

## MARK 9:14-20

### DARING THE RISK OF REACH<sup>1</sup>

“When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ And someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.’ And he answered them, “‘O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.’ And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.’ And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can!’ All things are possible for one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.’ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ And he said to them, ‘This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.’”<sup>2</sup>

**B**attles raged throughout Europe and in the Far East. During these dark days a Scottish pastor occupied a strategic pulpit in the capital of the United States. His name was Peter Marshall; his sermons have become legend. His wife, Catherine Marshall, compiled his sermons and published them that others removed in time and distance from his ministry in Washington might benefit from his preaching. Of him, it may truthfully be said that though dead, he still speaks.

One Sunday morning his sermon began in this way: “It was an afternoon in the early summer; there was a strange quiet on the battle field. In the bright sunshine, the air was balmy and had a breath of garden in it. By some grotesque miracle, a bird was singing somewhere near at hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Years ago, I read a sermon by Chuck Swindoll. I believe he had preached the message at Fullerton Evangelical Free Church where he then pastored. At the time, I was blessed by his ministry and this particular sermon was especially meaningful. I determined that should I ever have opportunity, I would share the message with my own people. I have adopted Pastor Swindoll’s message to our own situation here in the far north. I give full credit to Chuck Swindoll for the concept and for the message itself. Thank you, Pastor Swindoll for your faithful service to the people of God, and for your influence in my life.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

“On the firing step, with his rifle lying in a groove in the parapet, stood a private soldier in field-grey, his uniform stained with mud and blood. On his face, so young yet strangely marked with the lines of war that made him look old, was a wistful faraway expression. He was enjoying the sunshine and the quiet of this strange lull in the firing. The heavy guns had been silent—there was no sound to break the eerie stillness.

“Suddenly a butterfly fluttered into view and alighted on the ground almost at the end of his rifle. It was a strange visitor to a battleground—so out of place—so out of keeping with the grim setting, rifles and bayonets, barbed wire and parapets, shell holes and twisted bodies. But there it was—a gorgeous creature, the wings like gold leaf splashed with carmine, swaying in the warm breath of spring.

“As the war-weary youngster watched the butterfly, he was no longer a private in field-grey. He was a boy once more, fresh and clean, swinging through a field in sunny Saxony, knee-deep in clover, buttercups and daisies. That strange visitor to the front-line trench recalled to him the joys of his boyhood, when he had collected butterflies. It spoke to him of days of peace. It was a symbol of the lovelier things of life. It was the emblem of the eternal, a reminder that there was still beauty and peace in the world—that somewhere there was colour and fragility and perfume and flowers and gardens.

“He forgot the enemy a few hundred yards across no man’s land. He forgot the danger and privation and suffering. He forgot everything as he watched that butterfly. With all the hunger in his heart, with the resurrection of dreams and visions that he thought were gone, he reach out his hand toward that butterfly. His fingers moved slowly, cautiously, lest he frighten away this visitor to the battlefield.

“In showing one kind of caution, he forgot another. The butterfly was just beyond his reach—so he stretched, forgetting that watchful eyes were waiting for a target. He brought himself out slowly—with infinite care and patience—until now he had just a little distance to go. He could almost touch the wings that were so lovely.

“And then ... ping ... *ing* ... *ing* ... *ing*... A sniper’s bullet found its mark. The stretching fingers relaxed ... the hand dropped flat on the ground ... for the private soldier in field-grey, the war was over.

“An official bulletin issued that afternoon said that ‘All was quiet on the Western Front...’ And for a boy in field-grey it was a quiet that no guns would ever break.”

Then Marshall added, “There is always a risk—when you reach for the beautiful. When you reach out for the lovelier, finer, more fragrant things of life—there is always a risk—and you can’t escape it. The risk is what makes the Christian life exciting. It is thrilling—make no mistake about it. It is an adventure. As long as we live in this world, there will always be a risk in reach.”<sup>3</sup>

I am naïve enough to believe that there is still the wonder and faith of a child residing in each of us. Despite all the hot stoves that have burned us, in spite of all the hateful people who have hurt us, hope still slumbers within each of us. There is a hope which comes from a quiet and child-like confidence in God—a confidence we seem to have been born with. Things that appear imaginary and dreamlike to other people are real to us; and we will need to lay claim to this visionary hope through the risk of reach. The Bible calls that reach “prayer.”

