

Introduction

On top of Mount Carmel four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal had cried out all day for their god to answer in fire and consume a sacrifice, but to no avail. At last it was Elijah's turn. He prayed, and the Lord God answered immediately. Fire came down from heaven and devoured the sacrifice and the altar. The multitudes gathered there began to cry out, "the Lord; he is God; the Lord; he is God." Led by Elijah, the people seized the 450 prophets of Baal and slaughtered them. It was a wonderful day of vindication, but it wasn't over. Elijah then went back to the top of Mount Carmel where he prayed for the end of a three-and-a-half year drought. And God sent the rain. One can hardly imagine it getting any better than this for Elijah this side of heaven. However, Elijah came down from the mountain, and the exhilaration was about to be put to the test. Queen Jezebel sent a messenger to inform Elijah that she was determined to do to him what he had done to the prophets of Baal. The threat was too much. He ran for his life and asked the Lord that he might die. How does this happen? How does a man of God exhibit great strength one minute and crumble the next? We find the answer in our text this morning. And the answer says much about how we as disciples of Jesus Christ can maintain a strong sense of peace during troubled times. It is a text suited to the very days in which are living.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

The occasion described in these verses takes place shortly after Jesus had his glorious mountaintop experience. Up on a high mountain, the glory of God had shone through him and the Father exploded with delight. It was the PEOPLE on Mount Carmel who recognized and declared that the Lord is God. But on the mount of transfiguration, it was GOD the Father, who spoke: "This is my beloved Son." One can hardly imagine it getting any better than this for Jesus this side of heaven. However, Jesus had now come down from the mountain, and the exhilaration was about to be put to the test. Unlike, Elijah, however, the Son did not run away. He faced a faithless generation and overcame the consequences of their faithlessness.

At the outset we see how . . .

I. The Consequences of Faithlessness Ravaged a Son.

A. Upon his return from the mountain Jesus encounters a crowd out of which comes a man who is distraught over the terrible plight of his son. He is possessed by a demon which essentially throws him into the fire and into the water. Open fires were common in the day, and pools of water dotted the landscape for the purposes of watering. The gospel of Mark reports additional details. The indwelling spirit made the boy mute. From time to time it would seize the boy and throw him down. He would grind his teeth and foam at the mouth. This picture bleeds horror and pain and grief. Can you imagine having a child under such circumstances? The work of the demon was painfully destructive to his host.

The father's desperation is justified. He wants help for a helpless soul overpowered by a spiritual thief whose business is to multiply pain and compound agony, to steal, kill, and destroy him.

B. We should soak in this horrific picture because it presents a physical picture of the spiritual reality of every human being by nature. All humankind by nature is dominated satanically. All are dead in trespasses and sins and follow the course of the world. We are blinded by the god of this world and follow the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is at work in the sons of disobedience. Our souls are miserable and tortured. We are impaired and we pierce ourselves with many a pang. Sin does to us spiritually what the demon did to the boy physically.

The condition of this son demonstrates the purpose of the whole demonic realm. Its intent is to destroy peace and joy and faith and replace these with misery, darkness, hopelessness, despair, fear, tumult, dissatisfaction, and joylessness. Psalm 84:11 declares, "No good thing does [the Lord] withhold from those who walk uprightly." The contrary is so when it comes to Satan. He holds out only good-looking things but "No BAD thing does he withhold from those who walk in his way."

The Apostle Paul describes the depths to which faithlessness takes human beings under the domain of darkness. In Romans 1, he writes, "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They

are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

The devil always holds out something beautiful with the promise of delight, but the end thereof is destruction and death. Do not be deceived. Watch and pray that you might not enter into temptation. Flee from the passions of the flesh. They wage war against the soul and lead only to destruction.

In the face of desperation, we learn that ...

II. The Consequences Stymied the Disciples of Jesus.

The desperate father approaches Jesus with humility but with disappointment. He brought his son to Jesus’s disciples, but they were unable to heal him. What sad words! These disciples about a year prior had been commissioned by Jesus to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons.” And that is what they had done. So they are now failing where once they had succeeded. The trouble is not a lack of power or a lack of knowledge or a lack of experience. It is the lack of connecting with the power that was available.

What a sad shame. It is sad indeed when the world turns to the church and the church is incapable of rendering aid. It is not that we are the appointed social agency for the world. It is not that we are merely disaster relievers for the many miseries into which the world plunges itself. We are not called merely to improve humanity’s worldly experience. But getting people out from under the dominion of the devil and leading them to find hope for eternity, guiding them to locate eternal riches in heaven—this is what we are called to do. And it is a sad shame when a hopeless devil-riddled world shows up at our doorstep looking for some light, some power, some hope, and we have none to give.

