

# Coming down from the mountain top

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 December 2021

Preacher: Nick Louw

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, morning everyone. It's wonderful to be able to gather around God's Word. So let's open there, if you haven't yet, at Mark 9, as we finish up 2021's series in Mark before we move into the Christmas series.

And then we're going to pick up Mark again after Christmas and go all the way through to Easter. All right, well, last week, if you were here with us, you'll remember that we looked at quite an amazing event.

It was the mountain of transfiguration where Jesus took some of His select disciples up on this mountain and they got a glimpse of who He really is. Just a glimpse, but it was enough.

That He is so much more than the human rabbi that they thought He was. And they saw not only the glory of Jesus, but they also got a glimpse of the big plans of God that they are caught up in.

That God has been working out through history, that they are part of, and they saw that big picture. And we also learned last week that we also, as Christians today, even 2,000 years later, can have mountaintop experiences every time we gather around God's Word and the power of His Spirit.

[ 1 : 1 4 ] We don't need to go to some Middle Eastern mountain to experience God anymore. We can experience God through His Word. As we gather around this, as God ministers to us, we get that bigger picture of life and what we're involved in.

We get to see Jesus for who He truly is, rather than just what the world thinks He is. We get to see these truths and experience God ourselves, and it's amazing.

The question, though, is what happens when you come down from that mountain and you go back home to a struggling marriage or the stress of a difficult job or just an ongoing battle with sin in your life.

All of the ugliness of life out there doesn't seem to connect with the vision that we get in here, does it? Very often, I wonder if that's the same for you, that we hear all these amazing things about Jesus and the kingdom and about God's plans for this world, and then you go back out there and it just doesn't seem real.

It just doesn't seem like what we learn on our mountaintop experiences actually connects with ordinary life. Well, you might be encouraged this morning to learn it was exactly the same for Jesus' disciples, and we're going to see that as we join them, not at the top of the mountain today, but at the bottom.

[ 2 : 3 9 ] Let's see what happens. From verse 14, we pick up the narrative, and the moment Jesus and Peter, James, and John come down from this amazing experience, they run into trouble.

They find that the rest of the disciples are having an argument with the scribes. There's a crowd surrounding them. Something's gone wrong. And then as they approach, some of the crowd come running to Jesus, and they want to lodge a complaint with him about his disciples.

Turns out that there's a serious demon on the scene that the disciples were unable to drive out. Now, I know this is not an ordinary experience for us, where demons aren't nearly as obvious as they were back then or as they are in other cultures, but this was a serious spiritual being, and the disciples had tried to confront it, and they were powerless.

It was the first time in Mark that we find that the disciples, who, by the way, were given authority by Jesus to drive out demons. Twice in Mark, we read that he has given them the job of going and driving kingdom power into a broken world, part of which is overcoming spiritual oppression.

And so he had given them that job, and yet now they come across something they can't manage. We pick it up from verse 17. Look what happens. Someone from the crowd answered him, Teacher, I brought my son to you.

[ 4 : 04 ] He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, and he grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out.

But they couldn't. They couldn't. They were unable. They came across this demon, and he just didn't listen. He wasn't bothered by these mere disciples.

The scene actually reminds me of something I experienced a few months ago. We had the privilege of going to Kruger National Park. I don't know if anybody been to Kruger. Put up your hand a few. And you'll know if you've been to Kruger.

It's a huge place and long, long roads. And you drive for hours and hours on these game drives, on these long, desolate roads. But we were driving along, and we saw ahead of us there was this queue of cars that would just stop dead on the road.

And as we got closer, we saw that there was a queue also from the other side. And the traffic was just jam-packed, and they couldn't move. And as we got closer, we discovered why.

[ 5 : 07 ] Sitting in the middle of the road, lying in the middle of the road, was a pride of lions. Just having a mid-morning nap on the nice, warm tarmac of the road.

They had just eaten a buffalo. The carcass was on the side, and they were napping after their big meal. And the cars were kind of, they were blocking the road. And the cars were trying to get around them and trying to, you know, get the lions to move.

But all the lions would do is, every now and again, they would lift up their head, look at these pesky humans, and just go back to sleep. They didn't care. They weren't bothered at all.

They were undeterred by these humans. That's kind of, I think, what's going on here. This demon looks at these pathetic disciples, probably just laughs them off, and carries on doing his work.

