

2 July 2023

Luke's Good News: Signs and Wonders

Luke 7-9

Luke sits again at his desk.

My dear Theophilus.

Thank you for your reply to my last letter. You ask an important question, which I should have clarified earlier. No, I am not becoming a Jew. While the faith that I have found began within the Jewish religion, and was prefigured by the Jewish scriptures, it was never restricted simply to the Hebrews. To be sure, many of Jesus' followers thought so at first, but Jesus himself never drew such absolute distinctions.

Let me illustrate. One day, in Capernaum, a Roman centurion came to Jesus asking for help. He had heard about Jesus' healings, and a young servant of his household, whom he loved, was deathly ill. He asked if Jesus would heal this youth, but before Jesus could reply, several of the local Jewish leaders hastened to say, "It's all right to help him. He's a Gentile, but he's one of the good ones! He helped pay for our synagogue." Jesus ignored them and said to the centurion, "Of course I'll come with you."

But then the Roman replied, "That's not necessary. Just say the word." Jesus blinked with surprise, and the centurion explained, "I'm a man of authority, too. When I speak, I know it will be done. Your authority is different, and greater, than mine, but I trust it."

Jesus turned to the crowd and said, "I hope you were listening. This is what faith looks like, the sort of faith I haven't found yet among the Jews." Then he turned back to the Roman and said, "It is as you say. Go home. Your servant is well." And it was so.

Along about that time, John the Dunker – remember him? – was put in prison by Herod Antipas. He had had the gall to publicly condemn Herod's morals. One day a group of John's disciples came to Jesus and said, "Our master in prison sent us to ask you something. Are you really the one we are waiting for?"

Jesus replied, "I won't answer that: I'm here to make faith possible, not easy. Instead, you should go back and tell your master what you have seen today: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the poor receive good news. Then let your master, like everyone else, choose for himself whether to believe."

When they were gone, Jesus looked over the crowds. "How many of you went out to hear John at the Jordan?" Most raised their hands. "What did you go out to see? His fine wardrobe?" People laughed. "No, you went out to see a prophet, and so he is. And more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it was written, 'I am sending a messenger before you to prepare your way.'"

Then he looked at the scribes and religious leaders, "But you didn't listen to him, did you? 'He's a fanatic!' you said. 'He fasts all the time! He drinks no wine! He must have a demon!' Then I come along, eating at feasts and drinking wine, and you say, 'He's a libertine! A glutton! A drunkard!' What do you want, anyway? We play a dirge for you, but you don't mourn. We play a jig, and you refuse to dance. Make up your minds!"

One day, one of those religious leaders, a Pharisee named Simon, invited Jesus to his home for dinner. There was always a crowd around Jesus in those days, and somehow in all the bustle, a woman from the town slipped in unnoticed and knelt at Jesus' feet. I don't know who this woman was, or what her past had been, but apparently everyone else in the room did, because as soon as they saw her, weeping over Jesus' feet, kissing the tears away, and drying them with her hair, everyone grew silent. Simon the Pharisee curled his lips disdainfully and muttered, "If Jesus were really a prophet he would know what sort of creature he's allowing to touch his feet."

Jesus said, "Simon? Suppose there were two servants who were both forgiven debts to their master. One was forgiven five hundred denarii and the other fifty. Which one do you think was most grateful?"

"Um, the one who was forgiven the most?"

"Just so." Jesus reached down and lifted the woman's chin to look him in the face. "However great your sins have been, your love is more than a match for them. And so is the Father's love. Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven."

This feels a good place to pause and stress something that I think I haven't mentioned before. I told you how Jesus called people to his inner circle. By now, in fact, he had twelve men in that group. But those men were not the only ones who traveled with Jesus everywhere. There were also women who were part of that inner circle. There was one named Mary, from a town called Magdala, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, another called Joanna and a certain Susanna, among others. The barrier between Jew and Gentile was not the only separation that Jesus ignored.

Since four of Jesus' followers were fishermen, Jesus had access to boats, and one day he had Simon Peter take them all across the Galilean Sea, to a Gentile region. During the crossing, Jesus fell asleep in the boat, and continued sleeping even as a gale swept over the sea and the boat began filling up. "Master!" his followers shrieked, "We're going to die!"

Jesus sat up, rubbed his eyes, looked blearily at the storm, and said, "Oh, stop it!" And the storm stopped. "I thought I said only wake me up for an emergency. Where's your faith?" Then he went back to sleep as his followers looked at each other in stunned silence.

When they arrived on the Gentile shore, they were met at once by a wild man, possessed by demons, who came bounding naked out of the rocks, shouting, "Why are you here, Son of the Most High God? Have you come to torment me?"

Jesus got out of the boat and said, "You seem to know my name. What is yours?"

"My name is Too-Many-to-Count," growled the voice. "Because we are! Please, sir, don't send us back to the abyss!"

