

# Mark 9:14-32

Intro Fragile Faith and a Strong Savior March 2, 2008

Who here hasn't floated aloft in flights of fancy, in which you picture yourself triumphant, the talk of the town, the hero who rescues those in need? There's a little Walter Mitty in all of us. Mitty, James Thurber's fictional character was a meek and mild man with a fantasy life that filled his imagination. If we are honest, we all daydream of power and success: your manager recognizes your invaluable contribution to the company and you're made the CEO, your college prof grabs you in the hall, in his trembling hand is your term paper and your research revolutionizes human knowledge. Mothers have fantasies; too, well behaved, napping kids...if that doesn't sound like a fantasy, you don't have kids.

Christians succumb to the Walter Mitty complex, as they often feel overwhelmed by the turmoil of the world in which they live. For that brief moment, perhaps in prayer, we picture our world, as we would have it. The unsaved gather at our feet, grasping morsels of spiritual truth that drips from our lips. Our churches flourish, as people demand to give of their time and talents to the spread of the kingdom of God. Even the nursery is overrun by those longing to rock to sleep the runny nosed toddlers. Marriages are made whole; children profess faith; and the miraculous becomes the norm. Beneath our pastors pious, peaceful exterior is emblazoned an S ... faster than a bogged down sessional subcommittee, able to leap difficult passages with adept exegesis, look up in the pulpit, it's a deacon, it's a ruling elder, not its *Superpastor*. But then we shake ourselves back to reality and must confess that the kingdom of God has yet to come with power.

After Jesus defined discipleship as denying self, embracing suffering, and following him in Mark 8, He makes a promise: some will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.

After hearing the harsh words of the struggle of the Christian life, such words would be a delightful encouragement. Rather than living in fear of the rejection by the Son of Man when He comes in His Father's glory, there is hope of living and seeing our fantasy life become real.

What immediately follows may well be the fulfillment of this promise. Jesus takes his inner circle, Peter, James and John, to a mountain. There they glimpse God's glorious kingdom as Jesus is transfigured before them. Suddenly, two others, Elijah and Moses, appear, with Jesus. A cloud that envelops them, and a voice proclaims: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

As soon as it all happened, it was gone. As they make their way down the mountain, the disciples try to make sense of what just happened. Jesus again explains how the Son of Man will suffer and be raised from the dead.

It appears that in that brief moment, those three disciples tasted the kingdom of God. But is that *it* until some future event? What happens next gives the impression that God's kingdom is in retreat, as any mountain top experience fades from memory as we get back to reality. The disciples move from a transfigured Jesus to a disfigured boy, from experiencing the glory of God, to the gory reality of fragile faith.

Our passage shows us that when our fragile faith collides with distress, we need a strong Savior. There the kingdom of God comes with power. READ Mark 9:14-32

Coming down the mountain, having glimpsed at the majesty of Christ, it's time for reality in the valley.

As the splendor of Jesus' baptism flows into the temptation or Moses from Sinai finds the children of Israel in an orgy before the golden calf, there doesn't seem to be any kingdom of God coming with power here, as the disciples can't sequester themselves from the realities of life's problems. We don't know at first what the squabble is all about until v17, but clearly something is amiss.

The disciples and scribes argue and a crowd gathers. A father came looking for Jesus to heal his son. In 3:15 Jesus appoints the 12 to cast out demons. In 6:13 he sends them out and when they return in v30 it is apparent they were successful. But not today.

The scribes, the religious leaders, aren't about to overlook the disciples' impotence. These scoffers doubt the reality of the disciples' power, the fragility of their faith is apparent.

Where are father and son during all this? They are the topic of debate, but no one is helping them. They are the object lesson caught in the middle of the debate. Some may be blaming the father for producing such a miscreant of a child while others point to societal decay.

The hurting become topics of seminars and debates because it is easier to complain about what is not happening, where others have failed, than to do anything to help those who only remind us of our own powerlessness.

This is a painful picture of the church going about its task without its Head, Jesus Christ. No one denies there is a problem, but we are impotent to act. The answer to this comes later, but what we see in the disciples we can easily see at Cornerstone whenever our focus becomes the myriad of problems surrounding us and we try to answer them apart from the person of Christ.