He's undeterred by the disciples until, of course, Jesus comes. And he sees Jesus coming, and he's like, oh, flip. Because look what happens in verse 20.

[ 6 : 04 ] So they brought the boy to Jesus. When the spirit saw him, it immediately threw the boy into convulsions. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

So the demon that was undeterred by the disciples now freaks out when it sees Jesus. And as we continue in the story, we see with a word of authority, he tells the demon, get out and don't come back.

And the demon has no choice but to obey the Son of God. It's amazing. The spiritual realm has rules as well, and nobody ignores the Son of God. It's a reminder, again, that the glimpse on the mountaintop of who Jesus really is, the Lord of heaven and earth, was real.

And that Lord of heaven and earth, who is in complete authority over all the forces of heaven and earth, walked into our world and was here with us. That's who Jesus is.

But this story actually is here to show us why that reality was still so far from the disciples, and why they failed to tap into that power that Jesus brought to earth.

[ 7 : 11 ] Why they failed to connect the kingdom realities that they should have known about with their ordinary life at the bottom of the mountain. And that's the struggle of disciples then and the struggle of disciples today.

And this passage tells us why. And it highlights two problems. Two problems why we fail to connect heavenly realities with our daily lives. The first problem is this.

It's thinking that we have in ourselves any power to overcome brokenness in the world and in our lives. Thinking that we have power within ourselves to overcome the problems that a broken world faces us with.

And that is exactly what the disciples' problem was here. They assumed they had it within themselves to overcome this brokenness, this evil in front of them.

And we see that at the end. If you look right at the end of the account from verse 28, they go and ask Jesus. So verse 28, after he had gone into the house, his disciples asked him privately, why couldn't we drive it out?

[ 8 : 20 ] And he told them this kind can come out by nothing but prayer. The disciples didn't even pray. They encountered a serious force of evil and they didn't even pray about it.

They obviously were assuming that they had it within themselves to combat the brokenness. Because of who they were, Jesus' disciples, they had now special powers within themselves to combat this evil and brokenness that they faced.

And they were sorely disappointed. And we think, oh, how arrogant of them. How could they possibly think that about themselves? That they could overcome this brokenness in their own power.

But isn't that exactly what we do whenever we try to overcome any struggle without praying about it first? Think about it. Every struggle we face is a result of brokenness. It's a result of the fact that we live in a fallen world.

And yet, our first resort is not to go to God and say, I need your power to overcome this brokenness. Our first resort is to rely on ourselves, right? To overcome our struggles, to overcome our problems.

[ 9 : 24 ] Before we pray about it, we go, well, you know, maybe I can fix this myself. I have it within myself. I must be able to overcome my problems. I'm powerful.

And we think, I can fix this myself before I call in outside help. Like men with plumbing. I saw a plumber with the tagline, we repair what your husband fixed.

But it's not just men, I think, who by default try to be self-sufficient first. It's all of us. It's a natural human inclination. It's actually a worldview and an underlying assumption that we see in the world around us and society around us.

It's something called humanism. You may have come across it before. But humanism is a worldview that believes that the world's problems can be fixed by us. We have it within ourselves as the human race to fix the world's problems.

It sounds very positive. But it is underlying most corrupt political systems, actually. If you look in history, like Marxism, communism, they're based on the belief of humanism.

[ 10 : 31 ] We don't need God. We can fix the problems ourselves. We can overcome poverty. We can fix society. We can fix this world. That's the philosophy of humanism. And also, that flows into our religion.

And you see humanist religions, which is the assumption that we can overcome sin by ourselves, with our own power. In fact, a lot of religions, in fact, every religion other than Christianity, is founded on the assumption that we can overcome our sin by doing certain things.

We have it within ourselves to overcome sin, to save ourselves through our works from sin. And now, of course, this idea of humanism, that we have it within ourselves to fix all the problems of the world.

Not only does history disagree with that, but Christians disagree with that. We know the Bible says the world will only be fixed when Jesus comes, the one who God has appointed to come and judge and fix this world.

We know that. And yet, we so often act as humanists in our own personal lives, when we rely on ourselves to fix our own problems. When prayer is a last resort and not a first.

[ 11 : 42 ] And that was the disciples' problem here. It was their pride. It was their assumption that, as humans, they can overcome brokenness. And that is a huge mistake, to think that you have anything within yourself to overcome brokenness.