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Marshall, quoted from **The Best of Peter Marshall**; ©1983 Calen, Inc. Published by Chosen Books, Lincoln, VA 22078

Our great problem is that we are better students of the battlefield than we are of butterflies. We seem always to hear the words of our enemies playing back in our minds. Our minds continually bring us accusations of guilt, memories of wrongs, failures of yesterday; and those come like flaming missiles from the enemy to hiss, “Stop reaching. Stop asking. Stop praying. There are no butterflies.” And we listen to those defeatist voices.

As a messenger from God, representing His truth, let me caution you that if you stop reaching, you stop living—you can’t survive if you stop reaching.

Don’t misunderstand; there is a war on, a war that keeps us from seeing the butterflies. So never forget that you are in the midst of a battlefield. In fact, look at the last chapter of the encyclical we know as **EPHESIANS**, beginning with **VERSE ELEVEN**. The war this passage talks about is an invisible war, but it is war nevertheless. This war requires special equipment which is also invisible. When you put invisible equipment together with an invisible war, you can spell “mystery.” Our inclination is to push it away and call it “imaginary.” Don’t you believe that! Paul talks about a “battle” in **EPHESIANS 6:11-20** (see Holman Christian Standard Bible). From the lines on some of our faces today, others can tell we’ve been in that battle.

This is what the Apostle wrote in that passage. “Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. This is why you must take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. Stand, therefore,

“with truth like a belt around your waist,  
righteousness like armor on your chest,  
and your feet sandaled with readiness  
for the gospel of peace.  
In every situation take the shield of faith,  
and with it you will be able to extinguish  
all the flaming arrows of the evil one.  
Take the helmet of salvation,  
and the sword of the Spirit,  
which is God’s word.

“Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert in this with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough in Him to speak as I should” [**EPHESIANS 6:11-20 HCSB**].

There is a terrible war right now in Gaza; but the war isn’t raging just in Gaza. The battles don’t only happen in Syria or in Iraq. This war isn’t being fought solely in the deserts and mountains of Afghanistan. The battle in which we now fight is being waged in Canada—right where you live. This war is going on in your life; and I can assure you the battle is raging in my life. Whether I want to be in battle or not, I am in a war right now—and you are in this war.

Here we are, like soldiers in field-grey, at the parapet. We see the battle, we feel the struggle and we wonder, “What do we do? How can we handle it? That is why God gives us a whole list of armour [EPHESIANS 6:11-17] that we are to put on so we will be equipped to handle ourselves in battle. Use your armour wisely. The armour may be invisible, but each piece is divinely provided in order to protect you, to deliver you through the battle, to keep you from being wounded and forced out of the fight.

But what do you do in a parapet? How do you fight now that you’re armed—now that you’re protected from boots to helmet? How do you carry on in this invisible war? We’re given an order which may surprise you: “With every prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit—(*reach for the butterflies*), and to this end be alert, with all perseverance and requests for all the saints” [EPHESIANS 6:18, NET BIBLE]

We fight this battle with prayer—prayer for yourself and prayer for those in the trench next to you. You may be certain that you’ll never run out of a list of people to pray for—especially if you are the least spiritually perspicacious. If you are even modestly aware of the struggle that fellow believers are having throughout the world, you will always have people for whom you can pray. This is the reason the Apostle encourages us to be, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” [EPHESIANS 6:18]. He adds, “Pray for me also, that I may be given the message when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel” [EPHESIANS 6:19, NET BIBLE].

That is likewise my plea to each member of this assembly, “Pray for me also, that I may be given the message when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel.” If I could be personal for just a moment, I am aware of your prayers. You cannot know the battles I fight, just as I cannot truly know the battles you fight. However, I assure you that I recognise that I am engaged in battle; and whatever victories I may win are the result of God’s holy people entering into the conflict with me. Just as Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ arms to ensure that Israel prevailed over Amalek [see EXODUS 17:8-16], so you ensure that we prevail over the enemy through your prayers. Our victories are not the success of one individual or of a few, all share in these victories as we unite in prayer.

