving our lives for Christ”, yet we shrink from confronting the world of prestige and power that opposes his rule. We look for interpretations and excuses that mean we don’t have to face it. We find ways of doing well out of the current systems, obeying their authorities, while keeping hold of Jesus for a guarantee of future life. But what’s the use? It won’t work. What will we gain, what will the Church gain, if we get everything the world has to give but lose our selves?

We should make no mistake. This is a critical moment in our lives and in history. If we are ashamed of Jesus, if we shun the challenge he makes to the people and systems that organise power in our world, if we run from the death and rejection that he endured, the Son of Man will shun us when he comes in glory. It will be so even if we go to church or bible fellowship and there proclaim our faith in him under cover of a much less demanding theology.

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The day of his coming is not far off. A week later, he went up on a mountain to pray. He took with him the three who had become his closest disciples: Peter, John and James. As he prayed, his face was changed and his clothes became as startlingly bright as lightning. The prophets Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with him, talking about his “exodus”, his passing, which he would fulfil in Jerusalem.

He had spoken of the Son of Man “coming in glory”, and now it is made clear, at least to the three who saw it, that Jesus himself is that “Son of Man” whose coming is awaited. He had spoken of the death that awaited him, and now he is heard speaking with the giants of Israel’s history of a new exodus, his own passing, which he will accomplish in Jerusalem.

Jesus stands in glory at the very heart and centre of Israel’s history. His fulfilment will be its fulfilment. Elijah, the great prophet whose return was expected at the culmination of history; Moses, the founder and lawgiver of Israel; all that is great and best in Israel’s history is represented here in conversation with Jesus about his imminent destiny.

It seemed that the great prophets were about to leave them, but Peter felt the vision should not end. “Lord,” he said, “we should stay here and build three shrines, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” But Peter was out of his depth. If the vision was dazzling already, it had not yet reached its fullness. To hear the great leaders of Israel discussing the passing of Jesus

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was not the end of the matter. The prophets were about to step aside for an even greater revelation. Beyond Israel and beyond the greatest in Israel's history, the ultimate testimony to Jesus, his utter glory, is God himself. Even as Peter was speaking, they were swallowed up in a cloud, which filled them with fear, and they heard a voice saying:

“This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him.”

No longer an angel proclaiming the future of Jesus, but the voice of God declaring his present authority. He is God's own Son, invested with all the authority of God, and the disciples, and the whole world, are to listen to him.

Even as they heard the voice, they found themselves alone with Jesus. At the time, they said nothing about it to anyone else.

Jesus, who had refused the temptation to descend in glory from the parapets of the temple, has now appeared in glory, but with only three of his disciples to witness, and not before one of them, at least, had already learnt to recognise him for the Messiah.

The glory of Jesus is the glory of who he is. One who stands close to God himself, whose coming is the rule of God coming upon his people. But still he is Jesus, the teacher and healer. When they came down from the mountain they were met by a crowd and a man in distress who cried out that he had brought his only son, an epileptic,⁵ to Jesus' disciples but they had not been able to cure him. Jesus, dismayed to find so little faith, told the man to bring his son to him, and as he did so the boy was thrown into a violent fit. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to leave him and gave him back to his father, healed.

Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God who is great. But amid all the admiration and astonishment, Jesus said to his disciples, “Keep this one thing always in mind: The Son of Man will be handed over into the power of men.” They didn't understand. The Son of Man was, by definition, the one who would come glorious with the authority of God. How could he be handed over into the power of men? Wasn't it a total denial of what the Messiah must be to say that others could have power over him? It seemed

⁵ We can only guess from the symptoms described the actual condition of a person who is said to be afflicted by a demon. It covers a wide range of physical, psychological, spiritual and emotional disorders.

to make a nonsense of the very power of God. They heard him, and it puzzled them, but they were afraid to ask him what he ment.

In any case, they had other things to settle. Was it because three of them had gone off alone with Jesus for a day? Or was it because those left behind had been unable to do their job with the epileptic boy? Whatever it was, they were arguing about their status, which of them was the most important / competent / successful. Jesus called a child and stood her at his side, saying: "Whoever receives a child like this in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. The smallest among you all is the one who is great."

Status, importance, greatness - it's not about touting your talents and qualifications, it's about recognising others. Insted of trying to demonstrate how big you are, discover the greatness in a snotty-nosed child and realise that here you encounter Christ, and the greatness of God. The one who can be little and unimportant in themself is the one who will be great.

And there was another dispute going on, a territorial one. John sed to him, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name. We told him to stop, because he isn't one of us." But Jesus told him: "You mustn't stop him. Anyone who isn't against you is on your side."

In spite of the amazing revelation, in spite of all that he really is, Jesus was sorting out some very petty squabbles.