New Compass series celebrates Adventist identity

Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist

During the GC Session this summer, a young Adventist named Josephine Elia Loi decided it was time to celebrate her identity. Her short essay on "Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist" sparked an idea that is traveling around the globe.

Read Josephine's article now!

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The Economy, the Pope, and the Gospel
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Psychology: Friend or Foe?
Some counseling theories are helpful—and some are downright dangerous.
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Adventism: An Audacious Call (Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist, #1)

Josephine Elia Loi

Introducing “Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist”

During the General Conference (GC) Session in July 2015, I was reading a collection of essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish rabbi, on Judaism and the meaning of being a Jew. He wrote,

What is involved in being a Jew? Duties of the heart, not only external performance; the ability to experience the suffering of others, compassion and acts of kindness; sanctification of time, not the mere observance of customs and ceremonies; the joy of discipline, not the pleasures of conceit; sacrifice, not casual celebrations; contrition rather than national pride.[1]

In an age where “Jews are running away from Judaism and religion,” here was a man who embraced all that he was and his identity. He delighted in the laws—in spirit and in practice—and the ceremonies that were essential in his Jewish life. He firmly believed that Judaism has a distinct role in shaping society and its morality.

As a Seventh-day Adventist, I found it hard to read Heschel’s thoughts without being introspective. We too are a people whose identity is tied to God’s law. In society, we are likely categorized as part of the population who abide by “stricter” standards, and thus viewed as peculiar and perhaps antiquated. Given our beliefs vis-à-vis our contemporary culture, it is not always easy to feel self-assured or unashamed of our identity.

Some of the harshest criticisms of Adventism come from Adventists. I’ve done my share of criticizing too. This time around, though, I choose to celebrate my identity.

As refreshed as I was reading Heschel’s embrace of his beliefs, and thus was able to glean very profound insights on, say, the law, I too want to be a refreshing voice that affirms the wonder that is Adventism.

Our teachings are philosophically sound, harmonious, and practically applicable. Adventism is more than an idea; it is a way of life.

What is the essence of Adventism? A union of faith and works; a holistic worship from the mind, body, and soul; a time-sensitive mission with a global scope. Adventism sees no conflict in “If you love me, keep my commandments.” It needs not only an intellectual faith but also the manifestations of that faith in physical reality, such as in food and time. It presents a daring challenge of daunting magnitude: a loud cry preparing the world for Jesus’ second coming.

Adventism has the audacity to call for an unconventional life—a holy life—in this present world. It is a worthy ocean to throw myself into, and thus, “Why I Love Being an Adventist” was born.

Editor’s note: Josephine’s thoughts on this topic, written during the GC Session, are below. We will publish additional perspectives from around the world in the coming weeks. Readers are invited to submit their own reflections on “Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist” for possible publication. Learn how here.
Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist

I belong to a community of faith—the Seventh-day Adventist faith—that is presently having its quinquennial, worldwide conference in San Antonio, Texas. I am not in San Antonio, but I too want to celebrate my identity.

Identity

I love being an Adventist because it gives me a sense of identity as an individual and as part of a people. It sheds light on who I am in the eyes of God and on what humanity is in the eyes of God. The elaborate plan of salvation as shown in the sanctuary tells me the high regard that God puts on human souls and the length and depth of His efforts to redeem a seemingly hopeless race.

Moreover, being an Adventist tells me where I am in human history and, subsequently, my role here on earth. It comes with a high and ambitious mission that requires every bit of talent and dedication.

Sanctity of Time

I love being an Adventist because it teaches me the discipline of quietness and rest. The gift of the Sabbath, the sanctity of time, tells me that humanity is not here just to do, but also to be. More importantly, to be with God. Silence and stillness is not easy to master, especially in a hyperactive world, but the Sabbath comes every week, wooing me to practice and enjoy true rest.

This precious time provides a space for awe, reverence, and wonder in my life. And I have come to believe that a life without wonder is an unhappy one. The moments when I am overwhelmed with beauty and grandeur are most refreshing, and in the Sabbath, a door is opened to access the wonder that is God.

