

## Mountain-Moving Faith

Matt. 17:14-20

**Intro.** Have you asked God to move any mountains lately? This morning we come to that passage where Jesus said, **“Nothing will be impossible for you.”**

**Chap. 17** opens with Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. This spectacular vision of Christ in His glory fulfilled **16:28** where Jesus spoke to His disciples and said, **“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”** Six days later, the Transfiguration took place on some dark slope of Mt. Hermon as a preview or trailer of Christ’s Second Coming. In **chap.16** the Pharisees and Scribes asked Jesus to show them some sign from heaven...knowing their hearts, Jesus refused. But what He refused to do for the unbelieving, He did for His own who believed Him.

And the timing of the Transfiguration was strategically important. In **Matt. 16:21** Jesus just told His disciples **He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life...** He repeats this in **Matt. 17:22, 23**. We know how Peter reacted, but we can only begin to imagine how painful this was for His disciples. They struggled with confusion, heartache and despair. Try to put yourself in their sandals. The Master and friend you love and have committed your life to has told you He will be killed. Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, **“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”- Jn. 14:18** Yet this is how they felt. They felt they would soon be abandoned and orphaned. So at this strategic moment when emotions were running high, Jesus revealed His glory to Peter, James and John. The Transfiguration was mainly for their benefit and ours. As we found last time, it confirmed six important realities. The Transfiguration confirmed...

1. the identity of Jesus
2. the certainty of the cross
3. the coming Kingdom
4. the reality of eternal life
5. the change that will happen to believers when Jesus returns
6. Yet rising above the other 5 confirmations, is the fact that Jesus stands alone as the key man and focal point of God's redemptive plan

We say, *“all good things must come to an end,”* and so the Transfiguration ended. Moses and Elijah disappeared. The glory of God’s presence vanished and the landscape was dark again. Even the radiance from the face and clothing of Jesus faded. **v.8** says, **When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.** In contrast to the glory on the mountain was the darkness and the turmoil that awaited them in the lowlands.

### 1. *The Conditions in the Lowlands* - vs. 14 -16

**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."**

Mark and Luke add some details not found in Matthew’s account. **Mk. 9:15-18** says, **As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."**

Mark says an argument erupted between the disciples and some scribes. (**Mk. 9:14**) These scribes probably mocked the disciples because they were unable to cast the evil spirit out of the boy. Before His disciples could say what they were arguing about, a man from the crowd approached Jesus, knelt before Him and said, "**Lord, have mercy on my son.**" Notice the man called Jesus **Lord** and asked only for **mercy**. His approach and attitude were just what ours need to be as we approach the Lord.

According to Mark the father told Jesus the spirit **robbed** the boy **of speech** and **throws him to the ground**. He also said, the boy **foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid**. Imagine how other children reacted when he suffered these terrible convulsions while playing with them. And consider the heartache of this father. In **Lk.9:38** the father tells Jesus, "**he is my only son.**" He's **a son** this father loves and has high hopes for. He hasn't shunned the boy because of his condition, but has stood by him...hoping and praying that someday there would come a cure.

The symptoms the boy suffered sound like epilepsy. The father explained his son suffered these convulsions **from childhood**. But both Jesus and the father identify the boy's condition as a malady brought on by an evil spirit. We can only wonder how much mental, physical, and emotional illness is actually the work of Satan, who is called the Adversary and the Destroyer. And no answer is given to explain why this particular boy had become a target for demonic control.

This large crowd had gathered at the foot of Mt. Hermon because that's where Jesus was last seen and that's where His disciples were as they waited for Him to return. Since Jesus wasn't there, the father hoped His disciples could affect the cure he hoped and prayed for. But the disciples were powerless against this demon. They couldn't cast him out. The scribes then used the occasion to ridicule and taunt the disciples.

The fact the disciples were unable to cast this demon out is somewhat surprising because **Matt. 10:1** says, **Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness**. Authorization to drive out demons is repeated again in **Matt. 10:8 - Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give**. Up to this time, the disciples had been successful healing diseases and casting out demons. But in verses that follow, Jesus explained why they were powerless and unable to cast out this spirit. His explanation about faith is the main point of this story so hang on, we'll get there.

