

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, I offer my all to You in worship. I honour you with my mind, I sing to You from my heart, I speak with You from within my soul, I praise You with all my strength, I raise You up with my spirit, and I know and feel Your presence through everything I do. This is my prayer, O Lord my God; fill me with Your goodness and grace and make me ready for everything that happens! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_ *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Look back at those who have been an example of faith to you at some important part of your life. Pray for these people, and if they have already died, give thanks to God for their lives.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who lead worship in your church.** *Pray for those who sing in your worship group, or any other choir. The gift of singing is a powerful gift to help others appreciate worship, so pray that such people will be aware of how important their gift is for the building up of others*
- *Give thanks to God for the Bible, and pray that it will be truly valued and read by God's people today*
- *Pray for medical advancement, and the need for scientists to continue to break through and discover new ways of curing disease*

Meditation

Simplicity is;

The love of God which made the world;
The passion of Jesus for all people;
The work of the Spirit in the believer's heart;
The Gospel commission to save the world;
The example of Jesus to heed the poor;
The Word of God which corrects all error;
The life of the Church which bears the Faith;
The beauty of worship which lifts the soul;
The joy of a life lived for God and for others;
The defeat of Satan before Christ on the Cross;
And the promise of eternal life with our Lord in Glory!

God's truth is simplicity itself.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 17: 10-21

¹⁰ The disciples asked him,

‘Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’

¹¹ He replied,

'Indeed, Elijah will come and restore all things; ¹² but I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.'

¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

¹⁴ When they came to the crowd, a man came to Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵ He said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and suffers terribly; he often falls on fire and often into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.'

¹⁷ Jesus replied,

'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.'

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

¹⁹ Then the disciples approached Jesus privately and said,

'Why could we not cast it out?'

²⁰ He said to them,

'Because of your lack of faith. Amen, I tell you that if you have faith the size of a 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 'However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.')

Review

The stories in our passage of scripture today all happened after Peter, James and John had been with Jesus on a mountain top and seen Him 'transfigured' (17:1-9). It was an awesome experience described by Jesus Himself as a 'vision' (17:9). This does not mean that it was imaginary, or the result of sleep or a trance; it was a real experience that was unlike normal life, and this is what Scripture means by a 'vision'. It is not surprising that the disciples sought clarification about what they had seen (17:10-13) as they returned to the foot of the mountain. However, what they found there were scenes of utter confusion, and our passage today is something of an anticlimax after the Transfiguration! The disciples had failed to stand in for Jesus and cast out a demon (17:15,16) and Jesus had to help them out (17:14-18), before discussing what had happened with them (17:21-23). The stories typify what we mean by 'coming down to earth'!

Firstly, the three disciples wanted to know about Elijah. Even though they had seen both Moses and Elijah on the mountain, they were only interested in Elijah, whose presence was associated with the coming of the Messiah. Despite all they had seen and heard earlier in Jesus' ministry, and despite Peter's own declaration that Jesus was the Messiah (16:16) they did not have a complete mental picture of what God was doing. They clearly thought that the transfiguration heralded the 'day of the Lord', when according to popular belief, Elijah would herald God's coming to judge the world and reign supreme with His people (see also Malachi 4). Jesus had to remind them that Elijah had 'already come' (17:12), and the judgement of God was something that was unfolding before their eyes. However, Peter James and John were able to work out from what Jesus said that He was speaking about John the Baptist (17:13). This shows that they were beginning to understand more about what Jesus was doing and what He was saying.

The other nine disciples were not doing so well. They had attempted to deal with a difficult situation that had developed with the crowds, who continued to gather anywhere they thought Jesus might be. The disciples were confused because they had failed to do the work Jesus had commissioned them to do, which was to 'heal the sick and cast out demons' (10:1), and when He arrived, Jesus had to placate a father who had sought healing and deliverance for his son (17:15). The connection between the boy's illness and the demon is something we will explore later in the study, but whatever the boy's condition, Jesus healed him (17:18). The remarkable part of the story is not so much the deliverance, but Jesus' rebuke of the crowds; 'how much longer must I put up with you!' It sounds very impatient! Jesus was probably upset because the people were continuing to come to Him as to a faith healer and exorcist, and this was more important to them than the fact that He was their Messiah! Jesus showed this same angst about His people on other occasions as He journeyed towards Jerusalem and His death (21:12f. 21:18f. 23:37).

All this was probably very difficult for the disciples who had been attempting to 'hold the fort' at the foot of the mountain; so Jesus spoke to the disciples privately about faith in order to help them come to terms with what had happened. He made it clear that faith lay at the root of the problem, and lack of faith had meant that the

boy had not been healed. The disciples' faith had doubtless been affected by the absence of Jesus and the leading disciples, but as Jesus went on to say, even the smallest amount of faith would have been sufficient. There are some complexities to what Jesus says here (including verse 21) that need detailed discussion, and you will find this later in the study.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Why did the disciples ask about Elijah?
- What really happened with the 'boy with a demon'?
- Faith the size of a mustard seed

Notes on the translation of the passage

V20 'Because of your lack of faith'

You may be confused by my translation because nearly every other Bible version says 'because of your little faith'. You will recall that Jesus described the disciples' faith as 'little faith' on a number of previous occasions (6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8). In those texts, the Greek word is a diminutive adjective used like a term of endearment (see my notes on these texts). Here, however, the Greek is a noun denoting inadequate faith, which only appears here in the whole New Testament! For this reason, I believe it is necessary to translate the word 'lack of faith', and as soon as this is done, the whole teaching here begins to make sense (see below).