High Demands

I love being an Adventist because I have many opportunities to be reminded of my relationship with God in tangible ways. The opportunities come whenever I eat (or don’t eat), drink (or don’t drink), and work (or don’t work). I love that a relationship with God is not just a mental assent but a day-to-day reality. I learn that any loving relationship has requirements, and the fulfillment of these determines whether a relationship grows or deteriorates.

I love that God has required something of me. Among His commands are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with Him. It elevates my existence and dignity as a human being, knowing that I can do something to please God. He is not indifferent to my works.

Everything I do and don’t do, every initiative and restraint, is an opportunity to say “I love You” and “You are Lord over me.” Obedience infuses every aspect of life and gives meaning to daily, sometimes mundane, things.

I love that Adventism demands something of me. A faith that is not worth giving all is not worth having, and a commitment without requirements is questionable. Adventism believes in something more in me, calling me to a life that is not ordinary, and I gladly respond, Yes!
Read more articles in the “Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist” series

This article was originally posted on Josephine’s blog: http://www.josephineelia.com/2015/07/02/why-i-love-being-an-adventist/
Why Do YOU Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist?

Rachel Cabose

This week The Compass Magazine launched a new series called “Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist.” And we want you to contribute!

Too often we get caught up in criticizing what we don’t like about our church. So now it’s time to focus on the things we love.

When have you felt most proud or thankful to be an Adventist? What Adventist beliefs and practices make the most positive impact on your life? What would you tell your friends if they asked, “Why are you a Seventh-day Adventist?”

Send us your thoughts on “Why I Love Being a Seventh-day Adventist.” We’ll publish the best articles on our website. Here are the guidelines:

1. Your article should highlight one or more key reasons you appreciate Adventist beliefs and/or the Adventist Church. Stories that illustrate your point are great!

2. Length: 300-800 words.

3. Submit to admin@thecompassmagazine.com (pasted in email or as a Word document)

4. Include a short biographical paragraph about yourself and a headshot photo.

5. Compass will provide a small honorarium of $20 for articles we choose to publish, if they have not been published elsewhere. (Author must be able to receive payment via PayPal.)

6. **Deadline for submissions: October 15, 2015.**

To better reflect the worldwide nature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we especially invite submissions from outside the United States.

Why do you love being a Seventh-day Adventist? It’s time to let the world know!
The Economy, the Pope, and the Gospel

Valmy Karemera

On the morning of August 24, the Dow Jones plunged 1000 points to further heighten fears of a possible global economic crisis ahead. Economists and other observers have cited, among others, these causes for their concerns: China’s market volatility; the fall of oil prices from $100 per barrel last summer to below $50; the struggling price of copper—often regarded as the benchmark of the global economy; and the continuing increase of individual, institutional, and national debt around the world. Expect the pope, during his visit to the United States this month, to “challenge the world’s leading capitalist power.”

It’s not just the economy; there is also a refugee/immigrant crisis. Knowing that a large section of U.S. Catholics is Hispanic, Pope Francis is likely to address the immigration crisis by capitalizing on the recent events in Europe where 71 bodies were found in a truck on the Austrian highway and Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy, drowned in an immigration attempt and his body washed up on the coast of Turkey.

Pope Francis has been called “a moral leader in word and deed” by the U.S. president, Barack Obama, and the pope’s historic visit to the US is likely to leave no stone unturned. The pope has already brokered a diplomacy deal between the U.S. and Cuba, written an encyclical addressing climate change, and even allowed priests to forgive the sin of abortion.

In Revelation 13 and 18, the Bible predicts a massive global economic, humanitarian, and moral crisis where the Catholic Church will play a vital role. Expect the pope’s influence to increase as the world situation deteriorates. Expect a global Catholic Church dominance, not only in the religious realm but also in the political and economic spheres.

The Seventh-day Adventist Response

The Adventist Church will continue to respond to these turbulent times by preparing the world to meet its Creator. Hundreds of thousands of Great Controversy books have flooded the city of Philadelphia in preparation for the pope’s visit. Adventists understand that “for earth’s sin and misery the gospel is the only antidote” (The Ministry of Healing, 141). Yes, the gospel of Christ, not the pope and the Catholic Church, is the only cure for the world’s problems.

