

# 'O Faithless Generation, How Long Shall I Be With You?' - Mar 9:19

by G. Campbell Morgan

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*Jesus' transfiguration and descent into the valley reveal His self-emptying and willingness to share in humanity's sufferings and sorrows in order to bring about salvation and exodus.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 17:20, Matthew 21:22, Mark 9:19, Mark 9:24, Luke 17:5-6, John 14:13-14, Romans 10:17, Philippians 4:13, Hebrews 11:1, James 1:6

**Topics:** "Faith", "Unbelief"

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## Description

G. Campbell Morgan reflects on Jesus' lament, 'O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you?' highlighting the deep pain and indignation of Christ towards the pervasive unbelief surrounding Him. He emphasizes that this cry was not just directed at the disciples or the father of the demon-possessed boy, but encapsulated the entire faithless generation of that time. Morgan illustrates the contrast between the glory of the transfiguration and the despair of the valley, where Jesus encountered skepticism and despair. He urges believers to recognize the limits of Christ's patience with unbelief and to seek genuine faith, as exemplified by the father who cried out, 'I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.' Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper commitment to faith and the understanding that Christ's compassion and power are available to those who earnestly seek Him.

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## Transcript

Mar 9:14-29.

THIS cry came welling up from the heart of Jesus. In it pain and indignation merge; and the cause of each is revealed. There is evident pain in the plaintive inquiry, "How long shall I be with you?" In it the same note is discernible as in that old-time song of the vineyard, in which Isaiah declared that God concerning His people, asked with equal plaintiveness, "What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?" After about three years of public ministry, our Lord broke out into this question, "How long shall I be with you?" The plaintive inquiry was immediately followed by another, which is vibrant with the sense of wrong and indignation, How long shall I tolerate you? The question suggests most solemnly, that there is a limit to His patience.

The cause of everything is revealed in the opening exclamation, "O faithless generation." He spoke of the whole age in which His ministry was being exercised. The word was not one of rebuke to His disciples

alone; though they were included. The word was not a rebuke only for the man who brought his boy; he also was numbered with those of the generation. The word was not one of rebuke for the scribes alone; though of them it was true. The whole atmosphere in the midst of which the Lord exercised His ministry, the very spirit of the age, was that of faithlessness, unbelief; "O faithless generation."

The words of this text are central to the paragraph. Before them, massed in brief sentences, we have a picture of the things that Jesus found in the valley as He left the mount of transfiguration. He found disputing scribes, a distracted father, a demon-possessed boy, and defeated disciples. After the exclamation of the text we have the story of what He did with all these. He silenced the scribes, He comforted the father, He healed the boy, He instructed the disciples. So, passing into this atmosphere of unbelief, there welled up out of His heart these words, O faithless generation, how long will it be necessary for Me to be with you, ere you will understand or consent to believe? Nay, how long will it be possible for Me to remain in such an atmosphere, and carry on My ministry; how long can I bear with you, and where shall the limit be set to this intolerable unbelief? How long shall I tolerate you?

All this was the immediate sequel of the transfiguration. Here is one of the points of singular agreement between these Gospel writers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of these things as immediately following upon the transfiguration scene and experiences. In the reading of each Gospel, we descend swiftly and abruptly as it seems, from the height of glory and wonderful radiance, to the depth of degradation. We have stood with Him upon the holy mount, and have seen Him transfigured; and the glory has been too bright for the feebleness of a sinner's sight; so bright that even the three disciples were dazed, and said things that they themselves did not understand, so bright that we have never yet been able perfectly to understand the thing that happened on that mountain. Then in the valley we come face to face with one of the supreme illustrations of degradation that the New Testament affords, and the revelation is the more striking the more carefully we consider it. On the holy mount the voice of God had spoken concerning Jesus, and it had said, "This is My beloved Son." On the mountain height we saw the Only-begotten Son of God in glory. Descending to the valley, we hear the father say to Jesus, This is my child, my only child; literally, This is my only-begotten son. On the mount of glory, the Only-begotten Son of the Father; in the valley, the only-begotten son of a man, demon-possessed. The Lord is seen passing down from the glory, into that atmosphere of unbelief, and meeting that boy. It is in that way we must look at the valley scene.

