



ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Six:

UNBELIEF

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*'Demon possession' is not the kind of illness that
is generally recognised nowadays.
In Jesus' time it was a common diagnosis.*

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'This time is going to be the one. I can feel it in my bones.'

'This will be another waste of time, just like all the others.'

I've got used to feeling two contradictory things at once: hope and despair; love and disgust; tenderness and repulsion...

I know it's not Nathaniel's fault, he can't help it, but that doesn't always make it easy.

We were so happy when he was born. We'd had to wait a while and were just beginning to worry that we'd be childless. Then he came along, our firstborn, our son. What a delight he was: always smiling, always happy, content on his mother's breast, warm and snuggling in my arms. Life was good, God was good.

The demon first possessed him just after his first birthday. I was there when it happened, for which the LORD be praised. He was just starting to walk by then, taking his first wobbling steps, though mostly he still crawled. I was out in the yard, mending a broken broom handle when he came crawling towards me. "Hello Natty," I called out, "have you come to help Daddy?" Suddenly he stopped, stared straight ahead and started to shake and shudder. His arm collapsed in front of him and his face crashed into the hard-packed earth. His legs started to jerk wildly.

I watched with horror for a moment, then ran to him, sweeping him up in my arms and holding him as tight as I dared while he thrashed against me. All the while he was shaking and grunting and trying to escape from my arms. But I just clung on tight, the tears streaming down my face as I cried out, "Why? Why O LORD? Why?"

I turned to Nathanael and tried to address the demon inside him. "Go away. In the name of the most high God I command you to leave him alone. Be gone and never return." Over and over I commanded it but I knew it wouldn't do any good. I'm not a holy man; I don't have power to exorcise demons. I'm just ordinary and that's not good enough.

At some point Martha came out and joined me in my distress. Then the neighbours arrived, someone took Nat from me and gradually things calmed down. Nat stopped shaking and, apart from some bruises on his face and arms, seemed none the worse for the experience. Our

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friends tried to cheer us up: "It was a summer chill," they said, "nothing to worry about." Even the Rabbi was optimistic. "Yes," he said, "it does sound like a demon. But it's left him now. If we pray to the Almighty, He will not let it come back." But, deep inside me, I knew that it would!

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The years wore on and Nathanael grew up. Mostly, he's fine; you'd never know that he is different from other boys. He still has that sunny, cheerful nature—except when the unclean spirit returns to him. He's lived twelve years now and it must have come twice that number of times. Not that it's predictable; oh no! It certainly doesn't seem to have anything to do with the seasons and not even that much to do with the moon.

There was a period of over two years when he was completely free of it. As the first year passed and then the second, we rejoiced and began to relax. That's the thing, you see, you always have to be on your guard. Once it threw him into the fire. Martha pulled him out quickly and he wasn't badly burned—not as badly as she was, actually. Another time, when he was about six, it threw him into the pond. It was summer and there wasn't much water so his friends were able to rescue him and hold him safe until the spirit left him.

Why does it come? It's certainly not because he is an evil boy. Quite the reverse, really. He's very loving, always ready to help, generally obedient and polite. He's not perfect of course but he is a lovely boy; everybody says so. Does it come because he is good? But that doesn't make sense. "It's just God's will," some people say. Well, I'm sure that it is but that doesn't help. Why does God will it? Why does he will it for Nathanael and not others? Indeed, why are there demons and unclean spirits anyway? If God made everything he must have made them too. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." But demons are not good, they are evil. Surely God could not have made something evil. But if God didn't make them who or what did? My head spins and nothing makes sense.

I try my best to trust in God, to put everything in his hands, to believe that everything will work out for the best—if not in this world, then in the world to come at the end of the age. Despite this, even during that long gap when it left him completely alone, I couldn't really believe that he was healed. As his tenth birthday came the Rabbi called round

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to say special prayers of rejoicing for him. "Let us thank and praise the God of the universe that he has heard our prayers and sent this unclean spirit back to where it belongs." I joined in with the 'Amen', though there was still a 'but' in my heart. How do you believe something with *all* of your heart? I don't know.

A few days later it came back with renewed strength. It must have returned a dozen time in the last two years and worse each time. He cannot survive this much longer. Indeed, if the attacks continue to be more frequent and more violent I don't want him to survive much longer! That's a terrible thing to say but there's a part of me which believes it, just as there's a part of me that feels a burden of guilt for what is happening. If I really believed, would the demon have stayed away? If I really believed when I prayed that very first time, would it have left and never returned?