Into this pandemonium, Jesus comes. The crowd, tired of the tirade, knows where the answer lies – with Jesus. Immediately, Jesus gets to the heart of the issue. He asks what is the argument all about. Out from the crowd steps the man: he brought his son to Jesus, but as he was not present, he let them have a shot at restoring his son, but to no avail. Jesus identifies the core problem, a problem with the disciples, the crowd, even the father. They are all faithless. With a sense of urgency Jesus appears to despair over the future. The glimmer of God's kingdom dissipates like the mountain fog, as clueless crowds demand power not knowing where to find it. His simple command, "bring him to me" sets the stage for what must happen.

The boy is brought to Jesus, but the situation doesn't get any better.

For years the father has endured the pain and humiliation of the public spectacle. The presence of Christ does not sooth the situation, but brings out the horrific nature of the boy's plight. It will get worse. Jesus questions the father, not as a clinical evaluation, but to draw out the desperate need. It has not only been a constant since childhood, but the demonic nature of the malady may destroy the son. The father pleads, but in doing everything right, shows how fragile his faith is at this point.

"But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

I love the way he sees the problem as not just one for his son, but for him as well. As a child struggles with physical or moral issues, the pain and agony falls on the parent, too. They both need Christ's compassion. But his petition demonstrates how tentative his faith is at this point..."if you can..." The disciples couldn't, perhaps they were willing, but not able. Will Jesus be any different? Will there be any kingdom power here? Now?

Jesus' response is a rebuke.

The Greek is odd. It reads in English almost as if Jesus is asking if the father can do it, but it best reads as a shock that such a question would even be asked. Picking up on the first part of the question in v 22, Jesus throws it back. The father's question lacks the faith necessary, so the promise that follows creates an impossible situation for the man.

What help is it to be told that "all things are possible" if the catch is that one must believe. Jesus is not giving a formula as to how we can get everything we want. It is not about mustering up enough faith to manipulate God to answering our prayers. This is not a divine imperative to absolute faith, but calls us to come to grips with the good news.

No sooner do those words come out of Jesus' mouth that the man cries out.

The word here is the same as the shriek of the demon in v25. This is not a plaintive whine, not a whimper of despair, but the last gasp of what little faith he can muster. He cries out with firm determination that goes only so far, "I believe...help my unbelief."

As with the disciples, he too is impotent to dig up enough faith, even for the most poignant need, that of his son. Even his faith needs help. Faith is not enough for the power of God's kingdom to be experienced. At this point, all appears hopeless for us today. As a parent where do you go with Jesus' command? When you struggle, is it any help to be told: "believe harder!"

Jesus' rebuke encourages us. Helplessness, not holiness is the first step to receiving God's power.

There is no demand for a pure faith, for a perfect trust. Jesus does not hold the father at arms distance until he can prove his worth. If that were the case then our hope would be in our faith not in our Savior. Rather Jesus calls out the man's fragile faith, the tottering trust he possesses.

He is a member of a faithless generation, but he knows where his only source of help can be found. The moment he agrees that he can't is the first step to seeing that God can. Too often we imagine that our problem is a constipation of faith and the right book or seminar, the right counselor or worship experience will be the spiritual laxative that we solve our inner ache. But if that is the answer to our ailment, then we become our own saviors. Instead, God wants us to see our helplessness even deeper than we ever have before.

The evidence of his faith is not his declaration of belief, but his plea for help. He knows where the power of God's kingdom resides. The power is standing before him.

Jesus acts, not because the father now believed enough to release God to act, but that there stood before that father one with whom all things are possible, one who believed perfectly, without any doubt.

As the crowd gathers, Jesus acts quickly, for this was not a show of power, but in this healing the kingdom of God is as clear as when the Father's voice echoed from heaven on that mountain top.

But as Jesus acts, notice how, even for that brief moment of time, the power of the kingdom of God does not make the situation any better. The closer Jesus comes to freeing the son from years of torment, the more tormented he becomes. The demon shrieks, the convulsions worsen, and the boy falls limp on the ground so that the crowd is convinced he is dead. Don't rush to quickly to v27.

You want to experience the power of God's kingdom at work in your life? Bring Jesus your most precious and prized possessions and he may just make your situation far worse...before it gets any better. Moments before the father struggled with a deaf and mute son who periodically convulsed. Now he lay on the ground, apparently dead. It is like the words of the egotistical surgeon who pronounces the surgery a success, but the patient's dead.