Therefore we pause to consider the mountain in the background; that we may more clearly and accurately observe the valley in the foreground; and both, in order that we may discover the relation between the mountain and the valley.

Going back to the paragraph which gives the account of the transfiguration, we look at that mountain scene again in comradeship with those three men; yet also in the illumination of the Holy Spirit Who came to them afterwards, and enabled them to tell the story of the mount. Peter in his Letter declared that the holy mount had meant to them the fulfillment and ratification of ancient prophecies, for there they had seen the operation of the coming power of God through Christ. Omitting the sacred title of Christ, and the supreme title, Lord, I here resolutely use the name of His humanity, the name given to Him by Divine command, and by His mother's love, the name by which He had been known, and necessarily familiar through boyhood and young manhood, the name by which these disciples, ere there broke upon them the sense of His glory, had perpetually called Him, Jesus! There on the mountain height, the perfected spirit of Jesus having gained complete mastery over all temptation, physical, spiritual, and vocational, changed the tenement 'of the body, and fitted it for the super-earthly life. Until we have understood that clearly, we have

never seen the glory of the holy mount. The happening upon the mount was part of the private life of Jesus, rather than the public ministry. He had withdrawn Himself from the place of the crowds to Caesarea Philippi, there to challenge His disciples as to the result of His mission. We must dismiss that old legend or opinion that Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor, which was not in this neighbourhood, and upon the crown of which even at that time, a city was built. He was certainly transfigured on Mount Hermon, that is on one of the heights of that mountain a little farther to the north than Caesarea Philippi, in a place of loneliness. He had escaped from the crowds; He had even at last left at the foot of the mountain nine of His disciples, taking only three with Him. We are impressed by the privacy of the transfiguration scene. I think personally that so far as the real value of what happened then is concerned, no disciple need have been present. It was something lonely and peculiar in the life of Jesus. There was value in the fact that they were there, for them in the after-time, and perhaps for them also at the moment. I do not share the general view that these men were taken there because they were the chief disciples and the best. More probably they were taken because they were the weakest of the twelve. Remember it is not the strongest saint who is taken to the place of special vision. The strongest saint can do without the vision. It is much easier to go to the mount, and see the glory, than to stay down in the valley, amid that crowd of scribes.

Part of what these men were privileged to see,-for they did not see everything clearly,-that glory falling there upon Jesus irradiating Him, was not the shining forth of Deity, for Deity has no shining forth that is spectacular, or that can be apprehended by the eyes of sense. The only way in which the glory of Deity can ever be seen by men, is as it is veiled, hidden within humanity. The glory of the Deity of our Lord was not manifested there, but along the quiet ways, and in the compassionate ministries, in all the little things of life.

What then happened upon the mount? In that hour of the transfiguration, Jesus of Nazareth came to the full and ultimate perfecting of His human nature. In that hour we see the true finality of human life, so far as this world is concerned, as within the original plan of God. To illustrate in the simplest way. Had Adam never wandered from the pathway of the Divine command, or sinned, or fallen, he had never died; but having come to the end of probationary life, and completed his course, he would have been metamorphosed, changed, in this same manner, and prepared for the super-earthly life that lies beyond;-that life about which we know so little, and which in anxious moments sometimes we doubt altogether, but which surely exists, infinite in its mystery. Jesus at this hour came to that point of the perfecting of His human personality. By an infinite mystery God created a new Man in the creation of Jesus. By the mystic and awful purity of the Divine Conception He was sinless in His birth. Through all the years of youth and manhood up to this moment He had faced all the temptations to which man must be subject, mastering them, being victorious over them;-physical temptation, spiritual temptation, and the last and subtlest of all, vocational temptation. The last breath of that temptation had come to Him when Peter had said, God have mercy on Thee, not this way of the Cross! With stern and resolute heroism Jesus had said, Get thee hence, Satan, thou art an offence unto Me. That was the last victory over vocational temptation.

