

Lessons When Jesus Came Down the Mountain

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Series: The Gospel According To Mark

Text: Mark 9:14-29

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Prolonged series in the Gospel of Mark. And we are in Mark 9:14-29. We're remembering that the chapter began with the Mount of Transfiguration, the transfiguration of Christ with Peter, James, and John.

And now we come as they return off of that mountain, down to the mountain, and we read the account of what happened in those moments. So Mark 9:14-29. Let's give careful attention to God's inspired and authoritative word.

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.

And he asked them, what are you arguing about with them? And someone from the crowd answered him, teacher, I brought my son to you, for it has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.

And he answered them, o faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me. And they brought the boy to him. And when the Spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

And Jesus asked his father, how long has this been happening to him? And he said, from childhood. And has often cast him into fire and into water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us. And Jesus said to him, if you can, all things are possible for one who believes. And immediately the father of the child cried out and said, I believe. Help my unbelief.

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I to bear with you? Bring him to me." ²⁰ *And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.* ²¹ *And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood.* ²² *And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."* 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! (Mark 9:14-24, ESV)*

And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, you mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, he is dead.

But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, why could we not cast it out? And he said to them, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.

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This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Imagine picking up a novel. Tens of thousands of words, even hundreds of thousands of words, stretched out across many pages. Yet somehow, the author holds it all together. Every chapter, every scene, every character moves with purpose in the novel, weaving together a compelling story.

When I look at large novels, I marvel that an author can stay on track. I feel like a few pages in, I would be all over the place. But that expert author is able to maintain a clear theme from the first word to the last.

The Gospel of Mark is no different. And it's important for us to remember, as we're working through this Gospel, that Mark, along with all the other gospel writers, was not simply jotting down random stories about Jesus and just without any purpose, Jesus' sayings. They all wrote with a strategy.

Of course, the Gospel of Mark, like the other gospels, would not have had chapters and verses in them; it would have been one single document. So we have to remember that we are not looking at a loose collection of disconnected stories and sayings of Jesus. Mark, we know, moves quickly.

His is the action-packed gospel, but there is a certain flow to his writing. We have 16 chapters in Mark, and you may recall the first eight are jam-packed with many miracles.

Then, in chapter eight, there's a pivotal juncture in the gospel when Peter says in verse 29 of chapter 8, you are the Christ. It's a pivotal juncture in Mark's gospel. Then Jesus explains what it means that he is to be the Christ. Stunning news to the disciples, specifically to Peter. He will suffer and be killed.

And from that moment, things in this gospel start to rush rather quickly towards Jerusalem and to the crucifixion. So that's a pivotal point, kind of a hinge in this Gospel.

The first, there's many miracles, but from Peter's confession forward, in fact, right before Peter's confession and then after it, there are only three miracles. The blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8:22, then this boy with the demon, and then blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46. Then we're in chapter 11 in the triumphal entry.

And so the only miracle after that is the resurrection. So Mark gives us two miracles of the healings of blind men. And we noted when we went through the first one that that was an object lesson on sight. Some will see who Jesus is, some will not.

Some will see something of Jesus. Some will be blurry and progressively see more clearly over time, like his disciples. That was an object lesson that Mark is giving us in his strategy in this document.

To show what it means to be a disciple of Christ is to see who Jesus is, to know why he came. Now I would suggest to you that this miracle of the healing of the boy with the demon is also an object lesson in faith. It's an actual event, a historical event that happened.

But it's also a strategy of Mark's to show us, what does it mean to be a disciple. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

Now, why do we infer that Mark is talking to the reader about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus through this account? Well, look at how the account ends. We'll fast forward to the ending of our reading.

Privately, they asked Jesus, the disciples, why couldn't we cast this demon out? It ends with a private lesson for the disciples. Most of the miracles in the first eight chapters of Mark end with everyone in amazement at Jesus. They're amazed here as well. But it goes beyond amazement to a private lesson for the disciples.

Secondly, look at what is emphasized in this narrative, particularly verses 23 and 24. Jesus says to the Father, all things are possible for one who believes. And immediately the father of the child cried out, I believe. Help my unbelief.

