

## Nothing Will be Impossible for You (Matt. 17:14–23)

*By Jacob D. Gerber*

After the mountaintop experience of the transfiguration, Jesus jarringly reminded his three disciples in the previous passage that he must still suffer. Now, as the four men return, they discover that the nine disciples have been struggling to cast out a demon during their absence. In Jesus' frustrated evaluation of the nine as faithless and twisted, and in Jesus' extraordinary promise of the power of faith to move mountains, the Lord teaches his disciples an important principle about the suffering that both he and they must endure: *faith empowers believers to endure suffering*.

### The Faithlessness of Jesus' Disciples (Matt. 17:14–18)

Upon returning from the mountain, Jesus is immediately confronted by a man seeking his help: “And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water” (vv. 14–15). By calling Jesus “Lord,” it is unlikely that the man intends to confess that Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>1</sup> Peter himself has only recently come to understand this truth (Matt. 16:16), and the disciples do not believe that the truth about Jesus' identity has spread beyond their inner circle (Matt. 16:14). Nevertheless, it is important that this man not only calls Jesus “Lord” but also asks him to “have mercy” on his son, since these words are paired elsewhere only in the Gospel of Matthew in two other important stories of great faith for people seeking Jesus' healing: first, in the request of the Canaanite woman on behalf of her daughter (Matt. 15:22), and second, in the request of the two blind men who ask twice for Jesus to have mercy on them (Matt. 20:30–31).<sup>2</sup>

In this case, the man has already asked the nine disciples who did not go with Jesus onto the mount of transfiguration to heal his son, but they were unable to do so (v. 16). It is worth remembering, though, that Jesus had given all twelve of his disciples “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction” (Matt. 10:1). Hearing that his disciples had failed to heal this boy, Jesus responds with an unusual note of frustration: “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me” (v. 17). Calvin suggests that Jesus is directing his outbursts against the scribes (see Mark 9:14).<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Hendriksen, take the word “generation” as evidence that Jesus “cannot have

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 665.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 655. In both of those other contexts, the Canaanite woman and the two blind men also addressed Jesus as the “Son of David,” an important title in the overall theology of the Gospel of Matthew. This title does not appear here, but it is unclear what (if anything) we should make of its absence in this context.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:320–21.

been thinking only of the nine disciples who had failed in this emergency.”<sup>4</sup> Within the concise storytelling of the Gospel of Matthew, however, these explanations are unconvincing, although understandable due to their harshness against Jesus’ own disciples. In Matthew’s narration of this scene, the man has behaved admirably by coming to Jesus, calling him “Lord,” and asking Jesus to “have mercy” on his son—neither the scribes nor the whole generation is in view in this scene.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Jesus expresses frustration first at the lack of faith in the disciples to trust as implicitly in the power of his heavenly Father as he had modeled during his ministry.<sup>6</sup> Second, Jesus describes the disciples as “twisted”—that is, twisted “in their thinking, ‘distorted’ in their spiritual attitude.”<sup>7</sup> While the nine had not seen Jesus transfigured, they had all been present when Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God (Matt. 16:13, 20). The two words Jesus uses to describe his disciples (“faithless” and “twisted”) may allude to the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 32:5, 20, “where Moses speaks of the Israelites of his day as the degenerate children of their just and faithful God, a ‘crooked and perverted generation,’ ‘in whom there is no faith.’...if even they, from their position of special privilege (13:11–17), do not have the faith to draw on God’s saving power, what hope is there for the whole generation?”<sup>8</sup>

The disciples’ failure in this matter, then, becomes a source of deep discouragement for Jesus. Jesus’ words here reveal an under-appreciated aspect to the sufferings that he has begun to prophesy to his disciples: he would endure those sufferings in the midst of the doubts of his disciples.<sup>9</sup> Matthew is unique among the Gospel writers in the way he casts a spotlight on the doubts of the disciples, since he alone tells us that even after Jesus is resurrected, most worship Jesus, “but some doubted” (Matt. 28:17). Here, we see the pain that these doubts caused Jesus as he made his way toward the cross. Even the question “How long” is a double-edged sword, since it both reveals Jesus’ readiness to escape this aspect of his suffering,<sup>10</sup> but it also stands as one more reminder in this wider section reminder that his greatest suffering at the cross is fast approaching.<sup>11</sup>

After expressing this frustration, Jesus immediately “rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly” (v. 18). What was impossible for the disciples, Jesus accomplishes immediately.

## The Faith that Moves Mountains (Matt. 17:19–20)

The nine disciples, then, are humiliated three times over: first, when they fail to cast out the

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<sup>4</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 674.

<sup>5</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 666–67.

<sup>6</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 674–75.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 447.

<sup>8</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 660–61.

<sup>9</sup> “Poignant is the complaint of Jesus, which permits us to see under what discouragement he had to approach his passion. This burden, too, he had to bear.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 664–65.)

<sup>10</sup> “His ministry lasted almost three years by now. He was longing for the end.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 675.)

<sup>11</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 504.

demon in Jesus' absence; second, by Jesus' public rebuke of them as a faithless and twisted generation; and third, by Jesus' own ease in casting out the demon. Perhaps to avoid a fourth embarrassment, they wait until they are alone with Jesus ("privately") to ask him, "Why could we not cast it out?" (v. 19). Jesus' words are astonishing: "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (v. 20).

