

THE MAN . WHO REFUSED TO GIVE UP

And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him. and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. (Mark 9:17-18)

Stickability is not one of the choicest words in our language; it is not found in the dictionaries. Nevertheless, it is a good word to indicate tenacity of purpose; staying with a project until a successful conclusion has been achieved; a determination to succeed whatever the consequences. The word is never used in the Scriptures, but its truth has been evident in all generations.

Moses discovered Pharaoh to be a very stubborn foe who refused to release his slaves, even though plagues made life miserable for the Egyptians. The Hebrew leader stayed with his project until every captive was liberated. After Elijah had slain the prophets of Baal, he "went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees, And said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand" (1 Kings 18:42-44). When Simon Peter asked about the number of times he should forgive an awkward brother, the Lord told him to continue for "seventy times seven." He seemed to say, "Peter do not quit. Keep on keeping on!" Paul had similar thoughts in mind when he wrote to the Galatians saying, "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9).

There are many other illustrations within the Bible, but one of the most inspiring concerns a father whose faith endured through painful disappointments until his prayers were answered.

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The Man and His Child... Depressing

It would be extremely difficult to describe the anguish of that distressed father as he cared for his oppressed son. When Jesus asked how long the boy had been afflicted, the man replied: "Of a child. And oft times it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him." Probably the lad had been a delight to his father, but then one day a change appeared in his body. The tragic details mentioned by the father suggests epilepsy, which increasingly threatened the life of the youngster. The word used by Luke, who was a doctor, suggests lunacy, which people believed was caused by the moon. Matthew also records the father saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick" (17:15). "Lunatics were so called, not without foundation, because the light and changes of the moon have an influence on the body, and so act, through the body, on the mind" (quoted from "Mark," The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 16 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 50).

Describing the symptoms, the desperate father said, "It seizeth hold of him, teareth him, bruiseeth him; his body wasteth away." The physical defects were exploited by a demon, and the result was terrifying. The child needed constant supervision; fire and water were a continuing menace. The greater part of the boy's life had been affected by the malady.

When the father heard about the miracle-working carpenter from

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Nazareth, he wondered if anything could be done for his son and one day decided to bring the boy to the Lord. When cries of terror came from the throat of the child and he writhed upon the ground and gnashed his teeth, the parent's grief was overwhelming. Could Jesus do the impossible? There was only one way to find out—"Master, I have brought unto thee my son" (Mark 9:17).

His distress. The best thing anyone can do with a problem is to share it with the Lord. Had the parent stayed at home, he would have committed his son to a lifelong bondage. His decision. Sooner or later all people must decide whether or not to seek God's help; their decision is a personal responsibility. Jesus said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The Lord issues that gracious invitation, but He never compels people to accept it. His dismay. When the man arrived, he was appalled to discover his journey apparently had been in vain. The Savior was not with His disciples. He had gone into a mountain to pray and possibly would not return that day. The disciples reassured the desperate parent that there was no need to worry. "Where is your son? Bring him to us."

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The Men and Their Critics... Disappointing

An immense crowd of people watched as the anxious parent brought his child to the very confident men. Even the scribes were attentive, for the immediate future promised to be exciting. The precise formula used by the would-be healers was never disclosed, but if they emulated the actions of the Lord they probably placed their hands upon the boy's head and said, "We command you in the name of Jesus of Nazareth to come out of him." The lad stared blankly at them as the desperate father waited for the miracle that did not come. The onlookers were beginning to murmur; some laughed. The embarrassed disciples repeated their command but nothing happened, and soon the father and son were in the midst of argumentative people who shouted, "This is a disgrace. These professed healers are charlatans who offer much but give nothing; they are hypocrites."

The father sighed; it was evident the disciples of Jesus were helpless. Even they were embarrassed as they ceased their attempt to exorcise the evil spirit. The man who had expected so much stood silently wondering if anything else could be done. Should he abandon the quest and return with his son to their home? Should he spend the rest of his life speaking about the disappointing hypocrites whom he had met at the base of the mountain? To abandon his mission because disappointing disciples had failed to meet his expectations would be foolish. His face reflected determination; he would take his boy to Jesus even if he had to wait all night. He was filled with what has already been called stickability; he refused to quit. Had he returned to his home before meeting Christ, he would have made the greatest mistake of his life.

