

The Struggle of Faith

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[0 : 0 0] So it is really great to be with you all. I feel like today has already been a day of reunion and homecoming for me and Marianne. We've said it before, but Advent for us really does feel like something of a home church.

And it's so great to be back here with you all this evening. We're currently serving at Church of the Holy Cross, which is in Crozet, Virginia, just to the west of Charlottesville. And we've been at that work for the last 18 months.

And thank you for your prayers and support of our mission there in Crozet. Today, I can report to you things are going well. We really sense and feel the Lord's blessing. We're going to be looking at this gospel reading that Dan just read for us.

So if you have a Bible, please turn there. Before we do that, let's pray together. Father, we pray that you would help us to see the compassion and power of your son, Jesus Christ, especially as he's revealed to us in this passage we just read from Mark, and that you would help us, Lord, in our unbelief.

Strengthen our faith, we pray, through Christ our Lord. Amen. In 2003, I boarded a plane from New York to Athens, Greece for a school trip.

[1 : 1 3] We were going to spend about a month there. And it was an overnight flight. We took off, and we didn't know it, but we took off right into a thunderstorm. And about 10 seconds into the flight, the plane was shaking violently.

And to make matters worse, there was a loud boom and a big flash of light, and the power went off on the plane. For what seemed like an eternity, but it was actually only a few seconds, the plane was struck by lightning.

This, by the way, was the pinnacle of my prayer life, I think. I thought for sure that plane was going to drop right out of the sky. But everything was okay. Smooth flight for the next eight hours.

But while the plane settled down, I certainly was not settled down. It was a pretty tense next rest of the flight for me. I was completely unprepared for what happened.

And since that time, every time I've gotten on a plane, I've always appreciated it when the pilot extends the just very basic courtesy of letting us know if there's going to be turbulence. Just let me know if we're going to hit rough air.

[2 : 1 6] I can kind of prepare for it, and it'll be much easier to handle. In the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus consistently prepares his disciples.

He prepares his followers for turbulence. The Christian life is a life of faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith is formed through what is so often a struggle, a struggle in our journey with Jesus.

Because Christian faith is constantly contested and challenged. For some of us, it's challenged at an intellectual level. For others, it's just in a personal life experience level.

Flannery O'Connor, the great Catholic writer from the last century, she wrote very honestly and openly about her own struggles with faith. She felt this constant tension in her life between belief and unbelief.

And she said that unbelief was sort of the air that she breathed. And she captured, I think, really well in her writings sort of the malaise of modernity. And she writes this, quote, It's hard to believe always, and she's here talking about Christian faith.

[3 : 25] It's hard to believe always, but more so in the world we live in now. There are some of us who have to pay for our faith every step of the way.

In this episode we just read in our gospel lesson, we see the struggle of faith. We see how often we have to pay for it every step of the way on our journey with Jesus.

And actually, you see, I think, a progression of faith in what we just read. First, you see failing faith, a faith that seems to fail.

It's like it's a flame that's just been extinguished. But second, with the Father, we see a doubting faith. This is a frail faith that's like a flickering light that wants to become a flame.

And finally, we get an idea of what praying faith looks like. This is the kind of faith Jesus calls us to, a strong burning flame in the darkness.

[4 : 23] So I want to spend some time just even looking at this passage, the struggle of faith under these three headings, failing faith, doubting faith, and praying faith. A few years ago, as some of you know, Marianne and I moved to South Alabama with the hopes of planting a church out of another church.

And we were so excited to venture out on this new journey. We felt sure and confident that this is what the Lord had for us. And we had all of our plans in order. We knew exactly how all of this was going to unfold for us.

But almost as soon as we got there, we were faced with all sorts of challenges we didn't anticipate. We were faced with lots of difficulty, turbulence. And ultimately, for a number of reasons, it just didn't work out.

It was very disappointing to experience that sort of failure. It felt like for us, we moved from an experience of flourishing to an experience of failing. And it raised all sorts of questions.

Why did this happen? Why do we have to go through this? Many of us know what it's like to move out confidently into something new with all sorts of ideas about how this is going to succeed and work out.

