

INTRO | FAITH ON & OFF THE MOUNTAIN

Peter, James, and John followed Jesus up the mountain where Jesus the self-proclaimed servant who would suffer many things; the false-teaching rabbi who would be rejected by His people; the demon-possessed dissident who would be executed by the world; reveals his true identity. He is King. He is in control. That even though He is a good King, he is not a safe one—He is to be feared. This moment on the mountain is intended to be a monument for them to hold onto when they are off of the mountain. **Faith comes easy when we're on the mountain with God.**

The three disciples and Jesus travel down to the mountain. They go from basking in the presence of God with all of his glory, to dwelling in a broken world with all of its sin. Presumably, the other nine disciples have been with the crowds all waiting for Jesus to come down off of the mountain. Unlike the Father's voice from the cloud praising His Son; another father's voice is heard from the crowd crying out for his son who is demon-possessed and self-destructive. The father explains that, while on the mountain, he had brought his son to his nine disciples and they were not able to heal them. In Matthew 10, Jesus had given his disciples authority and power over such spirits. Before He rebukes the demon and saves the boy, an exasperated Jesus rebukes the people including his disciples: **17 And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?"**

The story is somewhat **reminiscent of when Moses came down off of the mountain.** Moses also found that the people he had left in charge were unable to control the people. Instead of leading the people to worship God, they led them into idolatry and false worship—including an orgy-filled revival (Exodus 32). Similarly, Jesus and his disciples return to find that the leaders have lost control, and even though they didn't build a demon-god of gold or organize a dance party, there is a demon-possessed boy throwing himself into fire. **Something has happened to change the faith of these disciples. Some would argue that they have lost faith. I would argue that they have not lost faith, but simple misplaced it.**

The disciples approach Jesus privately and ask: **"Why could we not cast it out?" 20 He said to them, "Because of your little faith.** Jesus makes it clear, that you can be identified as a "disciple" and possess LITTLE FAITH; and that "little faith" is akin to being faithless. **They have little faith...not A little faith...but faith is small.** Without faith, the Bible says, it is impossible to please God. Faith is presented as the beginning of salvation, as essential to living, and as fundamental to overcoming the world. The Bible says that faith justifies us, sanctifies us, empowers us, and protects us. Jesus will not tell us we need BIG faith that is impressive, but that we need a little faith that is genuine. **What is little faith? What is the cause of little faith? What is the remedy to little faith?**

CHARACTER OF LITTLE FAITH

Including this text, Jesus uses the term "little faith" five different times, and only in the book of Matthew. Every time Jesus uses the term, He reveals the character of LITTLE FAITH (not faith that is little).

The first time that Jesus uses little faith is in the Sermon on the Mount. In **Matthew 6**, Jesus teaches his disciples not to be anxious about the daily needs of their lives including what they drink, eat, or waer. He points to examples in creation to demonstrate God's commitment to provide what is needed. **Matthew 6.30-33 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and**

his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. **Little faith is characterized by ANXIETY.** This is not to say that anytime someone expresses concern over a need they are suddenly faithless. Rather, little faith is evident when one's life and decision-making are governed by earthly needs. Little faith is when think about your kingdom more than God's kingdom, when you seek earthly things more than heavenly things; when you stress over your poverty in world, more than rejoice over your riches in heaven.

The second time Jesus uses "little faith" is in the midst of the storm. As the disciples make their way across the lake in a boat, a great storm ensues. Matthew's word for a "Great Storm" is SEISMOS (earthquake). The storm creates tsunami like conditions with waves large enough to swamp the boat full of disciples. The conditions are dangerous and violent enough to fill experienced fisherman like Andrew, Peter, James, and John with a real fear of dying. Meanwhile, Jesus is sleeping. **Matthew 8.26-27** ²⁵ And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." ²⁶ And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of **little faith?**" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. **Little faith is characterized by FEAR.** This is not to say that anytime a man or woman fears they are faithless. But those of little faith are governed by the presence bad circumstances more than they are by presence of a good God.

The third time Jesus uses "little faith" is when He walks on water. The disciples get into the boat, and Jesus walks to meet them in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Afraid a ghost is approaching, Jesus calls out to them. **Matthew 14.28-33** ²⁸ And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of **little faith,** why did you doubt?" **Little faith is characterized by DOUBT.** It took some amount of faith to get out of the boat. But, once he took his eyes off of Jesus, he began to doubt. Those of little faith trust Jesus when they are in the boat, but when they risk walking with him atop the water, they see the wind, and begin to doubt that the power one who beckoned them to come can keep them afloat.

The fourth time Jesus uses "little faith" is after feeding the 4,000. Even though there were seven baskets of leftovers, the disciples do not take bread with them when they get into to the boat. When Jesus figuratively warns them to be aware of the "leaven of the Pharisees" they misunderstand. **Matthew 16.5-10** ⁷ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of **little faith,** why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? The feedings proved that God does not work according to realistic calculations or rationalistic odds. Less is more. Smaller is bigger. Weakness is power. God does not work or think like we do. **Little faith is characterized by CONFUSION** (e.g. misinterpret, misunderstand, or miscalculate).

