

The Power of His Word. Skyland. July 2007. Reading : Matt. 8. 5-9, 13-16, 23-26.

I want us to focus this morning on *the irresistible power of Jesus' word*.

I begin by noting that **disease** and infirmity could not withstand the power of His word. Take just two examples from Dr Luke's case book.

Ask Peter's mother-in-law, whose healing is recorded in verses 14 and 15 of our chapter. Listen to Doctor Luke's account, in chapter four of his gospel : 'he rose up, left the synagogue, and entered Simon's house (quite likely, I suggest, for the main meal of the Sabbath, which was served just after the synagogue service). Now, Luke continues, Simon's mother-in-law was seized¹ with a *great* fever (the word 'great' here reflecting medical usage which distinguished between 'great' and slight fevers), and they besought him for her. And he stood over her and *rebuked* the fever, and it left her; and at once (not the usual word translated 'immediately' – indeed the word used by Luke here is found only twice in the entire New Testament outside of Luke's writings) ... at once she rose up and served them', Luke 4. 38-39.² I note that it was 'at once' – all of a sudden – that her strength returned and that she arose³ and served them – a point mentioned only by Dr. Luke – who would have known better than any that a 'great' – a high – fever indicated a most exhausting illness, which would normally be followed by a time of convalescence – by a long recovery period accompanied by great weakness. But not in this case! I want you to note in particular that word '*rebuked*'. Luke is telling us that our Lord's word was sufficient!

And – ask Bartimaeus – 'Jesus stopped', Luke says in chapter 18 – when the Lord Jesus was pacing His way to Jerusalem – He stopped, 'and commanded the blind man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, that I may see". And Jesus said to him, "See ...", and *at once* he saw', Luke 18. 40-43 – where Luke uses the same word translated 'at once' as he had back in chapter four, when recording the healing of Simon's mother-in-law.⁴ In both cases, Luke – spoken of by Paul in Col. 4.14 as 'the beloved physician' – noted that the effect of the word of the Great Physician was instantaneous and complete.

But, *if disease was no match for the power of His word, neither was distance*.

Ask the centurion of whom we read in Matt. 8. 5-13. He had pleaded with Jesus for his servant boy, who was, he said, lying at home paralysed, 'grievously tormented ... fearfully/dreadfully tortured'. The elders of the Jews had spoken to Jesus on the centurion's behalf, beseeching 'Jesus earnestly, saying, *He is worthy* that you should grant this, for he *loves* our nation and has built a synagogue for us', Luke 7. 5. But, when Jesus said that He *would* come and heal the boy, the centurion had responded – not '*My servant* is not worthy that you should enter into his room', but '*I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof*', adding, 'Speak the word only - only say a word - and my servant boy will be healed', Matt. 8. 8. The centurion pointed out that his *own* authority was *derived* – that is, was derived *ultimately* from Caesar. So, when the centurion spoke – in his office as a Roman centurion, of course – he spoke with the emperor's full authority, and his command was therefore obeyed. Anyone who disobeyed his word would be defying, not so much him, as Caesar himself. The centurion was expressing his faith that Jesus was vested with the authority of God *Himself*, and that, to cure his servant boy, He, the Great Physician, had no need to pay a home visit to His patient – He had only to say the word.

He had no need to send any medicine – He had no need to send one of His disciples with the equivalent of Elisha's staff, to lay it on the sick lad, 2 Kings 4. 29 – or with the equivalent of Paul's handkerchiefs or aprons to heal him, Acts 19. 12 – He had only to speak the word. Events proved that the centurion was right, Jesus *spoke the word* and his servant boy *was* healed.