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!" (Mark 9:24, ESV)

So this passage, namely, is about faith. So, yes, it's another miracle that shows Jesus as the Messiah, the one who has all power. But here it is more than that. Mark places this story here to say, this is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It is to have faith in Jesus.

So if the first half of Mark is about Messiahship, the second half is about discipleship. And we noted earlier when we started this series, Mark is looking at three things. Who is Jesus? Why did he come? And what does that mean for us?

Well, he's zeroing in now. What does that mean for us? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? Peter has just recently made a verbal profession of Jesus. But faith is more than a verbal profession. Peter, James, and John just saw Jesus in all of his glory.

But faith is more than acknowledging that Jesus is glorious. We know that demons profess that Jesus is the Christ. James 2:19 tells us that.

We know earlier in Mark 3, whenever the unclean spirit saw Jesus, they cried out, you are the Son of God.

¹¹ And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." (Mark 3:11, ESV)

So demons profess. But certainly demons don't have faith. The devil knows that Jesus is glorious, but we know, of course, the devil doesn't have faith. So what is the nature of faith? That's what Mark is asking and pressing us towards.

And if a disciple of Jesus has faith in Jesus, what does that look like? And of course, these are vital questions because the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:7, we walk by faith, not by sight.

⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7, ESV)

He also said in Galatians 2:20, we live by the faith of the Son of God.

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

Hebrews 11:6 says, without faith it's impossible to please God.

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6, ESV)

So the Christian is one who believes and lives by faith. So we want to ask three things about faith that we see in this passage this morning. Three things. I'll give them to you up front, then we'll work through them.

Number one, faith is always Christ centered. Secondly, faith is sometimes small. And lastly, faith is never self reliant. Faith is always Christ centered, sometimes small, and never self reliant.

First, let's look at faith is always Christ centered. Now we have to be very clear here when talking about faith because the word faith is often used in a very general way, isn't it? We hear in our culture words like power, the power of faith, or the magic of believing or having faith in faith.

Those are concepts of faith that suggest that the act of faith is what really counts. You know, it doesn't matter who you're praying to, as long as you're praying. The object of the faith is peripheral. It's just have faith.

So you know, someone's going through a very challenging time and a well-meaning friend says have, have faith. But that's not what we're talking about when we talk about faith from a biblical sense. Faith from a biblical sense is always Christ-centered.

What that means is faith is fixed on Jesus. It's focused on Jesus, it's tuned into Jesus. In other words, when everything is chaotic and uncertain, faith tunes into Jesus. It looks to him as Lord.

Faith rests in Jesus when everything around is restless. And that's, that's the picture we're getting here. In Mark 9, when the world is scrambling and people are scrambling and frantic and worried, the person in faith tunes into Jesus, looking to him, trusting in him and his Word.

That's a biblical, a very general biblical, broad understanding of what faith is. Faith is always Christ centered. You may think of it like tuning into a radio. Now our young people won't understand this as much, but my age and older, when you turn the dial on a radio, you're trying to find the right station, right?

There's no streaming, no satellite, but you're trying to find the right station. And you know, if you're slightly off this, the signal is weak, it's filled with static and the message will be unclear. But when you tune into the right frequency, the interference fades away.

As I was thinking of this illustration, I was thinking of when I was in college and the Super Bowl is coming up.

And I remember it was in college and the Super Bowl was on. It was Super Bowl Sunday and we didn't have a TV, so my buddy and I used a small handheld radio to try to listen to the game.

The challenge is we were 30 minutes north of Bangor in Maine and the reception was awful. The joke was there's more cows in Charleston, Maine than people.

And I think that wasn't far off from the truth. So we were desperate to tune into the game. So we tried everything. Adjust the antenna, reposition the radio. We were holding up the

radio in different parts of our dorm room, and finally we found out if I stood up on the radiator and held it up in the corner of the room, we could hear.

And I think it was when Brett Favre won the Super Bowls. Brett Favre steps back. He goes back to pass. Now, I can't recall, but I don't think I stood up there on the right ear the whole game. We gave up, had to find the score the next day. But you could only catch it if you were tuned into the right frequency.

And that faith works similar. What are you tuned into? What is the center of your life? What is your heart set upon? And when life gets loud and chaotic, are you tuned into the problems and Jesus is in the background?

