

Faith that Moves Mountains

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Date: 19 February 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, to have faith means to trust or to believe. It's the same thing, in fact, the same word in the original text of the New Testament.

And we exercise this action of trust or faith every day. So when you drive on the road, we trust the other drivers not to crash into us. Or some time ago, our girls wanted to make Michelle and I dinner, or me dinner, and we had to eat it no matter what.

That was an exercise of trust. Especially when I'm pretty sure I heard one of them drop some of the food on the floor, giggle, and then say, shh, just put it back on the plate.

And then the other one said, give that plate to Daddy. For the record, they did a pretty good job. When it comes to Christian faith, it's not blind faith.

As a Sunday school child was said when once asked what faith was, they replied, faith is believing in something that is not real. No, it's not that.

[1 : 07] Christian faith is not blind faith, but faith built on evidence, in someone very real. But faith does mean to trust or to believe. And as we come to the next event in Matthew's book today, this is the underlying issue.

It is a presenting issue of a demon-possessed boy, but the underlying issue is a matter of faith. We can see it in verse 17, where Jesus accuses the generation of being unbelieving or not having faith. Again, in verse 20, when he says his disciples have little faith. Or again, verse 20, where he makes that extraordinary promise, that if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can move mountains, do anything.

Impossible. And it is an extraordinary promise, especially because it seems like there are still things impossible for us to do. Like Carlton winning the premiership.

Or more seriously, having a loved one healed. So how does that work? Well, before we get to all that, let me quickly recap the story so far.

[2 : 14] The chapter 16, verse 16, we heard last week that Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, the King, whom all Israel had been waiting for, who would bring in God's kingdom.

But then in chapter 16, verse 21, Jesus said, Well, it now means I must suffer and die. And if you remember Peter's reaction in chapter 16, verse 22, the very next verse, he says, Never, Lord.

No way, Jose. And as I said last week, the disciples could not comprehend why Jesus the King had to suffer and die. It did not fit with their expectations of the Messiah.

And they got those expectations from the Old Testament, but they thought the Messiah would do all these things now. They thought the Messiah, the King, would judge the nations now.

And they thought the Messiah would bring physical suffering to an end on earth for God's people now. Not suffer himself on a cross.

[3 : 14] Not be killed by the nations. And so as we saw last week in chapter 17, Jesus takes the leaders of his 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 him. They were to listen to Jesus and accept what he says, especially about having to suffer and die.

Now to listen and accept what someone says requires faith, doesn't it? For example, if I said, and listen to me, there is a fire in the multi-purpose hall. It's about to spread to this room. You need to evacuate now.

To accept what I say means you have to trust me. That it was true. And so for these disciples, there is none, for the record, there is no fire.

But for these disciples to truly listen to Jesus and accept what he says, they too must have faith in Jesus. They must trust him when he says he must first suffer and die before being raised to life and returning in glory.

[4 : 24] And this need for trust or faith is what Matthew now highlights in the very next incident. It's related, you see. And so we're at point one on your outlines and verse 14 in your Bibles.

Jesus and his three disciples returned from the mountain to meet a desperate dad and a suffering son. When they, Jesus and the three disciples, 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 down the mountain with a suffering son to be healed. And did you notice the dad's desperation?

First, he doesn't give up after the nine disciples fail. He approaches Jesus for another go. Second, he kneels before Jesus. A third, he actually commands Jesus.

[5 : 28] Show mercy. It's actually an imperative, a command. Like a parent desperate for their child to be healed, and so they command a doctor, doctor, save my child. Of course, we can understand his desperation, can't we?

For his son's suffering is great. Verse 15, we read that his seizures 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, great suffering caused by a spiritual evil. And I suspect it's meant to be a small reminder of all the suffering in our world that is caused by another spiritual evil, 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 he is desperate. I mean, I was talking with someone from our 1030 congregation last week, and he said to me that in the space of three days last week, he found out that both his brother and his sister have cancer and it's looking terminal.