There seems to be prophetic overtones in these events. The glory of Jesus has been seen in the sky just as His return will be signaled by great cosmic signs in the heavens. The Transfiguration, as Jesus promised, was a glimpse of what it will be like when "**the Son of Man comes in His kingdom.**" Jesus then descended from the mountain with His disciples. His descent may represent His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming when He returns with His Church, represented here by Peter, James and John. When Jesus descended from the heavenlies to the lowlands of earth He was met by turmoil / misery / satanic oppression / and unbelief...conditions that will prevail at the end of the Tribulation before Christ returns. These conditions are represented by the unbelief of the crowds / the oppression experienced by this father and his epileptic son / as well as His Jewish disciples whose faith is weak. What those who claim to believe in Him are powerless to do, Jesus accomplished in an effortless way

This scenario proclaims the true victor! The Church will never succeed in evangelizing the world / eliminating evil / or running Satan off the planet. Yet when Jesus returns in power and glory, every knee will bow to Him. With the sharp sword that proceeds from His mouth He will make all things right and Satan will be bound for 1,000 years. Jesus will single-handedly accomplish all this because He is King of kings and Lord of lords. His sovereign power is displayed again in **vs.17, 18**.

## 2. *The Command of Christ* - vs. 17, 18

**"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.**

Scholars debate who Jesus was referring to when He said, **"O unbelieving and perverse generation."** Was He talking about the unbelieving scribes who picked an argument with His disciples? Was He talking about the mixed crowd who had come hoping to see some miracles? Or, was He talking about His powerless disciples? I think the best answer is, "Yes"...all of the above.

The word **unbelieving** needs no explanation. Whether they refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah or believed in some inadequate way, the whole lot of them was unbelieving. The same is true of the world today. There are many atheists who refuse to believe in God. They view Christianity as a religious fable. Yet there are many in the Church who profess to believe in Christ but live as practical atheists. What they claim to believe has little impact on the way they live their lives.

**Perverse** means twisted or in common terms, messed up. This is what happens to the unbelieving. Having rejected the truth and the One who is the truth, their lives get all knotted and wound around things that are neither true nor trust-worthy. But again, the same thing happens to Christians who don't walk by faith and obedience to God's Word.

Suppose I refused to believe the owner's manual that came with my Chevy. Thinking myself smarter than the GM engineers who wrote the book, I decide to put transmission fluid in the gas tank / water in the crankcase / and topped off the transmission with washer fluid. What do you think my arrogance and unbelief will lead to? Will the Chevy perform as designed? The same is true for those who refuse to believe God and obey the manual for life He has given. It's no wonder the world is so messed up! We can't figure out why a man should be married only to a woman. We can't even decide who should be allowed to use a men or women's washroom? That's how **perverse** and messed up our world has become! The world is controlled by a prince today but His name isn't Jesus. The **prince of the power of the air** is Satan who disrupts, deceives, and destroys. **I Jn. 5:19 says, the whole world is under the control of the evil one.** This little demon controlled boy, represents every human being under the Satan's control...control that will only increase as we near the time of Christ's return. Apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ, we are hopelessly sick / out of control / and self-destructive. Only Jesus Christ can deliver us from this hopeless condition.

**Eph. 4:30 says, And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.** Many have scratched their heads and wondered if God can really be grieved and what is it like for Him to grieve? Yet here in **v.17** we're given insight into this question. We know that Jesus wept at the graveside of Lazarus and He wept over Jerusalem. But notice the frustration / disappointment / and grief in **v.17** – Jesus said, **"How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"** He's asking, *"When will you finally understand? When will you finally get it? How many times must my power and authority be displayed before you believe that I am the Messiah you've been waiting for?"* This is no anthropopathism...this isn't Jesus pretending to express human emotion to make a point! This is the Son of Man expressing emotion that was heartfelt and genuine. **Heb. 4:15 says, For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses...** Has someone ever let you down? Has your heart ever ached from deep disappointment? This same emotion was felt by Jesus...emotion that was very real and agonizing. Once again, Jesus asked these questions not just to vent frustration, but for the benefit of His disciples then and now. Then with utter simplicity and power Jesus said, **Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and He was healed from that moment.**

As Dr. S.M. Lockridge said in his inimitable way, *“Now, that’s my King!” That’s the Savior I’m counting on. That’s the conquering champion who never lost a battle. That’s the victor who stripped Satan of His power over us. Have you trusted Him to save and protect you?*

So, that was the introduction. Now comes the main point and it has to do with our faith in Him.

