

Descending the Mountain

Coming Down is the Hardest Thing

Luke 9:37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him.

³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my **son**, for he is my only **child**.”

³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him.

⁴⁰ And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.”

⁴¹ Jesus answered, “**O faithless and twisted generation**, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your **son** here.”

⁴² While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the **boy**, and gave him back to his father.

⁴³ And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples,

⁴⁴ “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.”

⁴⁵ But **they did not understand this saying**, and it was **concealed from them**, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which of them was **the greatest**.

⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took **a child** and put him by his side

⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever receives **this child** in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”

⁴⁹ John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.”

⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”

(Luke 9:37-50)

Coming Down a Mountain

Fogelberg says,

*The higher you climb, the more that you see.
The more that you see, the less that you know.
The less that you know, the more that you yearn.
The more that you yearn, the higher you climb.”¹*

Climbing mountains is a wonderful experience, at least to me. I’ve climbed a lot of them. The journey never goes quite the way you planned and the harder it is, the more rewarding the view at the top seems to be. But the more rewarding the top is, the gloomier coming down often is.

People who have never climbed a mountain before tend to think that **coming down** is the easy part. I suppose it depends on the mountain and the person, but in my experience, it is far easier in most ways to climb up. Most accidents on Everest take place on the way down, not up. I’ve never twisted an ankle going up a mountain, but I have on many occasions, coming down. It usually happens during the last dozen or so yards when I can almost reach out and touch my

¹ **Dan Fogelberg**, “The Higher You Climb,” *High Country Snows*, Full Moon/Epic (1985).

truck. It is carelessness that has arisen from being tired and anxious to finally sit down and rest. Tom Petty was right, “Coming down is the hardest thing.”²

We also sometimes think about coming down a mountain in emotional terms. We Christians especially have the “mountain top” experience in our vocabulary. There are several books out there with some form of this idea in the title: *My Mountain Top Experience with God*; *Mountaintop Moments: Meeting God in the High Places*; *Mountaintop Mornings*; and so on. The idea makes sense biblically, as God often meets with people on mountains (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc.). Coming down off of the mountain top experience can be very hard, whether it be a physical mountain or a spiritual one where your emotions were taken for a wild ride. It can be so difficult that people sometimes treat it like a drug, where you keep searching to find that Rocky Mountain High over and over, because it was so captivating when you were going through it, you don’t want it to end, but then you’ve lost it and want it back.

Imagine that you have just been welcomed to climb a mountain with Jesus during one of the wildest most pagan

² Tom Petty, “Learning to Fly,” *Into the Great Wide Open*, MCA Records (1991).

and deeply offensive festivals you've ever seen in person. Jesus has just told you personally in front of all those crazed people trying to placate evil entities with sacrifices and rituals that his church would do a full frontal assault on the very gates of hell. Imagine that **Jesus has singled you and your two best friends** out among a whole group of others, and only you were allowed to go with him. Then imagine that when you got to the top, you beheld a sight that no one else had ever seen, something so glorious, so otherworldly, that you were afraid to even talk about it. Other than Moses seeing God on the mountain, it may have been the most spectacular mountain top experience ever.

Now imagine **your trip back down** the mountain. Are you talking about it like crazy with your friends? Are you quiet about it, not wanting your Lord to overhear you? Are you all walking down the long trail in silence? Are you stunned? Are you thankful? What kinds of things are going through your head? Do you let it get to your head? And what do you do when get to the bottom? Will it change you? If so, how? This is where **Peter, James, and John now all find themselves**. They've seen Jesus transfigured on top of the highest mountain around. They've come down. Will it be

easy, or hard? Will it transform them, or will there be a massive letdown?