Or ask the nobleman – the royal official – of whom we read at the end of John 4 – whose young son was also healed by Jesus' word alone – even though Jesus was then at Cana, and the official's 'child' (as he tenderly described him to Jesus) was at Capernaum – *over 15 miles* to the north-east, John 4. 46-54.⁵ As the official – quite likely one of Herod Antipas's court officials – pointed out repeatedly⁶, the case was urgent – the boy was about to die. Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son *lives*' – not 'your son *will live*' – this was no mere prophecy that his son *would* recover. 'The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went' – believing not only in the extent of the Lord's *knowledge*, that He *knew* the child *had* recovered, but in the power of His *word*, that His word had shot faster than lightning those 18 or so miles to heal his dying son. The man arrived home the following day to discover that his child's fever had left him the very same hour that Jesus had told him that he lived – that distance was no more a match for the power of Jesus' word than was disease. 'Go', Jesus had said to the centurion – 'and the boy was healed *in that hour*' – 'Go', He had said to the royal official – and the father received confirmation from his servants the following day that his son was healed '*in that hour* when Jesus told him, Your son lives'.⁷

But, *if disease and distance were no match for the power of His word, neither were demons*. We read in verse 16 that 'He cast out the spirits with His word' – as He often did.

Ask Mary Magdalene – from whom Jesus expelled no less than seven demons, Mark 16. 9.

The known and unquestionable power of His word was such that demons cowered and quailed when they saw Him coming. Ask the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue of Capernaum, Mark 1. 23-27. 'Now there was a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit, Mark says. And he cried out, saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and *come out* of him!" And when the unclean spirit had convulsed him and cried out with a loud voice, he *came out* of him'.

Ask 'Legion', mentioned along with a fellow sufferer at the end of our chapter, who dwelt – in a pitiful condition – among the tombs of Gadara – an unclean spirit in a ceremonially unclean place – until Jesus came and spoke His liberating word.

Even the exceptionally strong demon at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration was wholly unable to withstand the might of Jesus word, Mark 9. 14-29. I say 'exceptionally strong' because the Lord's statement '*this kind* does not come out except by prayer' singled out *this* spirit as no ordinary, run-of-the-mill demon – but as a particularly nasty, strong and malicious spirit – who successfully defied the combined attempts of nine powerless and embarrassed apostles to expel it – but when *He* – our Lord – came, and issued the order, 'Dumb and deaf spirit, *I* command you, come out of him and never enter him again!', the demon came out!

But, *if disease, distance and demons were no match for His word, neither was the devil himself*. When, in the wilderness, the tempter finally came out into the open, dropped all pretence, discarded his mask, and offered the Lord Jesus the kingdoms of the world on condition only that He fell down and worshipped Him, Jesus simply responded, 'Go ('get hence', 'begone'), Satan!' According to the order followed by Matthew in chapter four, this was the last of Satan's three great, crowning temptations at the close of the forty days our Lord spent in the wilderness of Judea.

The devil's objective throughout had been to persuade the Lord Jesus to act independent of His Father – to go His *own* way and to do His *own* will. But Satan's first two attempts had failed abysmally.

His opening shot had been, 'If you are the Son of God, as declared by the voice from heaven at your baptism'⁸, command that these stones may become bread. Indeed, speaking of baptism, I remember that strange Baptist man once saying to the Jews, 'Do not think to say within yourselves, we have Abraham for our father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham'. Now, surely, with the power with which *you* have just been anointed ... (for which Malcolm has his eye firmly on Acts 10. 38, 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power') ... now, surely, with the power with which *you* have just been anointed ... you are able easily – albeit miraculously – to satisfy your own hunger'. But our Lord answered, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God'. It is not that, He was saying, which went into his mouth that was of supreme importance – but that which came out of God's! And He had received no word from His Father about making stones into bread! 'No', He replied in effect, 'I am content to stay hungry and await my Father's time. I trust God not to allow me to starve'.

The devil then took Him into the holy city, and stood Him on the pinnacle (the wing) of the temple. 'You don't want to turn stones into bread then. Well, never mind. Perhaps I have been looking at stones the wrong way. Let's have another go. So you trust God and His word, do you? That's nice! Well, you know, don't you, that you that His word assures you that you can safely cast yourself down from here. For '*it is written*, He shall give His angels charge concerning you, and, On their hands they shall bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'.

But that ploy hadn't worked either. 'It is written again', our Lord had responded, 'you shall not tempt the Lord your God – you shall not put Him to the test. This is not a question of *trusting* God but of *tempting* God'. And the One who, at the first temptation, would not *doubt* God and His word, at the second, would not *presume on* God and His word either!

