

Faith in the Valley

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[0 : 00] A large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him, and he suddenly screams.

It throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.

You unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied. How long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here. Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion.

But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you.

The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

[1 : 07] An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them, Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

For it is the one who is least among you, all who is the greatest. Master, said John, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said, for whoever is not against you is for you. Amen. Thanks, Aileen. Good evening.

My name is Darren. Tonight we are going to look at what is potentially, if you have just heard this for the first time, a bit of a tricky passage. We are encountering Jesus with a group of people.

There are demons. He has an argument with the disciples. So before we begin, we are going to watch a short video that puts this passage in context, and hopefully will help us flesh out a little bit of this part of Luke's Gospel, because this is a very important part of Luke's Gospel.

[2 : 17] It's a kind of hinge part as it moves into the rest of the narrative of what God is up to in his world with his people. So a short video is going to come up, and I'll come back up. The Gospel, according to Luke, began by telling us about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

And in the next section of the Gospel, Luke zooms forward in time. So John is now a prophet, and he's leading a renewal movement down at the Jordan River. And all of these Israelites are coming to be baptized, the poor, the rich, tax collectors, even soldiers.

Yeah, what's going on here? So all of these people are dedicating themselves to a new way of life. By getting dunked in a river? So long ago, Israel came to inherit this land by crossing through the Jordan River.

And God gave them a responsibility. They were called to serve him alone, to love their neighbor, and pursue justice together. And we know from stories in the Old Testament that they failed at this repeatedly.

Right. So John's calling Israel to start over, to go back through the river and come out rededicated to their God, ready for the new thing that God's about to do.

[3 : 27] And so it's within this renewal movement that Jesus first appeared. Jesus is baptized by John, and the sky opens up, and a voice from heaven says, You are my son whom I love.

With you I am well pleased. Now, God's words here are packed with echoes from the Hebrew scriptures. This first line is from Psalm 2, where God promised that a king would come who would rule in Jerusalem and confront evil among the nations.

And then this next line is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. And it refers to the Messiah, who would become a servant and suffer and die on Israel's behalf. After this, Jesus goes into the wilderness for 40 days with no food.

I mean, that's roughing it. And in this story, Jesus is replaying Israel's 40-year journey through the wilderness, where they failed to trust their God, and so they rebelled. But Jesus succeeded by resisting temptation and trusting God.

And so this story is marking Jesus as the one who's going to carry Israel's story forward. After the wilderness, Jesus comes back to the region of Galilee, to his hometown, Nazareth.

[4 : 31] He's in the synagogue, and he's invited to read from the scriptures. And he opens up the scroll of Isaiah, and he reads, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he's anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

Why to the poor? Well, in Hebrew culture, being poor wasn't just about money. It was more about low social status, so women and children and the sick, people on the margin.

And surprisingly, this could include people who had money, like tax collectors. They were considered outsiders, too, and so Jesus is here for them. Then Jesus continues reading.

The Lord has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Freedom seems like a big deal for Jesus. Yes, Jesus was freeing people from their sicknesses, from their past, from their shame.

And he was freeing them to become a part of God's new kingdom that Jesus said he was bringing into reality. After this, Jesus appoints 12 men from among all of his disciples as leaders to help him in his mission.

[5 : 31] And that number, 12, it's a very intentional symbol of the 12 tribes of Israel. But this is a ragtag bunch of guys. You've got a fisherman. You've got a former tax collector who worked for the Roman occupation.

You have a former rebel who fought against the Roman occupation. There's no way these guys are going to get along. Yeah, Jesus intentionally brought together people who were outsiders and sworn enemies.

But inside God's kingdom, they're called to reconcile and to live in unity. Following Jesus meant entering a new world order. And so Jesus went on to teach.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you because of me. Jesus even told his disciples to love their enemies, be strangely generous, even to people they don't like, to forgive and show mercy.

This is a radical way of life. And Jesus not only talked about all of this, he promised that he would lead the way, that he would be radically generous and forgive and love his enemies by making the ultimate sacrifice by giving up his life.

[6 : 38] The last story in this section of Luke is fascinating. Jesus takes some of his disciples up onto a mountain. God's glory appears as a bright cloud. And Jesus is suddenly transformed.

And there's two other prophets that appear, Moses and Elijah. Yeah, they're the ancient prophets who also experience God's glory on a mountain. And then God speaks from the cloud saying, This is my son.