Luke 9:37-50 – Context and Structure

When I look at the stories after the Transfiguration that take us to the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (Luke 9:37-50), I'm struck by the repetition in them. It isn't perfectly parallel like we find in other places (each story is its own self-contained structure, however). But it is still there. The first is about a man with a child who is possessed by a demon. He begs Jesus to cast it out of the poor boy. When Jesus finds out he had already asked his disciples to do it and they failed, he turns suddenly exasperated and denounces their faithlessness and asks them how long is he to be with them? He then casts the demon out himself, turns to his disciples, and repeats for them his coming death. He isn't going to be here much longer. A veil promptly covers their minds and a glazed look comes over their faces. They have absolutely no idea what he is talking about.

They immediately (when reading Luke) start to have an argument about which one of them is the greatest. Why? What sense does this even make? Jesus takes a child and puts it to his side as an object lesson for them. Then John comes

to him and tells him that they all got upset at someone else **casting out demons** in Jesus' name. And Jesus has an unexpected saying that promptly ends his time in Galilee. These several stories come full circle on one another and as such are meant to be read together.

- A. Disciples fail to cast out a demon (Luke 9:37-40)
 - B. So Jesus casts it out of a child (Teaching: How long will I be with you?) (41-43)
 - C. Jesus predicts his death (Teaching: Wicked generation, I won't be with you much longer) (44-45)**
 - B¹. Who is the greatest? (Teaching: Receive this child, least and greatest) (46-48)
- A¹. Disciples angry at someone else casting out demons (Teaching: Not against you, for you) (49-50)

The effect is, **this is what it's like for the disciples to come down off the mountain**. And what we discover is that they are not handling it well at all.

As we get into the following stories, it is always interesting to note **how Luke differs from Mark and Matthew**. This helps us identify his purpose as he communicates the same stories with his own interests for us. The first story in fact happens at the bottom of the mountain as soon as they get off of it. It makes sense that they are **back in Caesarea Philippi**. It tells us that a great multitude met him. Mark gives us a little more information saying that at the bottom of the mountain scribes were arguing with the nine disciples

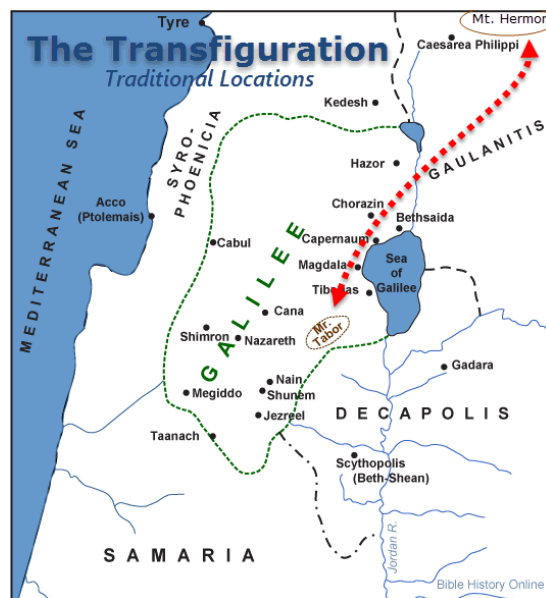
who didn't go up (**Mark 9:14**). Crowds had gathered round, but as soon as they saw Jesus, they were greatly amazed and ran to him and saluted him (**15**). Why? Perhaps **they had seen the light show** up on the mountain, like Israel saw the fire descend on Mt. Sinai? That's speculation, but it is interesting to see that Luke skips that part. He simply wants us to know that a crowd met him.

As Jesus is casting out the demon, Mark has a rather lengthy discussion about how all things are possible for those who believe, because the man didn't know if even Jesus could do this miracle. But he says, "**I believe, help my unbelief**" (**24**) and Jesus heals the boy, though even for him it was not immediate. For this kind of demon cannot come out with anything but prayer (**29**). Matthew adds here that faith like a mustard seed will cause that mountain to move (Mt. Hermon) (**Matt 17:20**). But **none of this is in Luke**. Luke **compresses** this story for some reason.

