

Can Jesus Make Any Difference?

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Date: 23 August 2020

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[0 : 00] Today we're continuing our study of the Gospel of Matthew and we've come to the second half of chapter 17. As we begin, let's read verses 22 and 23.

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 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, and they were greatly distressed.

One of the difficulties that people can often have with the Bible or with Christianity is that it can seem as though it's a long way from the realities and experiences of our day-to-day lives.

And passages like this one can reinforce that kind of mindset. So as we read about a demon-possessed boy, about mountains moving, temple tax, and a fish with a coin in its mouth, it's so easy to think, well, what has that got to do with me?

And it will be easy to jump to that conclusion, many people have done so. But what I want to try and say to you today is that that's the wrong conclusion to come to.

[1 : 11] I wish that we could look at the whole section that we have before us in the second half of chapter 17, but because of time, we're just going to focus on the bit from verse 14 to verses 23.

And in looking at this part, what I hope we'll see is that far from this being strange and irrelevant, this passage is actually describing three situations that are very common in all of our experiences.

They are a desperate family, a difficult crowd, and a disappointing experience. And I think every single one of us will encounter at least one of these in the week ahead, maybe more.

So I want us to look at these three things in turn, and then we're going to ask the question, which is our title today, can Jesus make any difference?

So first of all, we have a family in desperate need. In many ways, there's a huge contrast in the passage that we read for us. In the first half of the chapter, you've got this extraordinary moment when Jesus is transfigured, and his appearance changes, his heavenly glory bursts through for a brief moment.

[2 : 27] But then in the second half, it's very much a return back to earth and all the harsh realities that life can bring. And that's seen so clearly in verses 14 to 16, where we meet a father whose son is desperately ill.

Now, stay away when we read verses like that. We probably find ourselves asking the question, well, what's going on here? How are we to understand this? Clearly, the child has got a horrendous condition, but what exactly is wrong with him?

And what's the cause of that? In verse 15, as you can see, he's described as an epileptic, but just a couple of verses later in verse 18, we see that his condition is the result of demonic oppression.

And that, of course, raises the question about what the connection is between medical illnesses and the activities of the demonic forces of the kingdom of evil.

Sometimes in the Bible, you have straightforward illnesses like the paralytic who was lowered down through the roof by his friends or the woman who had continuous bleeding in Matthew chapter 9.

- [3 : 44] Other times, you have people who are just described as being oppressed by demons, and they're not really described in any sort of medical terms, like the daughter of the Canaanite woman in chapter 15.

But sometimes, medical illnesses and demonic oppression appear together, and that's the case that we have here.

What does that mean? Does it mean that the Bible is saying that illnesses like epilepsy are caused by demons? Or does it mean that demonic oppression can also bring with it physical symptoms?

Do we even think that demonic oppression is a thing? How is it that we understand this apparent connection that passages like this are making between demonic oppression and this child's horrendous fits?

Well, in answering that question, I think there's one fundamental truth that we can say that we will all agree with. But below that, I think there's three or more possibilities that we may or may not agree with.

- [4 : 53] Fundamental truth is this, that all illness, all suffering, all brokenness in people's experience, is all of that is a result of sin. It comes from the fact that we live in a fallen world.

And that fundamental truth is really important to remember, over and above whatever the specific details of an individual case might be.

The key point is that all of it is wrong and none of it is part of what God originally wanted or intended for humanity.

But underneath that fundamental truth, I think there's at least three possibilities that we may hold to. Option one is to say, well, demonic oppression is not really a real thing.

That's just how these people in the olden days used to interpret medical conditions that they couldn't actually understand.

- [5 : 55] In the West, we're probably tempted to think like that, but I think we would actually be in the minority globally even today. The other extremist is option three, which is to say that all neurological and psychological illness is a result of demonic oppression.

Or there's option two, which is, I think, much more in the middle, which says, yes, demonic oppression is a real thing, and it can manifest itself with symptoms that correspond to neurological conditions like epilepsy, but it's not the case that all examples of conditions like that are caused by direct satanic activity.