Millions of people need to learn that important lesson. The gospel presents the Lord Jesus Christ, and the people who spend time looking at and criticizing the church are foolish. Even at their best the disciples were humans with many faults and failings. Occasionally their best endeavors disappointed people. Wise men know that even when the church appears to fail, Christ remains the unfailing, unchanging Son of the living God.

I shall always remember an Australian who came to me seeking advice. He had been a very active Christian, but his usefulness had been destroyed by a preacher. His pastor had said the Bible was untrue, the Old Testament was wrong in many places, the virgin birth of Christ never happened, and it was an impossibility for Christ to have been raised physically from the dead. That unenlightened man had destroyed

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the faith of one of his members. The man was miserable and filled with dismay when he asked, "What shall I do?" I told him it was never safe to look at Christians; even the best sometimes fail. I urged him to direct his attention to the altogether lovely One. We prayed together and it was wonderful to see the old happiness beginning to return. When he asked for the second time, "What shall I do?" I urged him to seek membership in another church where the pastor had sufficient sense and faith to believe the imperishable Word of God.

The Master and His Compassion... Delivering

"And when he came to his disciples, he saw a great multitude about them, and the scribes questioning with them" (Mark 9:14). The record supplied by Mark suggests the Lord planned His movements perfectly.

His Timely Arrival. Descending from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus saw and heard the crowd arguing with the frustrated disciples. Had He arrived earlier, the episode regarding the failure of His followers would have been interrupted and a valuable lesson would have been lost. Had He arrived later, the burden upon the parent would have been unbearable. It is refreshing to remember that Jesus never arrives too late!

It was significant that Mark wrote, "And straightway all the people, when they beheld him, were greatly amazed, and running to him saluted him" (9:15). The Amplified Version of the Bible renders the passage, "And immediately all the crowd, when they saw Jesus returning from the holy mount, His face and person yet glistening were greatly amazed, and ran up to Him and greeted Him" (emphasis mine). The New English Bible says, "the whole crowd were overcome with awe." These people had seen the Lord on many occasions, but on that particular day there was something about the Savior that filled them with wonder. Possibly, some of the glory that had made His garments white and glistening on the mountain still remained.

His Thrilling Answer. "So they brought the boy to him; and as soon as the spirit saw him it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about foaming at the mouth" (9:20 NEB). The sight was appalling, and pitifully the parent said, "If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (9:22-24). Phillips translates the statement, "I do believe; help me to believe more." Jesus answered, "O demon of

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deafness and dumbness, I command you to come out of this child and enter him no more! Then the demon screamed terribly and convulsed the boy again and left him; and the boy lay there limp and motionless, to all appearance dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet and he stood up and was all right!" (9:25-27 LB).

His Tremendous Ability. "Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible" (9:23). That one simple statement was the way into God's ever-expanding world of possibility. No burden would be too heavy, no problem too difficult, no task too hard, if only men would believe. That Jesus was introducing a new way to live was apparently lost on that watching crowd. The law emphasized the importance of doing things. It was necessary to observe all the requirements of Mosaic teaching, to obey the instructions of the scribes, to fast regularly, and give alms to the poor. Jesus never denied the importance of these things, but when He said only believe, He made possible for men and women something beyond all they had ever known.

Today, people are urged to do many things. Some are advised to go on lengthy pilgrimages to important shrines. Alas, many are unable to make the journey. Some are told to keep the law, but the more they

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try, the more they realize their inability to do so. Others are aware of their lack of faith, and sinking in despair, cease to struggle. Jesus believed faith made up for the lack of all other qualities. If our faith seems small, then the Bible tells us of the man who said, "Lord I do believe . . . help thou mine unbelief' (see the author's commentary Mark's Superb Gospel [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985], 241).

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