CAUSE OF LITTLE FAITH (Mark 9.23-29)

The characteristic of little faith is evident throughout Matthew. Little faith is a faith full of anxiety, fear, doubt, and confusion resulting in powerlessness. The CAUSE of little faith is revealed in the parallel passage found in the gospel of Mark. ²³ And Jesus said to him, " 'If you can!' All things are possible for one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When the father asks Jesus for help, Jesus reveals that the root problem behind our anxiety, fear, doubt, confusion is UNBELIEF. **Little faith comes from little belief. This father and these disciples really don't believe. The world AND the church is fully of believers who hardly believe.** Genesis 3 reveals the true

nature of our problem: we do not believe God. **The enemy didn't simply persuade our first parents to disobey, he tempted them to disbelieve that God is good, wise, and loving.** The cause of little faith, characterized by anxiety, fear, doubt, and confusion is a result of denying the truth about God.

1. We are anxious about earthly things because we do not believe God is caring, loving, or powerful enough to provide.
2. We fear the storms of life because we do not believe God is present or in control.
3. We are filled with doubt in following Jesus's commands that are hard, uncomfortable, risky, counter-cultural and continuative because we do not believe God is trustworthy.
4. We misinterpret, misunderstand, or miscalculate because we forget what Jesus has already done and do not believe Jesus is faithfully working—doing more than we can see or understand.

In essence, the enemy, our flesh, and world call for us to trust ourselves. Similar to the faith of the Israelites who waited at the bottom of the mountain, these 9 disciples believe **WE CAN DO IT ON OUR OWN.** **They had little faith in Jesus and a lotta faith in themselves.**

REMEDY TO LITTLE FAITH

Jesus provides us a remedy to little faith. When his disciples ask why they have failed, he responds with "Because of your little faith." Mark, most likely writing for Peter, either remembers or understands the statement a bit differently: **Mark 9.28-29** ²⁸ **And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"** ²⁹ **And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."** Matthew here says the solution to the problem is faith; Mark identifies the solution to the problem as prayer. **Perhaps there is no difference between the two.**

When the disciples were on the mountain, they were told to LISTEN TO JESUS. The book of Matthew is unique, in that, it is the most comprehensive record of Jesus direct teaching. In other words, **it is not only an account of everything Jesus did—it is the most complete record of everything Jesus said.** Known as the "book of sayings", Matthew is the only one to record Jesus final command to **teach disciples to observe all that I have commanded you.** When you don't listen to Jesus, you assume you know what He is like, what He loves (or hates), what He wants you to do. Try that with your spouse.

We not only need to listen to Jesus. But we must also TALK WITH HIM. We listen to Jesus through reading His Word. **We talk to Jesus through prayer.** Prayer is the remedy to little faith. When Jesus tells his disciples that they have little faith, he is telling them that all of their anxiety, fear, doubt, misunderstanding, and power is because they have little prayer in their lives. Prayer is more than sharing our venting our feelings or making requests. **Jesus doesn't need to know how we feel, but sharing how we feel reminds us of our need for Him.**

As one commentator wrote, **"Prayer is simply faith breathing" (Bruner).** Prayer is not only the FRUIT of faith, but I believe it is the producer of faith. We pray when we doubt so that God can help us believe that he is loving and faithful to provide. We pray in the storm that God will help us believe He is present with us. We pray when we begin to doubt Jesus commands so that He can help us believe His Words are trustworthy. We pray when we are confused by what God is doing so that he can help us believe He is doing something far greater than we could ever ask or think.

A commitment to pray reveals the disposition of a heart—one that refuses to trust in itself and to believe God. **Prayer is not about changing circumstances, but changing our hearts.** If you are struggling with anxiety, doubt, fear, even confusion right now, will you believe in God enough to pray...even a little? Jesus said: **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.** We do not need BIG FAITH to do big things. All we need is a mustard seed; a small but genuine flake of faith. A little bit of real prayer, can accomplish what looks impossible.

CONCLUSION | JESUS PRAYS

Where do we get the power to do this? On the night Jesus was betrayed, after the last supper, Jesus took his disciples to a garden. As his disciples slept, Jesus endured such deep agony over his upcoming death, that he sweat great drops of blood. For certain, he was anxious, perhaps he felt fear, doubt, or even a moment of confusion—for none of these are sinful. **But how did respond to these feelings?** ³⁸ **Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."** ³⁹ **And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."** (Matthew 26.38-39). Ultimately, **Jesus prayed a prayer of surrender.** On the cross, Jesus endured all wrath and separation from the presence of God we deserved, so we might enter into the joy of His presence without fear and with all joy. **Jesus prayed to endure the cross for us, therefore, we must pray to endure our cross for Him.**

Prayer gives us the power to say I CAN'T UNDERSTAND, I CAN'T CONTROL, and I CAN'T OVERCOME and to remember that JESUS DOES, JESUS WILL, and JESUS CAN. **Philippians 4.5-9** ⁴ **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.** ⁵ **Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;** ⁶ **do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.** ⁷ **And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**