

All Things Can Be Done

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[0 : 00] Be to our God forever and ever, be to our God forever and ever, be to our God forever and ever, amen.

Please take a seat. I came up too early, you almost got me singing instead of preaching. People sometimes tell me that I'm lucky to be a Christian.

Lucky not because of the good things that Christianity does for me or brings me, but lucky because I'm able to be a Christian. Lucky because I'm able to believe the things that I believe. I'm so happy for you, they say.

Some people can believe those things. Some people, maybe they were born with the ability to have faith or brought up with it, but I just can't. I wonder if you've got friends who say those kind of things to you. Faith is something you either have or you don't have.

And if you don't have it, there's no point in being asked to believe. If you asked them what it would take to have faith, well, some of them, like my friends, would probably tell you that it would take a miracle.

[1 : 19] If God would just give me some evidence, supply me with a miracle of some kind, well, that would be enough for me to have faith. If only God would give me a clear sign, says Woody Allen, preferably a large deposit in a Swiss bank account.

Only God would give me evidence. Well, the answer to that, of course, is that God has given us evidence. He has revealed himself and proven himself.

If we'd been born 2,000 years ago and gone to Palestine and been in the right place at the right time, we would have seen God's power at work. We would have seen God's son healing and casting out demons and preaching with great power.

We would have seen him feeding 5,000 people at one time. And as we saw last week, if we'd been in the right place at the right time, we would have seen him irradiated, glowing white, speaking to Elijah and Moses on the top of a mountain.

And we would have heard the voice of God himself saying, this is my son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. God has revealed himself. He has done miracles.

[2 : 26] Of course, we're not there. We're 2,000 years later. But even if we had been there, would we have been persuaded? Would seeing those miracles and those signs and wonders be enough to give us faith?

Well, the impression that comes through Mark's gospel is very clearly no. Simply seeing miracles, simply having enough evidence does not bring faith. If that were the case, then Jesus would never have been crucified.

The crowds would never have let it happen. As it was, they turned and gave up on him and began shouting, crucify and crucify. But they'd seen all these miracles. If miracles were enough to bring faith, then the Pharisees and scribes would have knelt at Jesus' feet and said, please teach us the law.

Instead of trying to trip him up and entrap him. If simply seeing miracles was enough to bring faith, then the priests and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem would have given Jesus the keys to the temple and laid out the red carpet for him.

Instead of trying to find a way to crucify him. Seeing miracles does not bring faith. At best it produces a misguided or unstable faith which collapses the moment the miracles stop.

[3 : 44] The moment there's some hiccup in our experience. And that is exactly what we're seeing in our passage today. While Jesus is away up the mountain with Peter, James and John talking to Elijah and Moses, the other nine apostles waiting at the bottom of the mountain are brought a boy who is possessed by an evil spirit.

Full of confidence, the nine apostles attempt to cast it out. This should be no problem for them. Jesus gave them power in Mark 6 to heal and to exercise and to preach and so with great confidence they go to it.

I command you in the name of Jesus, come out of him. And nothing happens. Something is wrong. Something is different. Maybe it's a demon that is more powerful than one they've encountered before. Maybe the mode of the possession or the way it happened is different in this case. One thing we should note in passing is that the difference is not that this is simply a case of medical epilepsy. The symptoms are similar of course and maybe epilepsy is somehow involved.

[4 : 56] But there's more to it than that. Epilepsy does not generally leave people unable to speak except for the occasional scream or death. Epilepsy does not time its attacks to try and kill people by throwing them into fires or water as we see in verse 22.

And most telling, epileptic fits are not brought on by the presence of Jesus as clearly happens in verse 20. Whatever is going on here, whatever is causing these attacks, these convulsions, it is malevolent and it is intelligent and the disciples cannot handle it.

Though they try, it is beyond them. And what confusion it throws the surrounding people into. The scribes, probably standing at the back of the crowd, immediately see their opportunity.

At last, proof of what they've been saying all along. In Mark 3 verse 22 they said, The reason why Jesus is able to cast out demons is because he's possessed by Beelzebub, Satan. By the prince of demons, he's casting out demons.

Here now is proof. Jesus is either a fraud or at worst a demoniac. Now he's encountered a powerful demon. His disciples don't have the power to cast it out. The crowds are similarly thrown into confusion.

[6 : 19] Gathering around, clustering around while the scribes and the apostles trade insults and argue. They can't work out what's going on.

I've seen so many miracles from Jesus. Why now would he fail? Has Jesus run out of juice? Are the scribes perhaps right after all? They've been backing the wrong horse.

And then of course at this moment Jesus himself arrives. And the crowds rush forward, filled with awe or perhaps operating out of some kind of distress. The word could mean either. They charge across to him.

And as he asks what has happened, they blurt the story out. The man who's brought his son says, Teacher, I brought you my son. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak.

And whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down and he foams and grinds and becomes rigid. And I ask your disciples to cast it out. But they could not do so. What a scene for Jesus, to meet Jesus after that great moment up on the mountaintop.

[7 : 20] The heavens have been pulled away. He has been revealed as the centre of the universe and the centre of history. He comes down the hill and what mayhem he sees. His disciples can't cast out the spirit.

The scribes are accusing him of being a demoniac. The crowds are in turmoil. It's kind of ironic that it should happen at this moment. Jesus has just been speaking to Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop.

And he would know that the same thing happened to them. Moses came down from the top of Mount Sinai after speaking to God. A mountain covered in smoke and fire. Only to find that the people of Israel had quickly deserted God and made themselves a golden calf.

Elijah in 1 Kings 18 goes up to Mount Carmel. And in a massive display of God's power, he defeats the false god Baal and shames its prophets.

But in the very next chapter, he's on the run for his life. Complaining to God that he alone is the only faithful minister of God in Israel. So it's no surprise to Jesus to come down and find that things have gone to the dogs on him as well.

[8 : 28] That's the way it's always been. People are so quick to fall away. And so he says, shaking his head no doubt, You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you?

How much longer must I put up with you? You faithless generation. It's a very general comment. It could apply to everybody in the crowd.

Certainly it applies to the scribes. So full of pride and hate that when they see the suffering of this family, all they can think of is a great opportunity to have a go at the disciples and bring down Jesus.

It applies to the crowd, of course. They've seen so many miracles from Jesus. He's done so many things amongst them. So many healings. So many exorcisms. They've just received bread from him in a supernatural way, a chapter or two before.

And now something goes wrong and they're thrown into turmoil and confusion. Most sharply, though, of course, it probably applies to the disciples.

[9 : 37] So full of confidence. So confident that they can cast out this evil spirit. But did you notice, as we read it before, in verse 29, why they couldn't cast it out?

In verse 28, they asked Jesus, why could we not cast it out? And he said to them, this kind can come out only through prayer.

In other words, so confident were they in their own power, so ready to believe that they could impress the people and do this miracle themselves, that when something goes wrong, they don't even think to fall on their knees and pray to God.

Of course, that would be quite humiliating. They're professionals. They know how to handle this situation. Much better to try a new technique. Maybe if we all together say, come out in Jesus' name, it'll work.

You faithless generation. The scribes, the crowds and the disciples. Finally, of course, it applies to the man standing right in front of Jesus. The father, whose only child, as we learn from Luke, has been possessed by the demon.

[10 : 47] But here at last, I think we have somebody who has an excuse to be faithless. Worn down by years of worry over his child.

Tyrannised by some evil presence that is intent on destroying the child. Sick with worry, no doubt, that one day the boy will really be thrown into the fire and into water while nobody's watching and will die.

No doubt other people have attempted to exorcise the spirit before this. That was a common practice. And if those exorcists are like faith healers and exorcists today, no doubt the father was blamed when that failed.

His lack of faith, his secret sins. And now what a tragic end to his faith. He hears perhaps that Jesus has been known to cast out great demons and he comes cap in hand, hope in hand, to get his son delivered.

And what does he meet? A bunch of nine arrogant, look at me, I can handle this disciples who don't even bother to pray when things go wrong. What a tragic end to his faith.

[11 : 59] And how common it is. How commonly people come to try and find out about Jesus, hoping against hope that there is something in this Jesus, there is something in Christianity, there is something in the church. And we turn them away with our attitudes, our self-obsession, our failure to love or to inquire or to ask or to listen.

I had a very upsetting story at Christmas. It was somebody I knew who knows a prominent Canberra journalist who is an atheist. A few years ago his daughter, 13-year-old daughter, died of cancer.

But in the days before she died, she had heard, I think, from the hospital chaplain that God was a God of love and wanted to find out more about him. She asked her father to take her along to a church.

And so they went along, the father relented and took her along. But it wasn't too long. They had just walked in the door when they were asked to leave. The people at the church were getting ready for a wedding.

They couldn't stick around. What a tragedy. I have no idea what happened to that little girl's faith. But I know what happened to the father's. His atheism is more entrenched than ever.

[13 : 14] What little hope he might have had was destroyed. And it's so upsetting. I find it so upsetting because I'm sure that I've been in similar situations where I'm sure I've said or not said things that have driven people away from Jesus.

How much damage we do to the faith of others when we are faithless. What great opportunities we miss out on to encourage others and help people grow in their faith.

And here is a faith almost destroyed. When Jesus asks him about the fate of his son, the best he can manage in verse 22 is, But if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.

Yet what a challenge and what an invitation Jesus issues him in return. Verse 23, Jesus said to him, If you are able, all things can be done for the one who believes.

What a great answer. All things can be done. Don't you see what I can do for you? Of course I can deliver your son from this demon. Will you trust in me? All things can be done for the one who believes.