The next story is all the same in the Gospels. Mark and Matthew both tell us that **Jesus has now gone into Galilee**.³

They've come down from Caesarea Philippi, to the region of Galilee. **Luke does not tell you this** and the effect is, if you didn't know any different, you would think Jesus talking to them about his coming death was at that very same moment in Paneas.⁴ He does not want you to be focusing on "where," but "**what.**" This is clearer in the next story, the argument of the greatest in the kingdom. Here, Mark is specific that they are now back at **Capernaum** (**Mark 9:33**), by the Sea.⁵ But again, **Luke leaves this out**, making it seem like this story comes immediately after. Finally, the last story of

³ **Going Deeper: More Evidence for Mt. Hermon.** Mark says, "**They went on from there and passed through the Galilee**" (**Mark 9:30**). Matthew says, "**As they were gathering in the Galilee**" (**Matt 17:22**). Both make it sound like they were not in Galilee and then came into it. The thing is, "Galilee" isn't properly speaking the lake and coastal cities (this is why John, for instance, doesn't even use Galilee for the lake name, but Tiberias; you would clarify that it was the lake if you meant the lake). It is the entire region that Herod governed. **Mt. Tabor** is in the middle of Galilee (see image). If the Mt. of Transfiguration is Tabor, then they would have already been in Galilee, but if it is Mt. Hermon, they would not have been. The Hermon theory fits this much better than that Tabor tradition.



⁴ Luke's language does not demand this, but it lends itself to this thought. He says, "**But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing...**" (**Luke 9:43**). Because he gives no geographical marker, one could assume they were marveling at this particular exorcism. However, the language technically means everyone is marveling at everything, and so it could include many things that he was doing throughout his journey back to Galilee. **This is the genius of Luke.** He states things in a way that does not contradict the other Gospels, and yet compresses the stories for his purposes so that you will feel the impact of them when told together.

⁵ Matthew agrees, although he has an extra story that the other Gospels do not give (**Matt 17:24**).

the itinerant exorcist in Mark and Matthew are longer, and focus on things Luke is not concerned with (such as giving a cup of cold water in his name; **Mark 9:41** or returning to the little ones and the kingdom and putting a millstone around your neck and keeping yourself from going to hell (**Matt 18:6**). Why? Luke's effect forces you to read these stories together and compare and contrast them. And what we again see is just **how badly the disciples are doing** as they've come down from their mountain top high. And this sets us up perfectly for Jesus' need to now go down to Jerusalem, for unless he does this, it is clear that even his closest disciples are not going to be changed. Humanity has never been able to do that, even with a little help. No. We need a full reconstitution of our sin and stubbornness problem through the one-sided work of God in Christ.

The Father and his Demon Possessed Boy (Luke 9:37-43)

The first story takes place, “**On the next day**” (**Luke 9:37**). Jesus and his three friends have now “**come down from the mountain**” where “**a great crowd met him.**” Suddenly, “**a man from the crowd cried out, ‘Teaching, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child’**” (**38**). “**Only child**” is a fascinating choice of a word, because it is the word

the Bible uses for Jesus as the “only begotten” Son (cf. [John 3:16](#)). Though Luke does not use *monogenēs* of Jesus,⁶ he has in fact just used “Son” of Jesus as the Father tells the witnesses, “This is my Son in whom I am well-pleased” ([Luke 9:35](#)). And so a comparison is being drawn between this man’s only begotten son and God the Father’s Son. Notice also that the ESV uses “child,” this will become an important [conceptual link](#) to our third story.

At any rate, “A spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him” ([39](#)). Recall when we studied [9:1-50](#) together that the word “shattered” is used when [Moses](#) comes off the mountain and shatters the tablets of the covenant because of the great sin at the foot of Mt. Sinai. This image will come back in a moment when Jesus hears what’s going on, but for now, the point is simply that this is [a truly powerful demon](#) that has taken hold of this poor soul. Only our most terrifying demon-possession horror movies can begin to capture what this poor family must have been going through.

