

The Faith Factor

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[0 : 00] What is mountain top experiences? Well, mountain top experiences are the best. and we're very lucky in Cape Town. We've got one of the best mountains in the world.

! Isn't it the top seven? One of the top seven wonders of the world. And it's awesome to be at the top of Table Mountain. You get these glorious views. You feel alive.

You feel free. Most of all, you feel removed from the stresses and the strains of ordinary everyday life. It's just so nice to go up. One hike on a weekend can just reset your whole week.

But the problem with mountain top experiences is they don't last. Because we can't live up there. We don't live up there. We live down at the bottom of the mountain.

We live down at the foot of the mountain where, unfortunately, it includes mountains of their own.

Now, if you've got children, you'll know what I mean by mountains of laundry.

[0 : 56] And so there's mountains of issues that people face, not being up on the mountain, but just being down, living ordinary everyday life. Mountains of issues at work.

Mountains, maybe, of issues at home. Maybe you're facing mountains of issues with your health.

And all of these issues impact us, and we struggle to live a consistent Christian life, to take on life's challenges and overcome them with confidence and power and ease.

It would be nice to escape them and stay up on the mountain, but we've got to live here at the bottom and face these problems in our lives. So if you feel like you're struggling in life, you're not alone.

That's exactly what's happening with Jesus' disciples who were left behind at the bottom of the mountain, trying to deal with the problems of living in a broken world. But at the heart of their struggle, at the heart of all of their problems, is a struggle with faith, to trust Jesus fully.

And our passage today gives us three reasons why we struggle, as well as the solutions to overcome them. And so we'll be looking at struggling with faith as our first point.

[2 : 13] Struggling with faith. Faith is a key concept in the Christian life. You would have noticed that if you spend any time being a Christian, or around Christians, the problem is it's very easily misunderstood.

For example, have you ever been told you don't have enough faith just to overcome a problem that you're facing? Maybe you wish you could have as much faith as a really great saint.

Some churches will say that your miracle healing is waiting for you if you just have enough faith. It's a bit like the Disney version of faith.

If you believe enough, you can do anything. I'm sure there's many Disney songs that go along with those words. And on the face of it, it sounds like that is what Jesus is talking about in our passage today.

But notice the disciples, the context of the disciples are coming down out of the mountain. Last week, we were on top of the mountain. We saw Jesus in all of His glory.

[3 : 19] And the three disciples were with Him. But as they come down the mountain, they run smack bang into a huge problem that the other disciples couldn't resolve. So the story picks up in verse 14.

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before Him, 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.

And here's the key. I brought Him to your disciples, but they could not heal Him. The Greek behind that is, they did not have the power. They did not have the ability to heal Him.

Jesus gets irate. You unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied.

He gets frustrated. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me. And Jesus rebukes the demon. It comes out of the boy and he's healed in an instant. [4 : 26] The disciples are taken aback. They feel like Jesus has rebuked them and He has in a way. He's rebuking the people in front of Him, but He's also rebuking the disciples that were not able to drive that demon out.

Remember that in Matthew 10, Jesus had commissioned the disciples with that exact authority to go out and to exercise demons if they need to. And here they struggled to do that. It might sound like Jesus is being harsh here.

But if you compare this with a previous story in the Bible about a person going up a mountain, communing with God, turning all shiny, and then coming back down to also find a similar problem. I'm talking about Moses in the Old Testament. If every Jew reading this would understand that back story, they knew what would normally come next. Moses, when he came down the mountain and he saw the people worshipping the golden calf, he calls the Israelites to himself.

All the men, come join me here at the gate. Strap your swords on. We're going to go and kill these people who are worshipping this calf. And on that day, 3,000 died. If Jesus is the greater Moses, you're expecting more of a bloodbath if you're a Jew.

[5 : 45] But Jesus doesn't do that. He does give them a stinging rebuke. But he also helps them with the problem that they've got. In fact, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him, what happened?

And they need his help. And he does help them even though it does cut to the bone. Verse 19, the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, why couldn't we drive it out?

