

Faith that Moves Mountains

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 0 0] Well, faith means to trust or believe. It's the same thing. In fact, in the New Testament, in the original language, it's just one word.

And we exercise this action of faith or trust every day. I mean, when you drive on the road, you trust the other drivers not to crash into you. That's an exercise of faith.

And some time ago, our girls, here's another example, wanted to make Michelle and me dinner. And we had to eat whatever they made. And let me tell you, this was an exercise in faith, trust.

Because I'm pretty sure I heard one of them drop some of the food on the floor. And then giggle and say, the other one say, just put it back on the plate. And the other one added, put it on daddy's plate.

Now, for the record, they did a great job. But Christian faith is about trust or faith in God. And it's not blind faith. There's an old kind of joke where a teacher asked a Sunday school child what faith was.

[1 : 0 3] And they replied, faith is believing in something that is not real. And that's what people think Christian faith is sometimes. Just blind faith in something that's not real. But Christian faith is faith or trust based on evidence for someone who is very real.

But the word faith does mean to trust or to believe. And as we come to the next event in Matthew's book, there's this underlying issue of faith.

We'll see. And so there's a presenting issue of a boy who has a demon in him. But Matthew really takes our attention to the issue of faith.

In fact, I had someone come up to me this morning and say, I was so looking forward to seeing what you were going to say about demons and this, that, the other. And I went, oops. Because Matthew takes us to the issue of faith.

That's the underlying one. And we get a glimpse of it in verse 17 where he accuses the generation of being unbelieving or not having faith. Or verse 20 where he says to the disciples, you have little faith.

[2 : 0 3] And again, verse 20 with that extraordinary promise that if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can do the impossible, like move mountains. And it's an extraordinary promise, especially because it still seems like there are things that are impossible for us to do.

Like Carlton winning the premiership. It seems like an impossibility. Or more seriously, a loved one being healed of a disease. And so how does that promise work?

Well, before we get to all that, let me just very quickly recap the story so far. In chapter 16, we heard Peter declare that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ. And that phrase or that title, Christ the Messiah, that means king.

God's chosen king that all Israel had been waiting for to bring in God's kingdom. But then Jesus says in chapter 16, verse 21, that he must suffer and die as the king.

And if you remember Peter's reaction in 16, 22, the next verse, he says, never, Lord. No way, Jose. It can't be true. As I said last week, the disciples could not comprehend why Jesus, the king, had to then suffer and die.

[3 : 17] It did not fit with their expectations of what the king ought to do or rather when the king ought to do it. He said they expected from the Old Testament that the king would judge the nations now.

They expected that the king would end physical suffering on earth for God's people now. Not suffer himself, not be killed by the nations.

And so as we saw last week in chapter 17, the beginning, Jesus takes the leaders of the disciples, Peter, James and John, up a mountain to witness his true glory as the king.

So that they might know that Jesus is the real deal. And we heard God tell them in chapter 17, verse 5, to listen to Jesus, therefore, particularly when it comes to the fact that he must suffer and die for them.

Of course, to listen and accept what someone says requires faith. So, for example, if I said, look, listen to me, we got a phone call from the police. They say that someone's put a bomb in this building.

[4 : 22] We need to vacate now. Well, it's not true, just for the record. But if I had said that, for you to listen to me and accept it, you've got to trust me, don't you? It requires faith. So, too, for the disciples, for them to truly listen to Jesus and accept what he says about his path to the cross, they must trust him.

And it's this need for faith that Matthew seems to highlight for us in the very next scene. There's a connection, you see, where Jesus and the three disciples return from the mountain and they meet a desperate dad and a suffering son.

So at point one in your outlines and verse 14 in your Bibles. Have a look there. When they came to the crowd, that is, Jesus and the three disciples from the mountain, when they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him.

Lord, have mercy on my son, he said. He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.

It seems that while Jesus and the three disciples were up the mountain, a dad had come to the other nine disciples at the bottom of the mountain with his son to be healed.