[Photo: Freimages.com/Simon Stratford]
Psychology: Friend or Foe? Part 1: The Bad Side

Omar Miranda

“No way! Check this out!” I loudly exclaimed. Many years ago, while at the Adventist Book Center, I stumbled upon an Ellen White compilation I’d never even heard of: *Mind, Character, and Personality.*

My wife looked at me, hit my elbow, and shushed me. Apparently I was being too loud. I couldn’t help myself; I was excited! In that instant I had found the thrilling combination of my favorite topic written on by my favorite author. I felt like I had won the Adventist lottery of being the first table called at potluck!

As we drove home, my wife read to me from my newfound treasures…and I finally learned how God, writing through Ellen White, *really* felt about psychology and counseling.

**Excited? Not So Much…**

I still remember the day when I told my parents I was interested in psychology as a career. The look on their faces and their amalgamated level of excitement reminded me of how I felt when, many years ago, on Christmas morning, I tore into my first present, only to find…a six-pack of tube socks!

I’ve come to realize that my parents’ lack of…shall I say, "enthusiasm"…about my choice of careers reflected many Seventh-day Adventists’ feelings about psychology in general and counseling specifically.

Now, I understand why folks’ antennas go up whenever someone speaks of psychology as a whole, because, although I took several psychology courses at one of our fine Adventist universities, I was largely educated and trained by a secular university. Since then I’ve received training and several post-graduate certifications from various Christian organizations.

However, as I was going through my undergraduate program, I never once stopped to think critically about how God viewed psychology. It wasn’t until I was in graduate school, studying counseling, that I truly began to investigate God’s perspective on the multiple theories of psychology, personality development, and counseling that I was studying. Initially, I did it not so much because the question kept me up at night, but because I was attempting to allay the fears of prospective conservative Christian clients.

As I began to honestly and purposely hold up these ideas and principles—worldviews, really—to the perfect truth of God’s revealed counsels in both the Bible and Ellen White’s writings, I was amazed by what I learned.

I expected the Bible and Ellen White to basically stomp psychology and counseling, but I found the opposite to be true. Both sources elevated these disciplines of study, but clearly warned that they, like any other academic discipline, divorced from a core underpinning of who God is and His position in our lives, could be warped and used inappropriately.

So what do the Bible and Ellen White have to say about psychology and counseling? What, if any, schools of thought or larger theories of psychology and counseling merge well with a Seventh-day Adventist Christian worldview? And further, how can these psychological theories accent and assist our spiritual walk or hinder and harm it?

**Ellen White and Psychology**

In Ellen G. White’s lifetime (1827-1915), psychology—the science that studies the mind, its powers and functions,
and how it affects human behavior—was in its infancy (*Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, p. 2). However, that didn’t stop her from making these surprisingly clear and positive statements about its primacy:

- “To deal with minds is the greatest work ever committed to men” (*ibid.*, p. 4).
- “To deal with minds is the nicest work in which men ever engaged” (*ibid.*, p. 3). (In this context, “nice” means “delicate; requiring utmost care, accuracy, and skill.”)
- “It is the duty of every person, for his own sake and for the sake of humanity, to inform himself in regard to the laws of life and conscientiously to obey them. All need to become acquainted with that most wonderful of all organisms, the human body. . . . They should study the influence of the mind upon the body and of the body upon the mind, and the laws by which they are governed” (*ibid.*, p. 3).

I’ve been involved in psychology since 1990 and counseling since 1996, and I agree with her: a basic understanding of psychology and counseling is crucially important for all Christians—even if we never speak to a counselor, therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist. “But why?” you may ask. Simply put, it helps us all to be more effective soul-winners. When we understand the basics of what makes people tick, we can be wiser and more discerning in how we “bait our hooks” as we fish for men for the Master.

