

*One of the multitude answered, "Teacher, I brought to you my son, who has a mute spirit; 18 and wherever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and wastes away. I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they weren't able." 19 He answered him, "Unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to me." 20 They brought him to him, and when he saw him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground, wallowing and foaming at the mouth. 21 He asked his father, "How long has it been since this has come to him?" He said, "From childhood. 22 Often it has cast him both into the fire and into the water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us, and help us." 23 Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out with tears, "I believe. Help my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a multitude came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to him, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" 26 After crying out and convulsing him greatly, it came out of him. The boy became like one dead; so much that most of them said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand, and raised him up; and he arose. 28 When he had come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we cast it out?" 29 He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing, except by prayer and fasting."*

I often start thinking about the scripture and sermon for the next week on Sunday afternoon and as soon as I know what the next service is going to be about, I start sending out emails with that information. The more I can get done early the better. Better for those who do so much work to make the worship services special at Zion—so that the whole service has a theme of sorts and so that Kathy has as much time as possible to set up the visuals on the computer. Better for me, since I never know what the week will hold.

This past Sunday, I thought "faith" would be a great theme—especially since there are so many passages on faith and Christianity is based entirely on faith.

The results you get by typing the word faith into a Bible program is almost overwhelming. I'm using the Mark 9 passage but here are just a few things that the Bible says about faith:

*Matthew 9: 2; 20-22; 15:28; 21:21 Behold, they brought to him a man who was paralyzed, lying on a bed. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, "Son, cheer up! Your sins are forgiven you." Behold, a woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years came behind him, and touched the fringe† of his garment; for she said within herself, "If I just touch his garment, I will be made well." But Jesus, turning around and seeing her, said, "Daughter, cheer up! Your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that hour. Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Be it done to you even as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that hour. Jesus answered them, "Most certainly I tell you, if you have faith, and don't doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you told this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it would be done.*

*Mark 4:39-40; 11:22: He awoke, and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" The wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? How is it that you have no faith?" Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.*

*Acts 14:8-9-8 At Lystra a certain man sat, impotent in his feet, a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked. 9 He was listening to Paul speaking, who, fastening eyes on him, and seeing that he had faith to be made whole,*

Then you get into the letters of the apostles and sometimes the word faith is found in almost every verse.

*Romans 3:21-29: But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; 24 being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God sent to be an atoning sacrifice,\* through faith in his blood, for a demonstration of his righteousness through the passing over of prior sins, in God's forbearance; 26 to demonstrate his righteousness at this present time; that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus. 27 Where then is the boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28 We maintain therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Isn't he the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also...*

Then there is Romans 4:6 and Galatians 3:2ff and Hebrews 11:1ff. You might say that it is almost impossible to open the New testament without seeing the word faith.

In these passages faith is the basis for healing—both self and others. Faith is the basis for walking on the water. Faith is the basis of self-sacrifice. Faith is the basis for following Jesus. All-in-all faith is the main building block of salvation. That is how we become the children of God—through faith.

Not thinking about the rest of the passages we might find, with all that I've read and the passages I've mentioned, if I did a sermon on all of them, it would last until dark and STILL be incomplete.

So, clearly, if we want to get home by dinnertime, I needed to narrow it down a bit. As I looked, I began to see that passages on faith are sometimes quite different from each other. In our Mark passage, the man came to Jesus and asked if he would heal his son “if you can...” and there was a pretty sharp rebuke that came after that. I'm not sure what the difference was, but Jesus seems to have been frustrated. Maybe because the man seemed to be questioning his ability. Maybe because the disciples had failed.

I understand why the man might have said “if you can...” It appears that, just like the woman with the issue of blood, he had been trying to get this problem taken care of for some time. Then the disciples came along and said, “hey, we got this—we have the power...” but they didn't did they?

When he came to Jesus he was at the end of his proverbial rope. “please help if you can.” When Jesus replied about faith or faithlessness, the man has a classic reply—one that we should always remember. “I believe, help my unbelief...”

I have a friend that said our lives are a product of every little decision we ever made in life. That's partially true, but we are also products of everything that has ever happened to us in life, good and bad.

Sometimes even childhood experiences never go away—they are always a part of who we are.

Let me tell you a story from my childhood.

When I was a little boy, about 2-3 years old, one of my dad's cousins came to stay with us for several months. He was going to college and needed a free place to stay and they were close, so living with us was a good solution.

His name was Jim Darrel Wilcox—notice that even though his last name was shortened, true to the south, everyone included his middle name

Jim Darrel was a real character. He was always messing with me. If I wouldn't eat all my supper he would take an old dull butter knife and say he was going to cut himself with it if I didn't eat. To me this was real and I would eat.

Another thing he would do is get on his hands and knees and pretend to be a bear. “Grr, I'm a bear and I'm going to eat you...” I don't remember very well, but they say I would stand still, look him in the eye and say, “you are not a bear, you are Jim Darrel...” and the argument would begin. “Grrr, I'm a bear.” “Not a bear.” “I'm a bear.” All the while he would be coming toward me on his hands and knees. AS he got closer I would still say he wasn't a bear, but I would finally lose my resolve and turn and fly over the couch and get behind it.

Now you know what is wrong with me today!

I see a real parallel between my situation and the man in our passage. “I believe, help my unbelief...” I knew Jim was not a bear. I knew it was just Jim. I believed it was just Jim. He didn't look like a bear. He didn't really sound like a bear. I believed with all my heart and mind that it was just my cousin and not a bear—but why did I run? “I believe, help my unbelief...”

I'd say that most of you are believers. You believe—that's why you are here. Your faith probably brought you. Your faith has changed your life—you are not the person you used to be or even the person you would have been. In the New Testament we are told about the power of faith.