Listen to him. Luke is showing us that Jesus is the ultimate prophet. He is God's word to Israel. The three of them talk about what Jesus is going to do when he arrives in Jerusalem.

What's he going to do? He's going to go to the capital city to be enthroned as Israel's true king, but not in the way that anybody expected. And with that, Jesus' mission up in Galilee comes to an end. And the next part of Luke's gospel begins with his long journey to Jerusalem. The whole movement of this story of Jesus has been building to this point of a renewal movement, not just culturally, but of all of who God is and his people.

[8 : 02] And every gospel that records this transfiguration, that story of the mountain, that mountaintop experience where the disciples see Jesus be revealed for who he is, they hear the voice of God, they encounter prophets, that every single time that event is recorded, is followed by what seems a bit like an anticlimax.

Suddenly, they're down at the bottom of the mountain, and they meet this crowd. And the other gospels unpack it a bit to say, this isn't just a crowd who are hanging around waiting. They're arguing. There's a lot of turmoil going on here.

And in the middle of it is this child who is sick. And actually, they use the word demon-possessed. So when we think about this tonight, it is off the back of this huge event they have just experienced. But actually, as opposed to this being an anticlimax, this is a very deliberate engagement of Christ to actually show who he is and what this God is that he has come to reconnect people with. So I'm going to quickly pray, and then we're going to look at a few of the interactions Jesus has in this passage. Father, we thank you that you come and you see the world, and you don't just ignore it, but you choose to engage with it.

[9 : 13] So I pray that as we look tonight, the Christ who came and was transfigured on a mountain, but then came to walk among his people, you'd help us to understand what that means for each one of us.

I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. So that is the first starting point, that Jesus comes down from the mountain. It's a very simple point, but actually it's a hugely profound point.

In the moment where you have God revealed in his son, you'd have thought if I was one of the disciples and we are going to have this new revolution, that this was it, this was the beginning of some huge victory.

They were about to march down to Jerusalem and take back everything. But actually they meet and engage with the reality of life. Because that is what life is like. That is what all of us have.

We have these moments of mountaintop experiences, followed by the reality and messiness of life. And Jesus, as far as I can tell, is the only person who would claim to be God, who actually doesn't have a mountaintop experience and say to the world, now you come up here and find me.

[10 : 19] He does the opposite. He takes his disciples and he goes down into the reality of everyday life. It's quite a profound thing that Luke is telling us about what the nature of Christianity is, of the nature of Jesus.

It is a God in the fullness of who he's revealed to be and chooses to come and engage with life. I do not know of any other faith system that makes such a claim. Most other faith systems I know of either present a God who you then have to work towards and find.

And that is always done in private. This is a very public demonstration of Jesus coming into the lives of everyday people. And that is part of the reality of what Christianity is like.

It's part of the reality that attracted me to this faith in the first place. That Christianity was never supposed to be some sort of path of least resistance movement where we all just hang around on the top of the mountain and have a great time.

But actually it equips each and every single one of God's followers to then go into the world. The reality is most of us don't want to be in that place. I know I want to just have some sort of plateau moment.

[11 : 23] I went to see the film Free Solo over Chris. Have anybody seen this film? Could you stick that slide up please?

Thanks. Anybody seen this film? One person, great. So it's a climbing documentary. And to be honest, I can't stand climbing in any way, shape or form. And sorry if you're a climber, but even being among climbers, it's like going out with doctors or architects.

All they want to do is talk about climbing. The interpersonal stuff in this film is fascinating. So this guy, Alex Hanold, he climbs El Capitan, which is a 3,000 feet chair drop with no ropes.

And this is the documentary of this guy doing this absolutely mental thing. And people in the film, when they are interviewing him, they claim, do you have some sort of death wish? Do you not care about life? And when you look at his life in the film, he seems like quite an absurd guy.

He's in his mid-30s. He's lived in a van his entire life. He eats up pots. He's just quite an awkward character. Things like he has to learn how to hug at the age of 23 because he seems to think that people enjoy that.

[12 : 30] So he wants to do that too. But through the film, he gets into a relationship. And as he tries to do this relationship, part of the comedy of the film is locked up and these two people are trying to connect. But when he enters into her world and you see the normal things that she seeks to do, suddenly that world starts to feel a bit absurd.

And he says this in this hilarious scene where they're trying to buy a fridge together. And he narrates over the top. I guess for her, as his girlfriend, the point of life is happiness and being cozy. But anyone can be happy and cozy. But nothing happens in the world by being happy and cozy. Nothing great happens in the world by being happy and cozy. Instead, you need a different kind of

spirit, which he calls the warrior spirit.

