

DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS
“Why Jesus May Not Work For You”

There's probably not a person in this room who hasn't wondered, at one point or another, why God isn't working for them. Maybe like Jim Carrey, you didn't get the promotion, or your relationships weren't shaping up to be what you thought they would be, or you weren't protected from that one act of stupidity that seems to have cracked up your life for good and through it all you wondered where God was the whole time. Maybe you tried to do it God's way. You prayed and prayed to him only to be met by a deafening silence and now you wonder what went wrong.

Pretty much all of 2005 felt that way for Christa and me. Last January, just after our first anniversary, we discovered that the five-year plan was out the window because we had gotten pregnant, even though we were praying for the opposite. We were dismayed and wondered why Jesus wasn't working for us. In February, just after we had finally gotten used to the idea of being parents, we lost our baby, even though we were praying for the opposite. We were absolutely devastated and wondered again why Jesus wasn't working for us. Then month after month, we tried and tried to conceive again and month after month we came up empty, even though we were praying for the opposite. Over the course of the year, we slowly grew more and more despondent and disappointed with God and wondered why Jesus wasn't working for us.

You've felt. I've felt it. Even during Jesus' ministry, people felt it. Even when he was on earth, there were just some people who found that Jesus really didn't work for them, that they just didn't get from him the kind of help they hoped for. In Mark 6 there is an interesting story like that, the story of a time when Jesus went home again, returning to the town where he grew up. On his first Sabbath in town, Nazareth's most famous son was invited to preach at the local synagogue, in the church where he had gone to Sabbath school, to a packed house of schoolyard chums, old babysitters and family friends. They listened to his sermon with rapt wonder, amazed that such an accomplished preacher could come from a hick construction town like theirs. Yet, in Mark 6:5 it says that something

went terribly wrong with Jesus' ministry in Nazareth.

Mark 6:5 [NIV] — He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

Literally, Jesus was “powerless to work powerfully”, physically incapable to perform miracles. Sure, he healed a *few* people, which would have been a rousing victory to us. But there wasn't the same smashing success that he was used to, with hundreds of blind, deaf, lame and lepers that he had healed before. It was a crushing defeat. For some reason in Nazareth, Jesus just didn't seem to work for people and the question is why. Why do some people just not experience the power of God in their lives? Why doesn't Jesus work for some people?

What is most remarkable about Jesus' crushing defeat in Nazareth is that it came on hot the heels of a few of the most miraculous days ever recorded in the Bible. Back in Mark 4, it says that after preaching all day on the beach just outside of Capernaum, Jesus suggested to his disciples that they get away for some much needed R & R, so the thirteen of them piled into a rented boat and set off for the far side of the lake. Yet, that night was a night they wouldn't soon forget. As often happens on the Sea of Galilee, a furious squall whipped up. As one translation reads, “The weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed.” The swirling wind thrashed them from every side. Six foot waves lashed against the side of the boat, crashing over the gunnels, swamping their tiny ship. At least four of Jesus' disciples were experienced fishermen, strong men who worked on this lake for most of their adult lives, but when they started taking on serious water, they started to seriously panic. Desperate to reach safety, the twelve of them pulled frantically at the oars and screamed their prayers even more frantically to God.

I say the twelve of them because nestled calmly in the elevated deck in the stern lay Jesus, quietly curled up on a cushion, contentedly sawing logs after a long day in the pulpit. Don't get me wrong. I fully understand. After two sermons on Sunday morning, there is nothing more inviting to me than a soft couch, a cozy blanket, and the warm glow of the TV, beaming a soothing NASCAR race or football game into my living room. The only real difference between Jesus' nap and mine would be the howling, gale force winds and incessant crashing of waves, the frantic screams of a dozen men afraid for their lives and the relentless pitch and roll of a small fishing boat taking

on enormous amounts of the water of the violent lake, threatening to send the lot of them to Davey Jones' locker.

Here was Jesus sleeping in perfect peace surrounded by a sea raging with vicious fury. The disciples were

thoroughly unimpressed to say the least.

Mark 4:38b-39 [NIV] — The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don't you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

Like a parent walking in on a room of scrapping siblings, Jesus indignantly raised himself to full height and, with the voice of an exasperated school teacher, scolded the lake for playing so rough and yelled at the waves to “pipe down!” and, unlike what happens at home, everything was calm. Now the disciples were really afraid. “Who is this?” they stammered to each other. “Even the wind and the waves obey him!” Well, if they had just read Psalm 107 in the Old Testament, they would have understood because it says there that when God's people cried out to him, he stilled the storm to a whisper and hushed the waves of the sea. With just a word, Jesus did what only God can do. And yet he just didn't seem to work for the people of Nazareth.