Then, immediately passing to the mount, His life perfect, complete; every temptation having been met, and mastered; the whole citadel of His manhood held through all the prior period of years, inviolate; He was transfigured before them. The spirit of the Man, Jesus, always supreme, now that life was completed and rounded out, changed the tenement of His body, and fitted it for the super-earthly life. There ended the human life of Jesus, in so far as the life of Jesus was a revelation of a Divine purpose, of a Divine ideal, a pattern of humanity in itself.

What did He look like that day? How little we know. The descriptions are all graphic, and most suggestive. Of the men who wrote, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, neither was an eye-witness. They received their impressions from others, and confined their attempts at description to His features and garments. Luke simply says that the fashion of His countenance was altered. Matthew says, "His face did shine as the sun." As to His garments Matthew says they became white as the light; Mark says they were glistening and white, so that no fuller on earth could make a like whiteness; and Luke says they were white and dazzling. The metamorphosis of the Person of Jesus was so wonderful, that in subsequent days, the writers of the story could only gain from eyewitnesses these descriptions: that the fashion of His countenance was changed, His face did shine as the sun; and that the strange and mystic glory of the Presence saturated His garments with light and glory so that they were dazzling and glistening. There is nothing to be added to it; it remains a mystery. Here, however, is the fact of the Man coming to the fulfillment of His human life.

Observe in the next place, that in that hour of the ultimate victory of Jesus as within His own personality, the supreme interest of His heart was revealed; for in that hour of His perfecting He was admitted to the company of the spirits of just men made perfect. Moses and Elijah were seen there holding conversation with Him. Having passed into the condition for the super earthly life, in His manhood He entered into fellowship with those who had gone before Him. What then was the supreme interest of His heart? In that hour when He came to a marvellous perfecting; when once in the history of the human race, there had been revealed God's meaning in humanity when it is sinless; the supreme interest of His heart was of the exodus that He was about to accomplish. His heart even, then in its selflessness was weaned from the lure of the life of glory which He had gained and was, in an infinite compassion given bade to the valley, the world, and the darkness. In the moment of His own supreme victory, He saw the earth subjugated, mastered by evil, suffering as the result of that mastery; or as one of these men upon the mount, John himself did afterwards write in his Epistle, the whole world was lying in the evil one, beleaguered, imprisoned, oppressed, ruined. He talked with Moses and Elijah of the exodus. Himself, of that race, but separate from it by His own perfection, did in that hour of His ultimate crowning, assume responsibility for that race, and talk of the fact that He would break a way through, break down the prison gates, cut the bars of iron asunder, divide the sea, lead the exodus. He talked of His coming Cross and resurrection. The supreme and master passion of the heart of the perfected Man was for the perfecting of the men who suffered, and the bringing back of the Kingdom to God, its rightful King.

In that hour the voice of God was heard, and it must be interpreted by the whole atmosphere of the occasion. "This is My beloved Son," is the ratification of the perfection of His life. He, the Son, perfected by faith, was at once the File-Leader and Vindicator of the faithful; and to this witness was borne in that transfiguration light and glory. Then the command to the disciples, "Hear Him," was in order to their perfecting by faith. All authority to teach had been given to Him. He had been speaking of the exodus. "Hear Him" said the Divine voice. These men had been afraid to hear Him six days before, when He spoke of this very Cross; declined to discuss that which was now the subject of His Conversation with Moses and Elijah. Thus they were brought back to that very point, and commanded to hear Him.

From that mountain height they descended to the valley; and the cry that escaped His heart in the presence of all that He saw was this: "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?"

Look then a little more particularly at what He saw of unbelief. The supreme interest of this valley; scene is that of unbelief, revealed in different phases. There were the scribes, willful and persistent unbelief; there was the father, unwilling unbelief; there was the boy, irresponsible unbelief; and there were the disciples,

unconscious unbelief. The whole atmosphere was an unbelieving atmosphere.