V21 'however, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting'

Although the Authorised Version contains this verse, it is not present in most of the reliable ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament Gospels. There is some clear evidence that it has been copied over from Mark 9:29, and the whole of Mark's version of this story is more extensive than that of Matthew. The verse is not 'wrong' or 'untrue', it is simply out of place, and I discuss the meaning of it in my work on Mark 9:14-29.

Why did the disciples ask about Elijah?

The disciple's confusion was all to do with what they had been taught since childhood about the return of Elijah before both the 'End Times' and the coming of the Messiah. Their exact question to Jesus was 'why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' (17:10), which seems to us to be an odd question to ask just after the three of them had seen Jesus affirmed as Messiah in a vision of the glory of God. Yet for them it was important. Peter had declared at Caesarea Philippi (16:16) that Jesus was the Messiah, the 'Son of the Living God'. Jesus had demonstrated this through His words and actions, and part of His teaching was the declaration that John the Baptist was 'Elijah who is to come' (11:11-15), who prepared the way for Jesus through his preaching of repentance and the practice of baptism (Matt 3). They knew that Jesus equated John with Elijah, and they knew their scriptures about the return of Elijah (Malachi 3:5), so what did this vision of transfiguration mean?

Jesus began by replying that the scribes were right to refer to Malachi to discover God's will concerning the coming of Elijah who would 'restore all things'. The traditional teaching of the scribes from the final chapter of Malachi (3,4) was that the prophet spoke about two things, firstly the coming of the Messiah as announced by Elijah (3:1, 4:5) and secondly the repentance God requires when He comes: 'turn the hearts of parents to their children ...' (4:6). Jesus accepted this plain Old Testament teaching, but he indicated to the disciples that there was more to the appearing of Elijah than they had first thought. He confirmed their belief that John the Baptist was indeed Elijah, 'the one who was to come', but not only did he fulfil Malachi's prophecies, he also fulfilled the role of a suffering prophet; 'they did to him what they pleased' (17:12). He therefore emphasised to the disciples not only that God's Kingdom had come but also that the key to understanding what God was doing was suffering. They had certainly not learned this from the scribes, but from the teaching of Jesus, from the life of John the Baptist, and the scriptures.

The disciples struggled to understand all this. What had happened to John in prison was not what people thought would happen to the returning Elijah, and the path of suffering was not what the disciples thought would happen to Jesus. They needed to come to terms with the heart of God's plan, in which true glory would happen after suffering and after death. Their faith had to embrace this extreme truth as they followed Jesus, their Messiah. My guess is that they did not really understand all these connections until after Jesus was raised from the dead!

What really happened with the 'boy with a demon'?

By the time Jesus and the three disciples reached the bottom of the mountain, they were immediately pressed into the same situation which they had experienced before they went up (15:32ff); the crush of a crowd and a constant demand for assistance and healing. Much had changed on the mountain, and little had changed below!

In the pressurised atmosphere to which Jesus returned, His suffering as the Messiah ceased to be the issue; the focus now changed to the continued suffering of humanity. Jesus had to act because from the point of view of the crowd, their failure appeared to be a failure of the one who commissioned them. The absence of Jesus meant the crowd had less faith and this affected the faith of the disciples; unbelief is highly contagious! The embarrassment of the nine disciples is indicated by their absence from the story until they appeared later to ask Jesus what went wrong! It is as if they had fled the scene and were keeping their distance from the father of the child who was still suffering. Just as Gehazi had failed to heal a boy with Elisha's stick (2Kings 4:31), they were reliant on the return of their master to restore the situation, giving them back their dignity in the face of a hostile situation.

The approach of the father to Jesus (17:14) is similar to other approaches made to Him for healing (8:2,5 etc). It was all the more pitiful in the circumstances; yet it expressed the elementary faith to which Jesus always responded, and despite what had happened, the man still came with faith to Jesus. The boy was suffering from some form of epilepsy, and the Greek word means literally, 'moonstruck' (the expression also occurs in Matthew 4:24 where the condition is also associated with demon possession). The illness is not identified as demonic at first (17:15,16), probably because this was not important as far as Matthew was concerned. The association of demon possession with epilepsy offends some people today, but it need not. People make all manner of assumptions about illnesses today (look at eating disorders, back pain or dementia) that we suspect will be seen as crude in days to come. However, we believe what we do with all honesty and in some cases with few options. We do best to accept the judgements of people in ancient times concerning these things, and there is little evidence that people simply assumed that people with epilepsy were possessed. Yet sometimes, they felt that certain things showed themselves as the work of pure evil. We would be foolish to dismiss such judgements.