### 3. *The Crisis of Little Faith - vs. 19, 20*

**Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "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."**

Because the disciples were embarrassed, they waited to discuss this in private. They had already been humiliated in front of the scribes and that large crowd. Like a bunch of rednecks, they told the crowd, *“stand back and watch-is.”* But nothing happened. The demon may have participated in the mocking by afflicting the boy more severely after the disciples failed. *“So Jesus, let’s talk about this in private, away from that mean-spirited crowd. What went wrong?”* **“Why couldn’t we drive it out?”**

The answer Jesus gave is straightforward and to the point. He said, **Because you have so little faith.** So what we need is big faith, right? Not necessarily. Listen to v. 20 - **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.** **Little faith** must not refer to the size or quantity of our faith, but to its quality. Faith or trusting Christ was a real problem for the disciples. On at least 4 prior occasions, Jesus had rebuked them for little faith. In each situation, their faith withered when circumstances became uncertain or threatening. So Jesus wasn’t talking about the size of their faith. We know this because He compares faith to a **mustard seed** which is one of the smallest of all seeds. Though the mustard seed is small, faith the size of a mustard seed can accomplish amazing things. Jesus said it can move mountains. In that day, to *move a mountain* was an idiom for removing an obstacle or overcoming a difficulty. This is something God has done many times for His people. But in case you wondered...there’s is no record of any disciple ever moving an actual mountain!

I don’t often do this, but this morning I want to use a Hollywood movie to illustrate several *false concepts* of what faith is. The movie is entitled, Little Boy. It wasn’t a blockbuster, but Peg and I found it while scouring Netflix for something decent to watch. The setting is California. It’s the story of a little boy who adores his father and believes his faith can bring him safely home from World War II. The story has many good points, but it completely misses the point of what true Bible faith is.

Before the boy’s father goes off to war, father and son spend time together imagining heroic adventures. In each adventure the father asks, *“Do you believe you can do this?”* To that question the little boy always responds, *“Yes, I believe I can do this.”* This kind of faith is really self-confidence. Now self-confidence is valuable and important. People without self-confidence seldom accomplish anything. In fact, people with no self-confidence won’t even try to accomplish anything. But as life teaches us, self-confidence is limited and no substitute for confidence in what God can do. When the disciples asked, **Why couldn’t we drive it out?**, they may have tipped their hand. Mark’s account reads this way...**After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."** - Mk. 9:28, 29 Two things stand out here...first, when Jesus said, **this kind** (referring to the evil spirit), He seems to infer that some demons are more powerful than others. We see the Satanic hierarchy in **Eph. 6:12**. But second, note that Jesus said, **This kind can come out only by prayer.** Prayer is essentially the way our faith expresses itself. It’s what comes out of our mouth when we depend on God.

Prayer is asking God to do what we know we can't pull off in our own strength. I think it's significant that prayer isn't mentioned anywhere except after the fact.

Earlier we said conditions in the lowlands may represent conditions on earth when Jesus returns. Just like that crowd, those who survive the horrors of the Tribulation will be **unbelieving and perverse**. After teaching about the necessity of persistent prayer, Jesus asked a question. He said, **However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" - Lk. 18:8** In the context of **Lk. 18**, true faith in God is demonstrated by believers who actually pray. So as his question suggests, when Jesus returns, the fact that faith is missing will be evident because so few will be praying.

This makes me wonder...Did the disciples presume they could cast this kind of demon out apart from prayer? Did they think they could cast the demon out by will-power or by using the name of Jesus like a magic formula? One way faith can be small and ineffective is when we are prayerless. As James wrote, **You do not have, because you do not ask God**. The Gospel accounts leave us wondering if the disciples ever looked heavenward and prayed over this boy or did they think they had the power?

But back to the movie...The *second kind of faith* Little Boy explores is magical faith. Once again, his sole desire is to see his father come home safely. As the story goes, he's called to the stage to assist a magician. The magician tricks him into thinking he moves a bottle across a table by simply believing he can do it. Later a priest tells the boy he didn't really move the bottle, it was just a trick. But as we know, many people fall for magical and occult faith. They turn to Ouija Boards and Taro Cards. They hope candles and meditation will yield the results they're hoping for. This kind of faith is an abomination to God. It's misplaced and idolatrous.

