

Help My Unbelief 5-22-05

Matthew 17:14-23 (NIV)

¹⁴ When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵ "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." ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. ¹⁷ "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." ¹⁸ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁰ 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." ²² When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. ²³ They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.

Mark and Luke add a number of details to this story that are not in Matthew. So if you will indulge me, I will try to tell the details of all three accounts in my own words. Jesus and His inner circle, Peter, James and John met up with the other disciples a day after the transfiguration. (Luke 9:37) As they approached, they could see that an argument was taking place. (Mark 9:14) The teachers of the Law seemed to be arguing with the nine disciples over the best way to cure a man who was possessed by a demon. When Jesus approached, the people were filled with wonder at His presence. (Mark 9:15) He asked about the argument. (Mark 9:16)

A man came forward, knelt before Jesus and told of how the disciples could not heal his son. (Mark 9:17-18) He had gone to the disciples who had success in the past casting out demons (Mark 6:13), but for some reason were unsuccessful with this man. Like many seekers today who cannot find the help they need from believers, his father went straight to Jesus. It seems that his son had all the signs of epilepsy but not merely epilepsy. His seizures would often take place near fire or water to try to destroy the son's life. (Mark 9:22) In addition, he could not speak or hear any longer. The evil spirit rarely left him with any peace. He would scream out when it would take hold of him. (Luke 9:39)

Jesus rebuked those present for their lack of faith and asked that the man be brought. As he was coming, the spirit took hold of him and threw him on the ground and his mouth began to foam. Jesus asked how long he had been like this, and the father told Him that he was like this since childhood. (Mark 9:20-21) The father asked Jesus, "If you can do anything, please help my son." Jesus asked the man, "What do you mean, 'If you can?'" Everything is possible to the one that believes." He answered, "I believe; help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24)

Commented [notes1]: ³⁷ The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. Luke 9:37 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: ¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. Mark 9:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. Mark 9:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ¹⁶ "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. Mark 9:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ 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 9:17-18 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. Mark 6:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ²² "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Mark 9:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ³⁹ A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. Luke 9:39 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. Mark 9:20-21 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ²⁴ Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Mark 9:24 (NIV)

Jesus told the evil spirit to leave the boy alone. He lay so still on the ground that those watching thought he was dead. Jesus took his hand and raised him up to his feet. The crowd was in awe. (Mark 9:26-27)

Jesus and the disciples went into a house. Once they were away from the crowd, the disciples asked Jesus, "Why couldn't we do that?" (Mark 9:28) Jesus said that this can only be accomplished with prayer (Mark 9:29) and that they did not have the faith required to do it. (Matthew 17:20) He told them that if they had just a little faith they could move mountains. Nothing would be impossible for them. When they returned to Galilee, He warned them of the coming betrayal and execution, but that He would rise in three days. Though they did not understand what He meant, they were saddened. (Matthew 17:20-23)

Instead of taking each verse as I usually do, because we have so much added from the other Gospels, I am going to go over the story point by point. It appears that Jesus and the inner three disciples stayed overnight on the mountain, Mount Hermon. Jews were all over the Roman world, so it is not surprising that there were teachers of the law even in that wicked city of Caesarea Philippi. The argument was probably over how to free the boy from demonic possession. The great rabbis of the past had prescribed rituals for freeing people of demons, but the disciples had not only been given the power to make demons flee, but had often seen Jesus just command them to leave. It was not long before this that the religious leaders had said that He was able to cast out demons because He used the power of Satan. (Matthew 12:24) I imagine the arguments were centered on these issues.

When Jesus arrived, you will notice He does not join their argument. He rebuked them all for their lack of faith.

¹⁷ "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

In other words, "How long do I have to stay around and demonstrate to you a life of faith? How many miracles do you have to see before you start believing that God can do anything? How long will I have to put up with this refusal to trust in God with a wholehearted conviction?" From Jesus' perspective, the angels always do His bidding without question. The disciples had been given the power to deal with this kind of problem but backslid into doubt.

Then there were the religious leaders. They were there to trap Jesus, looking for things for which to criticize Him. He is saying, "How can you be so unbelieving and misshapen? The word in Greek for "perverse" was used for a piece of pottery that was misshapen. He was telling them that they were misshapen people!