**Not All Ponies and Rainbows**

Before you go thinking that Ellen White has nothing but praise toward psychology, she feels just as strongly about its dangers:

> In many cases the imagination is captivated by scientific research, and men are flattered through the consciousness of their own powers. The sciences which treat of the human mind are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls. His arts are accepted as from heaven, and he thus receives the worship which suits him well. . . . Through these sciences, virtue is destroyed and the foundations of spiritualism are laid. (*ibid.*, p. 20)

Specifically, she says, “It is the special work of Satan in these last days to take possession of the minds of the youth, to corrupt their thoughts, and inflame their passions” (*ibid.*, p. 22).

As Ellen White implies, many—even the majority of—psychological and counseling theories are erroneous! You may think this is a harsh statement, but after studying and being involved in both fields for more than twenty-five years, I’ve learned that we need to be discerning and careful about what we allow into our minds. These wrong and dangerous theories are largely based upon two erroneous worldviews:

1. The idea that **human beings are basically good**. This is called “humanistic psychology” or “secular humanism.” Many people in this camp believe that:
   - humanity as a whole is inherently good;
   - we have within us all we need to be the best that we can be;
   - as time progresses, we evolve and become even better.

   They subscribe to the principle: “What the mind can conceive, the mind can achieve.”

2. The closely related idea that **there is secret untapped potential in each of us**, and with specific training/mentorship, each of us can rise to our full potential. This idea is rooted in eastern religions and is a hallmark of such practices as hypnosis (what Ellen White termed “mesmerism”) and many theories of psychology, personality,
and counseling. Specifically, person-centered counseling, positive psychology, and Jungian psychology are centered in occult practices and thinking. We'll look at each of these practices and theories in turn.

**Hypnosis**

Author Dan Delzell writes, “Altered states of consciousness and other mystical practices open doors in the spiritual realm. Once a door is opened, a person becomes vulnerable to any spirits which come through that door.” He recognizes the crucial fact that Franz Anton Mesmer, the founder of hypnotic therapy (hence the term “mesmerism”), was a practitioner of the occult.

Delzell continues:

> Hypnosis is basic to the Eastern religions. Prominent hypnotists have estimated that there are probably over 100 different stages of hypnotic trance. Christians should never allow themselves to be put in a trance….regardless of who is leading you into that mental state of relaxation. No matter what obstacles we face, God will help us if we rely upon Him rather than magical or mystical experiences. It is very dangerous to open hidden spiritual doors through hypnosis.

Practically speaking, anytime you place yourself into an altered state of consciousness, you are giving up control and letting down boundaries—boundaries that God has put there for your own protection.

**Person-centered/Client-centered Counseling**

This is a key counseling approach under humanistic psychology. The founder, Carl Rogers, believed that the best person to understand the client (the person receiving the counseling) is the actual client. He summarized his theory like this: “It is that the individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior—and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided.”

Rogers felt that it was important to give the client what he called “unconditional positive regard” in an effort to make the counseling environment so nonthreatening and comfortable that the client would come to their own conclusions about what they believed, felt, and should do. In other words, Rogers believed that the counselor shouldn’t disagree with the client at all or come to any external judgments or conclusions that weren’t those of the client—the counselor should simply listen to the client.

This type of counseling is dangerous because it is basically the postmodern cultural worldview wrapped up in a counseling theory. The theory is founded upon the idea that the client’s feelings, thoughts, values, and emotions can never be challenged and are therefore—by default—“right.”

The prophet Jeremiah laments, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9, NIV). The practitioner of this dangerous theory can only sit helplessly by and watch clients wallow around in their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values…and only to hope that one day they come to the Holy-Spirit-inspired right conclusions.

**Positive Psychology**

“Positive psychology is one of the newest branches of psychology to emerge.” It “focuses on how to help human beings prosper and lead healthy, happy lives.” During the 1950s secular humanist thinkers such as Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and Abraham Maslow developed “theories that focused on happiness and the positive aspects of human nature.” While many other branches of psychology focus on dysfunction and abnormal behavior, positive
psychology is centered on helping people find fulfillment, productivity, and purpose.

The basic problem with positive psychology is that, although the theory recognizes the importance of what these thinkers call “spirituality,” it doesn’t recognize the validity, exclusivity, joy, and power of a relationship with Jesus. Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, NIV).