If you’ve ever done battle on the ground, you know how thrilling it is to hear the sound of your own air support flying overhead. That air power will weaken and scatter the enemy that’s assaulting you. You know what a thrill it is to hear artillery swish and hum overhead to hammer the other side, as behind you reinforcements are coming to engage the enemy. That’s what prayer is, reinforcement.

All around us are men and women appointed by God to exciting ministries. To fulfil the will of God, however, secure jobs must be sacrificed as those men and women cast themselves on the mercies of the unseen God. To reach for the dream is to pull up roots and dare to trust God. It is as though such individuals see a butterfly that others cannot see. There are snipers, each saying, “You can’t. You’re being foolish! Economy is bad! Bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” (Where do they find that verse?)

Do you have a butterfly? Unless I miss my guess, it is what we would call an impossible situation. Perhaps your marriage—you’ve worked at it and worked at it, and you have to admit that you’ve failed in some ways. It may look as though there is nothing but divorce that will solve the problem.

Maybe it's your work—you have had it explode in your face. Or the demands force you to compromise your faith. Perhaps the hours you are investing are stolen from your family, and you are beginning to suffer.

Perhaps your dreams have turned into a nightmare.

Or there has been heartache added, or a burden that won't leave.

The battle is raging, the missiles are flying, and your shield is buried somewhere in your seabag—maybe it has been so long since you last used that shield, you can no longer find it.

Maybe your battle is financial.

Maybe it is emotional.

It may be a physical ailment; and you have just heard the worst news your doctor could possibly give you and you are ready to cry.

You can't see a butterfly. You can't even imagine one!

In **MARK 9** a wonderful breath of fresh air is found. In the days of Jesus, life was simple; but pain was as real then as it is today. Physicians were hardly to be found. Medicine was limited to a bottle of oil and a few vases of herbs. Physical diseases pretty well finished people off, to say nothing of emotional and mental illness which sent people away from home and family. In **MARK 9** we encounter a father who is faithful to his son, and the son has had a demon since childhood—an impossible situation if ever there was one. Whenever the demon seized the child it dashed him to the ground and he foamed at the mouth, ground his teeth and stiffened out. An unseen enemy had captured this boy and was bringing him thoughts of suicide—throwing him into a fire or pushing him into water where he could hurt or drown himself. This is an awful scene. Surely you would agree that it is impossible.

This father brings his son to the Lord. Jesus responds with reproof to the gawking crowd [**MARK 9:19**]: “You haven't brought him to Me. I'm the only one who can solve such impossible scenes. You've tried to do this and you've worked on doing that. You've called upon these people and those and no one has been able to help. Bring him to Me!” So they bring him. And the Lord asks, “How long has this been happening to him?” The father replies, “From childhood.”

Well, you may be living with fears from your childhood too. People around you may be telling you, “There's no hope. You will never be different. You're finished.” In some cases, the feedback is perhaps loftier, couched in language that hides the hideous reality. “It's a congenital thing. You really have no reason for hope.”

That's what this man had been hearing for years. In fact, this precious little son of his was a helpless victim of the attacks.

Is there a battle going on—not a battle with guns and smoke and gunpowder and explosions? I'm not speaking of that kind of battle, but another type of warfare. Of course there is! There were demons present and the Lord, standing unintimidated against the forces of hell, commanded, “Bring him to Me.” So the father comes and pleads with the Master, “If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

Did you notice this father's language? “If you can!” He's asking the One who threw the stars into space, the One who gave the planet its spin, the One who set light in its incredible and unexplainable realm—he's asking if He can handle the boy? You must love Jesus' reply: “Bring him to Me.” The father says, “If you can do anything.” Jesus' answer is, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”

This does not mean that those who believe will get exactly what they ask for. It does mean that all things are possible in His hand. The LORD our God will, upon hearing your impossible situation, give you His answer—the answer you desperately need. His answer may not be the thing you’re grasping for, but you can turn it over to Him; He can take the burden of battle, giving you the dream of a butterfly.

The father replied to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” We must admire the vulnerability displayed in that answer. Jesus did! He took the boy to Himself, and in agony the demon was cast out. Imagine! The boy had been the helpless victim of a demon for years, and now he had freedom and relief.