The scribes questioned the disciples, the force of the word really being that they disputed with them. It was a most mean and paltry business, so far as these scribes were concerned. Then Jesus asked a question, "Why question ye with them?" and the father of the boy went on to tell Him the story of his boy. That was the subject of their question, of their disputing. The disciples were defeated. Here was an evidence of inability. Jesus being away, these people gathered round the disciples, laughed at them and mocked them, questioned them and disputed with them. Here was an evidence that their own unbelief was warranted! The very last scene before our Lord moved toward Caesarea Philippi was one with these men, who had demanded a sign, which He had declined to give. Now Jesus being away, these nine disciples were left, and they were failing. Our Lord had already given sign after sign, had they had the eyes to see, the hearts to understand, or the wills to believe; but they were not willing to do so. Our Lord came back into that atmosphere of critical, willful, persistent unbelief.

The father, aware of the efforts of the disciples and their failure, said to Jesus, "If Thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us"; and uttered that last cry, very beautiful and heroic, "I believe; help Thou mine unbelief"; all which nevertheless revealed his unbelief. He did not want not to believe; he would rather have believed; but he did not believe. He made a venture; he had the will to believe; but he did not believe. Our Lord came into that atmosphere.

Then the boy, with his irresponsible unbelief. It is admitted that the boy did not believe in Jesus; he could not, for he was under the dominion of a demon. There was incapacity for the exercise of faith. A boy, an instrument of faith and vision and hope; spoiled, blighted, blasted, ruined; unable to believe. No blame attached to the boy, but the fact is nevertheless a tragic one. Spoiled humanity! The highest function of humanity is belief, that activity of spirit that proceeds upon the pathway of reason, until it comes to some great promontory, and then spreads its wings, and upon the basis of its earlier journeying, takes eternity into its grasp.

Then there was the unbelief of the disciples. Six days had passed, and they had been six days of practical silence between these men and Jesus. If we are to thoroughly understand this scene, we must go back to the things that preceded them. Six days before, these men had passed under a cloud, when our Lord began to speak of the necessity for His suffering, His dying, His rising; His coming passion and exodus. They were not volitionally rebellious against Him, but they were unable to accept His teaching; and their inability had cut the nerve of their power. Be it remembered these men had cast out demons; when He sent forth the twelve; they came back rejoicing because they had cast out demons. Here, however, something had happened; something had come in between them and their power. They were still loyal to Him, remaining in the valley at His command; waiting there, desiring still to carry on His enterprise; but in the presence of this boy they were paralyzed, helpless. What had happened? All unconsciously to themselves at that moment when faith had failed them, and they had not followed Him even though they had not understood Him, there had been the paralyzing of their power. That is what our Lord meant when He told them afterwards that the reason of their failure was that of their little faith, as Matthew tells us; and the full secret of success was that of prayer, as Mark declares.

Once more, and finally, as we watch, our Lord in that valley of unbelief, so cold, so chill, so disappointing, that even out of His heart there sprang that wail, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I tolerate you?" let us observe most carefully that all that He did followed upon the experiences of the mount. The choice there made, was not to enter upon the ultimate realization of His

own human life. Through that victory in His life He turned back to the race of men to share their burdens and carry their sorrows and their sins, and make Himself, O wondrous Man! responsible for all the causes of their human suffering and their pain. When we watch Him descending from the mount of transfiguration, let us remember that it was a new descent, within the measure of His humanity, as wonderful as the first descent. Read again the great chapter of the Self-emptying of the Son of God in Philippians; that wonderful chapter in which we see Him in His eternal right, in the form of God. Then we read, He did not think this equality with God a prize to be snatched at, and held, for the purpose of Self-aggrandizement, but emptied Himself. The supreme and ultimate wonder of this fact is a glory which blinds us whenever we try to look upon it, this Self-emptying of Deity in some awful mystery that we cannot fathom. Now behold Him again on the transfiguration mount. He emptied Himself of all the rights of His humanity, and set His face toward the shadows and the darkness of the valley. All the activity in the valley was inspired and energized, not by the victory of the mount, but by the Self-emptying of the mount; not by the fact that He did there come to the ultimate in His humanity, but by the fact that having come to the ultimate He took that humanity, perfected, completed, transfigured, glorified, and bore it down again to the level of the valley, and to the deeps into which humanity had fallen. Now we begin to understand His power.