He replied, because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, move from here to there and it'll move, nothing will be impossible for you.

And so, we could be tempted to think that the problem, that their problem is a little amount of faith. Because that's what it sounds like Jesus is saying. You have so little faith. And then the solution is to have more faith.

That's a quick fix. You don't have enough faith, so have more faith. But in this kind of thinking, what Jesus expects his disciples is to generate that extra faith somehow from inside themselves.

[7 : 04] But this is to fundamentally misunderstand what faith is and how it works. And so, to help us think through this matter, I'd like to turn to one of the great, or rather, sort of unknown theologians.

And this person is called Adrian Plass. Have you heard of him? He wrote a very important book about living as a Christian and it's called The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass, age 37 and three quarters.

He's an ordinary Christian trying to make sense of what he believes. And so he started a little diary. He's a real person.

He lives in England. And he starts his diary on December the 14th. He says this, Feel led to keep a diary. A sort of spiritual log for the benefit of others in the future.

Each new divine insight and experience will shine like a beacon in the darkness. Can't think of anything to put in right now. Still, tomorrow Sunday must be something on Sunday, surely, to write about.

[8 : 08] But then he goes on to write about an experiment he had with getting more faith. He writes, Monday, January the 6th, bought a really good book about faith from our local Christian bookstore.

It's called Goodness Gracious in God's Name What on Earth Are We Doing for Heaven's Sake? Very witty title, I felt. It's all about how Christians should be able to move mountains by faith if they are really tuned into God.

Very inspiring. Wanted, waited till there was no one around, then practiced with a paper clip. Put it on my desk and stared at it, willing it to move.

Nothing. Tried commanding it in a loud voice. My son, Gerald, came in just then and said, what's all the shouting about, Dad? Could hardly tell him I was shouting orders at a paper clip.

January the 7th. Had another go with the paper clip tonight. I really took authority over it. Couldn't get it to budge. Told God I'd give up anything he wanted if we'd just make it move half an inch.

[9 : 28] Nothing. All really, all very, all rather worrying really. If you only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain, what hope is there for me when I can't even get a paper clip to do what it's told?

January 9th. After growth group, after home study. Good prayer and worship time after growth group. Forgot about the paper clip business for almost an hour.

Quite distracted about thinking about Jesus. Finally, gets back to the paper clip. January 11th. Got up early today to have a last go at that blinking paper clip.

Ended up hissing viciously at it, trying not to wake everyone else up. When I gave up and opened the door, I found my wife Anne and Gerald anxiously listening outside in their night clothes, looking on with anxiety.

So, Adrian Plass didn't quite get to getting that paper clip to move. But he does catch on to something there that's important for us.

[10:41] He says, he had a good prayer meeting, forgot about the paper clip business for almost an hour. Quite distracted thinking about Jesus.

And that's actually how we get our faith to grow. Not by concentrating on the problem in front of us, trying to get it to do something, but focusing on Jesus instead.

So, faith is not something that exists by itself. Like, let's say, water in a jar. And if you've got a big jar, and you've got this line, and you've got, your faith is there at the bottom, you need to put more faith in to get up to this line where, I don't know, maybe you've got faith enough for small miracles. And there's another line, you've got to pour more faith in to have faith enough for like major miracles. That's not how faith works. That's not what faith is.

A better word for faith here is trust. Trust. In fact, there's only one Greek word for all the English words that go along with the word faith.

[11:50] We've got about three or four English words that mean really the same thing with different sort of aspects to it. But there's only one Greek word that we translate three or four different English words.

And so, when you see the word faith in the Bible, well, we've got three words. We've got believe, don't we? I believe something is the same as having faith in something.

And then we've got trust. So, believe, faith, and trust are three English words, but they all come from the same Greek word. There's no different Greek words for those three English words.

And so, what's helpful is when you read the word faith or believe in the New Testament, it often helps to swap it with the word trust. And so, what Jesus is saying to his disciples is that you're not trusting in me enough.

You're not trusting in me fully. There's something missing from your relationship with me. If that's true, then the only way to get more faith is to grow in your understanding and relationship with Jesus.