You face your fears because your goal demands it. You give something 100% focus because your life depends on it. The point he is making is you can seek this kind of middle plateau, which one, he says, doesn't really exist because he's got this whole philosophy that any of us could die at any minute.

Therefore, that changes your entire perspective. The disciples could have equally had this perspective of life of now they're on the mountaintop. We hang around up here and we rebuild something. Actually, Jesus does something completely different.

[13:49] Probably quite unexpected to them. He comes down into the lives of everyday people. And that is what the whole of his kingdom was to be about. A movement of him, of God himself, into the lives of everyday people.

And actually, as we look at this, you will see that this isn't an inconvenience for Jesus. This isn't some sort of mistake on his journey. Actually, this is the place he will demonstrate the things that are revealed about him on this mountaintop are true.

And the first place he does that is with this child. So Jesus and the sick child. So the next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.

A man in the crowd called out, Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams. It throws him into convulsion so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not. You unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?

[15:01] Bring your son here. Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to the father.

And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. So the first thing Jesus confronts is the pain of everyday life, but also this idea with a pain that has an under-spiritual reality to it.

I'm not sure what you think when you hear of words that is used in this passage, like demons and spirits. And we all probably know in the West that we think of that as some sort of old-fashioned folklore thing that we rejected a long time ago.

But actually, for the majority of the world, this idea of an evil that is unseen, of a darkness, of brokenness, is actually something that the rest of the world helps make sense of reality.

But for us, it is often not something we would naturally incline to think is true. But actually, it's one of those places where one of the main accusations against being a Christian is you're closed-minded.

[16:06] It actually is one of the things where we look at the world and say, no, there's more going on here than simply what we can see and feel. Actually, there's something bigger going on underneath this. And the Scriptures affirm that, although God created everything in His goodness, that for a good personal expression of the Spirit, there's also a negative side to that too.

Now, that is a whole other talk in and of itself. But that's not what we're going to go into tonight. But we need to acknowledge that the Scriptures affirm a reality beyond what we can see, hear, and feel. And if you sit here and you might react against that, all I'm asking for you to do is be open to that.

A guy called Andrew Dalbonco in his book, *The Death of Satan*, which I would be lying if I said I read the entirety of, because it's very long, he's a secular atheist sociologist who talks about how in the West we've got rid of the idea of evil.

And is that a good thing or is it not? As we've traditionally got rid of all the things that would claim this thing existed. And he says, a gulf has opened in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources to cope with it.

We have jettisoned the idea in the West of cosmic evil or transcendent evil or supernatural evil. We don't believe in that anymore. In fact, we don't even like to use the word evil.

[17:19] The reason we don't like to use it because it implies value judgments or moral absolutes. So instead, we use medical language and talk about dysfunction, pathology, sociology. But as the 20th century has gone on, it has gone harder and harder to say that holocausts and ethnic cleansing and serial killing is just a case of bad psychological and sociological adjustment.

In the book, he goes on to talk about this very famous scene in *Silence of the Lambs*, which is about Hannibal Lecter, this horrible serial killer, about this FBI agent who's trying to use him to find

out another case.

And in one of the scenes, she is asking the question of one of the officers, what led this man to do this? And he hears her. And this is his reply. It's hard to do this without trying to impersonate Anthony Hopkins, but I'll try.

Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling.

You've got everyone in moral dignity pants. Nothing is ever anybody's fault anymore. Look at me. Can you stand to say that what goes on in my heart is I am evil?

[18:37] And he goes on to say that although he believes, on one hand, this is probably a positive thing, he actually believes that we do not have the resources to cope as a society by purely looking at sociological, psychological reasons.

Not that these things are to be rejected. That's clearly not what I'm saying. And actually, so when Jesus encounters this, this is not just him simply fixing a medical problem. He is fixing, on one level, a social problem that is something far bigger than the thing that is being manifested at.

This is a quote by Shakespeare. I felt a bit cultured to throw some Shakespeare in. There are more things in heaven and earth ratio than are dreamt of in our year philosophy. The scriptures affirm there is far more going on in our reality than we can hear and see and feel.

And that either leads to chaos, but actually what it shows here is that Jesus has complete authority for that situation. He commands this demon out.

Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to the father.

[19:50] He's done. His words, in and of itself, have power to expel this reality. One of the things of Jesus coming as the Messiah is the promise that you see on the mountaintop that he is going to come and restore things.