[5 : 29] Can't even imagine how it wouldn't. But we know what it's like to do that and to quickly realize, maybe it's our inadequacy, quickly realize the difficulty of whatever it is we're setting out to do and experience some sort of failure.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus, right before what Dan read, has been up on the mountain, the Mount of Transfiguration, with his inner circle, with his three closest disciples, where he was gloriously transfigured in their presence.

It was literally a mountaintop experience. They got to see Jesus in all of his radiant glory. But now, as the three disciples and Jesus are coming off the mountain, it's a completely different situation.

On the mountain, off the mountain. The Transfiguration actually echoes a time in the Old Testament when Moses and his companions went up on another mountain and experienced God's glorious presence.

And if you know the story in Exodus, Moses, when he comes down off the mountain, he finds a loud, raucous situation. He finds a situation of faithlessness. Faith has failed.

[6 : 33] This was tremendously discouraging and frustrating for Moses. I'm sure he himself felt a sense of failure and responsibility for what happened then. And now Jesus, who, by the way, on the mountain is identified as a new and greater Moses, he comes down from the mountain to find another noisy, raucous situation, one that's characterized by unbelief.

When Moses was gone for a bit, the people of Israel began to lose their faith. And in Jesus' absence, something similar is happening here in Mark 9, 14 and following. And we learn what all the fuss is about.

Jesus sees the remaining nine disciples arguing with the scribes. He says, what are you arguing about? But before they can answer the question, a man interrupts and tells us what's going on. Verses 17 and 18.

The man says, Jesus, your disciples are not able to cast out the spirit from my son. Now, it's likely, too, that the scribes were kind of rubbing it in on the disciples because they weren't able to do exactly what Jesus commissioned them to do, to bring healing and restoration to the sick, just a couple chapters before.

So the disciples, they have failed in this. And now, in a way, are kind of being shamed by the scribes. And Jesus, he kind of piles on a bit with an added critique.

[7 : 46] Verse 19. Oh, faithless generation, responding here to the disciples, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Jesus is identifying the root of this problem here.

Faith has failed. In Jesus' absence, he calls his followers to believe, to trust him, to rely on his power, on his commission. And yet, in his absence, the disciples, who, by the way, at this point were experiencing great success, they seem to fail.

Now, the situation, I think, is a bit analogous for us, for those of us who are seeking to follow Christ. Though Jesus is present with us by his spirit, we're still waiting on him to come back. We're living, in a way, with his absence.

And it's in his absence he calls us to this life of deep faith. But I want to pause here and consider this experience of failure of the disciples. Why does this happen? Why does failure happen? What do we do with our failure, especially our failure when we're seeking to follow Jesus?

Or any failure as Christians? Charles Spurgeon, he was a great Baptist preacher in the 19th century. And he preached a wonderful sermon on this passage. I could have just read his sermon.

[8 : 57] He says this, reflecting on what's happening here. And he starts to address pastors. But I think this is applicable for everyone. He says, And perhaps the disciples here are working out of their own sense of qualifications, rather than relying on the divine strength by faith.

No matter training, background, experiencing, strategy, it can all be perfect. Following Christ, we are called to rely on this divine strength that Christ gives us. You think about it.

Why do sometimes parents let their hard-headed kids fail? Not to be cruel. Not just to make a point. Sometimes it's so that our kids will know to ask for help.

It's a tender thing to see a three-year-old struggle to do something and get upset and frustrated, refuse help and assistance, and then finally come and say, Daddy, can you help me with this?

I need help. The good news is that Jesus is extremely patient with his disciples. He's extremely patient with those of us who have experienced failure of any kind.

[10 : 36] Those of us who have to come crawling back again and again and asking for help. This is his interaction with the disciples, as we'll see. But we're about to meet someone who does ask Jesus for help in a situation where faith is shaken.

Again, it's the second thing I want us to see, doubting faith. We've seen the struggle of faith when faith fails. But let's look at when faith doubts. The father of this boy emerges, I think, as an example of the sort of faith that Jesus responds to.

Jesus takes charge here in this situation. He says in verse 20, Bring the boy to me. And then the father starts to tell Jesus about the long history of this boy's struggle. This, by the way, is demon possession.

And it's been this way since childhood. And imagine the father's pain to see his child suffer in such a way. With these seizures and being mute and becoming stiff as a board and throwing himself to the ground.

