

Grow In Faith

July 8, 2001

Today's message is about faith and how to get more of it. God wants your faith to grow.

Christians sometimes speak of mountaintop experiences. Mountaintop experiences are spiritual experiences where the Holy Spirit speaks to your heart and changes you.

In a mountaintop experience you know that you are in the presence of the living God. And the experience changes you. Afterwards, you started making choices you never would have made if not for that experience.

Maybe you had a mountaintop experience on a retreat. Maybe you had such an experience on a missions trip. Maybe it was at a revival service. Maybe it was while you were alone somewhere praying. Whenever and wherever it occurred, you know you were in the presence of God. It was thrilling, joyful, moved you to tears, or a combination of these. God uses such experiences to increase our faith.

Jesus had just such an experience, a literal mountaintop experience. It occurred on a mountain. Let's look at it.

Mark 9:2-9 (NIV) ... Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

When Jesus got to the bottom of the mountain he found his other disciples in a confrontation with the teachers of the Law of Moses.

Mark 9:14-18 (NIV) When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 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."

This father loved his son and brought him to Jesus for help. The boy is being controlled by a demon. Demons are angels who have rebelled against God's authority. They have become the enemies of God and work against God in the world. They also work against you and me. They work to destroy our faith in God.

Let's see how Jesus responds.

Mark 9:19 (NIV) "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

Perhaps you can identify with the emotion Jesus expressed here. He has just been on the mountaintop. Everything is wonderful because he has been in the presence of God. God manifested himself in three ways. He did so through Jesus' transformation, through the visit of Moses and Elijah, and in an audible voice. Wow!

But then Jesus comes back down the mountain and is confronted by the problems of everyday life. And it is an emotional downer. In the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah had a similar reaction after the miracle on Mount Carmel. Maybe you have experienced something similar after a mountaintop experience of your own.

It is similar to the let down you feel when you come home from a wonderful, restful vacation. You return home and all the problems you left behind confront you anew. The same old pressures, strains, and problems are demanding your attention. You might think to yourself "I can't wait to find a new job, or retire, and be done with all this." That is something like the attitude we hear in Jesus.

But we never see Jesus shirk his duty. He faces the situation with patience and grace.

Mark 9:19-24 (NIV) Jesus said, "Bring the boy to me." 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. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "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."

"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!"

That is one of the most honest answers of anyone in the Bible. We could rephrase what he says this way. "I have a little bit of faith, probably not enough. Help me get more faith. Give me a reason to believe in you."

Jesus has been healing in this area for over a year. Surely the man has heard of Jesus. That is probably why he came. Likely he tried every other avenue of healing. He tried prayer. He asked the Jewish priests for help. He offered sacrifices at the temple. Now he has come to

Jesus. He does not know if Jesus can do this thing. When the disciples of Jesus could not help his son it likely lowered the man's expectations of Jesus helping him.

He honestly tells Jesus that he wants to believe. At this point he needed a reason to do so. Jesus will give him that reason.

Mark 9:25-27 (NIV) When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

So what can we learn about faith from this episode of history?

What faith did the man need to have? Jesus said anything was possible with faith. So what faith did the man need to have?

He needed to believe that Jesus could heal his son.

His faith problem was a lack of faith in the power of God in Jesus. The disciples, too, had a lack of faith. That is why they failed to heal the boy. And the teachers of the law had no faith. Jesus saw that everyone around him, for the most part, had little faith. And it distressed him.

In the four biographies of Jesus we see that faith is what Jesus was on the constant lookout for. In a very few people he found great faith. In most people he found little faith, and that bothered him.

What is faith?

Faith is trust.

It is not a religious word. It may not be a word you speak everyday, but you live it every day. We live by faith in others and objects every day. We live by faith when we drive. We trust that the oncoming drivers are going to stay on their side of the road. And usually they do. But keep an eye on them, because they might get distracted and drift over the line.

We use faith whenever we buy something. We trust that the seller is selling what we expect, food that is not rotten, appliances that work, clothes that will not fall apart with a few washings.

We use faith when we sit on things. We use faith when we accept what our mechanic or doctor tells us. We all use faith everyday. We trust in things and people every day.

In the context of the story faith is trust in God's power in Jesus. For us, today, faith is trusting in God and in Jesus. It doesn't matter what subject God speaks on. If God says it, trust it. Depend on it. Don't demand more details. Don't look for alternatives. Don't wait for a special feeling. Trust what God says.

Christian faith is believing what God says, and then acting upon it.

God knows everything and can do anything. So God will not make a promise he cannot keep. There is nothing God cannot do. There are no limits to God's ability.

God's ability is much greater than your problem. So bring your problem to Jesus. Come, and ask. But ask in faith. Don't come to Jesus and say, "If you can help me, please do so." Come with faith that he CAN help you. He created the world. Helping you with your problem is a piece of cake.

How do I get more faith?

You get more faith by testing the object of your faith.

You get more faith by finding out that what you are trusting in is worthy of your trust. You don't test the chairs you sit in everyday. You have great trust in them today because they worked for you yesterday. In the same way, as you experience that God is faithful to meet your needs, your faith in him will grow.

We see this principle in the book of Malachi. The passage we will read concerns taking God at his word.

Malachi 3:10-11 (NIV) Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty.

Now, while the specific command of the tithe and the promise associated with it does NOT apply to Christians, the principle is the same. God's character does not change. So we should be able to take a New Testament promise and test God with it. I suggest the following from the book of James.

James 4:8-10 (NIV) Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

God is promising you a mountaintop experience. He is promising you an experience of his presence.

So this week. Read your New Testament. See what Jesus has promised you. Humbly draw close to him in prayer. Tell him you will trust what he promised. Then do what he says. You will see that Jesus is worthy of your faith. And your faith will grow.