Or do you adjust until Jesus is clear and everything else starts to fade in the background? Christ-centered faith means tuning into Jesus.

Now look at verse 19. This is where we see this. Because when Jesus comes down off the mountain and he hears what is happening here and the commotion and the chaos and the failure and the frustration, what's his answer to all this?

Verse 19. He answered them. O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.

¹⁹ And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." (Mark 9:19, ESV)

Do you see Jesus is frustrated, he's exasperated. Now on the mountain we saw his glory. Now we're seeing Jesus in his humanity. It's a holy frustration, it's a holy anger.

And who is he frustrated with now? It could be the disciples, of course, because they're the ones who failed to cast out the demon. However, the term generation, O faithless generation, appears five times in the Gospel of Mark, and it never refers only to the disciples. It's more accurate, I think, to realize Jesus is expressing frustration with the whole lot of them, with everyone.

Look at the characters in this narrative. The disciples failed to cast out the demon. They weren't focused on Jesus. The father in the story, he'll show a small spark of faith, and we'll focus on that in a minute. But right now, he sees Jesus just as another problem solver, doesn't he? He's frustrated. I brought my son to you.

¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. (Mark 9:17, ESV)

And it's interesting, he saw the authority was passed down to the nine disciples that were there. I brought my son to you, Jesus, and nothing happened. So he doesn't really know who Jesus is.

And then there's the crowd. They're excited to see Jesus, but we question whether it's a faith-driven excitement and anticipation or more like they're fans chasing a celebrity, curious to see the next spectacle, the next show.

And then there's the scribes. And they're the worst of the lot. They don't seem to care about the boy or Jesus. They just want to argue and prove and glow in the disciples' failure.

So no wonder Jesus is fed up with this generation. The disciples are thinking about what they can do and can't do. The dad is thinking about what his son needs. The crowd is thinking about the next show. And the scribes are thinking about why they're always right.

And Jesus is in front of all of them, but he's not their focus. They're all looking at something else. And he answers and says, oh, faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? Why are they faithless?

¹⁹ And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." (Mark 9:19, ESV)

Friends, they saw Jesus, but they found no rest in Jesus. Have you ever been there? You're anxious about many things. You look out at our world, and your heart is troubled with the uncertainty of life and the unknowns of the future.

God's word is right in front of you, and you want Christ to fix your problems. But is your heart centered on Christ? Jesus was there, but he was not an anchor for their soul amid the storm. And Mark wants to press upon us.

To be a disciple of Jesus is not only to profess him as the Christ and to see him as glorious, but is to fix our eyes on him in the midst of the storms of life, in the midst of the blessings of life, to trust him, to see that he is all powerful, all loving, in control of everything.

And if I belong to him and I am his and he is mine, he is worthy to be trusted. We confess the Apostles Creed here this morning. And what were we saying when we confess who Christ is?

That he is the one who has all authority in heaven and earth that's been given to him. He is the one who is glorious. And friends, he's the one who just came down off the mountain.

You know, I think Peter, when they come down off the mountain into this mess, he'd be like, I told you we should have built a tent and stayed up there. But he comes down off the mountain where it was glorious, into the chaos, into.

And isn't it a beautiful picture of the Incarnation that he could have stayed on the glorious mountain? He could have stayed in the trouble-free atmosphere of such glory. But he comes down into the arguing, into the mourning, into the failure, into the unbelief.

Faith is having trust in Christ. It is always Christ-centered. And he is worthy of our trust. He is worthy of our faith.

You know, as I often draw your attention to, I draw your attention to the Shorter Catechism. And what is faith in Jesus Christ? Question 86. I think it's such a beautiful, concise, and biblically accurate answer.

What is faith in Jesus Christ? Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace. Hebrews 10:39. We are not those who shrink back and are destroyed, but those who have faith and preserve their souls.

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Hebrews 10:39, ESV)

Faith is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel. John 1:12. But all who did receive him, who received Jesus and believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God.

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, (John 1:12, ESV)

Faith is a saving grace where we receive and rest upon him alone. And what does Isaiah 26 say? You are kept in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on him because you trust in him. You trust in the Lord forever, who is an everlasting rock.