In Chapter 17, we see Matthew's the parallel passage for the one we are using today. In that passage, the disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't cast out the demon and he said that the power of faith is so great that in the size of a mustard seed, faith can move mountains.

Do we believe that? DO WE? As a child, I thought I believed that passage. The problem was that I tried to get something like that to happen—for something to move or disappear or something, but it didn't happen.

Did I have faith? I believe I did. Is this passage wrong? I don't believe so. There is another principle at play in understanding promises of Scripture—that of “God's will.” We are not going to go into reasons for unanswered prayer or at least unanswered requests. Just let me say that there may be mitigating factors—it may not be a lack of real faith.

That doesn't change the fact that Jesus said there is real power in faith. In Matthew 14:23-32 we see that faith healed the Centurion's child. Faith dried up the woman's flow of blood. Faith let Peter walk on the water—at least until he looked around and lived up to the name Jesus gave him (what was that?) Petros--”the rock.” I've wondered if he got that name before or after the walking on the water attempt :) Faith saves lives. Faith Changes lives.

And yet, or faith is not perfect. You and I can constantly pray the prayer of that father, “I believe, help my unbelief...” I believe that faith can be fed and faith can be strengthened. I believe it will grow and fill the space we allow for it. Quickly, lets look at ways faith can grow.

First of all, faith is like a muscle—it needs exercise. I believe that if Peter had stayed in the boat, he would have never become the man of God he eventually became. Remember that we are a product of all our experiences and decisions. It was the exercising of his “little faith” and even his failure helped him to be stronger he was not yet finished growing his faith. Exercise your faith. God is not done growing it yet—he is not yet done growing you.

Another thing we can do to grow our faith is to ask God to increase it. Pray over your faith. Isn't that interesting? Do we do it often? OR do we not even admit to God that our faith isn't what it should be? So really, the first step here would be to admit to God and ourselves that we need help—and then ask for that help. In Luke 8:22-25 we see the Disciples, the very ones who “should” have had enough faith, needing a faith overhaul. Here they are lacking and yet they are the very ones who delivered the faith to you and to me. In a different passage, they asked Jesus specifically to increase their faith or to “give them faith.”

Even Peter—after he exercised his faith and after it grew—he failed again didn't he? More than once. The last time on a grand scale, didn't he? In your mind, what was Peter's worst moment? For me it was the denial. He failed. His faith was not great enough yet.

In order to grow our faith we can exercise it and we can admit to God and ourselves that it is not big enough—and ask him to increase it. When our faith fails us we can pray for more faith—greater faith.

In Luke 22:31-34 Jesus foretold the denial. In verse 32, at the end, he uses the phrase, “...when you have turned again...” Once we exercise our faith and have admitted that our faith is not what it should be and once we ask God to increase our faith—the answer is to simply begin again. That's what Peter did and we all know who he became and how important he was to the Christian faith—and yet when Jesus was being arrested and crucified, he was pretty close to being in the same “boat” as Judas. But Peter picked up and moved forward in faith where Judas did not.

Maybe Peter worried over that failure every day of his life. I personally feel that the fact of the denial had something to do with the powerful and faithful life Peter lived later on. It changed him because he began again. He COULD have committed suicide as Judas did, but instead he left that behind enough to begin over.

Even though Jesus himself prayed that Peter's faith would be enough, it was not. Peter failed. Getting up and dusting off and moving forward made all the difference.

We see later at the shore of the lake that the resurrected master loved and accepted Peter in spite of the denial. He will do the same for you and for me.

We can also increase our faith by putting legs on it. By humbly doing more than is required. Maybe the important part of this is the humility. Be humble. Is your faith great? Don't flaunt it in front of the rest of us.

If you decide that you need to work out at the gym and you grow your muscles and lose all your fat and you start looking like “Ahhhnold” don't come to church here posing and showing all of us mere mortals what your body looks like. We don't want to hear how you did it. We don't want to hear you brag. We don't want to see it.

It is the same with faith—Jesus was reminding his disciples that growth and progress and service is expected of us Christians. As Christians we are slaves of God and not our own. We are his servants. If our faith and service and talents and all of that is great and wonderful and mighty—it was GOD who gave the increase. It was God who gave the strength. It was God who gave the talents. The most mighty and most faithful men and women of God are the most humble because they understand where it all really comes from.

If exercised and prayed over and begun again and again and given legs and used in humility—faith has great power. Jesus says it can move mountains and sycamore trees and kill fig trees.

There is at least one more thing that it can do—this thing is more powerful and more important than those things. Faith can change human lives and save human souls. Ephesians 2:8 says that it is by grace that we are saved, not of our own selves, but as a gift from God. I Peter 1:9 says, “the result of your faith [is] the salvation of your souls.”

The ultimate outcome of faith in God is salvation. Not the outcome of PERFECT faith. Faith on this earth will always be imperfect. We can still exercise it and pray over it and pick ourselves up when we fail. Jesus says that “little faith” even the size of a mustard seed, can do more than you and I can even imagine—it can even save a human soul.

I've known several people in my life who wanted to be saved—who wanted to have a relationship to God—to have him in their heart and life, but what they wanted was to be overwhelmed by God—what they wanted was God to inject them with perfect and complete faith all at once. No doubts or questions—nothing of the sort.

If God is leading you to make a decision, don't wait until your faith in yourself and in God is strong enough or until it is perfect—you may end up waiting and waiting until it is too late.

A little faith can go a long ways. At least far enough.

The bad news is that you and I can never be good enough and our faith can never be perfect enough or strong enough. The good news is that God doesn't expect perfection.