Jesus' words ring through the ages. Every generation is similar to all those that have gone before, unbelieving and perverse. What will it take? How many miracles do we need to see? How long will God put up with us? It is a question I often ask myself as I watch the news. When I think about the situation that Jesus walked in on, and what is happening today, it is no different. A father had suffered years of anguish trying to keep this evil spirit from destroying his son. Imagine that, not being able to let your son out of your sight for a moment. He said it hardly ever left him alone. I would

Commented [notes11]: ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.
Mark 9:26-27 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"
Mark 9:28 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ²⁹ He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."
Mark 9:29 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: ²⁰ 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."
Matthew 17:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ²² When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. ²³ They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.
Matthew 17:22-23 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: ²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."
Matthew 12:24 (NIV)

think this poor father was at his wits end. And here they are arguing religious dogma! No wonder Jesus would not join the argument! He saw the pain in the father's eyes, and felt the torture the son had endured for so long. Maybe today we would say it something like, "What is the matter with you people! Quit with the "I am right and you are wrong" stuff and believe God for some help for this poor family! You are all faithless and twisted because no one is doing anything to help them."

Hurting, lonely, and needy people surround us, and we are sidetracked on issues that do not matter in the least. We can be self-righteously indignant about a doctrine when the hurting are standing there in great need, and the Lord is hurting with them. It is like a child who has fallen off their bike crying in pain from scraped their knees and elbows, but mom and dad can only fight about whether or not they should have bought the bike.

Then Jesus focused in on the father of the man in need. The father had asked his Creator, "If you can, would you do something for my son?" Jesus shot right back, "What do you mean by 'if I can'." What was going on there was a lack of faith. Jesus was saying, "Not you too. Come on! You have to believe if you are going to get help. Listen, everything is possible to the person who believes!"

What a statement! It is an eternal truth! Is there a situation in your life that you truly know is not God's will that it continue? Everything is possible to him that believes! Everything! I believe for some things that people think I am crazy to believe. However, I know they are God's will, and I have His promise, "Everything is possible for him who believes." Everything!

The man came back with a very honest statement that I am sure all of you can relate to, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." Total honesty. Jesus loves it! He can work with that. You see, if the man had said anything else, he would have been lying. Many times, we have to say the same thing. "I believe You can do this Lord, but help me overcome my unbelief. I am struggling with doubt. You are all-powerful, all knowing, and fully capable. I just have a lack of faith because of my sinful nature. I ought to believe. There is no reason not to believe. Whatever is not of faith is sin. Help me overcome my unbelief."

When your child comes to you and says, "Daddy, I want to do a good thing but I can't. Will you help me? You know you will. It thrills your heart. You will lay everything else down and make it happen. That is the heart of your heavenly Father. When you want to do His will, but in honesty, you have to admit that you do not have what it takes, but you want it, then He will move heaven and earth to help you do that good thing.

With authority, Jesus commanded the spirit to come out of him and never enter him again. He raised the man up and gave him to his father. The relief on the father's face must have been something to see. The crowd was in awe of the great power of God at work right before their eyes. (Luke 9:43a)

Then Jesus and His disciples left the crowd and went into a house. Once alone, the disciples asked why they could not do what Jesus had just done. Why do you

Commented [notes17]: ⁴³ And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.
Luke 9:43 (NIV)

suppose they waited until they were alone? Maybe a little pride factor at work there? Mark tells us that Jesus said it takes prayer. In a few later manuscripts, it seems that the words "and fasting" were added. In the NIV version, verse 21 is left out because it was not in the best manuscripts. It said the same as in Mark. However, here in Matthew, Jesus' emphasis is on having faith. That causes me to think that He must have mentioned both in answering their question. It is just that the answer that really struck Peter, from whom Mark got his information, was prayer. The answer that struck Matthew was having faith. The two are linked. When in prayer, you discover God's will, and then you have faith to pray with conviction.

The Apostle John said that if we pray anything according to God's will, He hears us. (1 John 5:14) So is it by faith or prayer? It is by faith that comes from hearing from God in prayer. It is one thing for me to tell you something, to pray for you and try to encourage you, but when you hear from God, you know! You have the conviction that will stand the test. That is great faith. It is the kind of faith that does not look to what you have but at who God is. Paul wrote, ¹⁷ *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* Romans 10:17 (NIV)

Jesus went on to illustrate how powerful faith is. You probably recall the little packet of mustard seeds I brought. (Matthew 13:31) They are smaller than a pinhead. It does not take a lot of faith. It just takes the kind of faith that continues to grow. When watered it just gets bigger and bigger. (Matthew 13:32) When it sees results, it expects even more next time. The moving of mountains was an expression in Jesus' day that meant removing great obstacles. It was said that a great teacher could pulverize mountains. The mountain before the disciples was the healing of that poor man. All kinds of mountains stand in our way, but mustard seed faith, faith that grows can move them all. It does not matter how big the mountain is, God is bigger! It does not matter how impossible it looks, nothing will be impossible for you! Those are Jesus' words!