You said it earlier. I wonder if you meant it. In the prayer of confession, there is no health in us. It's always an uncomfortable thing to say. Why? Because it grates against our human pride.

Surely there's something in me that I can overcome problems and brokenness. That there's some kind of spiritual health. No, there's not. The disciples needed to realize that. Their problem was pride.

And that is what prevented them from overcoming this. In fact, ironically, them thinking they could was the thing that prevented them from overcoming the problem that they faced.

Pride prevents accessing power. You can remember that. PPP. Pride prevents power. If you remember nothing else, hopefully you will remember more than that.

[ 12 : 43 ] But that's a good kind of acronym to keep in your head. Pride prevents power. It cuts us off from tapping into the power that God wants to make available. That's the first problem.

Thinking that we have in ourselves anything that can overcome the brokenness in our lives. But there's another problem we come across in this story.

And that is thinking that God's power is limited on earth. That wasn't the disciples' problem so much as it was the father's problem. The father of this child who had the demonic spirit.

Look at the conversation he has with Jesus again from verse 21. Jesus says, how long has this been happening to him? From childhood, he said.

And many times it has thrown him into fire or water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us. Jesus said to him, if you can, everything is possible for the one who believes.

[ 13 : 46 ] See, this is a gentle rebuke by Jesus to this troubled father at his unbelief. His unbelief at who he has standing in front of him. The father believed that God's power to fix his son's oppression was limited.

And that's why he's got this doubt. If you can do anything, Jesus. And that's what Jesus challenges. But again, how true is that of us today? Thinking that God's power is somehow limited.

Some people think that that's by God's choice. I was speaking to someone recently who believes that God's just created everything and he's just withdrawn. And he's left us to our own devices. And he doesn't really do anything here anymore.

Other people think that God's not able to do anything. That the earth and the world has been so overtaken by evil that God, try as he might, can't do much to stop it.

Now, Christians don't believe that. Christians believe God is all-powerful in heaven and on earth. But there's still a form of unbelief that creeps in. And that is that not believing that he has actually made his heavenly power available to us to do real things in the world.

[ 15 : 00 ] And I think a lot of Christians believe that. That there's a limit to what we can do here. And we look out in the world and we look on our own lives and we don't believe that powerful things can happen until Jesus comes back.

But the thing is, he has actually given us his power to do things on earth. But this tendency, I think you see it a lot in conservative traditions, more than charismatic traditions.

We're more on the conservative side, as you know. And I think conservative Christians reacting against the unhealthy, charismatic obsession with signs of power and wanting miracles all the time.

We can very easily actually swing to the opposite extreme and not believe that God's power is here and available to us.

I think the father in the story believed that God was powerful. But what he failed to believe was that that power was now available to him in the person of Jesus Christ.

[ 16 : 07 ] Real power from heaven available to him. He needed to realize, we need to realize, I think still, that in Jesus, heavenly power has come to earth. When that Lord of heaven and earth came down here, he made that heaven's power available on earth.

And then when he ascended to heaven after his death and resurrection, he sent his spirit so that that power continues to remain here. It's here to stay in the Holy Spirit and in the church.

We need to believe that if we're going to tap into it. And so those are the two errors, the two mistakes that we see in this passage that prevent us from accessing heavenly power, that prevent us from taking the mountaintop realities into our daily lives.

Firstly, thinking that we can do it in and of ourselves, overcome the problems of a broken world. And secondly, thinking that God's power is withdrawn or limited in some way.

We need to be aware of these two errors. And the reason is because both of them are forms of idolatry. Both of them, both believing these things, having these problem thinkings, actually is idolatry.

[ 17 : 22 ] Let me explain what I mean. You know what I mean by idolatry? You see it throughout the Old Testament where people, we saw it in the reading earlier, even the Israelites would worship idols that they make as their gods.

And there's a lot of similarities actually between Jesus coming down the mountain in Mark 9 and Moses coming down the mountain in Exodus 32. Both times at the top of the mountain, they experience God and they receive his law.

The leaders of Israel and the old Israel in Exodus, the leaders of the new Israel and the law that they receive. Remember last week is, this is my son, listen to him. The only law that matters anymore is realizing who Jesus is and focusing on him.

But now they come down the mountain and Moses, when he came down the mountain in Exodus, found that in the meantime, the Israelites had made for themselves an idol, a golden calf affair.

Why? Well, the passage tells us why they made this idol. Firstly, they were waiting too long for Moses and they were feeling God is too distant, too far away. Let us bring gods closer to us that we can have access to.