And one of the first things you see him do in the valley, in the pain of people's lives, you hear the cries of the father, this is my only son, please help, that Jesus engages and he does something about it.

Showing that this mountaintop experience is actually alive and well in the grittiness of life and he conquers something that he will go on to conquer even more fully. Although he comes to do all this, we see through this that the people who seem to really struggle with what Jesus is actually up to are his disciples.

So Jesus and the disciples. So Jesus coming brings this amazing moment which people clearly are amazed themselves. But as the story goes on, you see that the disciples still haven't quite readjusted who they think Jesus is because of the kind of conversations they go on to have.

So one of the patterns you actually see in this gospel is Jesus sends the disciples to do something. They are like, this was amazing and he's like, great, now we'll probably have to deal with a lot of your personality issues and your heart realities.

[21:12] Which is what he does with every single one of us is he comes into our lives, he then reorders how we see ourselves and how we see how we fit inside this. And so we see this in verse 36 an argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.

Now if you've read any of Luke's gospel earlier on in this exact chapter Jesus has this huge sermon on how you need to give up yourself and be the least and take up your own cross it was literally about, it was in verse 23 these guys are now having an argument about who's the greatest.

It could even mean, we don't really know what the nature of that was it could even mean like well, if you need to be the least in this then I'm the best at being the least I'm the most humble no, I'm the most humble God is really humbling me right now more than he's humbling you so I will be at the top of this bottom pile up and then later they have this verse 49 where he says master John said we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he's not one of us now again I don't know if you sense the tone of this this actually reminded me of a few weeks ago I had two of my metron with their wives and their four toddlers I thought I was pretty equipped as a single man to have four toddlers in my house it turns out that's definitely not true and the two oldest boys went up into my office and they decided to rearrange things for me as a gift and I came up and I was like oh excellent but they were so happy they were like look at what we've done this is kind of what the disciples are potentially doing here they think

Jesus is going to be really happy with them well guess what we did today we stopped somebody trying to do something for you later on in this chapter they're actually going to encounter a

Samaritan village where they're rejected and say should we call down fire on this place like Jesus Jesus has never even done anything like that they have this sense of these kind of like people who were like well this is what you're like so this is what we expect we should probably do this and in both situations Jesus I don't know what Jesus' reaction in the moment would have been but he quite gently corrects who they are and brings them back to the reality of what he is about and he does that because he cares about them because he's not abandoned them for me this is an encouragement about what it means to be somebody who follows Christ they continually get these things wrong they continually come being like look what I did and Jesus is like my word no no no this is what I have called you to be and do as they journey with him as they journey with them from the mountaintop into the valley part of the expression of our journey is that

Jesus refines and changes our hearts but he does that as he walks with them this is a journey he will take them on to Jerusalem and as he engages in life with them they engage with their life also and he reshapes and takes them and he never abandons them in that process in fact ultimately they will abandon him he's committed to them to showing that this reality that he is living out in the lives of the people they meet he will do it with them too so Jesus confronts the arrogance and exclusiveness that they are demonstrating here and one of the ways he does that is he does this thing where he takes a child and he puts them among them so in verse 48 so Jesus knowing their thoughts took a little child and made him stand beside him then he said to them whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me for it is the one who is least among you who is the greatest very powerful thing [25:10] Jesus is doing here one he seems to understand their thoughts so he doesn't barge in and be like I know exactly what you're all thinking stop it here's the right answer but he challenges them through this beautiful demonstration of love now this is first century Middle East children have zero worth or value here actually you see a lot of some of the interactions Jesus has in the gospel wherever a kid tries to come and do something most of the adults are like go away you're unimportant Jesus takes something they would have considered unimportant and if they're in this mentality of we're on the victory march to Jerusalem they would have been so against what they would disarm this narrative they had in their head about who's the greatest and he does it by simply just taking a little child and puts it among them and it communicates not just in the moment again this is not just about him correcting something that they are thinking is wrong it demonstrates the second part of who Jesus claimed to be and who he was revealed to be on the mountaintop a God who has come for the least a God who has come to accept every single person so in doing this again he is showing the disciples that they've misunderstood who he is and what he's about but actually he is confirming that this is also who God is like he takes each and every single one of us in the confusion of life because the disciples are very confused clearly as to what