[6 : 39] It's awful suffering, isn't it? And so it's understandable he is desperate for their healing too. And here in Matthew 17, this scene of suffering and desperation at the bottom of the mountain is such a contrast to the glory of the three, that the three disciples saw at the top of the mountain.

But you see, this is why Jesus has come. Jesus has come to deal with the suffering down here and bring people to the glory up there. How? Well, by paying for sin and defeating the devil at the cross. And so opening a way to glory where there will be no more suffering, no more disease or disaster or death. This is what Jesus came to do. And he gives us a glimpse of this by healing the boy.

Do you see verse 18? Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of the boy and he was healed at that moment. Jesus, you see, has power to put right, to save.

And what he does here for the boy is a small picture of what he will do for us at the cross. By paying for our sins and defeating the devil, Jesus saves us from an eternity of suffering in hell and instead will bring us into an eternity of glory in heaven.

[7 : 56] Whereas I said, there will be no more suffering, disease, disaster or death. And he gives us a glimpse of it here by showing mercy and healing the boy at that very moment. But the thing is, the disciples should have been able to do this too.

Back in chapter 10, on the next slide, we read this. Jesus called his disciples, his 12 disciples to him and gave them authority to what? Drive out impure spirits or demons and to heal every disease and sickness.

And yet here, verse 16, I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. Now, if you've just read verse 16 for the very first time and you hadn't heard the Bible reading or looked ahead, I wonder what you'd expect Jesus to say next after the man says, your disciples could not do it. Would you expect Jesus to say, look, I'm very sorry, sir, but they're still on their pea plates. They're still learning. Would you expect him to say, look, I'm very sorry, I'm going to be trading them in for some new disciples shortly. Or more likely, we'd expect Jesus to do what he does in verse 18 and just heal the boy straight away.

In fact, we could actually go in our Bibles from verse 16 to verse 18 without skipping a beat. It'd make perfect sense, wouldn't it? So why does Jesus say verse 17?

[9 : 22] Well, we're at point two now and verse 17, a despairing Jesus and a fickle faith. Jesus says, Oh, unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you?

How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me. Now, as I said, this is not what you'd expect Jesus to say first, is it? And when Jesus does something unexpected, it's good to ask why.

It seems like he's making a point. And the point is, the crowd's need for faith, the need for faith in him. You see, in a moment, Jesus will say that the nine disciples could not heal the boy because they did not have faith in that moment.

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

Why? Because their faith is fickle. I'm sure they believe that Jesus can heal and do miracles, but they don't really put two and two together and believe in him as the king, the Messiah.

[10 : 32] Instead, they seem to treat him like a vending machine that dispenses miracles and works for them rather than treating him rather as the king who ought to be obeyed and served by them.

What's more, Jesus knows that he has come to pay for sin, to save us, but he also knows that this is only for those who have faith in him, who believe in him as the king.

I should also say that this is the only reason Jesus has not yet returned to end all suffering on this earth because he's giving people more time to believe, to have faith in him so they don't miss out on glory.

And yet despite all this generation has seen with their own eyes of Jesus, they still not believe in him as the king, the Messiah. And this seems to have hurt Jesus.

He sounds despairing, doesn't he? Twice he despairs. How long must I put up with you? How long is it going to take? You see, to have all the evidence that Jesus is the king before your very eyes and yet not believe the truth, not live in light of the truth, well, that means you're actually perverting the truth by your words and actions.

[11 : 53] And so that's why he calls them not just unbelieving, but perverse. Like ancient Israel, who saw God's signs and wonders, yet still do not trust God. And so Moses, in our first reading, called them a crooked and perverse generation.

It may sound harsh, but it's true. That's what happens when we ignore the truth and live contrary to it. We are perverting it. What's more, it's a wake-up call for the disciples who have doubted in that moment and need to have ongoing faith in Jesus, including the point that he must suffer and die.

And it's this matter of faith that Matthew now focuses on. For only Matthew records the next words of Jesus. So point three in your outlines, verse 19 in your Bibles. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, why couldn't we drive it out?