It is interesting to me that Luke, *the doctor*, calls it a “spirit” and later a “demon” and an “unclean spirit” that

⁶ He does two other times, both for raising dead people ([Luke 7:12](#); [8:42](#)). Curiously, in this story, Mark adds that as Jesus cast out this demon, the boy became as one dead ([Mark 9:26](#)).

seizes him. Mark also says it was a spirit. Matthew at this point uses the hapax (used one time only in the NT) only the word for “[seizures](#)” (a word related to the moon, curiously). However, he then tells us that it was in fact a “demon.” [To a modern materialist](#) who explains everything only by natural causes, seeing the good doctor choose only words like spirit, demon, and unclean spirit keeps us from seeing this as only a kind of epilepsy. [True epilepsy is a physical problem](#) that can and does plague many Christians. [It is not a form of demon possession.](#) But what this child suffered with masqueraded itself that way. But for him, it was something deeply sinister.

Mark here tells us that the argument that arose between the scribes and Jesus’ nine disciples that he left in the city was because the father had asked them to cast the demon out, but they couldn’t. I’m sure we can all imagine what a group of religious zealots now full of fury at Jesus would have to say to them. Luke skips that and simply tells us that the man “[begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not](#)” ([Luke 9:40](#)). Luke does not want us getting side-tracked in our full reading, by focusing on those evil scribes, because this is going to have a [parallel in our last story](#) (combined

also with the first story in the chapter when Jesus sends them out to cast out demons).

Yet, Jesus' response **foreshadows** this final story. It seems harsh and out of the blue. And it should be read in the backdrop of the first story in this chapter where he sends them out precisely to do this job—exorcize demons—and *they came back successful!* But not here. Why? “Jesus answered, ‘*O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?*’” (41). His words harken to Moses's song, “They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation” (Deut 32:5). Because Luke does not mention the scribes, our focus is rightly on the disciples. And yet, Hendriksen is surely right when he says,

Jesus was **deeply moved**, as the word *O* indicates. By means of this exclamation Jesus expressed his **pain and indignation**. The fact that he directed his complaint to the “**generation**” shows that he cannot have been thinking only of the nine disciples who had failed in this emergency. He was evidently deeply dissatisfied with his contemporaries: with the **father**, who lacked sufficient faith in Christ's healing power (cf. Mark 9:22–24); with the **scribes**, who, instead of showing

any pity, were in all probability gloating over the disciples' impotence (Mark 9:14); with the crowd in general, which is pictured in the Gospels as being generally far more concerned about itself than about others (John 6:26); and last but not least, with the nine disciples, because of their failure to exercise their faith by putting their whole heart into persevering prayer (Mark 9:29).⁷

I can't help but ask you what you think your response to all this might have been? Would you have been above all this faithlessness? Would you have seen clearly? This isn't an easy question to answer. We do live on this side of the cross, after all. Nevertheless, I know my sin and failures, and I can't help but think that if something like this just came upon me that I would be no different. I'm not saved by my lack of belief. I'm saved by my faith. As this boy's father says in Mark's Gospel, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

Jesus stops his lament nearly as soon as it began. He commands the father, "Bring your son here" (Luke 9:41). But, "While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him" (42a). It knew what was about to happen! It wouldn't matter. It could play all its tricks. Jesus will

⁷ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 514.

not be thwarted in this, his first battle after declaring war on top of that mountain. “Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father” (42). There is no mountain-top low experienced by the Lord of Glory, save how distressing it is that people continue not to believe. Jesus does not flinch or bat an eye. The boy is healed.

“And all were astonished at the majesty of God” (43). This verse clearly takes our mind back to the Transfiguration where they beheld the glory of God in Christ shining before them. Now that radiance fills the vision of everyone present. As above (on the Mt.), so below (at the bottom). Jesus takes his intrinsic glory back down the mountain to the people. They see what he just did. And they are astonished.