It was morning by the time their tiny boat landed at the marina across the lake. As they dragged the boat onto the beach, the disciples still debating in whispers the previous night's events, suddenly the morning calm was shattered by the piercing shrieks of a deranged lunatic sprinting towards them at full tilt from the hills. The disciples fidgeted nervously as the man raced closer and closer until finally, he threw himself to the ground at Jesus' feet. From up close, the disciples could tell that the man did not suffer from a degenerative mental illness. His condition was worse than that. His body was literally possessed by an evil spirit, or so it seemed.

Mark 5:9 [NIV] — Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”

In military terms, a legion was a brigade of 6000 Roman soldiers: 5800 infantry, 120 cavalry and a number of auxiliaries. The man's problem was not that his body was possessed by an evil spirit. It was that his body was possessed by an army of evil spirits working together to destroy his life. He had been driven from society, forced to live in the burial caves just outside of town. For a long time, the townspeople tried to restrain him with shackles on

his feet and chains on his wrists. Yet every time, supernaturally strengthened by thousands of demons, he ripped them, smashing his shackles as if they were made of paper. Until one day when they just gave up. Fresh out of ideas, they abandoned him to the graves, leaving him agonize alone, to engage in cutting with sharp stones he found in the field. They were helpless. He was hopeless.

Then Jesus showed up. When Jesus commanded the spirits to leave this troubled man's body, the man screeched at the top of his lungs, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" These demons were begging Jesus, through this tortured man, to not exile them to some uninhabited region or banish them to the ruins of an old city or, worse yet, to the sea. They were pleading with Jesus to let them stay in the area, so they could indwell the enormous herd of pigs that grazed on a steep hillside nearby. ***Mark 5:13 [NIV] — He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.***

The man had not been lying. There had literally been more than two thousand demons living inside of him, until with a word, Jesus evicted every last one of them. The townsfolk rushed to the sea to see for themselves what had happened and what they saw confounded them. Here was the man formerly known as "legion", the man possessed by thousands of demons, no longer smashing the restraints on his hands and feet but self-restrained, sitting quietly at Jesus' feet. Here he was no longer naked and cutting, but clothed and calm. Here he was no longer insanely ranting and racing wildly among the tombs, but in his right mind, sane and collected. It was too much for them to absorb. They demanded that Jesus leave the area at once. "Legion" begged Jesus to take him with them, to follow Jesus with the disciples across the lake.

Mark 5:19-20 [NIV] — Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord [God] has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

What the demons knew when they called Jesus, "the Son of the Most High God" the man affirmed in his testimony. Jesus had instructed him to tell everybody what *God* had done and the man turned around and told a story about what *Jesus* had done, about how with just a word, Jesus did what only God can do. And yet, Jesus just

didn't seem to work for the people of Nazareth.

The next morning, Mark says, Jesus and his disciples climbed out of the boat back at Capernaum, and were immediately swarmed by another mob of curious onlookers. Yet, out of the hundreds of eyes, one pair caught Jesus' attention. They were pleading and sad, surrounded by dark circles and set deep into tear-stained cheeks. They belonged to Jairus, an elder at the local synagogue and a desperate father, who had pushed his way through the crowd and fell at Jesus' feet, begging him for help. "My little daughter is dying," he cried softly. "Without your immediate intervention, she's not going to make it. Please come so that she will live." So, Jesus went with him, as did the jostling crowd, eager to witness yet another incredible miracle.

At the back of this pack hovered a solitary figure, a woman equally desperate to connect with Jesus. For more than a decade she had suffered from continuous menstrual bleeding, a condition which, in those days, had no reliable cure and rendered her continuously unclean, unfit for worship, unfit for society. This woman had lived for twelve years with both physical and emotional agony, isolated and alienated from friends, family and the community of faith. For twelve years she had fought to find a cure. For twelve years she poured her family's financial resources into the best doctors in Israel, spending every last red cent searching for relief and coming up empty doctor after doctor, appointment after appointment, test after test. In fact, after twelve years of agony, twelve years of medication, twelve years of side-effects, it was worse ever. For twelve years she had been on a wild goose chase with no answers, no relief, and no cure. Now, she was desperate, desperate for help, desperate for Jesus.

