

## FAITH LEARNED IN FAILURE

11-14-04

Mtt. 17:1-9 and 14-21

TEXT: *I tell you the truth, 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."*

--Matt 17:20

### INTRODUCTION

Here's a text that ought to take your breath away. It is an absolutely astounding statement and promise. Taking it at anything close to face value prompts all kinds of realistic, "But what about?" scenarios in our minds concerning what we've faced. Such a promise is wonderful but when compared to our experience it can be confusing. In light of this text, we become very conscious of our failures, of the things we've tried to have faith for and didn't get. We can all think of people not healed, tragedies not prevented, and times we desperately prayed for help and there seemed to be no answer. This can cause us to labor under a burden of guilt. We think:

"I must not have had enough faith."

Or, "If only I could believe more..."

Does it ever seem to you like some of the promises Jesus made almost seem to mock us in our powerlessness? In Mark's version of this story, he records the brief dialogue between Jesus and the father of the boy. The father pleads, *If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.* To which Jesus replies, *If you can?* Then He gives this sweeping promise: *Everything is possible for him who believes* (Mk. 9:22-23). Then, in those important instructions to the disciples the night before His death, Jesus' twice repeated, *If you ask anything in my name, I will do it* (Jn. 14:14). And, apparently Jesus repeated this illustration in our text of faith the size of a mustard seed later on in response to the disciples plea, *Lord, increase our faith,* as recorded in Lk. 17:6, though instead of a mountain being moved it is a mulberry tree.

Yet, there is something encouraging here, because the promise of our text comes in the midst of failure. I can identify with that! In fact, Frederick Dale Bruner, a retired professor from Whitworth College, wrote a superb commentary on Matthew. He titles this section, "The Healing of the Disciples Inability." Translating from the Greek, he sees the key to this story in the word, "unable." It is used three times:

vs. 16– "unable" to heal the boy

vs. 19– disciples asking Jesus why they were "unable"

vs. 20– the promise of our text, translated "impossible" could quite literally be translated from the Greek, "nothing will be 'unable' for you."

Well, we all have some inability that needs healing. And I doubt if anyone here feels their faith is where it should. Taking Bruner's clue, I find real help in this section in understanding faith and how I can increase my faith.

## **FAITH IS NEEDED**

Talk about a journey from glory to the depths of human misery! Jesus and three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, have just been on the Mount of Transfiguration where they saw glory beyond human comprehension. They saw Moses and Elijah and heard God's voice from heaven declare, *"This is my son whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* (17:5). Now, coming down from the mountain, they run smack into a big mess. Mark's Gospel adds a bit more color to the story, so here, let's look at his description of this event in Mark 9:14-29. Keep a finger there, because we'll be back and forth between Matthew and Mark.

Jesus and his disciples walk right into a big argument. The nine disciples left behind, not lucky enough to be included in the transfiguration event, tried to heal a demon-possessed boy and failed. Failures lead to blame, which can quickly become a heated argument, can't they? After the game is lost or after we mess things up, it seems everyone has an opinion and wants to fix the blame somewhere. For these disciples, maybe some thought they shouldn't have taken this on, praying for healing. Can't you imagine Matthew telling Bartholomew, "You prayed for healing, but it's clear to me this is demonic. You should have used a prayer of command!" Then Thomas interjects, "You guys were in too much of a hurry. We needed to pray longer." Then Philip voices his opinion, and, on it goes.

Remember that earlier, Jesus had clearly commissioned the disciples to go out in His name and heal the sick, and deliver the demon possessed (Mtt. 10). Here is evidence that this was not a one-time adventure, but a continuing ministry through them. So, these nine disciples are doing what Jesus clearly wanted them to do. In such a situation most of us would probably conclude it just wasn't God's will to heal this child.

But, this story makes life much more complicated than that. Here is Jesus, just coming down from the mountain with the voice of His Father still ringing in his ears, "This is my Son, whom I love." Now he encounters this earthly father saying, "Here's my son. Have mercy on him." Then, Jesus expresses strong emotion at the disciple's failure,

*O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.*

These are strong words: "unbelieving" (faithless) and "perverse," meaning twisted, crooked, deviant. Are His words a lament or more an exasperation? We don't know what intonation Jesus put on these words. But it is safe to say, Jesus is clearly upset. It is not just the disciple's problem, but it is somehow connected to a bigger problem encompassing that generation. Then Jesus heals the boy.

Later, in private, the disciples ask why they couldn't drive the demon out. Why did we fail? Why were we unable? The promise of our text is given as the answer.

*Because you have so little faith.*

*I tell you the truth, 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."*

I picture Jesus pointing to the mountain they'd just come down from as he says, "*you can say to this mountain 'Move from here to there' and it will move.*" He highlights this promise with the preface the NIV translates, "I tell you the truth..." The KJV here uses, "verily I say unto you," which maybe sounds more authoritative, though most of us would be hard-pressed to define "verily." But we recognize it as the word Jesus often uses when he's about to say something *really important*. I like the way Dr. Bruner chooses to translated this saying, "for amen, I tell you...." This is a "sit up and take notice" statement. The promise is mind-boggling. How then, do we get this kind of faith?

I remember one of my early ventures in faith that illustrates what is not being taught here. I was trying to *really, really* make something happen through my faith. I was in a desperate situation, at least from my perspective. I was 15, and had used my dad's Volvo to go skiing. (You can drive at age 15 in Montana). This was a 1957 Volvo that looked like a car from the late 40's with the curved roof-line carrying all the way down over the trunk in the back. This was one of the first Volvos in Kalispell— long before Volvos became as popular as they are now. My father was Swedish, and the Swedish origins of this car spelled quality to him. He loved that car! I was thrilled that he said I could drive it up to Big Mountain to ski, taking a few of my friends. In putting the ski rack on, I didn't notice that the curvature in the roof allowed the metal edges on the skis to come very close to the roof. Well, the road up to the ski slopes was rather rough and the bouncing was just enough to cause a ski to flex down and contact the roof. When I got home, my heart sank as I saw a place about an inch long on the roof where all the paint had been scraped off by the metal edge of my skis. I could envision never driving again.

In desperation I went to my room and began to pray in earnest. I knew God could work miracles, and I needed a miracle. I felt I had Biblical precedent to stand upon in claiming God's promises in this situation, for I remembered the Old Testament story of Elisha. He borrowed a friend's axe and the axe head flew off into the water. Elisha prayed and the iron axe head floated to the top of the water (2 Kings 6:5). It seemed to me the axe head was lost due to carelessness, and so it applied to my situation. And, in both cases, we're dealing with metal! So, I prayed for the paint to close over that narrow, inch-long bare metal. In my prayer, after interceding for awhile, I felt I really *did believe*. I felt in my heart God had mercy on me and had taken care of my problem. I ventured into the garage to see my miracle. The bare spot on the roof was still there. I went back and prayed some more, thinking God wanted to teach me perseverance. Another check and still nothing. Then I thought, "Didn't Elijah send his servant up on Mt. Carmel to look for rain seven times?" (I guess I was big into Elisha and Elijah stories!) So, I kept praying, trying to have more faith, but it was getting more difficult to believe. I don't think I made seven trips to the garage. But, for the next couple of years, that bare spot in the metal in top of that Volvo's roof was testimony to the failure of my faith. Interestingly enough, I never confessed and my dad never asked. I don't know if he never connected that damage with me, or never saw it. (Maybe I did get my miracle!) But that bare metal glared at me every time I got into that car.

I can smile now at my understanding of things back then. But, I knew what I wanted and I thought I knew what I needed. Certainly prayer was the right thing to do in my distress. Jesus

clearly teaches faith is the key to answered prayer. So I focused upon generating more faith for my emergency. I was acting like there was a "faith meter" in my heart. If I could get it to a certain level, pushing aside doubt, I would get what I wanted. I tried visualizing the outcome, seeing paint flowing over the damage from edges. I pictured the finger of God reaching down and touching the flaw. What I was asking for was nothing compared to some of the miracles Jesus did. It was not even in the same ball park as the mountain-moving faith Jesus is talking about in our text.

But, is that how things work and how faith is achieved? There is hardly a more common word to us in the Christian life than faith. Yet it is one that eludes our understanding. We want formulas, self-help steps, 30 days to a stronger faith. But, our text suggests another path to faith.

### **HOW DO WE GET MORE FAITH?**

First, Jesus debunks our quantitative idea of enough faith and we can do big things. That's legalism's equation: faith as big as a mountain will move mountains. No, Jesus says, just tiny faith as small as a mustard seed does incredible things, out of all proportion to its size.