Let These Words Sink Into Your Ears (Luke 9:43-45)

Luke now tells you, “But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing,” Jesus turned to his disciples (43b). I told you that this actually takes place at least a few days later, because they are not in Galilee. But Luke’s effect of compressing time here forces you to contrast what is coming with what just happened. He had just told them, “How long am I to be with you and bear with you?” (41). It sounds like pure exasperation. But it really wasn’t. He was actually

telling them something. He *wouldn't* be with them very much longer. He is lamenting that truth as much as anything. He loves these men, failures, faults, and all. But he isn't going to be here with them much longer.

He needs them to understand. Or, maybe it's better to say, he needs *us* all to understand. He turns to them and with a rather curt opening says, “Let these words sink into your ears...” (44). What words? Words that he had told them just a few verses earlier. “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men” (44b). Just as he had told them days earlier, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (22). The first time he said it, he gave no time frame. Now he adds that it is “about to” happen. The first time he said it, we have no hint about if they understood or not. Now it adds, “But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it” (45). This time Luke is the only one to tell us that it was deliberately concealed from them. He is using theology here to show us a second time in two stories that the disciples have a serious problem.

In the previous story, it was only the nine. In this story, it is *all twelve*! This includes the three (Peter, James, and John)

who just came down the mountain with Jesus. They didn't understand any better than the others what Jesus was talking about. In fact, perhaps their experience made it even harder to understand. How could someone who just revealed himself like that be talking like this? “What do you mean, about to be delivered into the hands of men?”

They should have known. It was prophesied, in the OT and by the Master himself (think of the Psalm 87-89 stuff from last time as part of that). But they didn't. And part of this concealing was that they became afraid. And no one would ask him anything about it. This now focuses our attention squarely on the three, because this is precisely what they did as they came down the mountain. They didn't say a word.

I said that Jesus needed them to understand, but it was clearly concealed from them. Who or what concealed it. Among Reformed commentators, most (including Calvin, Ryken, Ryle, Morris) all put the blame solely on the obtuseness of the disciples. Calvin explains,

A preconceived opinion is so effective that it brings a shadow over minds in the clearest light. The apostles imagined for themselves pleasant and delightful conditions in the reign of Christ and thought that, as soon as he became known, he

would receive the highest approval of everyone. It was unbelievable to them that the priests, scribes and leaders of the church would be against him. Therefore, this error having seized them, they did not admit anything that was contrary to it ... But how could they be ignorant, when the words were so clear and distinct, unless that vain illusion had clouded their minds? The fact that they did not dare to question any further has been ascribed in part to their reverence for him. But there is no doubt that they were also kept silent by their grief and by foolishness that they themselves invented.⁸

The [power of self-delusion](#) is almost inconceivable. We've seen this played out repeatedly over the last three years, even when done innocently. If we hear a drumbeat, then no matter what logic, science, or your gut tells you, it is just very difficult to overcome, especially when your emotions get in the way.

And yet, I can't help but think that Hendrickson,⁹ one of the few Reformed commentators to add [someone else here](#) is onto something. Without in any way contradicting Calvin and human responsibility and our own obtuseness, he says it's very clear that some principle, force, or person

⁸ Beth Kreitzer et al., eds., *Luke: New Testament*, vol. III, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 209.

⁹ [Hendriksen](#), 517-18.

outside of their hearts and minds of the Apostles is also at work. Some suggest it was **the devil**, but the devil didn't know any better than they did. This leaves only **God as the one who blinded their eyes** so that they would not see. And this happens often, in no way contradicting God's desire that men see, that God often hardens in spite of that "desire" because he has other purposes in mind as well. **No one** could fully understand what Jesus was about to do, otherwise, the plan might have been thwarted. Furthermore, he may have known that if they had understood, they would not have been able to handle this revelation at the time. Whatever the case, it is clear that they were also responsible, and this does **not put them in a good light**. But those words would never fully retreat and after it was all over, they would remember and be ashamed and yet also it would fuel their passion once filled with the Holy Spirit.