The wisest man in the history of the world, King Solomon, in his diary, the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, writes in twelve agonizing but crystal-clear chapters of his own failed attempts at finding all the things that positive psychology advertises it can offer. He called his attempts “vanity!” The bumper stickers are true: “Know Jesus, Know Peace; No Jesus, No Peace!”

**Jungian Psychology**

Carl Jung, one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century, was heavily involved in occult practices, and much of what he writes about can be most closely described as souped-up shamanism. His focus on the mystical and on dream interpretation is dangerous. Also, he admitted to placing himself—on a regular basis—in “trance-like” altered states of consciousness. Many of his theories are related to “insights” he had while he was in those states or gained through his careful immersion in and study into mysticism.

Although Jung rightly believed that we all have two basic forces of good and evil working and warring within us, anyone who is an observer of the human condition can clearly see this fact.

Now that we’ve looked at some unbiblical psychological theories, in Part 2 we’ll search for psychological theories that do mesh with a biblical worldview.
Irony and Spirituality in Matthew 8:23-9:1: A Narrative Analysis

Adelina Alexe

This article was the winning essay in the annual essay contest for doctoral students sponsored by the journal Word and World. It is reprinted with permission from Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry, Summer 2015.

The Story

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing.” And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”

And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.” And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.

And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. (Matthew 8:23–9:1, ESV)

Introduction

Narrative analysis, one of the most recently developed methodologies in biblical interpretation, is a multidimensional model that escapes the linear thinking of a typical exegetical process (background –> text –> application). Instead, the interpreter observes the text's artistry through different lenses. The study of characters, plot, actions, motifs, props, settings, and a host of stylistic features and literary techniques helps uncover the layered meanings buried beneath the surface of the text.

Irony, as a literary device, may not readily appear as a particularly rich medium for spiritual growth, yet it offers deep theological lessons that may otherwise remain unaccessed. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines irony as a “perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance.”[1] Within the sphere of irony as literary device, two types are prevalent in literature: situational or dramatic irony and verbal irony. While verbal irony reflects the intentional conceit of the real meaning of the words,[2] situational or dramatic irony involves “a situation in which there is an incongruity between what is expected and what occurs.”[3] This latter type of irony peppers numerous biblical narratives, inviting the serious reader to dig deep into the complex layers of the story to uncover the message within.

An example of situational irony is Matthew 8:23–9:1, the story of Jesus calming the sea and freeing the Gadarene demoniacs, in which the parallelisms present in the passage make manifest several striking ironies. The two miracles in this narrative have typically been studied separately, as parts of triads, or as parts in a series of miracles. The commonalities between these miracles, however, also warrant an exploration of them together: the passage begins and ends with Jesus getting into the boat, and the motifs of sea, peril, power, and rescue run through the
entire narrative, weaving a remarkable mesh of surprising character parallelisms that saturate the story with dramatic irony.

In order to highlight the irony, I have structured the essay around three parallels between different characters. Within this complex web of parallels, Jesus stands out as a unique character whose very nature exhibits an ironic polarity of power and vulnerability, displayed in resolute action and active submission.

As will be seen throughout the essay, an exegetical practice that includes the search for irony can be of great aid to pastors desiring to bring freshness and depth of message to their congregations.

1. The Disciples and the Demons

The parallelism between the disciples and the demons emerges from the speech patterns. Both sets of characters initiate a dialogue with Jesus, and in response Jesus replies once to each. The dialogues exhibit five common elements:

- peril,
- fear,
- an accusatory spirit,
- loss of control,
- recognition of limited power.

Both the disciples and the demons face peril, which elicits fear. The disciples fear perishing in the storm, and the demons fear being tormented before the proper time. Consequently, they each reach out to Jesus with a request: The disciples ask Jesus for help, and the demons beseech Him to let them enter a swine herd.