I don't know; and it is in this agony of unknowing and unbelieving that I have come here to find this man Jesus who commands, they say, every demon he comes across. Do I believe them? I want to. Do I believe them? I try to. Do I believe them? Well, I'm here aren't I? Ready to take the risk again, ready to get my hopes up again, ready to have them cast to the ground again.

I am here to ask—to trust—this Jesus to cast out this demon once and for all so that my beloved boy, my Nathaniel, can have a life like other boys. Is that so much to ask? So, I am here to ask him—but Jesus is not here.

The sun is no longer high in the sky as we approach the foot of the mountain but the heat is still oppressive and the boy and I are both sweating and stumbling as we stop to look around. There, at the place where they told us Jesus would be, is a knot of about twenty people. And over there, a smaller gathering, teachers of the law by the look of them. Even at this distance I can smell the tension between the two groups. We walk to the larger group, the dry grass crunching beneath our feet on the parched ground. A few white clouds dot the sky but there is little shade or relief from the sinking sun.

We stop by them and ask for Jesus. "He is not here."

"Where is he then?" I ask in frustration.

They wave vaguely. "Up the mountain somewhere."

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“When will he be back?”

“No idea.” They all seem just as confused and frustrated as I am.

Then one of them, brighter than the rest—Andrew, I think he was called—turns to me and says, “Perhaps we can help you. We are Jesus’ closest followers.”

So I explain the situation, all about Nat and his demon. (*His demon? It’s nothing to do with him. How easily we become familiar with even the most terrible things in our lives.*)

“Perhaps we could help,” says Andrew. “Yes, we’ve healed people of demons before,” says another. Suddenly they are aroused from their lethargy, full of life and enthusiasm. They take Nathanael and they all lay hands on him, crying out aloud for the demon to leave him. The teachers of the law, drawn by the noise, start drifting over towards us.

Nathanael, used to this sort of thing by now, endures it all with a quiet sufferance. Indeed, he is the only one who is quiet now as the teachers of the law start shouting at Jesus’ followers. I don’t know if one lot cancelled out the other but I do know that nothing has happened. Nathaniel stands impassive while the noise rolls about him and never so much as twitches a muscle.

Finally, Andrew and the rest give up. “I don’t understand it,” says one. “It works when Jesus does it.” At this, I lose it: “Well, he’s not here is he? And you lot are just useless. This is a complete waste of time.” I find myself sobbing my heart out. Jesus’ people stand by, embarrassed, and Nat comes over to comfort me. “It’s OK, Dad. It’s OK. Let’s go home to Mum. There’ll be another chance; I know there will.” And that pulls me to my senses. Not what he said but the fact that he, the child, is comforting me, the adult.

Just then one of the teachers of the law comes up to me. “Your son has a demon? He should go to the Temple, not waste time with this rabble.” ‘Shut up you stupid man. We’ve been to the Temple over and over. It did no good.’ But I don’t say it; it is always best not to get into a dispute with people like him. Instead, I just smile crookedly and mutter thanks to him. I’ve had enough of this. “Come on Nat,” I call, “you’re right. Let’s go home.” We turn to trudge our way back again.

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But we haven't gone more than a few yards when, above the ongoing squabble between Jesus' people and the lawyers, I hear a shout: "Look! Jesus is coming."

I look over and see four men striding towards us. The crowds run towards them but they cut through them like a bow wave and keep walking towards Nat and me. The crowds follow along behind. The foremost of the men is clearly Jesus. Dressed like any other man, looking just like any other man, he nevertheless has a regal air about him. He seems supremely self-confident, self-assured, self-possessed. "What is going on?" he asks, "Why are you all arguing?"

Although he asks the question of no-one in particular, it is me he is looking at. I feel compelled to respond. Telling Nat to stay where he is, I walk back to where Jesus is now standing. "Teacher," I say, "my son has had a demon for many years which throws him to the ground and tries to make him harm himself. Nothing can be done for him so I brought him to you to see if you could heal him but you were not here. Your disciples tried to exorcise the demon but they could not. So now we are going home."

Jesus listens, his eyes tightening and narrowing as I speak. I can see that he is very angry and I must admit that I feel little tendrils of fear at the back of my neck as I observe his reaction. He pauses a while and then explodes in fury: "You faithless generation! How long shall I have to put up with you? Bring the boy to me!"