And these are Matthew's words. He replied, well, Matthew's account. He replied, because you have so little faith, truly I tell you, says Jesus, 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.

Nothing will be impossible for you. So it's some time later and Jesus is alone with his disciples. And so they ask privately why they couldn't heal the boy.

[13 : 13] Jesus' answer, because of their little faith. And by little faith, Jesus really means no. Faith. Faith so little, it's non-existent.

He means their doubt, their unbelief. Now, how do I know this? Well, because Jesus says, faith as small as a mustard seed can do anything. And so their faith must have been even smaller than a mustard seed if they couldn't heal the boy.

But the thing is, mustard seeds are very small. In fact, I brought one to show you, but I've lost it. So I had a backup on a slide.

So on the next slide is a picture of it. Can you see it up the back? It's too small. Exactly. And that's the point. Mustard seeds are so small. And therefore, the disciples' little faith must have been smaller than that.

And to be smaller than that, it's pretty much non-existent, isn't it? And that's Jesus' point. Little faith, faith smaller than a mustard seed, is really no faith at all. It's doubt or unbelief.

[14 : 20] It's like what happened to Peter when he walked on the water. So on the next slide, we read this from Matthew 14. So on the next slide. Then Peter got out 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. And notice what he says, same word, you of little faith.

And then he equates it with, why did you doubt? See, Jesus uses the same phrase, little faith, but he equates it with doubt in that moment, or unbelief.

I saw a musing cartoon about Peter's faith on the next slide. It says that Peter's faith is much stronger in winter when the water is frozen. But the point here is that for Jesus, little faith means no faith, really.

It's a moment of doubt or unbelief. Whereas mustard seed faith is real faith. And so when the nine disciples tried to heal that boy with the demon, in that moment, they did not believe.

[15:24] They did not trust that God would drive out the demon, even though Jesus had given them the authority and assurance that they could. Now, whether it's because Jesus and the three leaders were up the mountain and not there with them, and so they doubted instead of trusting God, or whether it's because they trusted in themselves and their previous success in chapter 10, instead of trusting in God, either way, it's hard to know.

But either way, they did not trust. They had no faith in that moment. And so Jesus, his point here is that 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, having it. 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 a church at Hillsong, the new one in Melbourne.

It's a couple of years old. And they heard the lead pastor, Brian Houston, say, if you are not healed, then you don't have enough faith. That's a terrible thing to say if this person heard correctly.

[16:34] And it's actually a perversion of the truth. It's not what Jesus is really saying here. Because mustard seed faith is small, but enough.

So it's not about the amount of faith. It's about having faith. This is what the disciples were to have in Jesus, especially when it came to listening and accepting his coming suffering and death.

This is what the 12 disciples would 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, and to save us from an eternity of suffering in hell and bring us to eternity of glory in heaven.

So the first question for us this morning is, do we 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 it means to believe that he is our king. We'll do what he says. And do you trust that his death means your eternity is safe, secure, certain? Do we have faith in Jesus?

[17:54] That's the first question. And for us who have faith, who have committed our lives to Christ, then the second question is, do we continue to trust in him as our king, even in this world of suffering?

Because if we do, then yes, nothing will be impossible for us. But I suspect there's a third question lurking in the back of your minds, and that is, how can we move mountains?

How does mustard seed faith do the impossible? What does it look like? How does it work? Which is the last point on your outlines. And here I think we need to realise two things.

First, we need to remember that it's not our faith that actually moves the mountains, but the one our faith is in. Our faith is not like the force in Star Wars, where if we hold out our hand and concentrate hard enough, the mountain will move from here to there.

No, no. It's the object of our faith, the person our faith is in, who moves the mountain. Now I realise it's all a bit conceptual, a bit hard to understand, so let me make it a bit more visual for you.

[19:06] I'm going to try a little experiment here. I'm going to come down from here. But I need a volunteer. See how much you trust me now. And so, and I'm going to show you, Hong, your service leader, I'm just going to do you in.

And today I'm going to show you how Hong's faith will lift him off the ground. You ready? All right, here we go. Hong, do you have faith that this chair will hold you off the ground?