Furthermore, both pleas to Jesus couch an accusation. The fact that the disciples wake Jesus up and state the obvious in the situation ("We are perishing," 8:25) implies reproach. How could Jesus be sleeping when they are in such dire circumstances? How could a caring Master remain undisturbed when His followers experience life-threatening distress? As Weber suggests, “[t]he natural reaction of anyone in this situation would be to bail out the water, so the disciples must have been working feverishly” and “were probably angry that Jesus was not contributing to the bailing effort or exercising his power to help save their lives.”[4] The fact that after the miracle they marvel at Jesus’ supernatural power (“What sort of man is this?” 8:27) makes it most likely that their request remained in the realm of what was humanly possible. “To these men of little faith (8:26), Jesus was at least another pair of hands”[5] who could help steer the boat and keep the water out.

The demons’ accusation is more forthright: “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” (8:29). The detail “before the time” suggests that even though the demons are aware of a future doom, fairness requires that Jesus respect a certain time frame. Making no apology for their controlling actions, the demons set the stage for the plea to enter the swine and use an accusatory and subtly manipulative speech in order to ensure a positive response.

Another parallel feature between the disciples and the demons is recognition of their limited power as both sets of characters lose control under the threat of superior powers. The disciples lose control of the boat as they are powerlessly tossed back and forth on the raging sea. In response to their desperate appeal for help, Jesus displays His superior power and controls the natural forces that control the disciples, thus saving them from perishing. He is “sufficiently in control of the situation to be able to deal with the disciples’ fear before taking action on the storm,”[6] and manifests concern not only for their physical safety but also—primarily, in fact—for their spiritual security.

The demons are quite impressively introduced as characters that hold inordinate power in the country of the Gadarenes. Not only do they control two men, but the territory as well. They are “so fierce that no one could pass...
that way" (8:28). Their dominance, however, is suddenly threatened by the presence of Someone they recognize as superior in power. Jesus' mere presence is an ominous prediction of their grim future, which they voice in an attempt to evade it by entering a swine herd. Under the threat of Jesus' superior power, they lose control of both the two men and the territory. Thus, in a remarkable "confrontation between a formidable array of demons" and a "single individual,"[7] Jesus demonstrates a power before which even the demons are bound to bow down.

As noted, the disciples and demons exhibit the common features of peril, fear, loss of control, pleading with Jesus in an accusatory spirit, and recognition of their limited power. These similarities paint the background for the ironic and striking differences between the two collective character sets. The disciples fear because they do not know Jesus' power; the demons quite the contrary: They fear because they know it. While the disciples marvel at "what sort of man" Jesus is (8:27), the demons recognize the authority of the "Son of God" (8:29).

Another irony emerging from the comparison of these two characters is the fact that at the intersection of knowledge and obedience one can take different paths. The disciples follow Jesus through life-threatening storms even while they evidently do not fully grasp His nature and power.[8] The demons demonstrate no confusion. They know precisely with whom they are dealing, and their opposition derives precisely from this knowledge. Apparently, then, knowing God does not guarantee following Him, just as following God does not necessitate knowing Him fully.

Lastly, the ironic dissimilarity between the disciples and the demons is underscored by the sea motif: while the disciples fear perishing in the sea, the demons disappear in the waters. The "great storm" (σεισμὸς μέγας; 8:24) which threatens the disciples gives way to a "great calm" (γαλήνη μεγάλη; 8:26). This calm becomes almost prescient of the pigs' violent death. The very sea that Jesus calms in order to save the disciples swallows the demon-possessed pigs. Under the superior control of Jesus, the sea participates in both rescue and death, in a symbolic prefiguration of the final judgment.

2. The Demons and the Gadarene Population

The demons are connected with the Gadarene population through two common actions described in two words: "begged" and "came out." When confronted with the grim outcome signaled by Jesus' presence, the demons "begged" (παρεκάλουν; 8:31) Jesus to allow them to enter a swine herd. Permission granted, they "came out" (ἐξελθόντες; 8:32) of the men and went into the pigs. The Gadarene population's two recorded actions mirror those of the demons in reverse order: They "came out" (ἐξῆλθεν; 8:34) of the city and "begged" (παρεκάλεσαν; 8:34) Jesus to leave.