Walter Mitty fantasies of fragile faith never struggle. In our dreams we succeed because of an innate ability within us is unleashed. But the gospel forces us to come to the end of ourselves and see how God will break us of our idols, even the idols of our own family, our friends so that we feel the need to cry out, I believe, help my unbelief.

It is then that Jesus takes the boy by the hand and raises him up.

The language is reminiscent of the resurrection. Before resurrection there must be suffering and death. This is true as well in our own lives. But like the disciples we refuse to believe this is so.

The failure of the Walter Mitty life, the error of all our fantasies, good as they may seem, is believing the lie that God's kingdom, God's power is made most real when our heartaches the least. But when we by-pass the crushing blow of pain, we'll never know the reality of resurrection

Many of you mistakenly look to me to fix your problems and then become incensed when I help little. You want help with your marriage, addictions, greed, relationships, and guilt and see me as a religious Dr. Phil, who with a few sage words can send you on your way with hope. I may be insightful, but I won't fix you. You won't fix you. At the deepest level, you and I are far too broken to be the source of our own repair.

It is sad that people conclude that not only have I failed them, the church has failed them, the gospel has failed them...and God has failed them. It is sad because at the core the gospel is lost in the process. They have yet to come to the point to seeing that resident unbelief in each of us and looking to Christ to make up what we can never supply.

When you come to me, please know up front what I will do. I will point you to Jesus. If you do as I say, your life will no doubt be worse than it was before, because you must wrestle with a need deeper than the presenting problem. Your problem is not your spouse, not your child or job or even the plaguing sin. Your problem, my problem is unbelief and we can't fix that.

This is not a ploy to lessen my counseling load, but for truth is advertising. I don't have a lot of tricks up my sleeve to make you holy or happy. I can only remind you that you are in a lot worse shape than you can imagine...and that Jesus works in you in ways far greater than you can ever hope for.

If you long to see the kingdom of God come with power, then stop running from the call to discipleship. Don't by-pass the cross in hopes for a painless resurrection.

Mustering up more faith on your own, believing hard is not the answer. Rather than believing more, look to the one who stands in your place. Cry out with the father, "I believe" but be honest enough to continue with his plea "help my unbelief."

The disciples try to make sense of what just happened, but their question reveals their problem.

What they don't understand, what we fail to grasp, is that God calls us to tasks beyond our ability. It is not just a matter of learning the latest trick, but knowing where our help comes from. We long for the fix-it, the program or skill that will make our life better. But those solutions only take us further from having to trust Christ.

Christ points them to prayer, but be careful, this is not the better technique. Just pray more and all will be well. Some scribes misunderstood this text and added the words *and fasting* revealing the same programmatic desire.

Faith is not another term for self-confident optimism. The act of prayer is not a magic pill. Faith does not wish, hope, or desire--faith receives. Prayer is not some pious exercise, but that last refuge of a despairing heart. It is the cry of fragile faith, knowing that we cannot manipulate

God to respond, but have nowhere else to go with our pain. It is the longing for resurrection, but feeling the suffering of the torment. But it is then and there that God's kingdom comes with power. It is there God's voice echoes out that our help; our hope comes only as we are looking to the Father's beloved Son, as we listen to his words.

If our faith and prayer is merely seeking an answer, a solution to what ill us, then we've missed the nature of prayer. Our fragile faith is to seek that strong Savior who suffered and is raised.

Jesus once again drives home this truth as he travels with his disciples for the last time through Galilee, as they make their way down to Jerusalem. The Son of Man must suffer, he will die and after he is killed he will be raised from the dead.

Unfortunately the disciples then as well as us today, don't grasp well this truth. The twelve remained silent, afraid to ask for clarification.

This is such a despairing ending, were it not for the fact that we know this is not the end.

While the disciples don't understand, don't believe; don't pray (the only record in Mark of their praying is when they fall asleep in the Garden). But while they escape the doldrums of everyday life with flights of fancy of success and power, Jesus brings the kingdom of God in their midst with a power that transcends their wildest dreams.

He comes in the midst of our unbelief and loves us still. He lovingly brings us to himself, so that we can know the depth of his grace. He brings us to this table to feed and nourish us, despite our wayward hearts. We long to tell Him how He ought to give us what we desire, but he gives us what we need, faith. He is able, for it is He who believes and claims us as His child. So we, with the father, can cry out: "I believe, help my unbelief."