[5 : 37] And do you notice the sense of desperation of the dad? At first, he doesn't give up after the disciples fail, but he approaches Jesus for another go.

Second, he kneels before Jesus. And third, he actually commands Jesus, show mercy. It's actually a command. Like a parent desperate for their child to be healed and so says to the doctor, doctor, save my child.

It's a scene of desperation. But we can understand it, can't we? Because the son's suffering is great. I mean, verse 15, we read that he has seizures that often throw him into the fire to burn him or the water to drown him.

And in verse 18, we learn that this is because the boy is possessed by a demon. Here is an example of suffering caused by spiritual evil. I'm not going to delve into the whole topic.

I should mention, by the way, that if we are Christian, we have God's spirit in us. So it's impossible for us to be possessed by demons. We don't need to worry about that. But I wonder whether here we see in miniature what is happening in the world around us.

[6 : 44] That is, I suspect it's a reminder that all suffering in our world is caused by spiritual evil. Not demons, but sin. Sin has entered our world and brought with it disease and disaster and death.

And for this father, his son's suffering is awful, isn't it? And so it's understandable that he's desperate for healing. I mean, last Sunday, I was talking with someone from our church who told me that in the space of three days, he found out that both his sister and brother had been diagnosed with cancer.

That's serious. It's awful suffering, isn't it? And understandably, he's desperate for their healing. So I was praying with him last week. And here in Matthew 17, this scene of suffering and desperation at the bottom of the mountain, it's such a contrast to the glory the disciples saw at the top of the mountain.

But you see, this is why Jesus has come. Jesus has come to deal with suffering down here to bring people to glory up there, so to speak. How?

Well, by paying for our sin at the cross. Defeating the devil at the cross and so opening a way to glory. There will be no more suffering, no more disease, death or disaster.

[8 : 02] This is what Jesus has come to do. To free us from that. To bring us to heaven. The new world. And he gives us a glimpse of this by healing the boy.

Do you see verse 18? Then Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of the boy and he was healed at that moment. Jesus has power to save. And what he does here for the boy, I think, is again a small picture of what he would do for us at the cross.

For as I said, by his death, Jesus pays for our sins so that we can be forgiven. He saves us from an eternity of suffering in hell because we've all rejected God. And instead will bring us into an eternity of glory in heaven.

Where there is, as I said, no more suffering. And he gives us a glimpse of it here by showing mercy and healing the boy that very moment. A picture of what he does for us who trust in him.

But the thing is, the disciples should have been able to do this too. Because back in chapter 10 on the next slide, this is what we read from chapter 10 verse 1. Jesus called his 12 disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

[9 : 14] And yet, verse 16, the father says, I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. I wonder what you'd expect Jesus to say after verse 16.

Imagine if you haven't read the passage or heard it read before. And the father says to Jesus, look, I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. What do you expect Jesus to say next?

Would you expect him to say, look, I'm very sorry about this, sir. I'll be trading in my disciples for some better ones now. Or more likely, we'd expect Jesus to do what he does in verse 18 and heal the boy straight away.

In fact, you could actually go in your Bibles from verse 16 to verse 18, like I did, and you wouldn't skip a beat. It'd make perfect sense. But Jesus doesn't do that.

And when he does something unexpected, we need to ask why. So we're at point two in your outlines and verse 17 in your Bibles. Jesus responds by saying, oh, unbelieving and perverse generation.

[10 : 14] Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me. As I said, it's not what you'd expect Jesus to say.

So why does he? Well, I think it's to highlight the crowd's need for faith. See, in a moment, Jesus will say that the nine disciples could not heal the boy because they did not have faith at that moment.

And so Jesus takes that moment of the disciples' unbelief and he applies it to the whole generation of Israel. He calls them an unbelieving generation.

Why? Well, because their faith is fickle. Sure, they believe that Jesus can heal and do miracles. In fact, we've even got an ancient historian called Josephus who admits that.

