

Work in the Valley

Text: Mark 9:14-29

Back in the mid 1980's I had the privilege of trekking through the Himalayans, when I spent some weeks in Nepal.

It was spectacular scenery...huge mountains and deep valleys.

I remember the time we have to walk from one ridge to the next. The ridges seemed so close.

But to get from one ridge to the next we had to wind our way down one side of the steep valley, cross the river and wind our way up the other side.

What seemed like a short distance took the best part of a day!

The Christian life is a land of hills and valleys too.

Times of spiritual highs...

When you feel close to the Lord, and he feels close to you.

But there are times when we wind down into the valley...

seems to take forever to get to the other side.

As I quoted from Billy Graham as couple of weeks ago, 'The mountain tops are for view and inspiration but the valleys are where the fruit is grown.'

In one day the disciples moved from glimpses of the glory of Jesus on the mountain...

To the attacks of Satan in the valley.

As much as Peter would have liked to, Jesus and the three disciples can't stay on the mountain.

Coming down, they find the other disciples caught up in an argument with the teachers of the law

And things were probably not going well.

The teachers of the law are probably there to collect more evidence against Jesus.

They have taken advantage of Jesus being absent to really embarrass the disciples.

Jesus came on the scene and seems to catch everyone by surprise.

He asks, "What are you arguing with them about?"

This is when the story really begins to unfold.

A father speaks up, "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." (Mark 9:17-18, NIV).

It must have been very embarrassing for the disciples to be so powerless in the face of their detractors.

They were unable to free this boy from the demonic grip in his life.

They believed they could and had done it before with others but now they couldn't.

The paralyzing force of doubt had crept in and it was like a fire hydrant, extinguishing their faith.

Jesus replies, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." (Mark 9:19, NIV)

You sense Jesus' weariness at the disciples' lack of faith.

They still have such a long way to go.

Jesus quickly takes in the situation and deals with it passionately and effectively.

This father with a demon possessed son is desperate.

It's an awful feeling to be a parent and watch your child goes through any kind of sickness.

I don't think there is any feeling so desperately intense as a parent who cannot help their child.

Try and imagine what this father was going through.

The father is desperate: is Jesus able to help?
Jesus picks up on the father's words, 'if you can'.

Jesus response, "'If you can?' everything is possible for him who believes" (v23) raises an important point.

Notice Jesus didn't say:
I'm the only one who can handle this kind of situation.
If only you had said the right words.
Everything is possible to you if only you had that amount or quality of faith.
Only seminary trained people can handle things like this.

What Jesus said was:
Everything is possible if you have faith in what I can do for you.

The emphasis is NOT on the degree of faith,
but on the relationship of trust between the man and Jesus.

The main point is that the miracle doesn't depend on the degree, quality or amount of the man's faith...But only on having the faith to link him with the ministry of Jesus.
It is 'faith as small as a mustard seed' principle at work.

Faith in the right person opens up all kinds of possibilities.

The father responds quickly...expressing the measure of faith he has.

I like his honesty...
It is like my faith...there is always a mixture of unbelief.

This father was honest.
He was as honest and sincere as he possibly could.

You can criticize him if you want for a lack of faith, but at least he was honest.

Before growth can take place, before faith can be increased, before we can make it to the next level, we've got to be honest with ourselves and with God.

Which is the greater sin?
Faltering in our faith, or faking our faith?
If the doubts are there, you're not fooling anybody but yourself.

Honesty with our doubts can lead us to discovery and greater faith.
He's saying, I believe, I don't understand it all, but I'm willing to learn and hang in there until I do.

The response of the father is enough for Jesus and he responds in healing the boy.

The emphasis then is not on the quality of our faith...
But on the power of the master with whom we are joined by faith.
And there is room for us to grow...
"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Later, privately, the disciples want to know why they have failed so miserably.

Jesus gives them the simple answer: in these situations the only solution is prayer.

Why were the disciples so useless in this situation?

They had been successful in the past, when Jesus sends them out in chapter 6...

Where we read he gave them authority over evil spirits and they cast them out.

Maybe they fell into the trap of beginning to rely on their own ability and past experience...

Rather than on God.

They were lacking faith...which came out in their prayerlessness.

Pray is the vital link between the transforming power of the mountaintop,

And the desperate needs in the valley.

For them, and for us, prayerlessness leads to powerlessness.

A question that came up for me...

Do we spend time on talking and trying to do...and not enough time in prayer.

I know that I can so easily fall into that trap myself.

You become so busy trying to get on top of everything...