Going on from this, the storyline of 17:14-18 highlights the work of Jesus, who used His authority to take command of a difficult situation. We are told that the boy suffered terribly, and can well imagine how this moved Jesus. He rebuked the demon in the boy in order to heal him (17:18), and rebuked the demonic lack of faith in the crowds that had meant the disciples had failed to deal with the situation (17:17). His words were similar to those Jesus had previously used when frustrated at unbelief (see 12:39 and 45).

Faith the size of a mustard seed

The question that the disciples asked Jesus later (17:19) was obvious. Why had it all gone wrong? Again, Jesus' answer was immediate and to the point. The 'little faith' of the disciples which Jesus had commented upon before (9:26;14:31) was now exposed in a crisis to be no faith at all, affected no doubt by the crowds' impatience at the absence of Jesus (see notes above). Contagious faithlessness affected everyone! In this setting, the disciples had fallen prey to their own doubts and concerns, and had not shown even the smallest measure of faith necessary for works of the Kingdom (17:20). Jesus knew that deliverance simply could not take place without the evidence of faith, and the disciples had fallen short.

Jesus naturally continued by speaking about faith in order to encourage the disciples to take hold of what they had and use it. He knew they had 'little faith' and had spoken earlier about this (6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8), but as far as Jesus was concerned, little faith, like that of a mustard seed was always sufficient, and He used a classic scribal teaching method to illustrate what He meant. He compared the smallest visible thing, a mustard seed and the largest visible thing, a mountain, and declared one as capable of moving the other! The idea is ludicrous, but it is highly memorable, and the more we dwell on it, the physical idea sparks in our minds all kinds of spiritual possibilities. For although a mustard seed cannot shift a mountain, we are tempted to think that spiritually, faith can shift the biggest of problems; and that, of course, is the point of the illustration!

The reference to faith as able to 'move mountains' is similar to that which comes later in Matthew (21:21), and is picked up by Paul in his hymn about the love of God 'if I have faith, so as to move mountains ...' (1 Cor. 13:2). A great deal has been said about this passage, and not always very helpfully, particularly if it implies that faith can gain for you whatever you want. The spiritual truth of Jesus' teaching here is important, if not fully appreciated. It does not tell us that we can do whatever we want; it is about works of the Kingdom of God, and tells us that anything that God requires, of whatever size, may be accomplished through the smallest germ of faith. Too often, we focus on the great works 'bit', rather than the Kingdom or the faith 'as small as a mustard seed' which is what Jesus asks of us. We had best look to our faith rather than the size of the mountains!

Discipleship

Application

Jesus' path was now heading towards Jerusalem, and His whole ministry was rapidly moving on. Indeed, apart from the healing of two blind men (20:29) and some general ministry, Matthew records no other healing or deliverance. His focus was on the Cross and the universal work of deliverance. Our text contains an odd conversation, a botched healing corrected by Jesus, and a saying of His that is profoundly truthful yet which has been unhelpfully abused. No wonder this is a complex passage! Yet each part of it conveys straightforward Christian truths which are there for us to take hold of, and from which we can learn much.

We learn from this passage that suffering is and always will be the path of those who follow Jesus. We learn this from John the Baptist and the whole prophetic tradition, and Jesus fulfilled it on the Cross to gain us our salvation. Time and time again, Scriptures return to this theme, yet people still find it hard to accept. Unfortunately, preaching that says God will give us a good life still reverberates around the world on TV channels and in mass auditoria, and where people are conned about the Gospel, they will also be conned out of their money. The Gospel of Jesus is about Jesus, not about us and whether we have a good time or not.

Secondly, we cannot escape the importance of even the smallest faith in fulfilling the commission of Jesus to minister to the world in every possible way, whether it be healing the sick or delivering people from demons. This passage highlights one important issue, which is that a faithless crowd of people has a great capacity to diminish faith! Nevertheless, by using our small faith, even the greatest works of the Kingdom of God can be achieved, because such faith is based not upon our will, but upon Jesus and His love.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group what you think about Jesus' deliverance ministry, and how this connects with the healing ministry.
2. Share any experiences you have which illustrate the point that doubt can be infectious as well as faith.
3. What are the mountains which need to be removed for God's people today, and how may we show the faith to move them?

Discipleship challenges

- *Pray and fast for those you know who suffer, and whose suffering seems to make little sense in the light of their faith. Pray that the Lord will help you and others support people who are in difficulty because of all kinds of suffering.*
- *Speak to the Lord in prayer about your own faith and how you perceive it, whether you think it is large or small. Wait on Him to guide you and help you gain a proper focus on your life and faith.*

Final Prayer

Bring us, Lord Jesus, to that happy place where we can look back and be content that we have learned from the past, and to where we can look forward and anticipate with joy the future you have in store for us. May we be content that our lives reflect the faith that has been handed down to us; bring us to that place of peace, Lord Jesus. AMEN