Now, in the third and final temptation, Satan took Him up into an exceedingly high mountain – each temptation, I note, being staged at a higher elevation than the one before. First, our Lord had been 'led up' from the Jordan into the wilderness, Matt. 4. 1, then placed on the wing of the temple, v. 5 – several hundred feet above the valley below – and now transported to 'an exceedingly high mountain', v. 8 – where the tempter showed Him all the world's kingdoms 'in a moment of time', Luke 4. 5. Snap, 'There ... do you see them? And all this authority will I give you, and the glory of them: for that is delivered to me; and to whomever I will I give it. If you therefore will worship before me, all shall be yours', Luke 4. 6.⁹ The claim that the authority had been 'delivered' to him was certainly stretching the point – but we know him to be, not only the great usurper, but also 'the father' of lies, John 8. 44.

And yet, for all that, it was a genuine offer. For, in Revelation 13, we read of Satan's 'Superman' – the beast which came up out of the sea : 'the dragon gave him his power, and his throne, and great authority ... All the world ... worshipped the dragon because he gave the authority to the beast', Rev. 13. 2-4. 'God *did* say, You are my Son, didn't He? And you know where those words came from, don't you? Yes, from the second Psalm – verse 7 to be

precise. And what does God say in the very next verse? Ask of me, and I will give you the heathen for your inheritance', Psa. 2. 8. Yes, but, as you well know, a lot of water is to pass under the bridge before *that* happens – for between now and then, you will have to face the Cross, with all its shame and suffering. How sad for you! But it doesn't *have* to be that way. Frankly, I can offer you a short-cut. Think of it, the kingdom on the cheap. The kingdom ... without the cross – the glory ... without the suffering – now that is a bargain indeed! If *God* says, 'I will give you the heathen for your inheritance', I say, 'all these things *I will give you*', Matt. 4. 9. 'What about it? Go on, worship me!'

And it is at this point that our Lord drew Satan's temptations to an abrupt end – with His firm rebuff and rebuke, 'Get hence – begone – go, Satan', v. 10.

To which Matthew adds, 'then the devil left Him', v. 11! 'Go' – one short, direct word from Jesus was enough to expel and banish the overlord of darkness.¹⁰ Just one word from our Lord and the mighty monarch of evil was on his way!

But if disease, distance, demons and the devil proved no match for the power of Jesus' word – neither did the king of terrors, death.

Ask Jairus and his wife ... ask the widow of Nain ... ask the family from Bethany.

Could *Jairus and his wife* ever forget the Saviour's all-powerful word addressed to their 12-year-old daughter – to their *only daughter*, Luke 8. 42 – addressed to one who had died just a short time before, 'Talitha, cum' – 'which is translated, Young woman, I say to you, arise' – and who immediately rose up and walked, Mark 5. 41-42. Could *the widow of Nain* ever forget the Saviour's all-powerful word addressed to her *only son* – to one who had died some time before and who was being carried out for burial, 'Young man, I say to you, arise' – and who sat up and began to speak, Luke 7. 14-15.

And could Mary, Martha or *Lazarus* ever forget the Saviour's powerful word – ever forget His loud voice – addressed to one who had been dead – not for just a few hours – nor for some little time – but dead for *four days*, 'Lazarus, come out' ... when His commanding word had battered down the stronghold of death and the grave ... and when, as John said, 'the one who had died came out', John 11. 43-44 – when Lazarus had heard the voice of the Son of God and had come out of his tomb – as one day all men will hear that same voice and come out of theirs, John 5. 28!

Make no mistake – all – disease, distance, demons, devil and death – were subject to His word.

Nor, as we read, could ***the natural elements*** withstand the power of His word.

Faced with the great storm and twelve terrified disciples, 'He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea' – what Luke called 'the raging – the surging – waves' – with the words, as Mark records them, 'Peace ('hush', 'be quiet'), be still ('be muzzled')', Mark 4. 39. And the 'great tempest' of Matthew 8. 24, became the 'great calm' of verse 26.