In Mark, Jesus also emphasizes the role of prayer (Mark 9:29), and some manuscripts in Matthew add v. 21: "But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting."<sup>12</sup> Here, however, Jesus only emphasizes the faith that was necessary to perform this healing. As Carson (following Bonnard) notes, the emphasis here is less on the amount of faith, but on the quality of the faith: "Little faith, like a little mustard seed, can be effectual; poor faith, like that of the disciples here, is ineffectual."<sup>13</sup> What, though, does Jesus mean when he promises that "nothing will be impossible for you"? Calvin judiciously writes, "the meaning amounts to this, that God will never forsake us, if we keep the door open for receiving his grace. He does not mean that God will give us every thing that we may mention, or that may strike our minds at random.... Let us therefore maintain such moderation as to desire nothing beyond what he has promised to us, and to confine our prayers within that rule which he has laid down."<sup>14</sup>

## The Faithfulness of the Son of Man (Matt. 17:22–23)

The importance of that last point about the scope of what is possible for faith becomes important in this final section of this passage. At one level, the transition does not reflect a tight connection between these two passages, since Jesus has now come with his disciples into Galilee (v. 22a). In some ways, then, this passage stands on its own, as Jesus repeats the warnings that he has begun to teach his disciples: "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day" (vv. 22b–23a). This is no different from what Jesus has now stated three times (see also Matt. 16:21; 17:9, 12), except that Jesus now hints at his betrayal by Judas when he says that the Son of Man will "be *delivered* into the hands of men...." That word "delivered" is a word for betrayal, but it is also a word that describes the "delivering" of tradition from one group to the next, so that it becomes an important word to describe the "tradition" of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor. 11:23, where the same word is translated "delivered" and then as "betrayed").

Even so, the emphasis here seems to be on the quick arrival of these sufferings, as reflected in the phrase "about to." This translates the Greek word μέλλω (*mellō*), which signals something that is about to happen. Jesus had just answered "How long...?" (v. 17), and now he answers his own

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<sup>12</sup> The ESV does not include this verse in the main text of the Bible because it is unlikely to have been a part of the original manuscript: "Since there is no satisfactory reason why the passage, if originally present in Matthew, should have been omitted in a wide variety of witnesses, and since copyists frequently inserted material derived from another Gospel, it appears that most manuscripts have been assimilated to the parallel in Mk 9.29." (Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 35.)

<sup>13</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 444.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:326–27.

question to some degree: *soon*. More than that, the idea that “nothing will be impossible for you” by faith receives an important qualification here as Jesus models how he does not abuse his faith by trying to avoid the sufferings appointed for him. Later, Matthew alone records Jesus’ statement that he has the ability to avoid all this, if he wanted to: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled?” (Matt. 26:53–54). This statement comes in addition to Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39; see also 26:42, 44). All things are possible, yet for Jesus to avoid his sufferings would mean undoing the Scriptures and disobeying his Father in heaven. So, while these are technically possible, and while Jesus wills at some level to avoid the cross, he wills first and foremost to fulfill the Scriptures in obedience to his Father.

In the somewhat wider context, one wonders whether Jesus’ reference to the power of faith to move a “mountain” in v. 20 is perhaps a reference either to the mountain of transfiguration or, more likely, to the multiple ways that Jesus called Peter a “rock.” In the first case, Jesus played on Peter’s name, calling him a “rock” on whom he would build his church (Matt. 16:18). Then, Jesus called Peter a “stumbling block” that stood in his way to going to the cross (Matt. 16:23). Jesus’ faith is strong enough that he *could* move the mountain of his cross; however, the strength of his faith only moves the mountain of opposition (especially from his disciples) against his going to the cross. The disciples, however, who do not possess this perspective, are “greatly distressed” by Jesus’ words (v. 23b). Jesus has much more to teach them before he goes to the cross, but they will not be able to understand what he says until after he is “raised on the third day” (v. 23a).

## Discussion Questions

1. How does the man with the demon-oppressed son address Jesus (v. 15)? What does this address suggest about the faith of the man toward Jesus? When Jesus laments the “faithless and twisted generation,” about whom do you think Jesus is speaking (v. 17)? Why does Jesus speak so harshly about his disciples? What does Jesus’ exclamation here reveal about the unique suffering that Jesus endured at the doubts of those closest to him?
2. How do you think that the nine disciples felt as they approached Jesus “privately” to ask him what had done wrong (v. 19)? Where have you felt humiliated in your failure to serve the Lord? How would you have responded to Jesus’ response in v. 20? What exactly does Jesus promise when he says that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains (v. 20)? What kind of faith do you have when you ask something of God in prayer?
3. With Jesus’ words in vv. 22–23, how many times has Jesus now told his disciples that he will suffer? What does the phrase “about to” add? What does the word “delivered” add? Why do you think that Jesus is revealing the nature of his suffering to his disciples in piecemeal like this? If Jesus had so much faith, why do you think that he couldn’t remove the mountain of his suffering from his life?
4. What does Jesus’ own faith as he approached the cross teach us about the kind of faith that we

need when we endure suffering? How does Jesus' faith teach us to pray to the Lord about our sufferings? What is one area of suffering you are facing right now? How are you thinking about it? How are you praying about it? What kind of faith do you think God is seeking from you right now? Are you praying for that kind of faith? Why or why not?