[ 18 : 32 ] We don't have access to that Yahweh God. But also they thought that they had it within themselves, within their own resources to make gods, to save them. Do you see it's not too different from the problems at the bottom of the mountain in Mark 9?

The idea that God is too far off and besides, we can do it ourselves. That is the root of idolatry. We make idols. We and the disciples and the Father in this story have the same root problem, and that is thinking of ourselves too big or thinking of God too small.

To sum it up, we think that we're too big or God is too small. And that is what Jesus realized, that the sin at the bottom of this mountain is no better than the sin of the Israelites at the bottom of Mount Sinai.

It's an idolatrous heart that reduces God, that doesn't believe what God has done in Jesus Christ. Verse 19, Jesus says, You unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you?

How long must I put up with you? Bring him to me. The shocking thing, of course, is realizing how prone all of us are to that same kind of inclination, idolatrous inclination, where we make ourselves too big and make God too small, or we feel that God is so far from our daily struggles that we just try to solve them ourselves by default.

[ 20 : 04 ] That is unbelief, and it's not believing the gospel, because the gospel says that God has come in Jesus, that Jesus has atoned for our sins, that he has opened up access that we can boldly approach the throne of grace.

And yet, what do we do? We don't believe that, and we try to solve things ourselves. It's actually unbelief in the gospel which is the problem. So those are the two problems.

What are the two solutions? Well, we can see here, the passage also tells us two solutions, so let's concentrate. Now, it would be easy for me to say, Oh, the solution is pray. Pray more. Just go home and make more time to pray.

Be disciplined in your prayer. Connect with God. Build daily habits into your time. Easy for me to say that, but it's not easy to do, is it?

Sure, you know, if I'm compelling enough, or forceful enough, you'll go home and you'll do it for about a week. Your prayers will improve, and then it'll go back to normal, won't it? The reason why, the reason why we struggle to pray on a regular basis, and connect with heaven on a regular basis, and connect the mountaintop with our daily, ordinary lives, is actually much deeper.

[ 21 : 22 ] The problem is, it first requires a deeper change before we access what God has given us to access in our lives.

And what it requires, firstly, the first solution, is to come to terms with our existing unbelief. To come to terms that we still don't believe what we should.

Even if we're Christians, even if we've been Christians for years and years, and we believe a lot, there's still a whole lot we don't believe. That's what the father realized. Look at his answer in verse 24.

24. Immediately, the father of the boy cried out, I do believe, help my unbelief. Isn't that interesting?

Isn't that profound? Isn't that actually very wise? To realize that while he did believe, he still didn't believe. That is one of the best things we can do.

[ 22 : 18 ] Realize that even though we believe, there's still a whole lot we don't properly believe. Maybe you don't believe in who Jesus really is.

Maybe you believe some of this, but this, what he revealed on the mountaintop, is still not taken over your life yet. And maybe you need to pray this prayer to God.

I believe, but I still don't believe. Help my unbelief. Because only God can make us, cause us to believe and see the things we couldn't see before. We don't decide. We don't conjure up belief within ourselves.

We need God to give us belief. That's why this man prays to Jesus, to give him belief that he doesn't yet have. And if you don't yet have belief in Christ, you can't make it up. You need God to give it to you.

And he is ready and willing to, if you come to him in prayer. But even if you do believe in who Jesus is, we need to realize as Christians, we often still don't believe in that much of what we know in our minds hasn't yet penetrated into our hearts.

[ 23 : 23 ] Much of what we hear here at church and we nod our heads and we agree with, we go out there and yet it doesn't make any difference to how we live because we don't yet believe it.

We believe it, but we don't believe it. We believe it in our minds. We agree with it, but it hasn't overtaken how we think and speak and live. And so unbelief in our hearts is also a big problem for all of us that we're being warned of here.

We need the same humble attitude as that father. I believe, but help my unbelief. Help those areas that I still don't believe and I still don't live out what I know to be true. We need to pray those prayers.

We need to say what this father said. We need a humble attitude that recognizes our ongoing need for growth in our faith. No matter how long you've been coming to church, your faith needs to grow more.

You can always pray, no matter how long you've been a Christian, decades and decades, maybe your whole life, you still need to pray. I believe, but help my unbelief. Until we see Jesus face to face, until we have the darkened veil taken away, like the Apostle Paul says, until we see heavenly realities in front of us, we always need to be praying, help my unbelief, help my unbelief.