Interestingly, the word translated 'tempest' in the KJV and NKJV here is literally the word 'earthquake' – it is the word from which we get our word 'seismology' – and is translated 'earthquake' on every one of its 13 other occurrences in the New Testament. Matthew recalls that the 'tempest/earthquake' was '*in* the sea' not '*on* the sea', and, by the use of the word, indicates that there was a 'shaking', a 'movement to and fro'¹¹ – a disturbance – below the surface of the lake. Down below there was a violent movement in the seabed, causing great turbulence on the surface above.

All three synoptic gospels record the incident and each writer lends his own emphasis to his account. In his gospel, Luke says, 'a storm (the word for a whirlwind or hurricane¹²) of wind *came down* on the lake', Luke 8. 23. For his part, Mark describes graphically how 'the waves were beating *into* the boat, so that the boat was now filling', Mark 4. 37 lit. That is, Mark is saying, the waves, churned up by the strong wind, were cascading over the side of the boat and the water level was rising fast.

Putting the three accounts together, it is clear that, thanks to that which, according to Matthew, *came up from below* ... and that which, according to Luke, *came down from above* ... and that which, according to Mark, *came in from outside*, the disciples were, to use Luke's language 'in jeopardy', KJV – 'in danger', Luke 8. 23. But only until our Lord's commanding word sounded – to lull the fierce storm to sleep. I note that, in the context, the Lord Jesus claimed to enjoy *less shelter* than either the beasts or the birds in the natural world around – having, unlike them, He claimed, 'nowhere to lay His head', Matt. 8. 20 – yet Matthew wants us to know that, nevertheless, He – the Lord Jesus – *ever remained nature's Master!*

Well did the psalmist ask, 'Who is a strong Lord like you? ... You rule the raging of the sea ... when its waves rise, you still them', Psa. 89. 8-9. Both Moses and Elijah, who stood with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration in chapter 17, had controlled the mighty waters. But Moses had needed his rod, Exod. 14. 16, and Elijah had needed

his robe, 2 Kings 2. 8 – and that simply in each case to *divide* the waters. Jesus needed neither rod nor robe – His powerful word was sufficient – and that to master and control the unruly sea.

No – *neither disease nor distance – neither demons nor the devil – neither death nor the elements* – were a match for His powerful word – none were a match for that powerful word *by which He once made all things* – when, according to Psalm 33 verse 9, 'He spoke and it was done – He commanded and it stood fast' – none were a match for that powerful word *by which*, according to Hebrews 1. 3, *He now upholds all things*.¹³

But there *was one thing – just one thing* – which *did* reach *beyond* the power of His word ... one thing which lay outside the range of His powerful word – and that one thing was my desperate spiritual need. And so it is that I came here earlier this morning to 'proclaim the Lord's *death*' – to eat from a loaf and drink from a cup as symbols of His body given and His blood shed – to shut my eyes and try to imagine the wounds He carries still in His glorified hands, feet and side – and to praise Him for the tremendous love and self-sacrifice which accomplished *that* salvation for me *which even His mighty word was powerless – was impotent – to do*.

The apocryphal First Book of Maccabees tells how, in the period between our two Testaments¹⁴, Eleazar, a brother of Judas Maccabaeus ('the Hammerer'¹⁵), rushed to certain death to kill an elephant – not because he disliked elephants, nor because he wanted its ivory, but he rushed to kill this particular elephant because he believed – wrongly as it proved – that it was carrying the wicked king, Antiochus Epiphanes. 'Eleazar', the record runs, 'saw that one of the animals was equipped with royal armour. It was taller than all the others, and he supposed that the king was on it ... he ran into the midst ... killing men right and left, and they fell back before him on both sides. He ran right under the elephant, stabbed it from beneath, and killed it; but it fell to the ground on top of him, and he died there'. '*He gave his life to save his people*' was the narrator's comment, 1 Macc. 6. 44. Yes – *but he failed* – and effectively died to no real purpose.