"You can't stay in this man," Jesus said.

"Send us into that herd of pigs," the voice begged.

"Go, then," Jesus replied, and the demons left the man and entered some nearby pigs, who immediately rushed into the sea and drowned themselves. Jesus said, "Does anyone have spare clothes for this man?"

The man, clothed and restored to himself, gazed worshipfully at Jesus and said, “May I go with you, sir? Anywhere?”

“No, I have a different task for you,” Jesus replied. “Go back to your own people, those who thought that you were lost to them forever. Tell them what God has done for you.”

Then they got back on the boat and headed back across the sea. A crowd was waiting for them on the Jewish side, among whom was a man named Jairus, the leader of the local synagogue. “Oh, there you are! Please, sir, come with me! My daughter is near death!”

“Of course,” said Jesus, following Jairus. It was a densely packed crowd that day, and everyone was jostling for position, trying to get a peek at the famous healer. Suddenly Jesus stopped dead still. “Somebody touched me.”

Simon Peter said, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, this was a different sort of touch.” Jesus looked around him until his eyes rested on an old woman who was staring at him, wide-eyed and fearful. “Yes, my daughter?”

“It was me, Lord,” the woman said. “I’ve been sick – and unclean – with an issue of blood for twelve years now, and no one could help me. I’ve spent all my money on doctors, but they’ve only made me worse . . .”

Luke stops, compares two pages for a moment, then marks out the last line, muttering to himself.

“Is that necessary? Let’s leave that bit out. No need to dump on the doctors. We do our best. Let’s see . . . an issue of blood for twelve years now, and no one can help me. But I thought if I could just touch your robe . . . so I did.”

“And?” Jesus said.

“I felt something, sir. I think I’m healed.”

“You are,” replied Jesus. “Your faith has healed you.”

Just then some messengers from Jairus’s house appeared. “We’re sorry, master,” they said. “Your daughter has died.”

Jairus’s face crumpled in grief, “She was just twelve years old,” he moaned.

Jesus took his arm. “Ssh,” he said softly. “Trust me. Take me to her.” So Jairus led the way to his house, to his daughter’s bed. Jesus took her hand and said, “Get up, now, my child.” And she did.

Some time after that, Jesus called his followers together, sorted them into pairs, prayed over them, and said, “Now it’s your turn. I am giving you the power to heal and to cleanse as I do. Go out and use it.” They set a time and place to meet again and headed out into the countryside. I don’t suppose they realized it at the time, but Jesus was preparing them from what the rest of their lives would be like. At last, they returned, all of them bubbling over with amazement at what they had seen and done.

Jesus rejoiced with them, but he was also grieving. While they had been gone, he had gotten word that Herod had beheaded John. Taking his followers apart, Jesus tried to slip away into the hills for a time of quiet. It was useless of course. Someone noticed which way they went, with the result that their quiet refuge was soon surrounded by more than five thousand people. Jesus sighed, then went out to begin teaching.

As the hour grew late, the twelve came to him privately and said, “Master, you’ve got to send them away now. It’s late, and they’re all hungry.”

“Then let’s feed them before they go,” Jesus said.

Simon Peter said, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Master,” said another, “all we have is five loaves and a couple of fish.”

“That’ll do. Tell the people to sit down.” Then Jesus began breaking pieces off the bread and handing it to his followers to distribute. The bread didn’t stop until everyone had eaten, and even then there were twelve baskets left over. *Then* Jesus sent the crowds away and took his followers off alone.

“Let me ask you something,” he said that evening. “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

One said, “I heard someone today say that you were John the Dunker, back from the dead.” Everyone just stared at him. “Hey, I *know* it doesn’t make any sense, but it’s what I heard.”

Someone else said, “A lot of people think you’re Elijah, or one of the other old prophets, returned from the grave.”

“Hmm,” said Jesus. “And what about you? Who do *you* think I am?”

This time it was Simon Peter. “You’re the Christ. You’re the anointed one who is to save Israel.”

Jesus looked at him steadily. “Keep that to yourselves for now. But if it is true, you need to understand what it means. I have not come for a victory march. I have come to be rejected, betrayed, beaten, and killed. Then I will rise.

“And furthermore, the same treatment awaits everyone who follows me. Are you prepared to face that? All of you? Hear these words. If you hear nothing else, hear this: anyone who chooses to follow me takes up a cross and marches toward my fate with me. My followers must deny themselves daily and surrender this world. But it is worth it. What good is a world if you lose yourself? Claim me before anything else, and my father will claim you.

“Do you all understand that?”

And I don’t suppose they all did. But they would.

I close this letter now, Theophilus, with Jesus’ great and terrifying challenge. He told us what to expect, and his word has proven true. Most of those who sat with him around the fire that night have since died for him. So too, perhaps, shall I. But what does that matter? In him, I have found myself.

Your friend, Luke.