

Help my unbelief * Mark 9:14-29

March 12, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

If you've ever struggled in your prayer life,
If you've ever struggled in your faith,
If you've ever struggled in your faith and felt bad that you were struggling, this morning's passage is for you.

Because this morning's passage is one of the most authentic, most precious, most honest and real passages in the Bible and I'm excited to share it with you. So let's get right to it - Mark 9, starting in verse 14.

Now the irony here is that while what we're about to read is one of the most authentic, 'lived-in' passages in all of the Bible, it happens hot on the heels of one of the most glorious, majestic ones - the Transfiguration! Have you ever seen on TV or in a book or something, they tell part of the story and then it says 'meanwhile...' and describes what was happening at the same time while what they told you was just happening.

That's this. That's today's passage because while the Transfiguration was happening up at the top of the mountain, what we are about to read was happening down at the bottom.

So picture this, Peter and James and John have been up on the mountain with Jesus. They have seen Moses and Elijah; they have seen Jesus in all of His glory. They have literally had a 'mountaintop experience!' and then when they come back down the mountain, life comes crashing back in on them. Immediately, they're thrown into a conflict. And it's a doozy;

At the bottom of the mountain, there's a crowd of people gathered around their fellow disciples. And it's clear that this is not an adoring crowd. There are religious leaders there – teachers of the law – and they are in a full-blown argument with the rest of the disciples. (That's verse 14).

Now at some point, somebody must have looked up the mountain, seen Jesus coming and yelled 'Hey everybody! There's Jesus!' and everybody took off to see Jesus Himself. The people crowded around Him, overwhelmed with wonder and eager to hear what He had to say about this situation.

And so Jesus asked (verse 16) "What are you arguing with them about?"

17 A man in the crowd answered...

(Mark is famously sparse with his descriptions; I think that if I was writing this, I would probably have written: 'a man in the crowd, who looked ragged and worn, bags under his eyes and forehead furrowed by grief' answered:

"Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

This man and his son are living a nightmare. Can you imagine being in his shoes? You know what it's like to see your child suffering – whether they're sick or injured or whatever – just imagine how this father and the boy's mother must feel. Heartbroken. Helpless. Alone.

And let's resist the 21st century temptation to try to diagnosis this boy according to modern medical standards. Jesus says that it was an evil spirit tormenting the boy; let's honour that and realize just how destructive evil can be. It 'seizes this boy,' it throws him to the ground, foaming at the mouth. No wonder they brought him to Jesus in the hopes that He would heal him.

Instead of Jesus though, the father got the understudies. The disciples. They probably said 'In Jesus' name, come out!' And waved their arms around but nothing seemed to dislodge this evil spirit from the boy. If anything, they probably seemed to make it worse. And of course that drew a crowd and the crowd drew the religious leaders, some of whom were probably saying 'see, Jesus has no power!' and some of whom were probably saying 'Those are not the right magic words; you gotta use *this* incantation.' And that became an argument and now here we are. The boy is still afflicted and the disciples could do nothing and the father is desperate.

Now, for my part, I think my first instinct would be to say 'I can't even imagine what you're going through!' and give the man a hug.

Jesus though says: 19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?..."

As I read that, I'm thinking: 'Gee whiz Jesus, work on your bedside manner would you?' But I'm also thinking: 'who is He talking to here? Who is the 'unbelieving generation' that He's talking about?' Is He talking to the father? Or the disciples? Or the people at large, the people currently crowding around Him?

I think I could make an argument for any of those but something that happens later makes me think that Jesus is talking specifically about the disciples who couldn't cast out the evil spirit. Slide down to verse 28 and I'll show you what I mean. Once all the commotion dies down, Jesus is alone with His disciples and they ask Him 'Why couldn't we drive the demon out?'

29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mar 9:29 NIV).

The implication here seems to be that the disciples had not stopped to pray before they attempted to cast out the spirit.ⁱ They thought they could do it themselves without relying on God. A couple of chapters ago, in Mark 6, they *had* gone out and cast out demons in Jesus'

name but here in Mark 9 they're trying to do it on their own, without God. They thought 'Oh we've done this before' and they attempted to do God's work without God's power.