But they are a result of the fundamental truth that all suffering and brokenness and illness is a result of the fallen world that we are in.

I would go with option two in terms of my own understanding. I don't think it's wise at all to attribute neurological illnesses to direct demonic oppression, but at the same time, sometimes people do things and sometimes people experience things that are just so awful.

Then the only explanation that makes sense to me is that behind that lies a desperately evil influence. I think there'll always be aspects of this that we can't fully answer, but we can be absolutely sure of that fundamental truth we're highlighting, that all the awful symptoms that this boy was experiencing fundamentally were a result of the fact that this world is fallen and it's been ruined by sin.

- [7 : 43] And the result of all that is highlighted very powerfully in verse 15, where this father says that his boy suffers terribly.

And before us here is a heartbreaking example of the horrible effect of sin on a child. Sin has absolutely no hesitation in wrecking the lives of children.

And the result of that is here Jesus is confronted by a family who are in desperate need. And if you think for one moment that that is irrelevant to today, then you must live in astounding isolation.

Because today right now there are countless children in Scotland, in Edinburgh, who are facing the devastating effects of sin, and it's leaving them suffering terribly.

That might be physical or mental illness, it might be abuse or neglect, it might be the pain of a parent in the grip of addiction, it might be the awful grind of poverty, it might be loneliness and isolation.

[9 : 12] One thing that's absolutely true of Scotland in 2020 is that there are many, many children of whom we can say he is suffering terribly.

The question is, can Jesus make any difference? Second thing we see in this passage is a difficult crowd.

Jesus' response to this man is quite startling. He says to them, oh 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. And Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of him and the boy was healed instantly.

Jesus' response is directed to the crowds that were there. That's emphasised I think by the word generation that you can see on the top line there. Jesus is clearly disappointed and frustrated with the approach that the crowd are taking.

But why was that the case? What was going on? Well, in order to answer this we need to look a little bit at Matthew and a little bit at Mark. Now normally when we're looking at a Gospel we would tend to just focus on Matthew because we want to just see what Matthew is saying.

[10 : 24] So if we're studying Matthew we'll tend to just look at what Matthew is telling us. But in this case I do think that a quick comparison with Mark is going to bring out a very important point.

In Matthew as we just noted we're told that this boy is suffering terribly. Mark doesn't use exactly the same words but he just gives a description of what that suffering looked like.

But the other thing that Mark tells us is that when Jesus arrived the crowd were having a big argument. And so you take Matthew and Mark together and you see that before us here is a tragic pattern which has constantly repeated itself throughout human history.

The grown-ups are arguing while the child is suffering. And again the relevance of that to today is abundantly clear.

Because how often is it the case that children suffer terribly while at the same time our leaders are standing in parliament having an argument about who knows what.

[11 : 37] And it's not just leaders. How often do we grown-ups pour our energy into a big rant on social media about everything that's wrong with the world but we don't actually do anything to help the children or the adults who are actually suffering.

Now when I say that I'm not saying that to have a dig at parliament or at social media both of these things are phenomenal sources for good when they're functioning well. But what I'm trying to say is that it is the case again and again in human history that in the face of suffering it's a lot easier to put our energy into it.

It's easier to put our energy into arguing than it is to put our energy into actually helping. And it's in that context that Jesus says, oh faithless and twisted generation.

Now what exactly does Jesus mean when he says that? Well, Jesus is probably quite easy to understand it. It basically means exactly that to not trust God.

Which of course is just another way of saying I know better. So instead of thinking in the face of this suffering child, we need to look to God who can help us.

[12 : 56] This generation thought that they knew best although the fact that they were arguing seems that what was best was actually far from clear. But they had this mindset that they knew better.

And that kind of unhelpful thinking is emphasized by the other word that Jesus uses. He says that they were twisted. That word is also sometimes translated perverted so you might have that in your Bible version in front of you.