[12:58] And that is why Jesus goes on to explain what he's going to be going through for his people. So, if you find yourself struggling with faith, the thing to do to grow your faith, even though it's small like a mustard seed, a mustard seed is meant to grow, is to spend time getting to know Jesus, because that's exactly what he does in the center part of our story today.

So, we're looking at knowing Jesus better. The thing the disciples had to get was a fully rounded picture of Jesus. They had some aspects of who he was, but they hadn't connected that this mighty king, that they'd all seen in action, was himself going to struggle in this world, and struggle to the point of death.

And it would be through his death that ultimate victory would come. Struggling with faith doesn't get rid of the problems in the world, but through Christ they are transformed into victory, or something good, something that God can use for his kingdom.

And that's why Jesus takes him aside and explains again the two crucial things things it is that we need to get to know about him. And that is his death and resurrection.

So have a look at verse 22. When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.

[14:37] the disciples were filled with grief. And so we see the disciples struggling to connect Jesus as this Son of Man, this glorified being of God-like majesty and power they have just witnessed up on that mountain, with someone who had to suffer a humiliating death on a Roman cross.

But here's the thing, you only get redemption, you only get victory by going through defeat, you only get resurrection by dying.

Faith is a thing that connects redemption with death. Faith is a thing that connects victory with our struggles, with our problems. Faith trusts that God in his power is able to totally transform bad things to bring about good things.

And I think this is the struggle that we all have, trusting that the way God works to bring about kingdom growth is through our struggles, not by taking them away, rather through faith he keeps us connected to his transforming life-giving power as we go through the struggles in this life, as we go through the mountains of the problems that we've got.

And it's through that process that the actual problem is minimized, and our faith or our trust in Christ is able to overcome it.

[16:12] And friends, this is the only way to make sense of the problems we face and the struggles we go through in this world. If you face them by yourself, without Jesus, you've got no guarantee that anything good will come out of them.

It's just one unrelenting mountain of problem until you die. The only way to deal with problems in a way that keeps, I think, keeps you from slipping into dark depression or worse is to trust in Jesus and let him transform your struggles into something good.

This takes real faith, but it also requires more than we're able to give in and of ourselves. And that's why the last thing we learn about in this passage is that we have the resources of the King of Heaven available to us to deal with our problems if we trust in the ransom that this King of Heaven has paid for us.

And we learn this through one of the strangest lessons in the Bible, about the temple tax and the miraculous fish. And so the last point is living as sons and daughters of the King.

Living as sons and daughters of the King. Now we don't like to admit it, but being connected to royalty does have its perks. We're good South Africans, we believe in democracy, we don't really like this King stuff.

[17:45] But just imagine getting the resources of the English crown available to you. If you needed it. Ooh. They could make your lawn look like their lawns in the castle.

You wouldn't have to do your washing, you'd just ring it. Tug a pulley, ding, ding, your Batman would arrive, yes sir, go clean my, wave your hand, clean, clean the dishes, clean my clothes, get the car ready.

Ooh, I feel a bit peckish, make me some food. Food. Many of the struggles we go through and the problems we face would disappear just like that if we could claim royal blood, if we had the resources of a monarch available to us.

Well, that's the point Matthew is making in his last story. Now, the tax in question is the temple tax. It's not the tax to the Romans, but the tax was due on every Jewish child and paid to the temple, and this was called the atonement tax.

But Jesus here makes a breathtaking claim about his authority. So just to look at it, verse 24, after Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?

[19:13] Oh, yes he does, replied Peter. But here's where it gets interesting. Jesus basically says, no, we don't actually need to pay this tax anymore.

Peter comes to the house and Jesus was the first to speak. He's actually, he knows this conversation and he wants to challenge it. What do you think, Simon? He asked.

From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes? From their own children or from others? From others, Peter answered, well then the children are exempt from paying the tax. The Greek actually says the children are free. You'll find that in the ESV version or some other versions. Jesus is claiming to be the king of the temple.