This happens not because we lack the truth, not because we lack experience in history. But it does happen when we have lost connection with the power that is available. And that happens when we start looking at things from the perspective of the world. Whenever we lose sight of the fact that the gospel is what sets men free, we lose power. The church in almost every generation has asked the question, how can we get the world

to come to the church, what can we do to make the church more attractive to the world? Whenever those are the questions people ask, the inevitable result has been that the church devolves in something that is incapable of helping at the level of real need. The faithless world needs a bright shining light of hope for direction, but it will not get it unless the church remains a people of faith grounded not in ourselves and our methods and strategies, but in the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation. What the world needs most right now is not a vaccine; it is not a quick return to normalcy. What the world needs most even now is the gospel.

The consequences that stymied the disciples were . . .

III. Consequences that Permeated the Society.

Jesus, learning of the situation, expels a great cry of exasperation. He says, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?"

His frustration centered upon the condition not only of his disciples but of the entire generation. He called them faithless and twisted. They were without faith. And as a result they were twisted. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Without faith it is impossible to be anything other than perverse and twisted. When people resist God they plunge themselves into ruin of all sorts then they cry out in despair for help. It happens over and over. It is a vicious and relentless cycle. Over and over just like the days of the judges. Whenever you read the book of Judges, you can easily tire of the same thing happening over and over and over. The people grow faithless. They cry out to God. He delivers them. The people again grow faithless. They cry out to God. He delivers them again. And on it goes. Will people not learn? Will they not turn? Humans are stubborn in their unbelief, and we put God to an incredible test. Jesus's cry expresses exasperation and displays the absolute senselessness of unbelief and its consequences.

When Moses came down from his glorious time on Mount Sinai with the Lord, he brought with him the tablets that were inscribed by God himself. As he drew near the Israelite camp, he thought he heard the sound of war, but as he drew closer it was clear to be the sound of singing. And when he came near, he saw the golden calf and the people dancing around it in

idolatrous worship. Moses's anger burned and he threw the tablets down and broke them in pieces. He was exasperated. If our unbelief is exasperating to mere men, how much more is it a test of the patience of God! Thankfully we answer not to Moses, but to a gracious God who though he is exasperated and tested by our unbelief day after day is also gracious and patient and who bears with us. But I must say, the patience of God will one day come to an end. And justice will be served. I hope you are you prepared for that day.

The disciples were no match for the consequences that affected the boy, but . . . **IV. The Consequences Were No Match for Jesus.**

"And Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly." What may grip a life with misery and pain, what may fill the heart of a father with anguish, what may attract the attention of a faithless crowd, and what may stymie the disciples of Jesus themselves, is nevertheless no match for Jesus himself. It is striking how Matthew relates the words of the father and the words of Jesus. The father had said, "I BROUGHT HIM TO YOUR DISCIPLES and they could not heal him." Jesus said, "BRING HIM HERE TO ME, and the boy was healed instantly.

What is impossible with everyone else is not impossible for Jesus. He is able. Do you feel yourself like this father? Do you witness a loved one caught in the throes of faithlessness, whose openness to sin has taken them deep into destruction? Do you long for help? Do you feel yourself like this boy unable to loose yourself from this terrible condition? Do you feel the weight of your guilt knowing that you are powerless to remove it? Do you feel yourself like this crowd gathered around just looking on? Do you feel yourself like these disciples? You have tried what you know but the old stuff does not seem to be working? You feel defeated and everyone around is mocking your inability? Jesus is the one to whom you must look. He can help in the most dire of circumstances if you will but turn to him.

Turn to him for forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. There is not another who can, but he will if you trust in him. Turn to Christ in your bondage and despair. No one can lift you out of those chains but him. Turn to him in times of anxiety and uncertainty. He will keep in perfect peace whose mind is set on him. Turn to him for strength to pursue

godliness and holiness. Turn to Christ for a change of masters over your life. Turn to Christ for deliverance from the domain of darkness and victory over the evil one. He is not going to take you out of every trial and remove all your troubles, but if you trust him and turn to him, he will take you to heaven and make you holy.

Finally, this morning we see that . . .

V. The Consequences Occasioned a Valuable Lesson

So as the disciples watched Jesus step in boldly and eliminate a problem that confounded them, they wanted to know why. And they needed to know why. Jesus has a critical lesson for them. He said, it is because of your little faith. They were not completely faithless, but they were little in their faith. And yet with faith as a mustard seed, they would be able to do great things.

In fact even with faith the size of a mustard seed, says Jesus, you can move a mountain; NOTHING will be impossible for you. You may or may not have verse 21 in your translation. Verse 21 does not appear in a number of translations because it is absent from most manuscripts, but the substance of verse 21 is in most manuscripts of Mark. "This kind never comes out except by prayer." What emerges here is a lesson of utmost importance.

The valuable lesson is this: Followers of Christ are given the privilege of participating in the mighty works of God. What is necessary for this participation is faith—not great faith, just real faith, mustard-seed faith. The character of this faith is a relentless hold on God to do these great things.