And when we today hear those words twisted or perverted, we tend to kind of think of a certain kind of sordid or depraved behavior which I don't really need to give examples of.

But I'm sure we can all think of. I don't think that that's what this word is actually referring to here. Because the word that Jesus uses is not so much to do with what we would think of as twisted or perverted behavior.

The word that Jesus uses is more to do with not talking utter rubbish. The same word is used for example in Acts 20 to describe false teachers.

[14 : 03] It conveys the idea of not following a straight line from evidence to conclusion. In other words, it's not thinking straight and consequently you end up saying things that aren't reliable.

So a faithless and twisted generation has this kind of double edged sword of people refusing to trust what God is saying to them. While at the same time firing off their own nonsense ideas that don't display much evidence of actually thinking straight.

Do we still get that today? I think we do. We see it all the time. Crowds that think that they know best, who won't listen to anyone other than themselves.

And who take the truth and kind of bend it and twist it and tangle it into whatever they want to be and they end up spouting nonsense.

And more often than not, the end result of that is arguing and fighting. And that's why often when we're faced with suffering, we don't tend to think, how can I help?

[15 : 17] We tend to think, who can I blame? The crowd around Jesus were arguing and they were refusing to listen to anyone. Their ears were closed and their mouths were open and that is usually a terrible combination.

Therefore it's not altogether surprising that Jesus says to them, how long will I put up with you? And all around us we still see negative, difficult crowds.

You might work among one. You might see it in your community and you probably see it quite often on social media.

Can Jesus make any difference to that? The third thing we see is a disappointing experience.

In the midst of it all, you have the nine disciples who had tried and failed to heal the boy. Remember Peter, James and John had been up the mountain with Jesus, so it was just the nine disciples who had interacted with this father and his child.

[16 : 23] And as we read in verses 19 and 20 in the aftermath, they came to Jesus and they asked why couldn't we cast it out?

And this is particularly significant because just a few chapters earlier in chapter 10, Jesus had given his disciples authority to cast out demons and to heal every disease and affliction.

But here we are just a few chapters later and it didn't work. And you ask, well, what went wrong? Jesus explains that it was because of their little faith.

Now, I think we could quite easily misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. It's very easy to think that Jesus is saying, well, if your faith is small, then you're going to fail.

But if your faith is big, then you'll succeed. And over the years, a lot of people have spoken in that way, especially in regard to healing and also in regard to financial prosperity.

[17 : 27] The more you believe, the more you're going to get. But that's really a very discouraging message. Because if it's true, it surely also means that every failure or lack or difficulty in your life is your fault because your faith isn't strong enough.

And of course, that's not what Jesus is saying. And we know it's not what Jesus is saying because in verse 20, just one line later, he describes the faith that he's looking for as being like a mustard seed.

And of course, a mustard seed is absolutely tiny. So the focus of Jesus is not actually on the size of faith in terms of quantity. When he says little faith, what he means is much more in terms of the quality of that faith.

So in other words, it's not because their faith is small, it's because their faith is poor. And the same idea is conveyed in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 14, when Paul talks about encouraging the faint hearted.

Literally, that word faint hearted is the word little hearted. But of course, Paul is not saying that their hearts are quite small. He's saying that their hearts are struggling.

[18 : 41] And although we don't know the exact details of what happened, it looks likely that these nine disciples tried to cast out the demon. And when it didn't work, they felt intimidated and they gave up and a big argument broke out with the crowd.

So they probably actually started with big faith in the sense of thinking, yeah, we can do this. But then when it didn't work, that faith evaporated.

Whereas faith that maybe felt small and weak, but that didn't give up, would have had a very different result. Whatever the details were, the result is clear. It was really disappointing.

After all the highs of feeding the 5,000 and of seeing people healed, now the disciples are facing the disappointment of failure. The fact that things didn't go the way they wanted them to go and the kind of public humiliation of the fact that everybody was watching them make a mess of things.