[ 24 : 54 ] Because I don't see it now. I need to know these things and I need them to penetrate my life. We need to pray that prayer. And it's when we pray that and it's when our minds start to see these heavenly realities, then it's then that we can start to pray better because then we realize what prayer actually is.

Because what prayer actually is, is connecting heaven to earth. It's connecting the heavenly realities that we learn about here at church with our daily lives through faithful prayer in Jesus Christ.

Because he has done everything to make it possible to access the throne of grace. And so when we get that right, we need to learn to pray better. We need to learn to pray better.

That's what the disciples needed to learn here. That's what we need to learn. I want you to notice something, what Jesus says. What Jesus actually teaches us about prayer in this passage, verse 29.

They said to him, why couldn't we drive it out? And he told them, this kind can come out by nothing but prayer. Do you realize what Jesus is saying about prayer there? That, yeah, maybe some issues, maybe some problems you can overcome, but there's certain problems that only prayer can overcome.

[ 26 : 17 ] In other words, prayer is the ultimate resource by which we can overcome the deepest and darkest evil in this world. Prayer is far more powerful and profound than we think it is.

Prayer through Christ is the way we connect our daily lives at the bottom of the mountain with the realities of heaven. I was thinking of a way to describe what that's like, and the image that came to my head, I saw a World War II movie recently, The Thin Red Line.

It's pretty hectic. I don't know if you've seen it. But it's these American units going and invading, I think it was Guadalcanal in the Pacific Island. And it's insane.

These battles that they faced is just chaos, just explosions and bullets whizzing overhead. And they don't know where they are.

And they don't know which direction they're supposed to advance, except they have a radio. And the radio man and the guy they protect has contact with home base.

[ 27 : 27 ] And when he uses that radio, then it connects that unit with the bigger picture and shows them their part in the battle and it helps them to go forward in the right direction because there's that connection with home base.

That's what prayer is. It's our connection in a world of chaos where we're fighting battles daily. We need that radio. We need that connection with HQ. We need that connection with heaven and then we know where we're going.

We know what we're doing here. We can face the right direction and we can overcome those battles. Prayer isn't only about asking God to give us things, which as a father, he wants to, the right things, not all the things we ask for.

But it's not only, prayer is not only about asking God. It's not only about bringing your shopping list to God. Prayer is a profound way that we connect earth with heaven like nothing else can through the prayers of Christians.

That is how heaven and earth are connected. Prayer is an amazing privilege and I don't think we believe that. I don't think we realize that enough.

[ 28 : 29 ] I don't think I do. I was personally convicted by this passage this week as I was preparing the sermon and meditating on it. and I thought I must stand in the pulpit and encourage people to pray more.

I realized I don't pray enough. I don't pray enough. Your pastor doesn't pray enough. I pray a lot. It's part of my job.

I pray every day for the preparation in the Bible, for this church, for you guys. I pray, I know how to use the radio really well.

I'm very skilled at using it. And yet, when I am in those battles myself, when I'm facing temptation to sin, which happens far more than you think it does for me, when I'm facing despair and confusion, when I'm facing thoughts of just inadequacy of doing the work God's given me, you know what?

I forget about the radio. I forget that I've got the radio right there. I forget that I've got access to heavenly resources, and I try to bumble along myself.

[ 29 : 40 ] I need to pray more. I think we all do. I think we all need to get this bigger vision of what God has done in Jesus Christ to enable us to connect our lives, this world, with heaven, and we need to make use of that amazing resource He's given us.

No matter how long you've been a Christian, this is something you need to hear. in prayer, through Christ, God has given His people a vital, essential resource to do the work that He's given them to do, a way to connect the mountaintop realities that we are reminded of here at church with the daily struggles that we face out there as we do His work.

Will you go out this week and will you connect heaven with earth? Let's pray. Lord, we thank You that we can approach You like this so easily through Christ and through what He's done for us.

That He has uniquely made access possible. Lord, we often forget that we admit like that Father that even though we believe, we so often don't believe that these realities don't take root in our hearts so much so that we realize that at any moment of the day we can connect heaven with earth.

You have given us that privilege and so we pray that You would help us to do that. Help us to tap into those heavenly resources so that we can faithfully and powerfully do the work You've given us to do on earth.

[ 31 : 17 ] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.