Imagine the tragedy this must have been for his family. To see this happen and to feel so powerless to do anything about it. The disciples' struggle with faith is related to this experience of failure.

[11 : 41] But this dad's struggle with faith as he approaches the disciples and Jesus is related to an experience of suffering. Personal tragedy. And as we'll see, he wants to believe.

He wants to believe that someone can help. But he is struggling to believe that anyone can help him. And can you fault him in this situation? Whether it's some personal or professional failure or perhaps experience with tragedy or suffering.

Ourselves or with a loved one. One way that we can respond to these situations spiritually is to just simply doubt and be skeptical. Doubt God's power. Doubt God's goodness. Or just simply doubt God altogether.

But what happens here with the father is really remarkable as this unfolds. Because what's happening is that the dad is discovering the true focus of faith.

As he engages and encounters Jesus. Verse 22. He says, but if you can do anything. It's like we're at the end of our rope, Jesus. We've tried all the options. If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.

[12 : 46] And Jesus responds perhaps sharply, but I think tenderly in verse 23. When he says, if you can, all things are possible. All things are possible for the one who believes.

Jesus is saying, look, absolutely. I can do something about this situation. This is what the Messiah has come to do in bringing salvation to the world. And anyone with just a drop of faith who comes to me.

Jesus is saying, look, you've got my help. You've got my compassion. The father doesn't just respond. Notice he cries out. He says, I believe, but then it's almost like he catches his help.

It's like, but help my unbelief. I believe, help my unbelief. Do you hear his struggle of faith in coming to Jesus? He's saying, I believe on one level, yes, but help those parts of me that persistently just aren't there yet.

His faith may be wavering and doubting and struggling, but he's brought his faith to the right person, Jesus Christ. Then what happens? What does Jesus do?

[13 : 49] Jesus responds to this wavering, struggling, failing faith. Jesus rebukes the spirit and the child. In verse 25, the demon convulses the boy, comes out of him and leaves him.

It's interesting. It says as a corpse. And the folks around thought he was dead. Wait, has Jesus here made things actually worse? But then as the story progresses, though it looks like he's dead, having driven out the demons, Jesus now resurrects the boy.

Verse 27. Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up and he arose. Now note here the resurrection language. Jesus took him by the hand, raised him up, and he arose.

This is a resurrection scene in the gospel. And it's all a preview for a greater deliverance, a greater miracle, a greater resurrection. Jesus, especially we see this in Mark's gospel, he comes to do battle with the demons.

He comes to take evil head on and defeat it. And Jesus will allow himself to be overrun by evil when he suffers on the cross. It's as though Jesus draws out all the evil that's been loosed in the world onto himself.

[15 : 00] And on the cross in Mark 15, he becomes mute, refusing to speak in his moment of suffering. It's as though Jesus will trade places with this boy. And he trades places with all of us.

Why? To deliver us. And that's not all. Just like the boy who was left for dead for a moment when it seemed evil had won a great victory against him. Jesus will be raised from the dead also, delivering a final blow to evil.

The father has come to the right person with his doubting, struggling faith. The one who brings not just some temporary relief from suffering, but one who will suffer himself. And one through his suffering will defeat it as he is raised from the dead.

And here I think the father's doubting faith is an entry point for all of us. This father gives us a prayer. I believe, but help my unbelief.

Jesus invites our struggling, doubting, frail faith. Frail faith, doubting faith is Christian faith. You don't have to have all your questions answered before you follow Jesus.

[16 : 04] Christian faith is much more like knowing a person than knowing the answers for a test. And in fact, Christianity is built on the reality of a person who lived, died, and rose again and ascended into heaven.

And this person, Jesus, invites us to follow him. And this involves the risk and the struggle of faith. Getting to know anyone involves faith.

It involves risk. You want to get to know someone? You've got to take a risk. You've got to trust. Leslie Newbigin, the great missionary from the last century, he talks about this. And he says, quote, personal knowledge is impossible without risk.

It cannot begin without an act of trust. In a greater knowing of someone, it comes by greater trusting. And so it is with our faith in Christ. We come to Christ much like the father.