Not only do the two characters mirror each other, they are connected by causality. The causality can be illustrated as follows:
Jesus’ sending the demons into the pigs (“Go”; 8:32) works like a boomerang, and Jesus ends up being sent away from that place. While Jesus values people over pigs, the Gadarenes value pigs over people. By turning the value system upside down, the Gadarene people align with the demons and place themselves on the side of Jesus’ enemies. As a result of focusing on what was taken away from them, they fail to understand what was being offered, and they treat the Savior as an enemy. Thus, in yet another ironic twist, the Gadarene population treats Jesus in the same way Jesus has treated the demons: Jesus expels the demons from the men, and the Gadarenes expel Jesus from their country.

The demons’ “last wish” is a remarkably strategic plea that ensures revenge and opposition to Jesus’ ministry even as the demons slide the pigs down the steep banks. The story offers no reason why the pigs would “commit suicide” except under the impulse of the demons. What is clear in the story, however, is the opposition between Jesus and the demons. This is initially expressed in their question: “What have you to do with us?” (8:29), which “is not a question for information, but a formula of repudiation—literally, ‘What to you and to us?’ meaning ‘What do we have in common? We belong to two different worlds.’”[9]

The contrast between Jesus and the demons is further underscored by the demons’ use of power in order to possess versus Jesus’ use of power in order to free. Given this unambiguous opposition, the demons’ request is most likely a well-thought out plan to ensure sustained hostility against Jesus, which is precisely what the Gadarene population demonstrates. As “the unclean go into the unclean,”[10] the Gadarenes identify themselves with the demons and prove to be a people uninterested in being cleansed by Jesus.

3. The Demon-possessed Men and the Gadarene Population

The parallel between the demon-possessed men and the Gadarene population yields some of the most subtle yet incredibly powerful ironies. Both the demon-possessed men and the Gadarene population receive freedom. The demon-possessed men are freed from possession and are given back control over themselves. The Gadarene people are given back control over their territory. The place where no one could pass by for fear of the demons is now freed, and the city inhabitants are able to walk to Jesus.

The way in which the Gadarene population uses its freedom, however, is astoundingly ironic. While the very act of Jesus’ freeing the demon-possessed men has made it possible for the Gadarene population to freely go where Jesus is, they use their freedom to ask him to leave. Their choice reflects their bondage to material possessions, as suggested by the author’s use of the word πᾶς (whole, all, entire) twice in the story: “the whole herd [πᾶσα ἡ ἄγελη] rushed down the bank and drowned” (8:32), and “all the city [πᾶσα ἡ πόλις] came out to meet Jesus” (8:34). These descriptions are key for grasping the Gadarene population’s union with the pigs. The people identify themselves with their material possessions so completely that they become blind to the miracle of liberation. Thus, ironically, while the demon-possessed men are freed to regain control over themselves, the Gadarene population succumbs to deeper bondage to material possessions. As the demon-possessed men, who had succumbed to oppression too deeply to even speak for themselves, are liberated, the Gadarene people, who still have a voice to speak for themselves, use it only to make manifest their deeper acquiescence to material captivity.

Irony and Spirituality in Matthew 8:23-9:1
As mentioned in the introduction, the literary device of irony can sometimes remain undetected unless we search for it with intentional effort. This is largely due to its inherent quality of “surprise.” Yet in our aim of reaching out to people with the gospel message, it is well worth digging deeply into the text for every facet that can benefit the spiritual growth of the community we shepherd. Above and beyond the artistic quality the use of irony offers a story, this literary tool yields deep spiritual lessons. To illustrate this further, I offer, in the conclusion of this essay, a review of the spiritual lessons emerging from Matthew 8:23–9:1.

The Disciples

Two spiritual lessons arise from analyzing the disciples and observing the irony in this passage. First, as underscored by the parallel with the demons, closeness to Jesus is not a warrant of true knowledge of God. Although the disciples were followers of Jesus and thus were in close proximity to Him, their knowledge of His true nature was limited, leading them to possess weak faith. Conversely, an accurate knowledge of God does not guarantee obedience, as the demons who knew Jesus well demonstrate through sustained opposition to His ministry. The story illustrates two alternatives:

1. We may know Jesus fully and oppose Him, or
2. We may know Jesus little and have little faith.

A cross between these two emerges as the most desirable choice:

3. We may know Jesus fully and follow Him in great faith.

No character illustrates this alternative in the story, but it becomes the ideal for the reader.