They *say* they believe in God, but by not relying on Him, it shows that they *don't* really believe, not in a way that impacts their actions at least. And that's why I think Jesus says 'oh you faithless generation' to them – He's invested so much in them and they're still not getting it.

But even so, even though Jesus is frustrated by their lack of faith, He says "Bring the boy to me." Remember that the crowd ran over to Jesus when He came down the mountain, probably leaving the boy with his mother and so now they go and get him and Jesus sees what He's dealing with.

Verse 20 - 20 So they brought him [to Him]. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Heartbreaking.

21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered.

22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

This is the destructive power of evil on full display here. We often pray 'deliver us from evil' without really thinking about it but this situation shows us just how dangerous the spiritual powers can be. It throws him into convulsions; it tries to burn him; it tries to drown him. This is the self-destructive power of evil at work.

And it's been doing this since he was very young. 'From childhood' this boy and his family have been tormented by this evil spirit – boy do I feel for this family. They're at their wit's end.

And so the father says 22 "... But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

Jesus, however, replies: 23 " 'If you can'?" said Jesus. "*Everything* is possible for him who believes."

24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" "I believe; help my unbelief" (ESV).

This is one of the most precious statements of faith in all of the Bible. This man believes and yet he has the humility to admit that his faith is far from perfect. He knows he believes but he also knows that his faith needs to grow.

And this sets up a really neat contrast with the disciples. They think that they are SO full of faith, and yet they try to do amazing things without relying on God. The father on the other hand recognizes the weakness of his faith and so throws himself entirely on God. He says:

'I believe as far as I can but these things are so far beyond me that I need you to help me believe as much as I can.'

That's faith. Simple faith in the Son of God and utter dependence on Him. 'I believe; help my unbelief.'

R. Kent Hughes says: "A faith which declares itself publicly, and at the same time recognizes its weaknesses and pleads for help, is a real faith. What an encouragement to us all!"ⁱⁱ

Having heard that confession and seeing that the crowd was now running to the scene, Jesus acted. Verse 25 says that "...he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." Leave now and never come back!

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. [It could resist the disciples, but not Jesus]. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

Jesus gave him back to his father and off He went. For the first time ever, the boy could hear his parents' words of comfort. For the first time ever, they could hear his trembling voice. (Verse 25 – 'you deaf and mute spirit'). This evil spirit had tried to kill the boy but Jesus sent it packing and gave him life. Can you imagine being that father or mother? I'd probably be on my knees, overcome with gratitude, overwhelmed with joy.

Jesus had delivered a demon-possessed child and all it took was a struggling father's faltering faith. That's something that we need to hear.

Sometimes I think we get the idea that for God to listen to us, we have to have impeccable faith. Sometimes I think we get the idea that unless we never falter in our faith, we're really not very good Christians.

But this passage shows us that that's just not true. This passage shows us the real tension of belief and unbelief that we all experience as human beings. And it shows us that Jesus is able to take even the weakest of faith and work in powerful ways.

I like what David Garland says about this: "This father tethers what little faith he has to Christ and asks for help just as he is. Jesus does not expect him to summon up a mighty faith before anything can be done, but only to trust that God can act decisively through Him."ⁱⁱⁱ

Belief in God + dependence on Him = real, true faith, the kind of faith that God can work with.

[Now does that mean that if I have a sick relative I can have even the most miniscule faith and God is obliged to heal them? Or on the other hand, if they aren't being healed, does that mean that I don't have enough faith?

Well, no, because God has good reasons to do all the things that He does. We can't force God's hand no matter how hard we believe. We *can* though go to God in prayer, putting our faith entirely in Him, not pre-emptively limiting Him by praying half-heartedly or vaguely, or not praying at all, because God hears our prayers and answers them in ways that are faithful and good. Tim Keller once said 'God always answers the prayers that we would pray if we knew everything that He does.'^{iv} And so we pray by faith depending on Him.]

So let's think about this. What's the take away for us from the passage of Scripture? There are a few ways we could go, but what I want to focus on is this:

Allow yourself to pray 'I believe, help my unbelief.' When things fall apart, let this father's prayer be your own – I believe, help my unbelief.