[14 : 30] What a statement. And as we think about it, as we hear Jesus say it, doesn't it show the stupidity of faithlessness? All things can be done for the one who believes. The scribes are faithless.

Why are they faithless? Well, because they want to hold on to their self-righteousness. They value too highly the respect they have amongst the community. But if they'd only admit the truth about themselves, if they'd only stop pretending, if they'd only acknowledge that Jesus is the master, well, he would wash them clean completely.

He'd give them true righteousness. And if they'd come to him and learn, well, he would give them a ministry that would produce an honour and a glory that would last forever, just like he offers to all of us.

The crowds are so shallow in their faith, aren't they? They come to Jesus merely seeking cure for their aches and pains and diseases, for food now and then, maybe deliverance from the Roman rule.

Why do they settle for so little? If they'd really come to Jesus and let him take care of them, if they'd really listen to Jesus and obey him, then they'd have the bread of life and springs of living water.

[15 : 42] They'd be invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb that goes on forever and a kingdom of peace and happiness and justice. The disciples, well, for them, faith in Jesus means a way to get ahead.

They want to be big shots in the coming kingdom. If only they'd serve one another instead of jockeying for position. Then Jesus would lift them up and give them seats on thrones beside him and give them names that would endure for 2,000 years and beyond.

C.S. Lewis says about faith, We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. All things can be done for the one who believes. What a great promise from Jesus. We should clear up in passing two misunderstandings that we are likely to make at this point though.

When Jesus says all things, he's not issuing us a blank check so that if we really believe, if we really screw up our credulity and trust in God, we will get that villa in the south of France.

[17 : 02] He's not issuing us a blank check to ask for any silly old thing that comes into our heads. The all things that Jesus has in mind are the far better and far more wonderful things that God has in mind for us, that God wants to give us.

If we have faith in God, then there will be no limit to that. These are the wonderful things that the Apostle Paul talks about in Ephesians 3.20 when he says that Jesus is able to give us immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

The second misconception is what faith is. The faith that Jesus is asking for that lays hold of these all things that God is wanting to give us is not the faith that my non-Christian friends tell me that I have and that they could never have.

It's not a strong conviction or an amazing, miraculous ability to believe the unbelievable. It's not that heroic or slightly daft ability that Christians have to believe things that nobody else could believe. Real faith is something much simpler and much less impressive. Verse 24, this is faith. Immediately the father of the child cried out, I believe, help my unbelief.

[18 : 28] I believe, help my unbelief. Well, this is faith. It's not great conviction, is it?

It's so trembling, so shot through with doubt that the moment he says, I believe, he immediately has to add, help my unbelief. What weak faith is this? This is faith as small as a mustard seed and yet it's just what Jesus is looking for.

I believe, help my unbelief. What a great prayer this is for us. What a great prayer when we are feeling cold or dry in our faith or feeling far away from God.

What a great prayer this is when we've sinned again in that same old way and we're unsure if even God wants to have us back again. What a great prayer when we're in a situation where we despair of ourselves and unsure if we can ever be useful to God.

It's a great prayer for beginners who want to start a relationship with Jesus and it's a great prayer for the rest of us who want to keep on coming back to Jesus again and again and need to begin again and again. I believe, help my unbelief.

[19 : 38] How little God asks of us and how much he wants to give us. How ready he is to have us back. The moment Jesus hears these words from the man, he goes into action.

When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit saying, you spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out from him and never enter him again. After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out and the boy was like a corpse so that most of them said, he's dead.

But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up and he was able to stand. What the disciples could not do, despite all their efforts and confidence, Jesus does effortlessly and powerfully.

There is no resistance, no struggle for power. The demon is exorcised and ordered never to enter again. The boy is delivered.

And it makes us wonder, what great power might God work on our behalf if we prayed a prayer like this man prays? All things can be done for the one who believes, he tells the man.

[20 : 46] What things could he do for us? What things could he do through us? What areas of our life could he transform if we really believed, if we really started praying and trusting and living as if this promise were true?

All things can be done for the one who believes. Well, what has changed by the end of this passage that we're reading? In one sense, nothing.

The crowds are still faithless. Did you notice in verse 26, the demon comes out, the boy falls down still for a moment and the crowd say, Jesus has killed him. They still can't trust Jesus.

The scribes have withdrawn. They're not convinced. The next time we encounter them, it'll be in Jerusalem and they'll be trying to discredit and destroy Jesus once again. The disciples, well, they're still full of faithlessness too.

In verse 28, when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, why couldn't we cast it out? Notice how they can't bear themselves to bear to ask the question in public.

[21 : 55] They're still trying to save face. They still think it's all about being the big shots in the kingdom. They can't show weakness. They're still trying to act like professionals. But in the midst of all this unbelief, we have a great promise from Jesus.

And we have a great prayer from one poor, weak father. All things can be done for the one who believes. I believe.

Help my unbelief.