When she heard about Jesus, she had decided on her plan. She would sneak up from behind in the crowd and discreetly touch the hem of his cloak to be healed. He would never even have to know she was there, jostled as he was by the mob that surrounded him. She could make a clean getaway before he would even see. With a trembling hand she reached out for her last chance for happiness and brushed her fingers against Jesus' cloak. The bleeding stopped. She could feel herself being set free, free from twelve years worth of agony and alienation. For the first time in twelve years, she smiled.

As she slipped into the crowd, she suddenly heard a voice calling out behind her. It was Jesus. “Who touched me?” he demanded. The crowd snickered. The disciples blushed. “Um, Lord,” they said, “pretty much everybody touched you. You’re getting elbowed from every side, knocked every which way. The truth is that everybody’s touched you and nobody’s touched you all at the same time. So, be reasonable. Don’t keep Jairus waiting. Let’s keep walking.”

But Jesus wouldn’t let it go. “I know that somebody touched me. I could feel the power leave me and I want to know who it was!” The woman froze. Her shoulders dropped. Suddenly it was very clear that she wasn’t going to get away with her hit-and-run healing.

Mark 5:33-34 [NIV] — Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

What dozens of appointments with dozens of doctors over a dozen years had failed to do, Jesus did without trying! She had reached out in faith to Jesus and was totally and instantly restored to wholeness. And yet, he just didn’t seem to work for the people of Nazareth.

While Jesus was still speaking to the woman, a small company of men came from Jairus’ house with bad news, his daughter had died. Jairus crumbled into a mess of tears, convulsing with grief. He had lost everything. He had gone all in, put all his chips on Jesus, believing that he could heal his daughter and now it was too late. She was gone. But Jesus didn’t seem to care. In fact, he ignored the report altogether. “Don’t worry about it, Jairus,” he said. “Just believe.”

When they came to Jairus’ house, the place was already crawling with well-wishers. The mourners-for-hire were already there. They were paid professionals who would help facilitate the outpouring of grief, hired to comfort the family. Everywhere people sobbed inconsolably and raucously wailed at the top of their lungs. But Jesus would have none of it. “Why are you making such a fuss?” he demanded. “The girl isn’t dead. She’s just fallen asleep!”

It was another one of those moments that embarrassed the disciples. Truth be told, no one should have been expected to keep a straight face. It was just dumb thing to say. It wasn’t exactly their first funeral. These people

knew a dead body when they saw one. They were paid professionals, for Pete's sake. They had stood over hundreds of beds to confirm the death before orchestrating the formal mourning. Jesus hadn't even seen this girl and here he was saying that she had only fallen asleep! Frankly, they couldn't wait to see the egg on the mighty Jesus' face when he finally went into the room where she lay. Mom, Dad, Peter, James, John and Jesus filed quietly into the girl's room and gathered around her cold, blue body stretched out on the bed.

Mark 5:41-42 [NIV] — He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.

Jairus had reached out to Jesus in faith. Even when he heard the report from home that his daughter had already passed away, at Jesus' urging he had believed that Jesus could do the impossible: that he could raise his daughter from the dead. With Jesus' touch, with his word—“Hey kid, get up!”—he fully restored her to life. Jesus had done what only God can do. Yet, for one reason or another, he just didn't seem to work for the people of Nazareth.

It was after all of this that Jesus had rolled into Nazareth, that he had wowed them with his preaching in the synagogue. Everywhere else, people had been placing their faith in Jesus, believing him to be the Son of the Most High God. Everywhere else they had reached out to Jesus to do what only God could do in their lives. Everywhere else they had experienced the incredible difference that Jesus makes. That was everywhere else. This was Nazareth. ***Mark 6:2b-3, 6 [NIV] — “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him...***

Jesus didn't “work” for the people of Nazareth because they refused to accept him for who he is. When they looked at Jesus, they didn't see the Son of the Most High God. All they saw was Mary's kid, a local carpenter's son whose brothers still ran the shop on Main St, whose sisters they had courted and married. When they looked at Jesus, they didn't see the Creator in human flesh. All they saw was just one of the guys from high school, someone who certainly had no business preaching at them. When they looked at Jesus, they didn't see someone who could do what only God can do. All they saw was the snot-nosed, little kid they used to babysit. Because they didn't

acknowledge who Jesus is, they didn't experience what Jesus could do.

Back in Mark 1:1, we heard that Jesus is the Son of God, God in human flesh, capable of doing things for us that only God can do. His capabilities are unlimited in power, accomplishing the impossible in our lives. His character is unlimited in love, he is for us rather than against us.