The second irony is that the disciples’ weakness is made manifest in their very area of expertise. Being fishermen by profession, we can safely assume that the disciples could recognize real danger, and thus we can grasp the extent of the threat as we witness grown men cry out loud for help. If anyone could survive a storm on Galilee, unpredictable as the sea was, our best bet would be on experienced fishermen. Yet their area of proficiency proved insufficient in the moment.

Sometimes it is most difficult for us to appeal to God when we are tried in the areas where we are most confident in our capabilities. Despite how real and great a danger we are facing, we tend to rely on ourselves in what we know how to do best and seek the solution through our own powers. The presence of Jesus is guaranteed to ensure victory and salvation, but only when we know Him to be more capable of saving us than we are ourselves. To seek God on the same terms as we seek help from fellow human beings is an insult to His power and a disgrace to His mercy. As disciples of Christ, our “first priority … must be to focus on the power of Jesus, not on the power of life’s storms that threaten to overcome [us]]” Only then can our fear give way to trust and hope.

The Gadarene Population

The actions of the Gadarene population, particularly as evidenced by contrast with the outcome of the demon-possessed men, illustrate an ironic, sad, and counterintuitive reality: we can search for Jesus in order to ask Him to leave. We can undertake a journey to find Him, at the end of which our plea sends Him away. On what wretched efforts we hang our hope for security!

Knowing that, like the Gadarene population, we are liable to choose the false safety of material possessions over the freeing presence of Jesus, we are urged to ask ourselves with proper gravity: What might we be afraid of losing or unwilling to let go of, should God display His rescuing power in our life or the life of our neighbor? Are we able to value the healing of our brothers and sisters above our material belongings? Are we ready to let God bless us with His presence even at the cost of losing our possessions?
The Demon-possessed Men

Lastly, the outcome of the demon-possessed men reminds us that God is willing and able to free us even when we have succumbed to our oppressor too deeply to even verbalize our want for liberation. Despite giving in to oppressive people or habits, despite losing our self-control almost completely, our inner hope and desire, faint and silent as they may be, can remain fastened on our knowledge of a God who takes initiative and walks up to our place of defeat to create victory.

Jesus

The ultimate irony in these stories is Jesus Himself, whose character exhibits a surprising contrast. He who has the ultimate power through which He frees human beings from natural and supernatural oppression, humbly submits to the villagers’ request to leave. Thus, the great value He places on freedom is manifested not only in freeing the oppressed, but also in respecting the freedom of those who choose oppression. This irony is at the very core of God’s nature. He has unlimited power, but He has chosen to become limited by human beings whom He invested with reason and freedom to choose—even knowing that they will choose wrong.

God is powerful beyond measure yet vulnerable beyond belief. The Son of God, as this passage shows, has authority over the entire realm of our planet: supernatural, natural, and human. Yet when asked to leave, He wordlessly and compliantly gets into the boat and crosses over to His own city (9:1).

As our ultimate example, Jesus teaches us that in our effort to bring the freeing message of salvation to others, respecting their freedom to choose is a prerequisite for successful ministry, even when in the moment it more resembles failure. This is as true as it is ironic, and it is as counterintuitive as the vulnerability of Jesus’ earthly ministry is to the human mind.

Conclusion

The growth path that brings us ever closer to Jesus is often situated at the crossroad between the stories of the Bible characters and our personal experience. Situational irony, as we have seen in our exploration of Matthew 8:23–9:1, is a tool that allows us to access spiritual lessons of eternal consequence. In the pursuit of truth, it would profit pastors to include the use of irony in their hermeneutical toolbox, as ultimately the recovery of precious lessons with which to nourish searching souls is at the very heart of pastoral ministry.

Notes:


[12] Commentators elucidate that sudden and violent storms are not unusual on the Sea of Galilee. Due to its relatively low location and being surrounded by mountain ranges, unpredictable storms were common and were strong enough to produce waves up to seven feet. These waves could easily capsize a fishing boat without sails, of the sort that Jesus likely used in the account of Matthew 8:23-9:1. See Weber, *Matthew*, 119 and Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 351.