The *third kind of faith* Little Boy explores is faith based on earned results. At this point in the story the boy is given a list of good deeds. By doing these he's told he will earn his father's return. Now we want our children to grow up believing that work is rewarded. The farmer who plants seeds and tends his garden believes he will harvest a crop as the result. And it's true, we reap what we sow. Yet profit-motive faith or earned results faith is another false view of what faith is. It's sort of a "*God helps those who help themselves idea*." True faith relies on God's goodness mercy and grace and power...not on our performance. And listen, faith is only as strong as its object. This is why Jesus said, Trust God!

Though Little Boy believes with all his heart...though he has faith in his faith, he never learns that true faith rests in God and His promises. From the verse in our passage this morning, he's shown that Jesus said faith the size of a grain of mustard seed can move mountains. Putting this to the test, he goes to a store and gets his hands on a mustard seed. The problem is...he still thinks, "*I can do this*." Standing in the middle of a street facing a mountain with his hands raised, he takes a stance the magician taught him as if he was casting a spell. His neighbors watch and make fun of him. But guess what happens as he strains every nerve to believe? There's an earthquake! I didn't see that coming! And behold, the earthquake causes the mountain to move a couple of inches. (Only Hollywood could come up with that!) But each time something remarkable happens in response to his faith, the little boy is told, "*You did it!*" God is never mentioned.

The point I want you to grasp is this...true faith isn't confidence in what we can do. True faith, though it may be as tiny as a mustard seed, is confidence in what God can do. God created the universe. He is the One who made and moves the mountains. God sent his only begotten Son to die that we might be forgiven our sins and live as His children. There is benefit in self-confidence and hard work, but these in no way compare to the power of God who is able to do more than we could ever ask or think. True faith isn't trusting what we can accomplish...it's confidence in what God can accomplish when we surrender our lives to Him. It's not a "*you can do it*" faith. It's a "*He can do it*" faith. Only this kind of faith brings glory to God. The disciples hadn't learned this yet.

Later Paul did. In **II Cor. 3:5** he wrote, **Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.**

I've told you about a Hollywood story, but I know a much better story and this one is true. It's the story of another boy named David who slew a nine foot tall giant named Goliath. When Israel's military officers and their army recoiled in fear, the young shepherd boy, David stepped forward. He didn't say, "*watch-is.*" In **II Sam. 17:37** we hear David say, **The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.**" Using only a sling, David sunk a smooth stone in the forehead of that Philistine giant and that mountain of a man who opposed God's people moved didn't he? He came crashing down...the original smack down! David didn't say, "*I can do it*"...He said **the Lord will** do it. God used a shepherd boy who trusted Him. Through the faith of that shepherd boy, He displayed His power and glory.

Do you know what makes mustard seed faith unique? A mustard seed is a living organism. When planted and watered, that little seed grows into one of the largest herbs. And just like a mustard seed, our faith will grow given the right information...the water of God's word.

As we finish, I want you to hear the exchange between the boy's father and Jesus. In **Mk. 9:22** the boy's father speaks to Jesus and says – **"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."** I love this next part... **"If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."** **Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"** Isn't this where we often find ourselves?...believing but not fully trusting. Questioning whether God can really do what we need Him to do and praying only as a last resort. Instead we should say, "*I know God can do it...His power exceeds anything I could ask!*" Little faith doubts, but effective faith thanks God for the answer before the answer ever comes!

**Little faith** believes when we have something in our hand...when the pantry and check book have all we need. When things were going well and everything seemed under control, the disciples found it easy to trust the Lord. But as soon as their circumstances became uncertain or threatening, their faith withered and they failed to pray in faith. Are we any different from them? When we're healthy and have all the necessities of life our faith tends to be strong. But when we face a need, our faith is often weak. We give way to doubt.

So how can do increase our faith? We can do what this father did. He admitted his unbelief and asked for help to overcome it. Have you ever prayed, "*Lord, increase my faith.*" The Lord often does this by drawing our attention to specific Scripture passages. But as James and Peter explain, the Lord also allows tests and trials to refine and mature our faith. Like the athlete who increases strength by gradually lifting heavier weights or by running longer distances, we grow as the challenges increase. The challenges expose our weaknesses and drive us to the Lord. Mustard seed faith is small, but it grows and becomes productive because it's based on the God who cannot fail.

As a parting verse, let me close with **Prov. 3:5, 6 - Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.** Trust Him friends. When you trust Him, He'll take what is crooked out of your life.