I believe, but help me in my unbelief. I want to believe more so that I can know and understand more. St. Augustine said that we don't understand and then believe.

[17 : 07] He says, actually, it works the other way around. We believe. We have this initial trust so that we can know, so that we can understand. And this is, I think, what's happening here with the father.

He's coming to Jesus with this frail, doubting faith, even when he doesn't fully understand. But he's hoping that Jesus can help him in this situation and help him in his unbelief. Jesus responds to doubting faith.

Frail faith, doubting faith, it's true Christian faith. But it's possible to be in a place where we're not always in failing faith. We're not always in existential crisis of doubt.

And Jesus points us in the direction to where our faith can be strengthened proactively, where it can be nurtured and sustained. How? How? Jesus says prayer. Now, it's interesting here.

Jesus doesn't give us a technique for prayer. He doesn't tell us what type of prayer that we should pray, whether this is contemplative prayer, liturgical prayer, extemporaneous prayer. Jesus just gets us set on prayer.

[18 : 04] Prayer is the way that faith is strengthened. So Jesus goes back home and his disciples, they are amazed when they see what Jesus is able to do with the boy. And they were wondering, why couldn't we cast him out, Jesus?

What went wrong? And notice the disciples are, they're wanting to learn. They're wanting to learn from Jesus. And Jesus says in verse 29, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.

On the one hand, earlier Jesus said, look, the problem is faithlessness. There was a faith breakdown. But on the other hand here, he's calling them to prayer. You need prayer.

We need prayer. St. Augustine, once again, he captures the relationship between faith and prayer. He says, where faith fails, prayer perishes. For who prays for that in which he does not believe?

So that in order that we may pray, let us believe. And let us pray that this same faith by which we pray may not falter. In other words, prayer fuels faith and faith fuels prayer.

[19 : 04] There's a dynamic relationship between these two. And a great prayer to consistently and constantly pray is, Lord, I believe, but help, help my unbelief.

Some of us, when we come to faith in Christ or early on in our Christian journey, we have lots of early successes. Mountaintop experiences. Sense of God's presence and goodness.

All seems right. Maybe experience what we might call victory in our lives. Our faith seems alive. It all seems so real and true and good and genuine.

But many of us know the longer we go, the longer we go on this journey with Jesus, the Christian life gets harder in many ways. I love watching our kids play.

It's so innocent and joyful. I love to watch our imaginations run wild. Not a care in the world to just watch kids play. And some of my more morose moments, I watch them and I think, this is going to get a lot harder for them the older they get.

[20 : 07] Life is going to get more difficult. And it's easy for all of us, I think, to look back on earlier periods of our life and think, oh, the good old days when we didn't have many cares. For me, I look back to college when my biggest care was, what are we going to do this weekend?

Or maybe trying to cram for a test. But life gets harder. And the Christian faith gets more difficult and more complex. And Jesus prepares his disciples for this life of faith.

A life of faith that can be a struggle. The disciples here have a budding, partial, struggling faith. And Jesus is saying to them and he's saying to us, look, it's prayer where the struggle of faith begins to be resolved.

Things get increasingly difficult for Jesus too. And we find Jesus in the gospel strategically withdrawing and intentionally giving himself to prayer. Think about it.

How is Jesus' mission and faith sustained? In the gospels, we see Jesus praying. In the next chapter in Mark, or later on in Mark, we see Jesus praying in agony, knowing what's coming for him at the crucifixion.

[21 : 20] He prays, my soul is very sorrowful even to death, Abba Father, but all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Then he says, yet not what I will, but your will be done.

Jesus meets us in our failures. In our failures of faith. Jesus welcomes our frail, struggling, doubting faith.

But he calls us to the hard, but yet deeply rewarding and joyful path of prayer that builds faith over time. It's like every time we enter into prayer, whatever kind of prayer it is, a prayer that's focused on Jesus, honest prayer.

It's like we're laying down another brick in a fortress of faith. Jesus prepares his disciples. He prepares us for turbulence.

He says, look, don't be surprised when things get bumpy. Don't be surprised when you don't understand things. That's okay. Don't be surprised when there are doubts, when there are failures, when your faith is tested.

[22 : 24] But here's what you should do in those moments, especially. You should watch and pray and your faith will grow. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen.