All things are possible by faith

Text: Mark 9:14-29

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**Scriptures:** Hebrews 11:1-6; Exodus 32:1-20; Mark 9:14-32

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘By Faith’, 71, 183, 431, 523

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#28)

**Theme:** Jesus compassionately heals a demon-possessed boy whose father had faith, albeit weak; in contrast to the ‘faithless’ disciples who could not drive out the evil spirit

**Proposition:** All things are possible by faith in Christ

**Introduction**

What is faith? Some people might say it is ‘*complete trust or confidence in someone or something*’. For example: ‘*The population has faith in their politicians*’. Others use the word faith to mean ‘*a belief that is not based on provable facts*’. For example: ‘*She has faith that housing will become more affordable*’.

Faith is a central theme in the Bible and Scripture reveals God’s definition of this important word: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1). Biblical faith is confidence or trust in God. It is belief that His, as yet unseen promises, will certainly be fulfilled in the future. Abraham exemplified this faith, ‘*he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*’ (Gen 15:6). The Apostle Paul explains Abraham’s belief ‘*No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*’ (Rom 4:20-21). The Heidelberg Catechism, drawing on Scripture, identifies three components to true faith: knowledge, conviction and deep-rooted assurance (LD7A21).

‘City Climb’ in New York City is the highest open-air public building ascent in the world, it involves climbing a 45 degree angle staircase and then leaning out over the edge of a 400m high ledge 106 stories up - whilst secured at all times with a harness to a safety rail. You can go online and learn about this tourist attraction and gain knowledge (edgenyc.com). You may be convinced by the advertising blurb that it is reliably safe for a person like you to do this climb. However, it is only when you entrust yourself to the safety equipment, clipping into the harness as you ascend and then lean out over the edge that you show you that even though you are in a life-threatening situation, you have a ‘deep-rooted assurance’ that you will not fall to your death.

The central idea of our text today from Mark’s gospel is faith in Christ. In our three points we’ll see:

1. A faithless generation
2. A father with weak faith
3. A Saviour who makes true life possible
4. **A faithless generation (v9-19)**

I am glad to be back from a refreshing period of annual leave and I am looking forward to what the Lord has in store for this church in the year to come. However, sometimes, getting back to work from a holiday can feel like a harsh return to the daily grind of life in a fallen world where even the most satisfying work is adversely affected by the effects of sin.

We read earlier from Exodus 32 of the time when Moses came down from Mount Sinai where He had experienced the glory of God and had spoken with the Lord ‘face to face’ (Ex 33:11). This was not only physically, but much more spiritually, a ‘mountain top’ experience for Moses. Then he left the majestic presence of the Lord to descend to where the Israelites had made a golden calf and were worshipping it. He went down to the fallen world and a fallen nation. Scripture records the sad reality that ‘*The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play*’ (Ex 32:6). They were truly a faithless generation who did not believe in the promises of God. Almost all of them, including Moses himself, did not enter the Promised Land but died in the wilderness.

In his gospel, Mark records that Jesus descended from the Mount of Transfiguration together with Peter, James and John. These disciples had seen the radiant glory of Christ as He talked with Moses and Elijah. When Jesus came to the other disciples they were not worshipping a golden calf, but like Israel of old could have accurately been categorised, they were described by the Lord as ‘*a faithless generation*’ (v19). Remember that Mark has already recorded a number of previous occasions when Jesus rebuked His disciples for their lack of faith and hardness of heart; when He calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee (4:40); when He walked on the water (6:50, 52); when the disciples did not understand the miracles of the feedings of the 5,000 and 4000 (8:17-21). His words ‘*O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?*’ reflect Christ’s godly frustration with His disciples who were at this time indistinguishable from the unbelieving people amongst whom they lived. How difficult it must have been for Jesus to be surrounded by disciples who knew Him and saw His powerful works, but still did not believe Him to be who He is.

On this occasion, the disciples had been unable to cast an unclean spirit out of a boy who suffered greatly under the evil influence of this destructive being as the lad’s father explained to Jesus saying: “*I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able*" (v18). Yet Jesus had earlier commissioned the twelve to go out, giving them ‘*authority over the unclean spirits*’ (Mark 6:7). The power and authority of Jesus conferred on his disciples was fully sufficient for the task He had set them. Mark confirms this when he writes about the work of the disciples “*And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them*” (6:13).

So what went wrong here with their inability to heal this demon-possessed boy? Did the promise of Jesus to His disciples that they would have his power and authority to cast out demons fail? No. Later, when Jesus was inside a house away from the crowd, the disciples asked Him “*why could we not cast it out?*’ (v28). Jesus replied “*This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer*” (v29). What does this mean? Effective powerful prayer is rooted in faith; knowledge, conviction and deep-rooted personal assurance that God will do what He has promised. It is worth noting that in the parallel account in Matthew’s gospel (17:14-20), Jesus is recorded as replying to the disciples question “*why could we not cast it out*’ with the words ‘*because of your little faith*’.

Jesus had given the disciples the authority to cast out demons, but this was not like some super-power that they now possessed by right. It was the delegation of Christ’s healing ministry to disciples who believed, and continued to believe, that He had the power that they lacked. Some commentators suggest that the disciples had come to think that this power over the evil spirits was in their control. If so, then this was a subtle form of unbelief, for it led them to trust in themselves and not in their Lord.

However, before you and I rush to condemn the slowness and stupidity of the disciples, we would be wise to pause and reflect on how similar to each of us at times they were. Brothers and sisters, has not Christ has given us His authority and commissioned each one of us to “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*” (Matt 28:18-19)?

True faith believes that we have all that we need from Christ to do what He calls us to do. True faith trusts in God even in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. False faith makes excuses, seldom or never sees fruit, and wonders why the church does not grow. James wisely pointed out that “*faith apart from works is dead*” (Jam 2:26). How would you describe your faith in Jesus Christ this morning? Perhaps,

* You do not believe that He is the Ruler above all rulers and the Saviour of His people. You are in desperate need of true faith, or perhaps
* You have strong faith, your life shows abundant evidence of the fruit of your faith, and your prayer life is strong, consistent and blessed. Praise God
* You do believe, but your faith is weak, and you need help.

The father of the demon-possessed boy was in this last category, as we’ll see in our second point.

1. **A father with weak faith (v20-24)**

The earthquakes which have affected parts of Turkey and Syria this past week have been devastating to regions already struggling with poverty, the effects of war, and corrupt government. Imagine the desperation of family members who can hear the cries of their loved ones beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings, or perhaps were still receiving text messages for help. Family members who lack the resources to clear the broken concrete and masonry that trap the helpless. It is heart-breaking to know that someone you love is suffering and dying but that you cannot save them yourself.

This was the situation of a father whose son Jesus asked to be brought to Him, Mark records that “*when the spirit saw him (Jesus), immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth*” (v20). The destructive energy of the possessing spirit is seen in the violent convulsions, foaming at the mouth, involuntary gnashing of teeth and rigidness followed by exhaustion. These manifestations resemble the symptoms of epilepsy. However, this was not simply a chronic nervous disorder, but demonic possession, as the Scriptures clearly reveal. We need to be careful neither to assume that demon possession does not still sometimes occur today or to think that all epilepsy (and/or other conditions) are due to demon possession.

Jesus asked the afflicted boy’s father, ““*How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him*”’ (v21-22). The demon’s repeated efforts to kill the boy reveals the ‘end game’ of Satan and his forces; the destruction of the image of God in man through death. Mark records the plea of the helpless father “*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us*" (v22). The father thinks that Jesus might be able to help. He hopes that Jesus would be compassionate, but he is not sure. Then Jesus said to him, ‘“*If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!*” (v23-24). I find these to be some of the most encouraging words in the Bible because at times I identify myself with the helpless father who believes but also knows that his faith is weak. How about you?

Faith in Jesus makes all things possible, but desired outcomes are not guaranteed. God knows how best to answer our prayers of faith giving us what is ultimately best in accord with his perfect will, but not necessarily meeting our expectations beyond what He has promised. The outcome of the work of Jesus on behalf of the man depended on this father’s ability to believe, not on Christ’s capability to heal. It is when our natural human resources become exhausted that the majesty and glory of Christ are most clearly seen.