³ You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. ⁴ Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. (Isaiah 26:3-4, ESV)

Friends, faith is always Christ centered. And we're challenged today. To be a disciple of Christ is to trust Christ. It's to trust His Word. It's to be in the midst of chaos, in the midst of the worry and fretting, and to say, Jesus is in front of me. Jesus has given me his word. I belong to him, and I trust him always, Christ centered.

Now, this narrative secondly teaches us that faith is sometimes small, sometimes small. As you look at Jesus' interaction with the Father, it really is so beautiful. I'll draw your attention to it. Again, he comes and he asks, what are they arguing about? This father says, I brought my son, who is so tormented, to your disciples. But they couldn't deal with it. Jesus rebukes the whole lot of them.

In verse 20, they brought the boy to him. You see that the terror that this boy is under. And Jesus asks the Father, how long has this been happening to him?

²¹ And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. (Mark 9:21, ESV)

You see three things Jesus does in this part of the narrative. First, Jesus diagnoses the need as a great physician, doesn't he? Like a patient coming before a doctor. And the doctor asks, well, how long has it been? What's it been like? How long has this been happening? He's a great physician.

And secondly, he challenges the Father, doesn't he? Challenges the Father. Then lastly, he teaches the disciples. But look at verse 20. Excuse me, verse 17 again. I brought my son to you, for he is a spirit that makes him mute.

¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. (Mark 9:17, ESV)

And then verse 22, it cast him into the fire, into the water, destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.

²² And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." (Mark 9:22, ESV)

Now, I want you to zero in on the Father here in the text. He says, if you can do anything, help us now. May remind you of when the leper spoke to Jesus. He said something like this to Jesus, but it was also entirely different, didn't he?

In Mark 1:40, he said, if you will, you can make me clean.

⁴⁰ And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." (Mark 1:40, ESV)

It is always entirely correct to pray like that, if you will. In other words, Lord, if you're willing, I want this job. If it be your will, I want this promotion. But if it be your will, I want this to happen in my life.

Oftentimes we pray for those who are sick. Perhaps they're on the deathbed. And it's entirely correct. Always pray, Lord, if it be your will. If it be your will. We don't make demands of Jesus. He knows what is best. If you ask anything according to his will, he hears you. He answers you according to his will.

The leper said, if you will. It's always right to pray like that. But it is never appropriate to pray. If you can, look at Jesus' response in verse 23, if you can. There's an exclamation point there. It's not if you can or can't, for the Son of God only can. It's not a matter of whether he can, but Jesus seems to indicate, do you think I can?

All things are possible to him that believes, but the power is not in faith. The power is in Jesus. But faith is what connects us to Jesus, what causes us to tune into Jesus. Jesus can do all things. It's not a matter of his ability. All things are possible to him.

Now look at the man's response. Because it shows us that faith is not always, not only Christ centered, but sometimes faith is small. Verse 24, the father of the child cried out, saying, I believe. Help my unbelief.

²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24, ESV)

Now, friends, doubt is never prized in Scripture. In other words, the goal of the Christian life is not more doubt. There have been some movements in the church over the years that have seemingly prized doubt. In other words, the more skeptical and doubtful you are, the more authentic you are.

Have you been around some of that? I have. The more you could question the Scriptures, the more you can be skeptical. you're more authentic. No. Scripture never prizes doubt. Scripture prizes faith. Faith is the goal. To grow in faith is the goal. Scripture does not prize doubt. But Scripture is realistic about doubt.

Jude 22 says, have mercy on those who doubt.

²² And have mercy on those who doubt; (Jude 1:22, ESV)

Romans 14:1 says, welcome the one who is weak in faith. The Scripture is entirely realistic about doubt and understands that many times in the Christian faith we will have faith mingled with doubts.

¹ As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. (Romans 14:1, ESV)

And this man, we see it in him. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. In other words, you might say, I believe God is good, but why is my marriage struggling? Or why did it end in divorce?

I believe the Bible is true, but it seems like what God is calling me to is impossible to follow.

I believe God is wise, but I don't understand why my loved one is suffering as they are.

I believe my sins are forgiven, but I still carry feelings of guilt and shame.

I believe God is in control, but right now it feels like my life is spinning out of control.

I believe God has a purpose for me, but I never imagined that it would look like this.

I believe. Help my unbelief and friends.