The only faith we really need is to come to Jesus. Jesus tells them, "Bring the boy to me." The father has it right when he says, "Lord, I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24). Isn't that a wonderful statement? Isn't that the cry of all our hearts? In the Gospels, especially John, faith as belief or trust in the person of Jesus Christ is mentioned 98 times. So, rather than focusing on our doubts and getting rid of them, or examining our "faith level," we need to focus upon Jesus, increasing our trusting dependence upon Him and His desire and will. One of the main ways we do that is through God's Word. In Romans 10:17, Paul affirms this:

*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*

Scripture read and Scripture proclaimed are ways our faith increases. The KJV on this verse is straightforward and simple: *So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

That is why it is not only important to spend time in studying the Bible in your personal devotions, but also to be in worship on Sunday when the Word is proclaimed in the sermon, song, and the readings. The hearing of the message proclaimed, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, builds our faith. I don't get many opportunities to sit under the preaching of someone else now. But when I do, generally it is always a faith-infusing/ renewing event, when the pastor is faithful to God's Word and filled with the Spirit. Embers in my heart that seem black and lifeless, under the proclamation begin to come alive again and brightly glow.

The other way we come to Jesus is in prayer. We can spend time in His presence. Mark in his account lets us know Jesus added to this "mountain moving faith" statement that this kind of demon can come out only by prayer. The earliest manuscripts don't include fasting as some later ones add. But, in our modern translations, fasting survives as a footnote. The point being made is that this is intense, serious prayer. One of the ways the early Christians, under the guidance of Scripture and Jesus, intensified prayer was through fasting. This is not just a polite, "Dear Jesus, please bless so and so" kind of prayer. I've heard Ron Hutchcraft refer to this intense kind of

prayer as "O God" prayers— where there is groaning, crying out, “O God, help us!” This is prayer that is serious, desperate, hanging onto God with all we have. Fasting can intensify our prayer and thus that is probably why it got added in later in the copying of the manuscripts. In Matthew’s account, prayer only makes it as a footnote in our newer translations. If you look for vs. 21, you’ll find it in a footnote. It was likely a later addition here too. But it really matters little as far as I’m concerned. For, as we put the two together, it’s been said that prayer is simply faith breathing. Faith is the inside and prayer is the outside. We express faith by praying. If our lives are relatively prayerless, it means there’s not much faith. Faith *will* pray. And prayer results in more faith. Mark’s account is helpful, because for practical purposes, we need to start with increasing our prayer life. Faith may seem nebulous. But, we can pray more. We can fast. We can gather together in the community of believers to encourage one another and pray together. If we gathered together for prayer meetings as well as we do for our worship, I know we would be amazed at what we’d see God doing.

Let’s not miss the implication that there are miracles, healings, things within God’s will that don’t happen because of our faithlessness and prayerlessness. The very things that it seems God has called us to do that we are unable to do, where we fail, should not cause us to give up. Rather they need to motivate us to press in, seek God more fervently, and as the disciples did, ask the question, “Why were we unable?”

We could summarize this by saying faith comes as a by-product of an intimate relationship with Jesus developed through prayer and the Word. Faith is not something in itself, an "it" we seek. We seek Jesus. In my intense intercession over the car roof, I was focused upon generating “enough faith.” If I had relaxed and just spent time in the Lord's presence, I may have discerned that God was more interested in bringing greater wholeness in my relationship with my father. My relationship with Dad could have had less fear and more love and acceptance in it. Just maybe that was the miracle to be received if I'd been open. Learning to trust and lean upon Jesus in all circumstances comes from experience and time with him. Trust and faith in a person doesn't happen overnight. Crash courses don’t make it. It is a product of experience, time spent, knowing their heart. So it is with our Lord.

## CONCLUSION

Our text is meant to motivate us to not give up on things that seem like mountains. Don't quit after an early failure. Keep on, keep at it in prayer, including fasting as appropriate. Saturate your heart with the Word of God until you know the heart of God in that matter. For when you know what He's about, what Jesus wants, faith is present, isn't it?

I came across an account of an event that I think illustrates this well. You may have heard of the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago. It is the second oldest rescue mission in the U.S. It carries on a vital ministry to the homeless, to alcoholics, and to many of the rejects of the world. It was founded in 1880 by a Christian couple, George and Sarah Clarke. Early on, they leased a building and the ministry began to grow. But expenses mounted and the day came they couldn't make the rent payment. It finally came down to the last 24 hours before they would be evicted. Throughout the night, George and Sarah prayed, asking God to provide in His time and way.

They determined to trust and not question the Lord. They just remained before the throne of grace in simple faith, pleading with God until the breaking of dawn. When they emerged from their house in the morning, they gasped. Their front yard was white with something that at first reminded them of the manna of the Old Testament. Then, they recognized that the lawn was covered with mushrooms of the highest quality. AND, it wasn't the season for mushrooms. They gathered the crop and took it to the chefs at Palmer House, a famous hotel and restaurant, and sold them for a premium price. The money was just enough to pay the rent and their ministry expenses.