Jesus has called them to do and he holds and says this is see what I'm doing here this is what the father does with you and when you live like this you too are engaging in that reality so when God comes into the valley he encounters these two children and then the first one he demonstrates that actually this place Jesus has full authority over the brokenness and pain and sin of the world and then he then demonstrates actually the fullness of love is manifest at the core of who God is this is what my kingdom is like Jesus is saying he takes an unimportant castaway kid and says you accept people like this this is part of what God does he accepts you he accepts me in that moment of our loneliness of our weakness doesn't cast it away doesn't say kid work yourself at the top of the mountain actually Jesus comes down and meets us where we are too that's our kind of final point for tonight this isn't just a good man come down into the valley to make some better things happen but

God himself comes into the valley so the transfiguration prepares Jesus not just for human suffering and tragedy and he does engage with that he does care with that and he does do something about that but it's actually prepared him to go into this ultimate valley the scriptures talk about the valley of the shadow of death this was the place that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for him was going to be the place of his death the disciples still wrestled with this is they don't understand when he says in verse 43 and 44 this prediction of his death while everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did he said to his disciples listen carefully and the Greek language this was written in is more than just listen carefully get this in your ear pay attention to this you need to hear this what I'm about to tell you the son of man is going to be delivered into the hands of men that was ultimately his death on the mountaintop

Elijah and Moses they talk about Jesus' departure and they use the word exodus it's a departure in the sense of he will depart he will die but it's also very loaded language that this video showed us that this was echoing the language that God is taking his people into something new and that Jesus in his death was going to accomplish this so Jesus goes through this mountaintop experience knowing that he was preparing him to follow the law and the prophets down into the valley to the place of despair and death the place where demons shriek and people weep the place where the son of man will be handed over to sinners the disciples were overwhelmed and confused by this but he continued to take them along and the transfiguration shows us that we were well they were unable to understand a lot of this that he was set and resolute in what he was going to do actually from coming into the valley he demonstrated the fullness of who is there and actually he would end up ultimately in a very different hill a little grotty hill outside

Jerusalem and on that mountain he would give himself to allow this defeat over the evil and brokenness that he sees in the interaction with the first child but also to claim with like the second child all people to himself again and it's the place where we all find ourselves we all find ourselves in either these mountain top moments or these valley moments and Jesus is fully present in both the reality is that's quite confusing I know it's been confusing for me over the years I've had moments where I think yep Christianity sorts everything out then life comes and I think that my whole faith system is about having these safe little moments and I've missed that one God calls his people to be present in the world as the good news of his kingdom but actually it's in that place that he changes the hearts of the disciples he meets and changes the lives of both these children and he does that with each one of us I've told this story before but I remember when I first became a Christian when I was around 20

[30 : 56] I thought right this is about a chance to sort life out whatever that really means and for the first few months I thought yeah that seems to be going well I mean I'm completely deluded if I was to look back and then actually measure whatever I thought was doing well then but not long after that during the breakdown of my mother's third marriage which in and of itself should indicate where the story is headed it was like a systematic breakdown of all aspects of my family there was homelessness manic depression sexual abuse people go to jail alcoholism people who did not talk for years and I was like man this was not the faith I signed up for this was not the faith that I was supposed to be present in I thought Jesus was supposed to come and make everything better and amazing actually the reality and the test for me in that was but is Jesus present amongst this stuff is he alive and well against evil against sin against brokenness and calling people home to himself in the act of love in that moment it was too confusing ten years down the line

I can see I don't I'm not trying to don't mishear me I'm not trying to say God caused A to happen so the B would happen that's not what I'm trying to say but the valley teaches us that Jesus comes off the mountain and into the present of each one of our lives to do something to change us and to call each one of us home for me that has been miraculous it's not completely sorted in any way shape or form I've seen my mother my half brother my step brother all become Christians I reconcile relationship with my father all in the midst of real pain and that's the God who shows himself in Christ it's not a God who says come up the mountain and find me and behave yourself it's a God who comes and manifests his glory among his people and says look look how I am with these children respond to me in a similar way as God says to the disciples on the mountain this is my son listen to him and trust him and when you do that these experiences while it's been great sometimes and painful in others they have meaning because they have a

God who's present in each one of them so I'm going to pray and then pray Father we thank you that the nature of who you are isn't detached from reality but present in your son would you help us to know what it means for us to go into our lives knowing that you are present in all things that you don't just stand idly by that you act and you act because you have authority you have authority over all things and in that call to look at a child and be embraced by you Lord would you help us to know what that means for each one of us how we need to respond to the invitation from you to be called home like a child and to accept that in that trust I ask that in Jesus name Amen