Who Is the Greatest? (Luke 9:46-48)

As the next story begins, they have now gone to **Capernaum**. However, Luke again does not tell us this, meaning that the effect is that it all comes to us at once. This is deliberate, because we are now going to really see just what coming off this mountain did to the three.

Blindness, from themselves and God, still fully in our minds, we learn that “An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest” (46). Luke tells us that Jesus knew the reasoning in their hearts (47), but we may not understand it. So let’s think about it. Why might they be arguing? Because Jesus had just shown favoritism to the three. Furthermore, he was not happy with the nine when they couldn’t cast out the demon. You think this might have caused the pride of three to grow and the envy of nine to reproduce? James and John were already called “the sons of Thunder.” I’m sure you’ve been around groups of men long enough to know that there’s often a kind of alpha-male competition that takes place.

So they have an argument about who is the greatest. Jesus responds to them by taking a child and putting him by his side (47). When last we looked at this passage, I suggested that this story is modeled on Korah and his rebellion. Korah was a cousin of Moses, a Levite, but not a priest. He grew jealous of Moses and tried to commit a kind of mutiny. Moses told them to put their staffs by the side of the doors and God would sort out who was chosen.

This time, I want to look raise a more contemporary argument that this passage has sometimes been used to prove. Bavinck, for example, uses this text to say the following,

While grace is not automatically inherited, as a rule it is bestowed along the line of generations. ‘For the infants of believers their first and foremost access of salvation is the very fact of their being born of believing parents. This view is continued in the New Testament. Like John, Jesus appears on the scene with the message: “Repent and believe the gospel!” He takes over John’s baptism, thereby proclaiming that, despite their being circumcised, the Jews need repentance and forgiveness. The contrast gradually becomes so sharp that Jesus no longer expects anything from his people and they in turn reject him and hang him on a cross. Still, despite all this, *he continues to regard their children as children of the covenant* (Matt. 18:2ff.; 19:13ff.; 21:15–16.; Mark 10:13ff.; Luke 9:48; 18:15ff.). He calls them to himself, embraces them, lays hands on them, blesses them, tells them that theirs is the kingdom of heaven, marks them as an example to adults, warns the latter not to offend them, says that their angels watch over them, and reads their hosannas as a fulfillment of the prophecy that God has made the speech of children a power by which those who hate him are silenced, and he has ordained from their lips.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 528.

In other words, this passage is used in a long line of other passages as a string of pearls to prove [infant baptism](#).

The typical Baptist response is one exemplified in an apocryphal story I once heard where Spurgeon was debating an infant Baptist. The man begins his argument, “[Hinder not the little children from coming to me](#),” and sits down. Spurgeon stands up and quotes, Job 1:1, “[There was a man from Uz whose name was Job](#).” The man responds to Spurgeon, “[Sir, I fail to see what your verse has to do with baptism](#).” Spurgeon got him. “[Likewise, sir, I fail to see what your verse has to do with baptism](#).”

Clearly, this story in Luke has nothing to do with [baptism](#). Bavinck’s point isn’t that *per se*. Rather, he is saying that Jesus’ treatment of this and other children is in line with OT covenantal teaching about children, which actually contradicted the Rabbis who thought it was never worth their time to spend even a minute with a child. One Rabbi wrote, “[Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble, destroy a man](#)” (Ab. 3, 10:R. Dosa b. Archinos).¹¹

¹¹ Cited in [R. Kent Hughes](#), *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 365.