It's actually a very beautiful prayer, isn't it? And it shows the presence of faith in this Father. It's small, but it's there. Our faith is not perfect, but Scripture tells us it is sufficient. What makes faith sufficient is not our ability, but that it is a gift of God.

Your salvation comes by grace through faith, not of yourselves. It is a gift of God. So the faith that we have to believe the Word of God, the faith that we have to believe the Gospel, is sufficient because it is a faith given to us by God.

And God has designed it to be sufficient. Is it perfect? No. Is it imperfect? Yes. Is it weak? Yes. Does it vacillate at times? Yes. Does it waver? Yes. Is there doubting at times? Yes. But is it sufficient? Yes.

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. And faith is sometimes small. Now you may say, how do you know he has faith? Well, he showed up, didn't he? He was there. He was there. Don't underestimate showing up.

You know, sometimes we come into church and come into church struggling. We don't always come in robust. Perhaps we're dragging ourselves. But you show up. You show up. He showed up. And he didn't give up either. He didn't give up. And he clearly loved his son. And he slowly began to see who Jesus really is.

Now, this is a side note, but we should take a moment to give thanks for men and fathers who strive to be faithful. He came with his son because he loved his son. We should give thanks for men and fathers who love their families, who lead by example.

We should give honor to fathers and grandfathers of the patriarchs, imperfect though they are, who have brought their sons and daughters to Jesus through steady devotion and strength.

In a culture that often overlooks or diminishes the role of men, we ought to give thanks for those who have embraced the call to shepherd their families and act as men in this world.

He came and he said, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Small faith is still genuine faith, friends, and this is very good news for us this morning because I want you to take note of what Jesus didn't say in response to this man. He didn't say, go back and get rid of all your doubts and then come to me.

Don't you know I'm the glorious one? Go get rid of your doubt, work on that fellow, and then come back. The Father says, I believe, but I'm still riddled by doubts. I'm not as faithful as I should be. Help me.

Oh, friends, there are short, small biblical prayers that we can echo, and I think this is one of them. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. I believe, but I'm struggling. Try that as you start off this new year. Lord, I trust you, but man, I'm struggling. Help me.

But friends, it's a small faith, but it's the faith that hangs on, doesn't turn and run, acknowledges the struggle and stays with Jesus. It is the mustard seed faith that Jesus said can move mountains.

And when Jesus saw the crowd running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit. In response to this small faith, he commanded the demon out of him never to enter him again.

²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." (Mark 9:25, ESV)

And things got worse, didn't they? Isn't that something? Sometimes when you trust God, when you make a choice, I'm going to believe you, it gets worse. He's there. He's throttled by

this demon. He's laying like a corpse. The people think he's dead, but Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up.

27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. (Mark 9:27, ESV)

This is often how God works. When we're trusting him, things seem to get worse. It seems to be going in the wrong direction. But look at the end. Beautifully, Luke would add to this story. Jesus gave his son back to his Father. The beautiful work of the Savior is pity, is love. Nothing's lacking.

There might be small faith on our part. But there's nothing small in who Christ is. All things indeed are possible to our Savior. Faith is sometimes small. It's always Christ-centered. And lastly, faith is never self-reliant. This is the key to the entire passage.

Verse 29, the end. Again, I love how Jesus deals with the disciples in private. You know, he doesn't shame them for their failure in the situation, but in private they come into Jesus in the house and they say, why could we not cast it out? And he said to them, this kind comes not out but by prayer, only prayer.

29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (Mark 9:29, ESV)

It's the key. We're being given a keyhole through which we peer in and see a private lesson of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And that it's that faith is never self-reliant.

Now, what's interesting here is that this was not the disciples' first encounter with demons, was it? Mark 6:7. Jesus gave them authority, go out, gave them authority over the demons. And the success was so grand they came back right to Jesus excited. The demons are subject to us in your name.

7 And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. (Mark 6:7, ESV)

17 The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" (Luke 10:17, ESV)

They had profound success. People are getting free, they're getting healed. But now failure. And it's a legitimate question, why couldn't we cast it out? We've done this before, didn't work this time. What's Jesus' answer? This kind comes out, but not by prayer.

You didn't pray. You thought because you did it before, you could do it again. In those moments, the disciples had become self-reliant.