Just as the very presence of Jesus provoked amazement in the crowd when they saw Him (v15), so His words prompted the father of the boy to cry out “*I believe; help my unbelief*”. This desperate father is humbly communicating his shaky spiritual condition. Something like ‘*I have some faith but it is mixed with faithlessness. My faith is weak and frail. I need your help, firstly for my faith so that you can do the impossible for my demon-possessed son*’.

The strength of faith varies between different people at different times. Doubts can, and do, arise in the face of the troubles and trials of life, the temptations to sin and the pressure of an unbelieving world. Like a fragile seedling plant, faith needs to be carefully nourished over time in order to grow stronger.

Today, if your faith is feeling fragile, pray for yourself the words of the humble desperate father in our text: “*I believe; help my unbelief*”. Believe that Jesus is able to do what is impossible for you or anyone else to do. Humble yourself and acknowledge that your faith is weak. Nurture your faith by growing in knowledge of God’s Word (2 Pet 3:18) through individual Bible reading, study and meditation, group Bible studies and regular congregational worship. Nurture your faith by growing in conviction that God can be trusted to deliver on all His promises being careful not to expect from the Lord that which He has not guaranteed to give you. Nurture your faith by growing in personal trust in Christ in the midst of difficulty and uncertainty in your life.

Growing in faith and training in godliness is ‘*of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come*’ (1Tim 4:8). Why, because Jesus alone makes true life possible, which brings us to our third point.

1. **A Saviour who makes true life possible (v25-29)**

We have seen the weakness of the disciples’ faith which rendered them unable to cast out an evil spirit. We have also seen the weakness of the father’s faith and his plea for help with his unbelief. Now we see the strength, power and authority of Jesus displayed as He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it: “*You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again*.” (v25). Mark records that: ‘*And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.”*’ (v26).

It seems that the spirit had one last go at destroying the boy as it reluctantly yielded to Jesus’ command. The boy appeared to be dead to those looking on. Most of them certified him without life, but Jesus took the boy by the hand and lifted him up and he rose up. Not only was the boy alive, he was now free from the terror and bondage of being indwelt with an agent of Satan whose goal was to destroy him. Jesus had restored the boy to true life. I can only imagine the reaction of his father, the joy, the thankfulness to Jesus, the increase in the strength of his faith!

After this healing, Mark records that Jesus and His disciples journeyed through Galilee and Christ again predicted His coming execution saying that after three days He would rise again (v30-32). The same power that gave the demon-possessed boy freedom from this destructive tyranny of Satan, would restore the dead Jesus back to life, never to die again. This power is the absolute power of God Himself. This same power Jesus promises to all who believe in Him saying: “*For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*”(John 6:40).

Do you believe this, even though you have not, as yet seen it? Do you have a personal assurance of the hope of your own resurrection to life eternal when Jesus, the Saviour, returns to this earth? Do you possess a conviction that, even though you have never seen this Jesus in the flesh, He is exactly who He says that He is in the Word of God? By His own truly truthful words, He is: The Bread of life (John 6:35); The Light of the World (John 8:12); The Way the Truth and the Life (John 14:6); The Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14); The Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25).

I cannot make you believe this and I cannot myself strengthen your faith if you do believe. I cannot but God can! Without faith in God’s promises, fulfilled in Christ, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). True faith is absolutely essential if you and I are to receive the gift of true life from God. No amount of your own ‘good works’ will purchase your life. Like me, in and of yourself, you are spiritually bankrupt. “*Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*” (Heb 11:6).

So, I implore you, draw near to God, just as the desperate father came to Jesus because there was no one else who could help. Believe that God exists. There is abundant evidence of His glorious physical handiwork all around you and within you (Rom 1:20). Brother, sister, friend: you are indeed ‘*fearfully and wonderfully made*’ (Ps 139:14). God’s Word, the Bible, is unlike any other book ever written because it is all God-breathed. It is true truth from the mouth of the One who never lies. God alone is fully trustworthy. Only a fool says in his or her heart ‘*there is no God*’ (Ps 14:1). God does reward those who seek him. His reward is the precious gift of His only begotten Son. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

*True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true, it is also a deep-rooted assurance created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation* (HCLD7A21).

Come to Jesus and believe that all things are possible by faith. Believe that He alone makes true life possible. Believe and you will truly live!

AMEN.