And again, it's not hard to see that that is so relevant to our experience every week. So sometimes we have great highs, moments when things go really well.

[19 : 57] But other times things go badly and the things that we thought would go well go wrong and we can often end up in disappointment. For all of us, whoever you are, that's the experience of life, isn't it?

Whether it's at work or at school, at uni, in sport, in our relationships, we have highs and have lows.

Sometimes things go well, sometimes things go badly. And for us as disciples, if you're a follower of Jesus or if you become a follower of Jesus, that's going to be your experience too. And I am sure that if you were to go and look at yourself in the mirror right now, I don't think that you would look at yourself and think, I am so delighted with everything I've achieved. I am pretty sure you would be very prone to look at yourself and feel disappointed at all the ways in which you think you failed.

And again, the key question to ask is, can Jesus make any difference?

Well, the answer to that question is yes, Jesus most definitely can make a difference. But you're probably thinking to yourself, well, Thomas, we knew that you were going to say that.

[21 : 13] And the key thing that I need to show you is why Jesus can make a difference. And in this passage, there's two clear reasons running through it which show why Jesus can and will make a difference.

And these two reasons are, he has the authority to make a difference and he has the desire to make a difference. And that applies to all three of these experiences that we've looked at.

So for the desperate families, Jesus has come with the authority and the desire to bring healing and victory. Jesus' authority is clearly shown in a key word in verse 18, and that's the word rebuked.

He rebuked the demon and it came out of him. That word tells us two really important things. One, it tells us that what this demon was doing was wrong.

The boy's suffering and the suffering of his father and his wider family is utterly wrong. And that's the same as two of all the other ways in which sin has ruined the lives of individuals' families.

[22 : 31] And families, it's two of all the ways in which sin has ruined your life. In Jesus' eyes, that kind of suffering is not inconvenient. It's not just an unfortunate stain of society. It's not this kind of inevitable thing that's going to be experienced by the lower classes.

It is utterly and completely wrong in Jesus' eyes. And that's why in the face of all that wrongness and all that suffering, Jesus rebukes the demon and he says, get out of that boy and don't go anywhere near him ever again.

And the second thing that word tells us is that Jesus has come to win victory over the forces of evil. He's able to rebuke that demon and expel it from that boy because he has come to win victory over all the forces of evil.

This and every other time that Jesus casts out a demon is a powerful demonstration of the fact that he has come to wage war against the kingdom of evil and there is only going to be one winner.

And that victory over evil that Jesus has accomplished is emphasized again and again throughout the New Testament. In John's first letter, for example, it says, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

[23 : 55] Jesus has come to put right all that has gone wrong because of sin and he is victorious over this demon and over every other force of evil.

So it's really clear that Jesus has the authority to heal, but he also has the desire to do so as well. And that's seen very powerfully in verse 17.

He comes, he rebukes the generation, but he says, bring the boy to me. And this is remarkable because so often we can be the opposite.

In the face of horrible suffering and brokenness, our instinct can so easily be just to slot in and hide with the crowd and to keep us far away as we can from the person who's in desperate need.

It is never like that with Jesus. He rebukes this crowd, he says, but bring that boy to me. Stayed away. And instantly he is healed and all the suffering that this family has endured is over.

[25 : 12] Now it's important to remember here that the miracles of Jesus like this one are a foretaste of what the future holds for all who put their trust in him.

So the Bible is not saying that if you come to Jesus, he'll instantly heal you if your faith is strong enough. The Bible is actually saying something far better.

It's saying that this healing of this boy is a glimpse into what Jesus will do for all of us in the new creation, where all the horrible effects of sin will be gone and there will be eternal healing from all suffering and brokenness.

And so that means that for anyone who is suffering ill health, whether physical or mental, Jesus is promising us healing.

And in particular, I want to say that this is so important for anyone who's watching today who has a child who suffers a lot.