I've got the book on my bookshelf. But they do not believe that Jesus is therefore the king, the Christ, the Messiah. Instead, they seem to treat Jesus like a vending machine that dispenses miracles and works for them.

[11 : 21] Rather than God's king who ought to be served and obeyed by them, you see. What's more, Jesus knows that he has come to pay for sin and to save us and bring us to heaven.

But he also knows that this is only for those who have faith in him, who believe in him as the king. By the way, this is the only reason Jesus has not yet returned to end all suffering.

Because he's giving people more time to believe in him so that they don't miss out. And yet, despite all this generation has seen, with their own eyes, they still do not believe that Jesus is the king.

And it seems to have hurt Jesus, doesn't it? I mean, he seems like he's despairing. Twice he despaired, saying, how long must I put up with you? How long is it going to take?

And to have all the evidence that Jesus is the king before your very eyes, and yet not believe the truth? And not live in light of the truth?

[12 : 33] Well, it means your actions and your words are denying the truth. Or to put it even more starkly, it means your words and actions are perverting the truth.

That's why he calls them perverse. Like ancient Israel, who saw God's signs and wonders, yet still did not believe our trust in God, Moses called them, in our first reading, a crooked and perverse generation.

It may sound harsh, but it's true. And its harshness here in Matthew was to be a wake-up call for the disciples, who needed to have ongoing faith in him.

And it's this matter of faith that Matthew now focuses on, because Matthew only really records the words we read in verse 20. So point 3, verse 19, we'll start.

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, why couldn't we drive this demon out? He replied, because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will move.

[13 : 40] Nothing will be impossible for you. And so the scenes change, they're by themselves, and the disciples asked Jesus privately why they could not heal the boy. And Jesus' answer?

Because of their little faith. And by little faith, Jesus really means no faith. He means doubt, unbelief.

How do I know? Well, because Jesus says that faith as small as a mustard seed can do anything. And so their faith must have been even smaller than that if they couldn't heal the boy.

But the thing is, mustard seeds are very small, as we saw. In fact, I had one to show you as well, but I lost it. And so I had to back up on the next slide. Here is a picture.

Can you see it? Someone at the 9 o'clock service said, we can't see it, it's too small. That's exactly the point. Mustard seeds are very small.

[14 : 41] And so if the disciples' little faith was smaller than that, well, it's pretty much non-existent, isn't it? That's Jesus' point. Little faith smaller than a mustard seed really is no faith at all.

It's doubt or unbelief. It's like what happened to Peter when he was walking on the water. So on the next slide, we read this from Matthew chapter 14. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus.

But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, Lord, save me. Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. You of, same phrase, little faith.

He said, why did you doubt? See, same phrase, little faith. And Jesus equates it with doubt or unbelief. I saw an amusing cartoon about Peter faith and walking on the water on the next slide.

It says, Peter's faith is much stronger in winter. The water's frozen. But the point here is that for Jesus' little faith, little faith means no faith at all.

[15 : 46] It's a moment of doubt or unbelief. Whereas mustard seed faith is real faith. And so when those nine disciples tried to heal the boy, in that moment, they did not believe, they did not trust that God would drive out the demon, even though they'd been given authority and assurance they could.

Which is a bit different for us, by the way. Now, whether it was because Jesus and the three leaders were up the mountain and not there, and so they kind of felt fearful without their leaders and doubted instead of trusting God, or whether it was because they trusted in themselves and their recent success rather than trusting in God.

It's hard to know. But either way, they did not trust God. Instead, they had no faith in that moment. And so Jesus' point is, it's not about how much faith we have.

It's about having faith. If faith as small as a mustard seed is enough to move mountains, then it's not about the amount of faith. It's about the existence of faith.

And this is something that some church leaders have misunderstood. In fact, someone told me just last Friday that they were with a non-Christian friend at Hillsong Church here in Melbourne, I think it was, and they heard the lead pastor say, if you are not healed, you don't have enough faith.