What I want to do is to run away, to get as far as possible from this awesome furious man. Because he *is* awesome: even though he is clearly very angry, he is also clearly completely in control of himself. When I get angry, the anger often takes me over, possesses me like some kind of demon. Not so with him. He allows himself to express his anger but there is no doubt who is in charge. No doubt at all, actually, because his face and his mood suddenly change. Seeing me transfixed, neither departing nor bringing Nathanael over, his face relaxes, the tension in his muscles dissipates and he drops to his haunches and a tender smile lights up his face.

"Bring the boy to me," he says again and this time I have no fear, only an overwhelming desire to trust him. I turn to Nat and beckon him to come over. He walks to us, a little uncertainly but with a small smile on his face. Jesus is still crouched down, now with both his arms

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outstretched, welcoming Nathanael and encouraging him to come. Suddenly, just as Nat gets to Jesus, the demon attacks him again. It violently throws him to the ground where he writhes and strives, trying to fight with it as it struggles for mastery over him.

"How long has he been like this?" asks Jesus. "Since he was just one." I reply. "He's a good boy; he's always been a good boy and it seems so unfair. No-one has been able to do anything about it but if you can, please take pity on us."

"If I can?" asks Jesus. "Anything is possible for the one who believes." I felt as if I've been struck with a hammer. He means me. If I believe, then it will happen. No-one has ever said this to me before. Always I have relied on the skill, the piety, or the status of others to cast out the unclean spirit. If my own wavering belief is what's required then I don't know what to do.

I look at Jesus and ask myself, 'Do I believe?' and the answers come back simultaneously: 'Yes, I do believe.' 'No, I don't believe.' But I have to choose; and I choose the 'yes':

"Lord, I believe. Please help my unbelief." Jesus gives me a big warm grin and he nods, his eyes full of compassion and understanding.

He looks around at the crowds which are quickly gathering around us and down at Nathanael who is still twitching and jittering at his feet. "You unclean spirit; I command you to come out of him and never return." Nat gives a huge cry of anguish and thrashes around on the ground, convulsing and contorting worse than I have ever seen him before. Then, just as suddenly, he is still. Deathly still, deathly pale.

My heart seems to stop beating. I hear someone in the crowd say, "He's dead!" and I want to speak but I cannot. The demon is gone, I know. I felt its clammy uncleanness rushing past me as Nathanael went limp. But is he dead? I look at Jesus. He is smiling down at Nat as he gently takes his hand and helps him to his feet.

Nat looks dazed and shaky, confused and disoriented. But Jesus just sweeps him into his arms and hugs him tight, laughing louder and louder. I feel myself captivated by his joy; all my tension and pain releasing as I too burst into uncontrollable joyous hilarious laughter. It is a moment of release from so much hurt that I never even knew I had. He has just healed my boy; he has just healed me!

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Nat is in ecstasy. For the first time in his life he is free. I am so happy and so grateful that I throw myself at Jesus' feet. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," I cry through the tears and the laughter. Jesus gently raises me up too and brings me into his arms as well. We stand there, the three of us, for precious golden moments before he releases us. "Go in peace," he says and walks away.

'Peace,' I think as I watch him depart, 'yes, peace. Until this day I never knew what peace was.' Putting my arm around Nat, we turn and start the joyous journey home.

NOTES

This incident is recounted at greatest length by Mark, chapter nine, verses nine to twenty-seven. Matthew (17:14-20) and Luke (9:37-42) also have versions.

'Demon-possession' was common in Jesus' culture, as it still is in many parts of the world today. Stevan Davies (1995) considers two possible causes: as an unconscious response to oppression within a family or as a manifestation of a multiple personality disorder. Both of these, especially the latter, may have roots in childhood experience but they tend not to manifest themselves until adolescence at the earliest.

In this case, neither of these explanations appear to be appropriate since Mark specifically tells us that Jesus asks when the seizures started:

Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood."

It seems more likely that the child was suffering from what Western medical science would describe as epilepsy. (Matthew tells us that the boy's father described him as a 'moonstruck' (*seleniazomai*), someone whose behaviour is affected by the moon. Matthew also distinguishes between demon-possession and being 'moonstruck' (4:24).)

The father's quote, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good," comes from the first book in the Bible—Genesis chapter one verse thirty-one—where God is pictured looking over creation and reflecting on it.

REFERENCE

Davies, Stevan L. 1995, *Jesus the Healer*, London: SCM Press.