He will first silence the questioning scribes by a question. "What question ye with them?" said He to the scribes, and they said no more. He then gave these men another opportunity to believe. First He wrought the wonder. If the hour ever come when He can no longer tolerate a generation, when He can no longer bear, we may rest assured it will be in the hour which is so dire and dark and awful, that God Himself can do nothing more! There is the possibility! Do not look at it in some wide area. Let Us take it to our own souls. There is the awful tragic possibility in our life that willful unbelief can be so blind, so persistent, and so rebellious that at last Christ will have to say, No longer! But He will never do it until He has given us the ultimate opportunity. These scribes were laughing at the disciples, and criticizing them because they were feeble, calling in question the power of the Lord. Into their midst He came down, and worked the wonder. It was another opportunity for them.

Is there anything more beautiful than His dealing with the father? How He called forth his faith when he was in an agony. In a method of speech that was almost rude perhaps-which method we miss in translation he said to Jesus, "If Thou canst do anything, have compassion." Brought into the presence of the Master of the disciples who had failed, he doubted if He could do anything. Jesus looked back into his eyes and said, "If thou canst! All things are possible to him that believeth." Bear in mind, that man had certainly heard the words of our text, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I tolerate you?" Now when the man said, "If Thou canst," Jesus said, "If thou canst! All things are possible." Then the man, never more beautiful than now-no hypocrite this, no man pretending to believe,-said, "I believe." That was the dawning of faith. He was not sure; so he added, "Help Thou mine unbelief." That is the grandest faith possible, the finest exercise of faith. Whereas faith is always crying, Lord, I believe; behind are the lurking questionings and the wondering doubts; and instead of letting faith master us, we cry out, Lord, help our unbelief! So surely as a soul is learning the lesson of this story, so rapidly results shall follow. The Lord honours the will to believe. The man believed in the best way possible; and the Lord immediately responded. He won an honest faith that day, and the man was compelled thus to tell all the truth about his mind and soul. "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." Immediately, the Master turned to his boy, and cast the demon out.

We have seen the tragedy of a boy made for faith, unable to believe, demon-possessed. Now see the things that happened. He cast the demon out; and the boy lay there, pale, pinched, looking dead. Then

Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up, and he arose. I think that boy believed in Jesus afterwards. The Lord gave him back his boyhood, his youth, his hope, his capacity for dreams, visions and faith; and I think to the end of time, that boy's faith was centered upon the One Who had given him his chance.

Then He patiently instructed His disciples, told them, as Matthew records that the reason they failed was because of their little faith. The faith that faltered at Caesarea Philippi was paralyzed in the valley, until He came back to them; and so He declared that, "This kind can come out by nothing, save by prayer"; prayer being used there, in its finest and truest sense; prayer is the activity of faith; prayer is that resting of the soul in Jesus, which rests at last in the will of God, and prompts the power of God. So these men were recalled to faith, and instructed as to its true exercise.

"O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" In that inquiry we hear the pain of Jesus. Unbelief gives Him, sorrow because it harms man. Is not His pain most poignant in the presence of the little faith of His own? Not those disputing scribes outside the Christian Church to-day, who are striving to prove our incapacities, and laugh at us for our failure; but we who are inside with such little faith that we seem to work no miracles, and do no spiritual wonders; we grieve His heart most of all.

Then I should be untrue to the one thing that is searching my own soul, unless I gave attention to the last question, terrible, bitter, "How long shall I tolerate you?" There are necessary limits to His bearing with unbelief. Sometimes it seems as though He were asking that question about me; and about the Church! Then let us together say to Him: Lord, we believe. Help Thou our unbelief!

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