[17 : 03] Now, if that's true, if he really said that, then it's actually a horrible thing to say. That it's your fault. Because you don't have enough faith. And what's more, it's actually a perversion of the truth.

I should say, you have to be very careful with Hillsong, because it's such a mixture of truth and lies. But it's not what Jesus is talking about here.

Because mustard seed faith is small, but real. And so it's not about the amount. It's about having faith, genuine faith.

And that's what the disciples were to have in Jesus, especially when it came to listening and accepting the fact that he had to suffer and die. As the king. This is what those nine disciples were to have when it came to using the authority Jesus gave them.

And this is what we are all to have when it comes to Jesus saving us. We have faith, trust, belief that he really is the king who came to die for us, to pay for our sins.

[18 : 03] So that he could save us from an eternity of judgment in hell for ignoring him and bring us to an eternity of glory in heaven. So the first question for us this morning is, do you have faith in Jesus?

Do you believe that he is the king? Have you handed over the steering wheel of life to him such that he directs how you live now? I mean, that's what kings do.

They direct people, their subjects. And do you trust that his death means that your eternity is safe, secure, certain, because he's paid for your sins, done and dusted?

Do you have faith in Jesus? And for us who have, then the second question is, do we continue to trust in him as our king? Even in this world of suffering, because there are always temptations to doubt, especially when suffering comes.

And if we do, though, continue to trust in him, to have faith, then yes, nothing will be impossible for us. But I suspect there's a third question, and that is, what does that look like?

[19 : 17] How does our faith actually move mountains? How does mustard seed faith mean nothing will be impossible for us? How does it work? Which is our final point.

Well, I think we need to realize two things. First, we need to remember that it's not our faith that actually moves the mountain. As though our faith is like the force in Star Wars, and we kind of just close our eyes like Yoda, put out our hand and move the mountain.

It's not like that. Rather, it's the object of our faith, the person our faith is in, God, who moves the mountain, who does the work. Now, I realize it's all a bit conceptual and it's hard to understand.

So let me see if I can make it a bit more visual with an experiment of sorts. So I need a volunteer. I'm just wondering if I can grab a volunteer. Glenn, thanks for raising your hand.

Now, I'm going to show you how Glenn's faith is going to lift him off the ground. You ready? Okay. All right.

[20 : 21] Just come here, Glenn. All right. Do you believe, have faith that this chair will hold you off the ground?

Absolutely. All right. Well, put your faith into practice. I actually meant sit on it, but you can stand on it. I can stand on it. You can sit on it.

And then I was going to say, you've got to lift your feet off so we know it's not the chair. You're not helping the chair. Anyway. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. Now, thanks, Glenn.

Now, we all know it wasn't his faith that held him off the ground, was it? It was what his faith was in that held him off the ground, the object of his faith.

And it's the same here. In fact, this is the way Jesus has been talking all through Matthew's gospel. It's not just a one-off thing in this passage. So have a look on the next slide at Matthew chapter 9.

[21 : 18] He says to a lady who was, take heart, daughter. He said, your faith has healed you. And the woman was healed at that moment. But she and Jesus, and we all know it wasn't her faith that healed her.

It was who her faith was in, Jesus, that healed her. And so even though Jesus says your faith has healed you, he doesn't mean it's like the force, as I said in Star Wars.

He means the object, the person of our faith has healed her. It's the same with us here. Our mustard seed faith can do the impossible only because it is in God who does the impossible.

Our faith can move mountains only because our faith is in God who does the moving for us. For God is God. Only he can do the impossible.

That's the first thing we need to remember. The second thing we need to remember is that if God can do the impossible because he is God, then for the same reason, because he is God, he can choose what impossible things to do and when to do them.

[22 : 27] So being God not only means he can do the impossible, it also means that he has the sovereign right to choose which things and when he'll do them.