[26 : 15] If that's you, I've got two things I want to say. One thing I want to say is that we have so much admiration for you. But the second thing I want to say is that if you have a child who suffers a lot, for whatever reason Jesus is saying, bring him to me.

And if you do that, if you tell them about Jesus, if you hold their hand and pray with them, even if they're not able to articulate their own understanding in the clearest of terms, I have no hesitation in saying that if you bring them to Jesus, you can look forward to the day when both you and your precious son or daughter will be healed.

And forever you can enjoy being with one another and being with Jesus without any of the suffering that you face just now.

And I can say that because Jesus has the authority and the desire to bring healing and victory over all the ways in which sin has broken our lives.

And that means that whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, whatever it is that causes you distress and difficulty in your life, Jesus has come to bring you hope. And so many people's lives have been transformed by Jesus, yours can be too.

[27 : 53] And all you have to do is just trust in. For the difficult crowd, Jesus has come with the authority and the desire to make a new crowd that's different.

So in front of this crowd who don't believe and whose thinking is distorted, which is in so many ways the same as the crowds that are all around us today, in front of that crowd, Jesus shows his authority.

And in doing so, he demonstrates who he really is. And 2,000 years later, we can look back and see that again and again and again, Jesus has stood up to the test of facing a difficult crowd.

Throughout history, numerous crowds have risen and fallen with their own ideas and their own arguments. And yet still today, Jesus is the most well-known, most influential and single most significant person in all of human history.

Jesus today reigns in authority over the whole universe. He's King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And from that position of authority, Jesus is calling people into a new crowd that's different.

[29 : 11] He is building a new humanity. And these disciples and the women who were with him in these early days were the start of it. But it wasn't an exclusive club.

It's a crowd into which everybody is being called and that new humanity has grown and grown and grown into a massive crowd. But the crucial thing is that it is a crowd that has to be different.

So it's a crowd that doesn't make up its own ideas that are twisted or muddled up. It's a crowd that listens to the authority of Jesus and follows him.

And that the very heart of that teaching is that this crowd is to be a place where we love one another. So instead of fighting about who's right, the new humanity of which Jesus is creating is a place where we love one another because we all know that ultimately on our own, we are all getting it wrong.

Jesus is calling us into a crowd that follows him. A crowd that's full of love, joy, peace, togetherness, kindness, hope.

[30 : 31] And that's what he wants his new humanity to be like. That's what we as a church are here to be like. But not only does Jesus have the authority to call us into a new crowd, he has the desire to do that as well.

And it's a reminder of the amazing truth that Jesus wants us with him. He wants us in his crowd. He wants you in his new humanity.

And again, that's powerfully reinforced for us in verse 17. Go back to the question, the questions that Jesus asked. He said to this crowd, how long am I to be with you?

How long am I to bear with you? What is the answer to that question?

When Jesus says how long am I to be with you, what's the actual answer to that question? The answer is until he dies for them.

[31 : 41] Because despite all the failure and foolishness of this crowd, Jesus is not going to give up on them. He's going to go to the cross for them.

And that's because his desire is not to leave us as a big, faithless, broken, muddled up crowd. His desire is to bring us to be with him in something far better.

Jesus has the authority and the desire to make a new crowd that's different. And for those who are discouraged by disappointing experiences, Jesus has come with the authority and the desire to use us in astonishing ways.

At the heart of the disciples' failure was the fact that their faith was poor. They thought that they could do it. It hadn't worked. And it looks as though they gave up. And it seems to be the case that their faith was much more in their own ability.

In verse 16, the Father said, I brought it to you, disciples, and they could not heal him. Now, I may be reading more into this than I should, but I kind of think that's maybe hinting towards us that the disciples were kind of thinking, well, we can do it.

[32 : 58] And the Father, whether he realizes it or not, is saying something that's utterly true, theologically, that neither these nine disciples nor anyone else could ever heal the boy. The only one who can do it is Jesus, the Son of God.