Trying to do all the stuff that you need to do, or that is expected of you...

That you forget to Pray.

Bill Hybels has a fantastic book titled 'Too busy not to pray'.

In there he relates his own experience

"Prayer has not always been one of my strong points. For many years, even as senior pastor of a large church, I knew more about prayer than I ever practiced in my own life. I have a racehorse temperament, and the tugs of self-sufficiency and self-reliance are very real to me. I didn't want to get off the fast track long enough to find out what prayer was all about."

I don't know about you, but I can relate to those thoughts.

In our self-sufficient, self-reliant society prayer seems like an unnatural activity.

It is an assault on our proud human nature.

Later he was compelled to look at prayer and writes, "I studied almost every passage on prayer in the Bible. And then I did something radical: I prayed."

He adds that the greatest thrill of it was not all the answered prayers...but the difference it made in his relationship with God. It gave him a trust, confidence, peace and relief as he learned to pray.

The disciples had a lot to learn about prayer, and the link with God and his power.

Mark records a number of times where Jesus has withdrawn from the busyness of life to spend time with his father in prayer.

Not only do the disciples have a lot to learn...but so do I.

I need to make sure that I take that time with my heavenly father.

I do it in group time, and I need to do it more, when I'm on my own.

People are drawn to prayer, because, as Jesus said, God's power flows through prayer.

Someone has said: when we work, we work...but when we pray, God works.

Skeptics may argue that answered prayers are only coincidences, but as an English archbishop once observed, 'It's amazing how many coincidences occur when one begins to pray.'

As we pray we exercise faith in God...for whom everything is possible.

This gives new horizons of hope.

That is not to say he will always heal or deliver within a fixed time or space.

It may not be his purpose to do so...in which case we must accept his will,

As the Apostle Paul did in 2 Cor 12:8-10.

However it is always his will to heal and deliver in the ultimate sense, when you give yourself to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

So let me ask you, "Have you ever experienced a spiritual power failure in your life?"

Have you ever felt powerless against temptation?

Have you ever wondered, "Where's the power?"

You are not alone. Great men of God throughout history have had high and low points in regards to their faith, times of anguish having doubts about God – like Jacob, Job, David, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Thomas, Peter, etc. people who questioned, faltered, doubted and yet in the end remained faithful.

For me, one of my favorite stories was that of Elijah who had the audacious faith to go before the wicked king Ahab of Israel and say, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." (1 Kings 17:1, NIV)

We got to look at that passage on Friday night and yesterday at Belgrave Men's Convention.

After 3 years, he arose to a big showdown against the prophets of Baal to determine exactly who is the true God.

We know the story how he built an altar, dug a trench around it, soaked it with barrels of water and with one simple prayer, called down fire from heaven and it consumed the offering and the altar.

What a bold demonstration of faith, you talk about mountaintop experience.

He killed the prophets of Baal and things looked like they were on a roll.

Then Jezebel, the king's wicked wife, sent a message to Elijah, basically saying, "I'm going to kill you."

And Elijah, the man who had the faith to hold off the rain for 3 years, who faced off against 400 prophets of Baal, able to call down fire from heaven, suddenly became weak-kneed and took off running and became suicidal.

What a rollercoaster ride.

He went from an incredible high to a deep and powerless low in record time.

However, God restored him and still used him and grew him in his faith.

The good news is that when we face up to our faltering faith, when we admit it, that is when we give God room to do only what He can do.

Notice what Jesus did not do:

- He didn't say, "Sorry, you don't have enough faith."
- He didn't say, "Muster up some more faith and come back later."
- He didn't say, "A miracle can only happen if you have a certain quota or level of faith."

No, Jesus went ahead and healed the boy.

What are some things we can learn from this story?

Be honest with your doubts.

It is only when we stop faking and start facing them that we can grow in deeper faith.

God is not threatened by your doubts.

The church or others may feel threatened, but God is not.

He openly embraces those with honest doubts that are seeking answers.

Come to Jesus and keep your eyes on Him.

Faith must express itself in our talking with God and in personal sacrifice.

If we want to do anything significant for God, we are going to have to be willing to spend time with Him and sacrifice some things for Him.

Prayer is the power grid of faith.

Put your eyes on Jesus and not the problem.

Those who falter in their prayer life, also begin to falter in their Bible reading.

It affects our spiritual understanding.

When our spiritual life is weakened, we don't care about spending time in the house of God to worship, fellowship, and ministering to others.

Response is to Come to Jesus and keep your eyes on Him.

FROG... (fully rely on God)