Paedobaptists often do not think that Baptists have a way of taking what Bavinck says here about children seriously unless we baptize them. Thomas Poage Hunt, an early PCUSA (before it went leftist) preacher said, “Now, do those who reject infant baptism, in any manner, mode, form or shape, pretend publicly to receive infants, in the name of Jesus?”¹² His rhetorical question demands a “no” answer. As the joke often goes, “Why do you Baptists hate your little children?” It’s sad to me this kind of polemics and unwillingness of both sides to hear legitimate truths. In this case, the truth is, Jesus loves children. In Matthew’s version of this, he even says, “Unless you become like this child, you will in no way enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Clearly, there is something special about being born in a Christian household. Great blessings and great promises are very near to these children from childhood. They literally taste how good the Lord is all the time, even if they end up denying it later on. I also think we Baptists can sometimes, in our knee-jerk reaction against pedobaptism, end up treating our kids in exasperating ways, ways that lead, from a human point of view, to their abandoning the faith.

¹² Thomas P. Hunt (1794-1876), *The Bible Baptist No. 1* (New York: M. W. Dood, 1857).

But it certainly doesn't have to be like that, nor do we have to baptize our infants to believe most of what Bavinck said here. They do have a great access to salvation that is not afforded many people. Jesus and therefore parents should and often do love them, embrace them, lay hands on them, bless them, see them as reminders of what we must be as simple faith-filled believers, and even **treat them as saved** when they pray even though they have not expressed their faith in God, because they don't really understand that yet. Why wouldn't we? We don't doubt that they believe we are their fathers when they call us dad, even though they don't understand technically what that really means? So why do it with the Heavenly Father we teach them to believe in?

That doesn't presuppose we know they are saved, but we can *treat* them as such as we guide them along in the faith until they express that salvation in clearer ways and confess it is now time to go public with it and become part of the visible people of God. All that said, the point we Baptists make to our paedobaptist brothers still stands. **This passage literally has nothing to do with baptism.** And I think it is dangerous to use passages like this to say such things when they clearly do not, even if the wider point they are making

surrounding the issue has validity (the whole “are they in the covenant” question aside for today).

What Jesus is doing here in using this child as an example, especially as it comes to us in Luke’s Gospel, **can’t help but make us think of that previous child we just saw**. Now, it is true that Luke doesn’t use the same word (*paidion* here vs. *pais* earlier), but conceptually and literarily, there is a parallel. The previous child was **demon possessed, violent, and shattered**, until Jesus healed him. Here is another child. What will they do or think about him? Will they point and gawk? Will they chide and deride? Will they argue over which child is the greatest?

Jesus forces them to see in this contrast of the children their own stupid argument. **“Receive this child and you receive me and the one who sent me” (Luke 9:48)**. That’s all Luke says about a much longer narrative in Mark and Matthew. This is a child. **That’s the kind of people God sees us as**, especially when we bicker and fight, especially when we are utterly clueless about his teachings. Little children. *And that’s OK!* God is full of mercy and kindness, not just to children, but to us.

Jesus adds the saying, now pressing the point home directly. **“For he who is least among you all is the one who is**

great” (48). In other words, you are fighting about who is the greatest Christian? The most prestigious? The most famous? The smartest? The wisest? In the words of Paul, you make **super apostles** out of some of you but just piddly old “Christians” out of others? Shame on you. The reality is, the least, like this child, is what you all need to be. And if you can see that, then you will be great. The point isn’t to say this child is a Christian who should be baptized, but that this kind of nonsensical worldly fighting is **tearing down the Kingdom of God**. There’s another fight that needs to be taken up. And it is coming soon in Jerusalem.

The Itinerant Exorcist and the Dullness of the Three (Luke 9:49-50)

Importantly, this is not the end of our narrative in Galilee. We have **one more short story** of two verses. And in it, who should come to the forefront, but one of the three who was with Jesus on the mountain. “**John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us”** (Luke 9:49). Let’s try to wrap our mind around what’s going on here.

John has just come off the mountain. He was not among those nine there who could not cast out the demon. This was likely a reason why the argument arose over who was the greatest. John had not been tested like they had. Maybe he thinks he would have had enough faith to do it! He and Peter and James are *obviously* special. Yet, along with the nine, their cluelessness about Jesus' coming death and their squabbling simply proves that their coming down the mountain has *left them utterly unchanged spiritually*. Like so many mountain top camp experiences, once the dust settles and its back to work, the emotions and feelings quickly fade away. Their pride, their mountain top high, it has left them unchanged to their own spiritual need for grace. In fact, sometimes those highs actually lead to apostasy as people trust in the feelings rather than the Father.