Actually, the deliverance Jesus brought didn’t look much like deliverance at first. In fact, the child appeared to be dead. Peter, relating the story through Mark, notes that “the boy was like a corpse” and that most of the people present were confidently asserting, “He is dead” [MARK 9:26].

We can’t always see the outcome of God’s design; however, by faith we can be confident that He will always work for our good and for His glory. His mercy may seem terrible at the moment; but His mercy is true mercy designed for our benefit.

Later, Jesus’ disciples asked Him privately why they could not cast out the demon. Jesus’ reply was simple: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” [MARK 9:29]. Prayer is the exclusive solution. Think on this for a moment. Prayer is the exclusive solution! There are situations in life that have no resolution except for prayer.

Prayer is the answer that I so often need when I come to the impasse that stops me cold. Maybe that doesn’t sound too impressive or dignified for me to admit; but, like you, I often look for ways around and through problems. I try to pull this string, to call on some individual, to rely on some resource—work it out myself. Foolish, isn’t it? Acting as if I was playing some celestial game, I look for a lifeline, for an answer from anywhere other than Heaven’s hallowed halls. All the while, I know in my heart there is but One who can provide the victory.

Do you have an impossible battle in your life? Most of us do. That’s why I thank God for the privilege of prayer.

There are two lasting principles in this whole idea of butterflies in battle. First, in life’s battles, *there are snipers of fear which human hearts cannot ignore*. You’re better at analysing the sniper than you are at finding the butterfly; so am I. Repeatedly, you play back in your mind the words spit out by those shooting at you, and you can’t seem to escape them. The words defeat you before you ever crawl out on the parapet. There’s a better way!

Every military has heroes. Among United States Marines, few stand taller than Chesty Puller, a remarkable and highly decorated Marine officer. In the Korean War, having led his troops to the frozen Chosin Reservoir during a brutal Korean winter, three Chinese armies attacked unexpectedly. To this point, China had not entered that war, and suddenly the enemy appeared in numbers no one could have anticipated? Puller’s response was, “We’ve been looking for the enemy for some time now. We’ve finally found him. We’re surrounded. That simplifies things.” That is visionary.

During that same battle, he uttered the famous line, “They are in front of us, behind us and we are flanked on both sides by an enemy that outnumbers us 29:1. They can’t get away from us now!” His indomitable spirit instilled in his Marines the will to fight and to win.

How do you view the opposition confronting you? Each challenge, each trial, is but an opportunity for God to act, if we can but see.

Second, *in life's battles, there are butterflies of faith which natural eyes cannot see*. Call your friends around you when you are in battle, and they'll tell you more about the battle than about the butterflies. Call on some humanistic mind to assist you in the midst of the trenches, and that humanistic mind will tell you how bad the situation really is. The human mind specialises in describing battles.

Let me recommend the most perfect piece of battleground information in the world—the morning newspaper. The **Globe and Mail**—twenty-five millimetres thick and filled with nothing but battle. You can hardly get it inside your house. You try to read it and it is page after page of battle after battle, sniper after sniper, wrong information, erroneous information, exaggerated information, human information telling you all about the battle.

Turn on the evening newscast. It is an hour of one battle after another, snipers firing at snipers. It will sap your energy and leave you bereft of hope.

I need a butterfly, God. When we open His Book it's amazing how many of them flutter out.

There was another life lost in battle during a different war. It wasn't a foot soldier in field grey. It was a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot wearing air force blue, a young man only nineteen. His name was John Gillespie Magee, Jr. He wrote about flying before his dying, and in his words you'll find the essence of what I've been sharing with you.

“Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung  
High on the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air.

“Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue,  
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or even eagle flew—  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.”<sup>4</sup>

You are on the threshold of a world you wouldn't believe. I challenge you to look beyond the battle, to see beyond the fear of the missile, to think beyond the worry over a sniper, and to claim by the grace of God the butterfly that has come along your parapet. Reach out with all the risk of prayer and claim it. Dare the risk of reach. Go to your knees. It is only there you can find the butterflies; they are always near the face of God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Pilot-Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., R.C.A.F., “High Flight”