But this morning I have remembered One – the Son of man – who came to '*give His life*' – to give His life a ransom for many, Matt. 20. 28 – but who, unlike Eleazar, did *not* fail – I have remembered the One who gave His glory, John 17. 5; gave His throne, Isa. 6; and gave His riches, 2 Cor. 8. 9 – the One who gave His back to the murderous scourges, His cheeks to those who pulled out His beard, Isa. 50. 6 – the One who gave His head to the thorns, His hands and feet to the nails, and His side to the spear – and all for me – I have remembered, in Paul's words, 'the Son of God, who loved me and gave *Himself* for me'.

'Who *loved* me ... '. Some time ago, I came across the following story in a book by John Ortberg¹⁶:

'We used to have a bedtime ritual when my children were small. 'I don't love you *this much*', I'd say, holding my hands a few inches apart. 'And I don't love you *this much*', I'd say, with my hands about 12 inches apart, 'or *this much* ... or just *this much*', with the gap growing wider and wider – until it was as far as my arms could reach, and then I would say, 'I love you *this much*'.

'On one occasion', John Ortberg continued, 'my little daughter turned my own words round on me. We were washing the car when she reached into the open boot, lay its contents on the ground, and sprayed them thoroughly. Blankets, a new dress, *my* tennis racquet – and *some of my books!* – were all hosed and soaked through. My little girl, who was about four at the time, could see from my face that she had sinned – big time. She looked up at me with her big brown eyes, threw her arms out as far as she could, and declared, 'I love you *this much*'. Good move, young lady!

The Lord has filled *my* world with beauty and variety, with waterfalls and sunsets, with majestic mountains and brightly coloured birds, but He says, 'I don't love you *this much*'. The Lord has blessed me with life, with my faculties, with the ability to know right from wrong, but He says, 'I don't love you *this much*'. The Lord has given me people, given me a wonderful wife and family, and even some friends! But He says, 'And I don't just love you *this much*'.

It is as I took the bread and cup this morning and pictured my Lord's outstretched arms on the cross that I finally heard Him say, 'Malcolm, I love you *this much*'.

This morning, the glorious Son of God Himself deigned to be our host – invited us to come and take both bread and cup – and we have heard Him say again, 'this is my body given *for you* ... this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out *for you*', Luke 22. 19-20¹⁷ – yes, all for us – and all because *our salvation was the one thing which reached beyond the power of His word!*

Endnotes

¹ Afflicted – which word stresses the severity of the illness and her chronic state. See Howard Marshall, page 194.

² Just as He rebuked the wind and the sea, Matt. 8. 26.

³ She 'rose up' as He 'rose up' from the synagogue, v. 38.

⁴ '*Parachrema*' in both cases. Compare Luke 5. 25; 8.44, 47, 55; 13.13; Acts 3. 7; 9. 18; 16. 26. The word occurs nineteen times in the New Testament, no less than seventeen of which come from the pen of Luke. (It is found nine times in the Septuagint.)

⁵ About seventeen and a half miles as the crow flies – or as Jesus' word reached.

⁶ The imperfect tense of the verb "besought/requested/begged" implies repeated or persistent action.

⁷ Or ask the Syrophenician woman, Mark 7. 24-30.

⁸ Matt. 3. 17.

⁹ Note the repeated 'I' and 'me' – because previously he had been careful to keep himself very much in the background.

¹⁰ Note that the three temptations began when the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, say (literally) that these stones become loaves of bread'.

¹¹ W. E. Vine's Expository Dictionary, article 'Earthquake'.

¹² 'A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature'. William F Arndt & F Wilber Gingrich.

¹³ Psa.33. 6, 9; Heb. 1. 3. Nor will the armies of earth be any match for it; note the sword which comes from His mouth, Rev. 19. 15. Well did Solomon write, 'Where the word of a king is, there is power (control, mastery, rule over)', Eccles 8. 4. Cf. Isa. 55. 11.

¹⁴ Probably in 163 B. C. See 'Israel and the Nations', F. F. Bruce, pages 155-156.

¹⁵ 'The Bible and History', William Barclay, page 143.

¹⁶ John Ortberg, in 'Love Beyond Reason', page 71.

¹⁷ *'Amidst us our Beloved stands,
And bids us view His pierced hands,
Points to His wounded feet and side –
Blest emblems of the Crucified'.*

C. H. Spurgeon.