It reminds me of Samson, right when Samson is with Delilah, and Delilah wakes him up and says, Samson, the Philistines are upon you. And he wakes from his sleep and he says, I'll go out as other times and shake myself free. But he didn't know that the Lord had left him.

²⁰ And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him. (Judges 16:20, ESV)

What was Samson saying? I've done it before, I'll do it again. But by breaking his Nazarene vow, he chose self-reliance over relying on God. And every day of our lives, we have the choice. Are we going to choose to have faith in our Savior, or are we going to be self-reliant?

What this passage is saying is faith is never self-reliant. In fact, the whole lesson is about self-reliance and how it is in stark contrast to faith in Christ. Jesus says, you didn't pray. What is prayer? Prayer is an expression of reliance on God, isn't it?

The very act of asking and expecting is an act of faith. One author says prayer is faith turned toward God. And in those moments, what we see is the disciples relied upon their past experience, their past victories. And they didn't pray.

Friends, this is a stark question towards the end of the sermon, but what makes you think that the gifts and abilities you have now, you always have? We just assume sometimes, don't we?

I'm going to call soon. But this reminds me of a reoccurring dream I have. And now it's not every night, but it does come. And it's one of those dreams that always startles me, wakes me up.

I'm standing before a crowd, it's usually a large crowd, everybody's there. I have the podium, I have my notes out, and I go to speak, and I can't speak now. Some people have bad dreams about falling, others about leaving the house without their clothes. This is my bad dream.

Everybody's there, they're ready, everyone's eager, and I know what to say. I go to speak and. And nothing will come out. And I'm sweating now. Wake up. That's a good reminder.

I've been doing this preaching since I was 15 years old. I'm almost 47, so do the math. That's a long time. And how easy it is for me to come up and say, you know, I've done, I've been doing this for a long time. I know what to do.

What makes you think because you're a good leader and you have the ability to draw people around you and get things done, that you'll always have that gift, friend.

It is so easy for us to become self-reliant and say, I can do it, I can make it happen. But prayer is saying, oh no Lord, in us there is no good thing. We need you, we're desperate for you.

Prayer is faith turned towards God, and prayer keeps us reliant on God. And I challenge you at the start of this new year to take time to pray more than you have before. What daily activities do you do that you can set some time aside when you're doing those things?

Doing the dishes, driving, doing your daily walk—all the time you can turn your heart and face towards God and remind yourself that you are not, and I am not, as self-reliant as we think we are.

And to consider that the challenges, the struggles, and the disappointments that are in our lives right now are intended to draw us closer to him in prayer. As we sang in that hymn, draw me closer, draw me closer.

And often it is the challenges, it's the trials, it's the struggles that are intended not to move us away, but draw us closer with further dependency upon God. We see our inadequacies as a gift because it leads us to depend more fully on him.

So the next time we face bad news or disappointment or impossible situations, kind of like the heartbreak of a father watching his child suffer, that we would pause and we would pray. And that question we pressed upon our hearts: what is our kind? This kind comes not out by prayer.

What is in our life right now that we want change, and it frustrates us? But we're going about it on self-reliance, and we need to turn to the Lord and pray. Be challenged, church, and as a church, collectively pray.

What a beautiful time in the small group we had this past week, just at the end of our study in Ecclesiastes, to pray for the various needs. That prayer would just be worked into the DNA of who we are as a church, that our first reaction would be to pray because of how we need him in our small faith, in our Christ-centered faith, that we're reminded that our reliance is on him.

So let's pray.

Father, make us a people of prayer. Make us a people who grow in faith. Forgive us for our lack of faith. That even as the son was frustrated on that day as he looked out of the crowd, so we feel your heart frustrated with us as well.

At times when you've done so much in our lives that we can look back and say if you did it before, we'll trust you again. And yet we don't. We veer to the left and to the right. We complain, we get discouraged. We thank you that you are one who is kind and you receive.

Our small faith causes us to be more aware of our deep need for you today and increase our faith. Remind us that apart from you, we could do nothing.

Father, help us to see that there are battles that need to be won that aren't won because we don't pray. Make us a people of prayer. Help us, we believe. Help us in our unbelief.

We pray in Christ's Name, Amen. Let's stand together.