When they got back to Galilee, Jesus warned them again that He was going to be betrayed, murdered and after three days rise again. It is amazing to me that He understood this from Scripture. We have Peter quoting Psalm 16 in the book of Acts. (Acts 2:25-28) There, the Psalmist clearly predicted that the body of the Holy One would not see decay. The Apostles never quoted Hosea on the reason that Jesus knew He would rise the third day, but if you look at it, I think you might agree with me that this is how He knew to tell them that He would rise in three days.

He mentioned this on His first temple visit in John 2. *Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again.* (John 2:19) He must have known early on that this would be the case. He will repeat this warning through the last month of His ministry. I think He knew from these verses in Hosea, ¹ *"Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds."* ² *After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.* Hosea 6:1-2 (NIV) Jesus knew that He was the Lamb of God, as John the Baptist declared. The lamb is the sacrificial animal upon which the sins of the nation are placed on the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 23:27) The lamb was slaughtered as a picture of the judgment upon sin, torn to pieces, injured, wounded, just as Hosea said

Commented [notes18]: ³¹ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Matthew 13:31 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: ³² Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." Matthew 13:32 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: ²⁵ David said about him: "'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.' ²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, ²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. ²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' Acts 2:25-28 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." John 2:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ²⁷ "The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the LORD by fire. Leviticus 23:27 (NIV)

God would punish the people of Israel for their sins. But Hosea goes on to say that after two days He will revive us and on the third day, He will restore us that we may live in His presence. Christ had been in the presence of God throughout eternity. He was soon to face the judgment of sin just as Israel did according to Hosea's prophecies, but He was going to receive the judgment for all sin in His body.

I do not have any idea what the application was for the northern ten tribes of Israel. They went into bondage and pretty much disappeared as a nation. Judah would go into captivity later and be restored to the land, but not Israel. What did this mean, on the third day He will restore us?

As is so often the case in prophecy, the prophet went from talking about the punishment of sin upon Israel to the punishment taken by the Lamb of God. Jesus knew He would rise on the third day through Scripture. His confirmation was Jonah, who was in the belly of the great fish for three days. He quoted that one several times, as the sign the skeptics would get. (Matthew 12:39)

The disciples did not understand the warning, but it did discourage them. No one said anything. They probably remembered the rebuke Peter got for trying to tell the Lord it was not right.

Now it is time to pack your bag with eternal truth. I trust that every time you open God's word, you are looking for eternal truths to take with you. We have several that come out of this story.

First, do not argue philosophies, meet the need of those around you. Do not argue about how it needs to be done, just have the compassion to do it. (2 Timothy 2:23)

Second, how do you do it? Do it by faith that comes through prayer. Hear from the Lord and act on that conviction. When you know what God wants, pray with all the authority of heaven and it will be done. (Romans 14:23)

Third, and this goes along with the second, remember, "*Everything is possible for him that believes.*" If you have a little faith, "*nothing shall be impossible for you.*" (Luke 18:27)

Fourth, let the word of God speak to you as Jesus let it speak to Him. (John 14:26)

Imagine the impact on this world that we can have if we will just receive what Jesus has shared with us in this story. "I believe. Help my unbelief," we cry out with honest hearts. Then He tells us everything is possible if we will pray, know His will, and act in faith to meet the needs of those He brings into our lives. This kind of faith will move mountains of loneliness, addictions, habitual behavior, destructive thought patterns, and financial need... you name the mountain and believing prayer can move it. This world needs our prayers prayed in faith, and we get the privilege of praying God's will into the earth. What a wonderful assignment! Thank God for it. Do not slack up on it. It is a big assignment, but it comes from a big God who enables us with His own Spirit. Any volunteers?

Commented [notes23]: ³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.
Matthew 12:39 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: ²³ Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.
2 Timothy 2:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: ²³ But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.
Romans 14:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: ²⁷ Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."
Luke 18:27 (NIV)

Commented [notes27]: ²⁶ But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.
John 14:26 (NIV)