

Releasing the Life of Faith

Thomas Robinson, *The Suffering & Glory of Life in Jesus*, 4, July 13, 2014

Matthew 17:14-23

¹⁴ And when they came to the crowd, a **man** came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵ said, “**Lord, have mercy on my son**, for he is moon-struck and he suffers terribly. For often he **falls into the fire**, and often into **the water**. ¹⁶ And I brought him to **your disciples**, and **they could not heal him.**”

¹⁷ And Jesus answered, “**Faithless and twisted generation**, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.”

¹⁸ And **Jesus rebuked the demon**, and it came out of him, and the **boy was healed** instantly.

¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “**Why** could we not cast it out?”

²⁰ He said to them, “Because of **your little faith**. For truly, I say to you, if you have **faith like a grain of mustard seed**, you will say to this **mountain**, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and **nothing will be impossible** for you.” ^[21]

²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The **Son of Man** (*anthropos*) is about to be delivered into the **hands of men** (*anthropos*), ²³ and they will **kill him**, and he will **be raised** on the third day.” And they were **exceedingly grieved**.

Matthew 10:1, 7-8

¹ And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction....

⁷ “And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.”

Matthew 13:31-32

³¹ ... “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Matthew 21:21

²¹ And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen.”

Matthew 19:26

²⁶ But Jesus ... said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Luke 17:5-6

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

⁶ And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

1 Corinthians 13:2

² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

1 Corinthians 15:1

¹ Now I would remind you of the good news I proclaimed as good news to you... that Christ died

Down from the Mountaintop

The minds of Peter, James, & John must have been churning as they came down with Jesus from the mountain: Jesus, Moses, Elijah, the Voice, the fear, the assurance, the questions. They had been away, on a high mountain, with Jesus. But now they descend like Moses (Ex 32).

What they come to is crowds, a cry for mercy, suffering, danger, failure, disappointment. A man with a “moon-struck” son (epilepsy, demon, moon?). It’s trying to kill him in fire and water.

Mt tells the story briefly (cf Mk 9:14-27). It is a paradim of a generation like most: without real faith, its thinking turned backwards about what matters, living in deception (Dt 32:5,20).

Jesus is the presence/inbreaking of reality, God’s presence. He sustains us all the time but we live never taking his reality seriously. We confess and deny at the same time, like Peter (Mt 16).

How long? Jesus is carrying them along, helping them to see, experience. But, can they see?

Jesus says, “Bring him to me.” And it’s done. The reality is astonishing. But can we live in it?

Why Didn’t It Work? Tiny Faith

The disciples seem embarrassed by failure. “Why were we not able...” Earlier, Jesus sent them out to do such healings (Mt 10:1,8). What happened? Jesus’ answer pushes them to think:

It has to do with “little-faith.” Jesus has often mentioned “little-faith” – trusting God for clothing (6:30); fear in storm (8:26); Peter’s on water (14:31); faith to see beyond present fearsome reality. But then he talks not about great faith but about tiny faith, like a mustard seed.

Jesus has sometimes talked about big faith: the Centurion (8:10); the Canaanite woman (15:28); blind men (9:28-29). People who unexpectedly break through barriers of culture, old patterns of thought to trust that Jesus brings a new reality, that he changes everything for good.

The crucial thing is that it is not just faith, but faith in the right direction – trust in God, in Jesus. Then the tiniest peep-hole of faith sees a whole new world. Nothing is impossible.

Jesus doesn’t give them a better technique of healing. Better, more powerful words to say. He doesn’t even tell them they need greater faith. The “mustard seed” implies that what they thought was faith was really no faith at all. They’d sunk back into self-deception, self-trust. The only power of faith is God and his grace. God works by his own will. Paul emphasizes that faith must embody God’s character, God’s love. But mountains fly. Nothing is impossible.

Grieving at the Good News

Matthew helps us see the difficulty for the disciples (and us) to live in that new, empowered reality, by their very natural reaction to Jesus telling them again about his coming suffering.

Jesus has just shown that nothing is impossible for God working in him. He now speaks of the future with irony: The “Son of the human” is being handed over into “human” hands.

Humans will take this one who is their own, their hope, the inbreaking of the life of their creator, the healer, the one who overthrows the demonic powers that destroy them, and humans will kill the ultimate human. But – mysteriously – he will be raised on the third day.

The disciples clearly can make nothing of the last phrase. It is only the killing that hits them.

They also can’t put together the idea of unlimited power, nothing impossible, with being killed. Jesus the victim blocks out Jesus the embodiment of God’s power and glory. These can’t go together. Thus they are overwhelmed with grief. They still have to learn God.

But, this killing is an event. It will happen. It reveals how paradoxical and wonderful God’s reality appears in our world. That “good news” will become reality. Grief will turn into joy.