And so in dealing with this desperately ill child, if the disciples thought, we can do this, then their faith is completely muddled up because they're just looking to themselves, which is not real proper healthy faith.

The whole point of faith is that it's looking to Jesus and to him alone as the one who has the authority to heal. And so the reason their faith was pure was because they'd forgotten the authority and power of Jesus.

And you think to yourself, well, you know, they've kind of made a complete hash of it here. They've not just made a mistake in one of their private conversations with Jesus.

Here they are in front of a huge crowd and they've made a complete hash of everything. And it would be so easy to think that in the midst of all that disappointment and this failure that Jesus' reaction would be, well, you guys have had it.

[34 : 13] I don't want to work with you anymore. The incredible thing is that Jesus does not say that. He actually says to them, if you rely on me, even if your faith is small, you can move mountains.

And do you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying that even though they have just endured what's probably the most spectacular failure of their lives, He is saying to them, I still want to use you for amazing work.

And a history proves that this was true because the early church, which arose from these disciples and their followers, that was a church that faced many mountains.

So they were a tiny group with no money, no buildings, no facilities, no established communication network, no legal status, and yet they were commanded to communicate with the whole globe.

Most of them were uneducated, none of them were trained in public speaking or leadership, and yet they were sent to people of all classes, of all cultures, of all ranks of society.

[35 : 24] They faced aggressive persecution, they lost their status, their privileges, their possessions, and the whole world wanted them silence. This early church faced many massive mountains.

And what happened to all of those mountains which confronted the disciples and the early Christians? They moved.

All of these mountains moved. And Jesus has been doing exactly the same ever since. It doesn't matter if your faith feels as tiny as a mustard seed, as long as it is looking to Jesus, He is saying, just keep trusting me.

And if that was true for the disciples, true for the early church, exactly the same is true for you. You might feel today, thinking of the week that's coming and thinking, well, how am I going to serve Jesus as a disciple in the week ahead?

You might think yourself, you might look at yourself and feel like a total failure. You might feel like a massive disappointment to yourself and to God. You might feel that your faith is like the tiniest of all tiny mustard seeds.

[36 : 37] If that's you, then Jesus is saying, come on, I've got some mountains for you to move. And all of this is showing us that Jesus makes a massive difference because it's the authority and the desire to do so.

But the last thing I want to say, and I think this is the most important thing of all, is that Jesus does it all by being willing to be delivered into the hands of men.

That brings us back to the verses that we started with. And it all comes together because we're seeing here that ultimately the consequences of our failures are going to fall on Him.

The aggression of a harsh and difficult crowd is going to be hurled onto Him. And the forces of evil that are wrecking this family are going to be turned onto Jesus.

And He will be killed. And Jesus did it all so that your life can be different.

[37 : 56] So that it can be different today and it can be different forever. So that people who are desperately suffering can have hope of something better.

People who are intimidated by the crowd can come into a new crowd that's warm and kind and non-judgmental. And people who have failed can be encouraged to do amazing things for the glory of God.

Can Jesus make any difference? Too right He can. And so whoever you are, if you are a Christian, please just renew your commitment and your trust in Him today and say, yes Lord Jesus, I want to go for it this week for you.

And if you're not yet a Christian, now is the time to do it. Now is the time for Jesus to start making a massive difference in your life. And whatever hurdles you think are there, they are not hurdles.

Just pray to Jesus and say, Lord, I want to follow you. Help me at every step and I guarantee you that He will. Amen. Let's pray.

[39 : 06] Lord Jesus, we thank you for the amazing difference that you made in this boy and his father's life and for that whole family. We thank you for the amazing difference that you made in the disciples' lives and in all the people we read about in Scripture.

We thank you for the amazing difference you've made in our lives. And for any here today who are seeking you, anyone listening, who are longing for their lives to be different, we pray that you would just draw them to you just as you have drawn us.

Thank you so much Lord Jesus for making such a difference. And may we live out this week as part of your new humanity, following you, serving you and being like you.

Amen.