It's something only God can claim to be. But what's more, by organizing the atonement payment in such a miraculous fashion as he does in a moment, he makes Peter, and by extension us as Christians, not just a disciple, but a royal son of the king.

[20:26] The children are free. Then Jesus continues, verse 27, but so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake throughout your line, take the first fish you catch, open its mouth, and you will find a four drachma coin, that's what's needed, take it and give it to them for my tax and for yours.

What the? This fish miracle is one of the craziest ways to pay the tax. You couldn't have guessed that that is how Jesus would provide the atonement tax in a million years.

The first fish that you can, I mean, you could have said, keep catching the fish until you get enough coins. I don't know how long that's going to take. Peter, we need to pay the tax.

You can't pay it. I'm going to pay it for you. I'm going to do it in a way that no one could guess. Only that I can do it. Because you can't actually do it.

The tax is there to show you that you can't pay atonement for yourself. But I can do it. The first fish you find, you're going to find enough money. Totally unexpected.

[21 : 52] totally subversive way and totally by the power of Jesus. Why does Jesus tell Peter to pay the ransom tax in this strange, miraculous way?

To make the same point that the cross is going to make when Jesus pays the ultimate ransom. ransom. It's to show that God has more power than all the power in the world to provide redemption and salvation for his people, for his children.

And not only that, once we receive this ransom by faith, it elevates us to position of royal sonship and daughterhood so that all the resources of heaven are available to us as we struggle down here on earth to trust and serve Jesus.

That's the point that Jesus is making here. Galatians 4, verse 5 and 7 from verse 4, Galatians chapter 4 from verse 4 says this, When the set time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that they might receive adoption to sonship.

God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out Abba, Father.

[23 : 30] So you are no longer a slave, but God's child. And since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

heir. And if you are an heir, you get to call on the king, no matter what time of day or night, no matter what you need, and he is going to answer you because you are his son.

If you are a daughter, but if you are not, you can call on him all you like, and he has got no reason to answer your prayers, or to help you with your problems.

But if you are a Christian, you have this privilege that no one else in the world has, that allows you to go to the king of the universe and ask him for help, and he'll help you.

Why does God save in this strange way? Peter, you can't pay the tax, go find a fish. And then a greater word is spoken to the whole of humanity, you can't save yourself, I will die for you so that you can get life.

[24 : 49] Why does he save in this strange way? Well, it's to overthrow every human pretense at ability, so that you know it's not your self-generated ability that can save you.

It's not your self-generated ability to be effective for the kingdom. It's not your self-generated ability to increase your faith. It's not even your self-generated ability to solve the problems in your life.

Everything in the Christian life, all of the time, is generated by the power of God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. What faith does is accept that I don't have the ability, but I know someone who does and goes to him and asks for everything that we need.

It accepts and trusts in the power that God generates. It accepts and trusts in the plans that he makes. It accepts and it trusts in the way that he does things and in his timing.

Faith helps us rest assured that in God's timing, all things will work out for our good. Friends, there's only one way to be adopted into this royal family of Christ, and that is to trust in the payment that he has made for your atonement, for the mistakes and your powerlessness and your inability.

[26 : 21] If you haven't done that, you need to, because that's the only way to make sense of the struggles that you face. outside of Jesus and his kingdom, we're orphans, tossed around on a sea of chance with no meaning and no purpose and no ending to your pain.

If you do trust in Jesus, then make sure you're calling him as a royal son and a royal daughter of the king to give you the spiritual resources you need.

not just to get rid of the problem, but to keep on trusting him, to keep on struggling through the problem, knowing that because of the cross, all evil can be redeemed.

Trusting that Jesus will ultimately see us through to a full and glorious future at the resurrection when all things were made new. Well, let me pray for us as we close.

Lord Jesus, you are our mighty king and savior, and in your grace and mercy, you've paid the atonement price and you've included us in your royal family.

[27 : 45] Lord, our problems we face are bigger than we can manage by ourselves, us. And so we need your help, we need your guidance, we need your truth.

Lord, we need you to help us struggle through life and overcome in the end. Amen.
Amen. Thank you.