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The mighty work of God was the casting out of the demon. But Jesus promises that NOTHING will be impossible for those who possess this kind of faith. He declares that 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. The Jews related to what Jesus was saying. They used that very idea of moving

mountains to speak of overcoming great obstacles. It was far from the mind of Jesus that people would try to move literal mountains through faith. You know if what really mattered in the world was shifting a mountain from one place to another, God would be doing that. But what God cares about is the redemption of sinners and that redeemed sinners live in holiness. He cares about people humbling themselves before him and seeking his face and living in love for him and in love for neighbor. He cares about delivering those crushed under the abuse of Satan's dark domain and transferring them to the kingdom of his beloved Son. He cares about godliness radiating from the lives of the redeemed. And these are true mountains. These are the truest, biggest, most insurmountable mountains in the world. And Jesus is saying moving these mountains will not be impossible for those who are connected with the power of God through faith.

We turn to Hebrews 11 and see what God does through faith. Through faith Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice. By faith Abraham obeyed God. By faith Sarah received power to conceive. By faith Abraham offered up Isaac. By faith Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God. By faith the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. By faith David downed the giant. But it was also by faith, says the writer to the Hebrews, that some were tortured, others were mocked and flogged. They were stoned. They were sawn in two; they were killed with the sword. The mountains Jesus is talking about are mountains whose movement displays a love for God and faithfulness to his word. These are the most daunting realities when you behold a faithless and twisted world. But with God they are not impossible.

So what is the nature of this faith as Jesus declares it? Are you ready? I have two words—persevering and prayerful. Remember how the desperate father approached Jesus? "I brought him to your disciples and they could not heal him." Apparently they tried and it didn't work. So they gave up. They were not trying. They had tried. They could not. That is not faith. Faith does not simply try. Faith keeps at it. Faith acts. Faith keeps on acting. It is prayerful. It prays and prays. Throughout the New Testament we see an emphasis on prayer not as "once-and-done" but as an ongoing activity of doing. "Keep on asking, and it will be given to you. Keep on seeking and you will find; keep on knocking and the door will be opened."

Paul says in Ephesians that real prayer keeps alert "with all perseverance." Faith does not pray and give up; faith keeps praying.

James declares that "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." He points us to Elijah who prayed that might not rain, and for three-years-and-six-months it did not. Then he prayed again and it did rain. But it is also true that when Elijah prayed for rain, he did not pray just once. He prayed not just once but twice, not just twice but three times. All in all it was seven times before the prayer was answered! Jacob was confronted by God on the eve of his meeting with Esau. He wrestled with God in the form of a man. The "man" said, "let me go." Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man responded, "you have striven with God and have prevailed;" and he blessed him. Mountain-moving faith is powerful because it connects to the power of God. Mountain-moving faith does not change God, but it is God's power at work to change us and to work through us to change others, to deliver others, to restore others.

So you see, followers of Christ are given the privilege of participating in the mighty works of God. What is necessary for this participation is faith—not great faith, just faith, mustard-seed faith. The character of this faith is a relentless hold on God to do these great things. And this means you and it means me. What does that faith look like in the wake of a coronavirus pandemic? It is prayerful; it is trusting; it is confident that God is working good for those who are the called according to his purpose. It is anchored in the gospel and the hope of a day when there will be no more viruses and holds forth that hope to others. It says with Job, though he may slay me yet will I trust him. This faith is concerned with people whose lives are greatly impacted, whose hearts are being filled with fear and anxiety. But even more than that, mountain-moving faith is concerned for the glory of God and the faithfulness of God's people. It longs and looks for spiritual deliverance of sinners and obedience to God, no matter what is going on. And here is a mountain moved: (Isaiah 26:3-4) the steadfast of mind God will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in him. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord is an Everlasting Rock.

Conclusion

While Moses was in glory on Mount Sinai with God, things were unraveling below as the people made a golden calf and began to worship it. While Jesus was on the mount of transfiguration, things were unraveling below. And now in a sense Jesus has gone back up the mountain into the glory of the Father, what will he find when he returns? He will certainly find things unraveling here below. He will find a faithless and twisted generation.

But how will he find his people? Let's be sure he does not find a faithless and impotent church. One of the chief marks of a faithful church is that it prays. The faithful church is a praying church—not a church that tried to pray and gave up, not a church that prays when it must, but a church that PRAYS—actively, passionately, trustingly, obediently, and perseveringly.

I saw a photograph this week of the vice president meeting in prayer with a number of others, asking God for wisdom in handling this crisis we are in. And I saw where the vice president was mocked because he prayed. People were insinuating that "We are in trouble now." The world may laugh and scoff. Prayer may seem a joke to a faithless and twisted generation. Indeed it may look impotent to the world. But truly, if you believe Jesus, you know that what looks impotent to the world is actually what connects God's people with God's mighty, mountain-moving power.

Do not simply pray and be done. Know that faith even as a mustard seed is a faith that prays and prays and prays and prays and won't let go.