Yeah, well, take a seat then. Maybe lift your legs up so we know you're not helping the chair. There we are. Hong's faith has lifted him off the ground.

Now, is it really Hong's faith or is it the object of his faith that's doing the lifting? It's the object, isn't it? Thanks, Hong, you can take a seat. Give him a clap.

And Jesus means the same thing when he uses this kind of language. So on the next slide, for example, when he says to a woman who he heals, he says, take heart, daughter.

[20 : 16] He said, your faith has healed you. And yet the woman, and we know it's not her faith per se, it's the object of her faith, the person her faith is in who does the healing, Jesus.

Of course, the reason Jesus puts it like this is because we still need faith to come to him in the first place and to ask him. We still need to trust in him like the woman did to be healed.

And so when Jesus says, our mustard seed faith can do the impossible, it's only because it's 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 and nothing is impossible for him. That's the first thing we need to remember. The second thing we also need to remember that if God can do the impossible because he is God, then because he is God, he can also choose which impossible things he will do for us and which he won't.

Which prayers he will answer and which he won't. Being God not only means he can do the impossible, but it also means he has the sovereign right to choose which and when he will do those impossible things for us.

[21 : 32] Of course, he will always be working for our long-term good. He has proven that by sending his son for us. And as Paul says on the next slide from Romans chapter 8, he is always working for our good.

What's more, he has 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 winning the lottery.

But the Bible tells us that God works to help us trust in him and not money. And for most of us, winning the lottery will help us trust in money and not in God. Even if we try and kid ourselves and make deals like, oh God, well if I win, I'll give this much to this missionary and this much to this missionary.

And so we can expect him to choose not to do that impossible thing for us. He could if he wanted to, but it's unlikely given what we read in the Bible.

On the other hand, if we ask God to do the impossible thing like help us and other Christians persevere in faith despite suffering, then we can expect him to do it because the Bible tells us that this is the sorts of things he does.

[22 : 44] So 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 how one Sunday at his church back in Cape Town, a gunman burst into the church and shot many of its members.

And when the TV cameras turned up and one of the reporters interviewed a grieving member who just lost her child, I think it was, and the reporter said to her, is there anything you want to say to those attackers?

And the church member said, yes, I want to say I forgive you. Now that's not a normal human reaction, is it? Actually, it's an impossible human reaction unless God enables her to do it.

But you see, this is the type of impossible things God does, enabling his people to persevere in suffering and even using that evil for good to grow them in the likeness of Christ.

Christ himself who 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.

[23 : 57] And so I take it we are to have faith in God that he can do the impossible like healing those who are sick. And in fact, he's answered some of those prayers, hasn't he? As some of you have told me stories about how tumors have shrunk and the doctors cannot explain why.

I was talking to another person who said that he's been healed of cancer or gone into remission and the doctors did not expect it. They can't explain it. God can do the impossible.

But the thing is, mustard seed faith will not only trust God to do the impossible like heal us or our loved ones, but it will also trust God if he chooses not to.

We can't have it both ways. God is either God or he's not. So let me finish with the final story about a guy I knew from Bible study when I was at university.

He became a minister and planted a church out in Sale far east of Victoria. He was in Jeff Hall's year at Bible study. He was diagnosed with cancer just over a year ago and he died last November. [25 : 06] Or December I think it was. And 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 had faith in God to choose what impossible things he would do for them. After all, he is God.

And so at the funeral I heard his wife say this. She said, many of us ask why he died and I just don't know why but God does.

And then she added, and I know God is faithful. He has been faithful to us and will continue to be. And 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 we would have that kind of faith. Let's pray.

Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you for the reminder this morning of what Jesus came to do and how we are to have faith, trust, belief in him.

[26 : 17] Father, help us when it's hard to trust in you and we don't know why things are happening or why you're choosing not to answer prayers. Help us to trust you that you are a God who can do the impossible and at the same time that you are a God who works in all things for our good.

So help us to have faith even when things don't go our way. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.