Which prayers he will answer and how he will answer them. Of course, God will always work for our long-term good, especially to make us like Christ.

And he proves that he works for our good because he gave up his only son for our good. As Paul says in Romans 8, that famous verse on the next slide, he always works for the good of those who love him.

What's more, he's even given us some idea in the Bible of which impossible things he tends to do and which he tends not to do. So, for example, we might pray and ask God to do the impossible thing of us winning the lottery.

That'd be nice. And yet the Bible tells us that God works to help us trust in him, not in money. And for most of us, winning the lottery will help us trust in money and not God.

[23 : 29] Even if we convince ourselves, oh, we'll give lots away to God's stuff. It still doesn't work like that. And so we can expect him to choose not to answer that prayer and do that particular impossible thing.

He could, but he's unlikely to, given what we read in the Bible. On the other hand, if we ask God to do the impossible, like help Christians persevere in faith amidst suffering, then we can expect him to do this because the Bible tells us that this is the sorts of things he does.

I remember as a teenager, a long time ago now, a pastor from South Africa spoke at a conference I was at. And he told us about what happened in his church back in Cape Town. And he said that it was a Sunday service and a gunman burst into the church and shot open fire on the congregation, killing many of its members.

And he said that a TV cameras and crew turned up and it interviewed one of the members who was still grieving, still crying because her daughter had been killed. I think it was.

And the reporter said to this lady, is there anything you want to say to your attackers? And the church member said, yes, I want to say I forgive you.

[24 : 42] And that's not a normal human response, is it? It's actually an impossible human reaction without God. But you see, this is a type of impossible things God does.

He enables his people to persevere in suffering and even uses that evil for good, to grow us like Christ. A Christ who himself said, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

Of course, the Bible also tells us that nothing is impossible for God and that we are to pray for everything that concerns us. And so I take it we are to have faith in God that he can do impossible things like healing cancer or other diseases and so on.

And in fact, he has answered some prayers like that at our church. Many people have told me. Well, one example just last week, someone told me how they prayed and they had some tumors and they shrunk really small so the doctor could do the surgery much more easily.

And they came out much better on the other end. And doctor could not explain why the tumors shrunk. He said, I knew why. Other people have told me that they've been healed of cancer when the doctors did not expect it.

[25 : 57] But the thing is, mustard seed faith will not only trust God to do the impossible, like heal us. He will also trust God if he chooses not to.

We can't have our cake and eat it both ways. Faith trusts God in both situations. And so let me finish with one last story of a guy I know.

He was in my Bible study group at university and he became a minister out at SAIL, far eastern Victoria. He was actually in Jeff Hall's year at Bible College. And he was diagnosed with cancer just over a year ago.

And he died end of November or early December last year. He left behind a wife and four young children. Now he and his wife have faith in God to do the impossible.

And so they prayed that God might heal him. But their faith in God to do the impossible also meant they trusted God enough to let him choose how to answer their prayer.

[26 : 56] After all, he is God. And so at the funeral, I heard his wife say, Many have asked me why he died and I just don't know. I don't know why, but God does. And then she added, God is faithful.

He has been to us and will continue to be. So we celebrate the blessed assurance that my husband is now at home with his heavenly father. Now that's real mustard seed faith, isn't it?

Let's pray that we would have the same. Let's pray. Our gracious father, we thank you for this reminder today that Christ came into the world to save us from sin.

And to bring us into your family, to restore us to yourself as you restored the boy. Father, we thank you also for this reminder that it's not about how much faith we have, but that we have it.

And so far, we pray that you would help us to keep trusting in you. Help us to pray for the impossible, but to trust you with whatever answer you give us.

[27 : 59] And we pray for those who are suffering like the people I've mentioned today. Father, we pray that if it's your will, that you would grant them healing. But above all, keep them trusting in your son no matter what.

For we know that glory awaits that will far outweigh all this suffering. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.