What does that mean to pray like that? Well let's consider it in real life terms.

I know that many of you have loved ones whose health is failing. They're getting weaker by the day and you don't know what to do.

I know that some of you are having relational problems. People close to you have hurt you and you don't see any way you can possibly get through it.

I know that there may come a time in all of our lives when some emergency happens that shatters our reality and turns life upside down.

When that happens, pray 'I believe.'

Plant yourself firmly on the foundation of God's love and know that He will never let you down. Stand firm in your belief that God always works for good in the lives of those who love Him. There are a number of places in the Bible where God says "I will never fail you, nor forsake you."^v Cling to those words like a drowning man clings to a life preserver. Root yourself in the conviction that God is trustworthy and believe.

Pray 'I believe.' But know that you can just as freely pray 'help my unbelief.' God will not disown you if you are having a hard time keeping the faith in the midst of hard times. This passage shows us that a tiny little faith that surrenders to God is better than a lot of faith that doesn't.

Invite Jesus to come alongside you and strengthen whatever faith you have. You may be overwhelmed by your current circumstances, struggling hard to see how God could be at work in them; when that happens, don't let it dislodge your faith but instead ask Jesus to help it to grow. A little faith that asks for help is better than a supposed faith that doesn't.

In fact, Grant Osborne reminds us: “We will never have enough faith; we must depend entirely on God and Christ. We exercise our faith in humility, simply trusting that God can act in and through us.”^{vi}

So when you find yourself overwhelmed, at the end of your rope and out of options like the father, let his prayer be yours too – ‘I believe, help my unbelief.’

Now before we wrap up, I think that there is one more aspect of that prayer that we need to consider and I think that it’s there in the passage, even if it’s not said out loud. We’ve talked about belief and unbelief in terms of Jesus doing something spectacular; what about belief and unbelief when it comes to spiritual things?

For a long time, I kept the knowledge of Jesus at a head level. I knew the Sunday school stories, I knew about Him. I ‘believed’ in a theoretical sense but just like the disciples, my ‘belief’ didn’t lead to me depending on God. I just did everything myself. And whatever doubts I had about Jesus, I just kept to myself and didn’t really pursue them.

But when God got a hold of my heart, He enabled me to pray ‘I believe, help my unbelief.’ And He took my faith from head level and rooted it deep in my heart. Before I knew *about* Jesus; after, I knew Him. When you pray ‘I believe, help my unbelief,’ you are simultaneously confessing your faith in God and inviting Him to grow and develop and strengthen that faith. You are inviting Him to help you to grow in the parts of your life that you really need them to grow.

So consider this as we close. I think if we’re here, we probably all ‘believe’ on a head level. And we may even believe with all our hearts. But are there any areas in your life where you are struggling to trust God to work in His good and sovereign ways? Maybe you’re quite happy to believe at church, but when you get home your heart is full of doubt about your family, your work, your financial prospects? For those things, just as much as for the physical ones, Jesus invites us to pray: I believe. Help my unbelief. Let’s pray.

BENEDICTION

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

ⁱ David Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC) 357.

ⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark* (Preaching the Word commentary) ‘Power through faith/belief’ Mark 9:19b-27. On this idea, see also Grant Osborne (Teaching the Text): “This is one of the most important theological descriptions of true discipleship in Scripture. Every one of us should have it inscribed on a plaque and hung on the wall over our desk, for it describes us all. The father admits that he has some faith, yet also a huge area where he lacks faith. He knows Jesus’s reputation and has heard the stories, but he has experienced firsthand the ineptitude of Jesus’s disciples. He has a “grain-of-mustard-seed” faith, so he says in effect, “I have a little faith; help me in the great areas where I cannot as yet have faith.” TtT9:24

ⁱⁱⁱ Garland, 363.



Timothy Keller ✓
@timkellernyc



God will either give us what we ask for in prayer or give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knows.

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^{iv} Tim Keller:

^v Fox example: Deuteronomy 31:8, Joshua 1:5, 1 Chronicles 28:20, Hebrews 13:5.

^{vi} Grant Osborne, Mark (Teaching the text commentary) 'Teaching the text 2' Mark 9:14-29.