Ephesians 3:20 [MSG] — God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

So, the question is not Jesus and whether he has the power to accomplish amazing things in our lives nor is it whether Jesus loves us enough to want to do amazing things in our lives. He has and he does. The question is, “Have you made up your mind about Jesus? Do you accept him as the Son of God, capable of doing in our lives things that only God can do?”

Some people think of Jesus only as a good man, an inspiring teacher, a spiritual guru, or a revolutionary philosopher, but not God in human flesh. As a result, they never experience the power of God in their lives. Other people acknowledge Jesus with their mouth, but deny him by their attitude. They accept the message of the Bible, the good news about the all-powerful, all-loving God who came to earth as Jesus so that we can experience his power at work in our lives. Yet, at the end of the day, they don't truly believe that Jesus is all-powerful, or at least they don't pray like they do. They don't truly believe that Jesus is all-loving, or at least they don't live like God really cares. As a result, they never really experience the power of God in their lives. As it says on your outlines, to see Jesus “work” for you involves acknowledging who Jesus is.

Now, don't misunderstand. I didn't just say that if you accept that Jesus is really God in human form, he will powerfully work in your life to fix everything that's wrong like Jim Carrey wanted. God could fix your life in five minutes if he wanted to. He could get you that anchor job, reconcile your relationship with Jennifer Aniston, and even repair your car if he wanted to, but that isn't necessarily his highest purpose for our lives. God can heal that cancer, find you a spouse, bring life to your womb, land you that job or make you popular, but is not necessarily his highest purpose for your life. It is true that God's highest purpose for your life is to see you experience the most

fulfilling, thrilling life imaginable, in a relationship with him.

John 10:10 [NLV] — I came so they might have life, a great full life.

The thing is that this great, full life is life the way he defines it, not you. When Jesus and the disciples were stuck in the middle of a raging storm, Jesus had no real inclination to make the storm go away. When Jesus finally did calm the storm, it wasn't because his disciples had faith, but because they had *no* faith. For Jesus' part, he was able to sleep in the back of the boat in the midst of the storm because he knew that in God's hands everything would be ok, regardless of how it looked on the outside. He knew that God wanted what was best for him so he could sleep and leave all the worrying to God. That's called trust.

What Jesus wanted the disciples to experience was not the stillness of the storm, but such a deep trust in God that they could leave the worrying about life up to God, sleeping through the storm, just like Jesus did. The question is not whether I get what I want from God. The question is whether I want what I get from God. The question is whether I trust God when things don't work out according to plan, whether I can sleep through the storm. As it says on your outlines, to see Jesus "work" for me involves agreeing to Jesus' goal. The goal is sleep, not stillness.

The other thing you see in this passage is that intellectually accepting that Jesus is really God in human form is really not enough for Jesus will powerfully work in your life. Somehow church people get it into their heads that faith is in their heads, that believing in Jesus is making sure that we are doctrinally accurate in our thinking about him. Faith does have an intellectual component, but when the Bible uses the word "faith" most often it doesn't mean "belief". Most often it means "trust" or "faithfulness". Look at the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. The text simply says that when she heard about Jesus she touched his robe. It doesn't say *what* she heard about him. It doesn't focus on the accuracy of the intellectual content of her faith, except for the fact that she believed he could heal her. It focused on the fact that she trusted Jesus to do something about her situation. She tracked him down, pushed through the crowd and touched his cloak. Her faith was more than intellectual agreement about Jesus. It was an active force in her life. It changed the way she behaved. That's true faith.

James 1:17 [NIV] — In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Faith that doesn't change the way you live is no faith at all. You can believe that Jesus can provide for your family's needs, but if you don't make the faith decision to manage your money God's way your belief will do you no good. You can believe that Jesus can find you a spouse, but if, in impatience you refuse to wait for a person God would approve of your belief will do you no good. You can believe that Jesus is able to physically or emotionally heal you, but if you never pray with others for healing, if you never make the choices that make healing possible, your belief will do you no good. You can believe that Jesus does not want your friends and family to die without knowing him, but if you never bring yourself to tell them about him your belief will do you no good. Faith is not an intellectual exercise. It is an act of trust. It is living as though Jesus were really all-powerful and all loving and capable of helping you deal with whatever storms life throws your way. That's why, to see Jesus "work" for you involves acting boldly in faith and watching to see how God honours your trust.

[Sandi Dixon video]

WHAT SHOULD I DO TO SEE JESUS "WORK" FOR ME? BY PUTTING YOUR WHOLE LIFE IN JESUS' HANDS AND TRUSTING HIM TO MAKE IT FULL.

PAGE 8

PAGE 11