“Jesus, this guy’s on the wrong team! He’s not in our click. He’s not one of the chosen twelve. You only sent us out to do that!” Jesus’ responds in a similar way to the bickering, with a *proverbial saying* of irony. *“Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you”* (50). Notice something here. This man is not casting out demons by Beelzebub (which will come up soon in Luke’s Gospel). He is casting them out *in Jesus’ name*. And apparently, it was *working!* The point is,

this guy is not actually playing for another team. He sees the power of Jesus, not someone else. And he believes in it. So when Jesus tells them this, he is not giving some carte blanche teaching that anyone not against you is a Christian even if they are just a nonchalant, minding-their-own-business pagan. This man is doing, *in Jesus' name*, precisely **what they should have been doing**, casting out demons in his name! But they weren't. And this man was. They need a talking to.

As we were going through the fifty verses together, I did not see it then, but one of you reminded me that this story sounds an awful lot like a story in Numbers. Moses had just gone up the mountain and came down, putting the **Spirit that was on him on the seventy elders** (Num 11:25) who had gone up that very mountain with him previously (Ex 24:1ff). As soon as this happened, **“they prophesied.”**

But, it says, **“Two men remained in the camp.”** Sounds similar to our story also. Eldad and Medad somehow received the spirit too, and they began to prophecy (26). Sounds like this man casting out demons in Jesus' name. A young man hears about this and runs to tell Moses (27), but Joshua, **“the assistant of Moses from his youth”** said, **“My lord Moses, stop them”** (28). **John. Same thing.**

Moses's response? "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (29). And the story ends with everyone returning to camp.

Our story does ends a similar way, with Jesus saying, "Do not stop him." But rather than going back to camp, they are now going to make their way down from Galilee, to Jerusalem, where in just a couple of months from now, all hell would break lose and they would be severely tested and would fail. For you see, the Transfiguration by itself was not enough to change even the three. Just glory alone never is. Even though they beheld the Glory, like Moses, they would fail and fall, even as soon as they came off the mountain.

It takes more than just an example or a divine vision. Because the problem is in us; the problem is us. It takes a changed heart and the work of a God-man to reconcile you to a holy God of whom you have fallen short of his Glory. And this is what Jesus is about to do for them.

That work is now completed in time and space. We look back on the cross that they did not yet even begin to understand. Look to how Jesus alone came down from that mountain composed and sinless and ready to meet the needs of any who believe in him. He didn't need changing. He needed to

die so that we could be changed. As the boy's father shows us, like always, this is about faith. Faith in Christ. Hear this word and do not be hardened by your sin so that you cannot see the grace of God before your eyes. Don't treat Christianity like a mountain-top experience, but like a day-to-day ordinary step along a long journey, the destiny of which is not to get to the top of the mountain, but to come back down again to be at home with your family and your God. Then, one day, we'll all go back up to the heavenly mountain together.

Bibliography

Bavinck, Herman; Bolt, John; and Vriend, John. *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.

Calvin, John. *A Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*.

Fogelberg, Dan. "The Higher You Climb." *High Country Snows*. Full Moon/Epic (1985).

Hendriksen, William and Kistemaker, Simon J. *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001.

Hughes, R. Kent *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998.

Hunt, Thomas P. (1794-1876). *The Bible Baptist No. 1*. New York: M. W. Dood, 1857.

Kreitzer, Beth et al., eds. *Luke: New Testament*, vol. III. Reformation Commentary on Scripture. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.

Petty, Tom. "Learning to Fly." *Into the Great Wide Open*. MCA Records (1991).

Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ*. Harper & Brothers, 1922.

Ryken, Philip Graham. *Luke*. Reformed Expository Commentary 1. Ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009.