

Help My Unbelief!

Mark 9:14-29 ¹⁴ And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them. ¹⁵ Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. ¹⁶ And He asked the scribes, "What are you discussing with them?" ¹⁷ Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. ¹⁸ "And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not." ¹⁹ He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me." ²⁰ Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² "And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" ²⁶ Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting."

Mark 9:14-29 ,

Sometimes you come across some people who think that we must never tell children that they have lost or failed or not succeeded. I remember, as a child, sometimes being in a game or competition, and when it was over, someone came out and said, "There are no winners or losers today! We are all winners! Everyone is a champion!" I remember thinking, or at least feeling, that the grown-ups were cheating when they said that. Instead of being bold enough to disappoint some kids and declare someone to have won, or someone to have lost, they took the easy way out, and pretended that the contest was not a contest, and everyone won.

There are even educationalists who tell us that all competition is bad for children's self-esteem, so we must never say that someone has failed, or come last. And of course, there is no better way to produce people who are apathetic, unassertive, unambitious, and passive than to tell them that their feeblest effort means they are a champion. If everyone is a champion, there are no champions. If everyone wins, then everyone may as well have lost too.

Because in real life, people win, and people lose. People come first, and people come last. People succeed, and people fail. This is reality. And it is not only the reality in the world, it is a spiritual reality too.

Paul says, "**1 Corinthians 9:24** ²⁴ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

In the Christian life, there are those who do well, and those who do not. There are those who bring back five talents for their five, and there are those who bury their one. There are those who will be rewarded at the judgement seat of Christ, and there are those, according to 1 Corinthians 3:11, who, though they will be saved as by fire, yet they will suffer loss.

As much as our sentimental, hyper-democratic society would like you to believe that everyone comes first, that's not true now, and it's not true in eternity either.

What makes the difference between a mediocre Christian life and one that God greatly uses? What makes the difference between a Christian life that returns to God His investment with interest, and one which simply returns to Him the soul that He created? What is the difference between success and failure, reward and loss in the Christian life?

In the end, it comes down to this simple word: faith. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world. Without faith it is impossible to please Him. According to our faith will be our experience of victory, or loss. God's sovereign power is the same. God's will to bless each of His children is the same. Alfred Edersheim put it this way, "When the infinite fullness is poured forth, as it ever is in Christ, it is not the oil that is stayed, but the vessels which fail. He giveth richly, inexhaustibly, but not mechanically; there is only one condition, the moral one of the presence of absolute faith - our receptiveness."

In this passage, we encounter a failure on the part of Jesus' disciples. They failed in faith. And along the way, Jesus is going to teach them what they should have done, through a desperate father, whose faith was also wavering.

I. The Disciples' Failure

⁴ And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them. ¹⁵ Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. ¹⁶ And He asked the scribes, "What are you discussing with them?" ¹⁷ Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. ¹⁸ "And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not." ¹⁹ He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?"

Jesus has come down the mountain with Peter, James and John. It probably took several hours to climb down, and when they finally reach the bottom, instead of the other nine disciples being alone, as He left them, there is a crowd, and a growing one. When they see Jesus, they run to Him.

From a distance, Jesus can already hear there is an argument taking place. Some of the scribes are present, and have no doubt leaped at the opportunity to criticise and try to discredit Jesus. The cause of the dispute was probably the situation with the father and his demon-possessed child. The remaining nine disciples could not cast out this demon. More than likely, this had turned into an argument about whose fault it was, and the scribes probably got some anti-Jesus mileage out of it. For there is no other way to see this situation: the nine disciples had failed. They had been presented with a task, and they had failed. Jesus is exasperated to find out that His disciples could not cast it out. It grieves Him. It burdens Him. Why are they still so hardened in heart? So slow to believe?

¹⁹ He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?"

Think about it. How do you feel if you have worked hard to gain people's trust – you have been diligent, honest, fair, transparent, open. And when you have done all that, and the people whose trust you are trying to win turn around and do not trust you, how do you feel? All the more in the case of Jesus, who has lived before them perfectly, demonstrated His power and authority, proved Himself to them, and yet they still have doubt and unbelief.

And in this case, their persistent doubt had brought failure. A poor father had been further frustrated. Perhaps his faith in Jesus had taken a blow. It had given the scribes another opportunity to accuse and blaspheme. So Jesus is grieved by this lack of faith.

After all, these men have been with Jesus. They have lived with him for years. Within six months, He is going to be taken away from them, and then what will they do? They have been walking by sight, and they have to learn to walk by faith. Right now, Jesus calls them faithless. They are walking by sight, and they have failed at a critical point.

All of this turns our attention onto this poor father and his son. Look at the horrible condition his son was in.

II. The Father's Frustration

¹⁷ Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. ¹⁸ "And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid.

First, the demon had made him mute, taken away all power of speech. This alone is a heartache: to have your own flesh and blood, your own child unable to ever speak to you, communicate love or gratitude, or wonder, or enjoyment or grief. What a sadness- to have a child who could not ask questions, or make comments, or discuss deep things with his father. In verse 25, Jesus calls it a deaf and dumb spirit, meaning it had also taken away all power of hearing. Cut off from instruction, from encouragement, from blessings, from praise, from warnings. A silent world.

Second, the demon would send him into convulsive fits. Now the Bible is not saying epilepsy or seizure is a sign of demonism. Nor were the people of Jesus day so primitive as to attribute every seizure to Satan. But in this case, the demon would afflict the lad by sending his body into a state of seizure: rigid muscles, falling down, foaming at the mouth, gnashing the teeth. Anyone who has some form of epilepsy, or has a child, or spouse, or parent who has had seizures, knows what a difficult thing this is. The sense of losing control of your own body, the pain felt, the utter exhaustion after the seizure.

When Jesus asks the boy to be brought before Him, the demon sends the young man into another fit.

An he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth d when.

Third, this demon sadistically waited for the most dangerous times to do this.

²² "And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him.

He would wait till the family was gathered around a cooking fire, and everything seemed normal, and then throw the boy into a fit, his rigid and thrashing body falling into the fire, as the father wrestled him out, putting out the burning clothes, while the no doubt crying mother ran to begin tending the burn wounds. One wonders how many permanent scars and scrapes this boy had. Or, on other occasions, they would be in a boat together, enjoying a short journey over the Lake, or perhaps fishing, and the demon would strike, sending the boy convulsing into the water, while the desperate father jumped in, grabbing his son, trying to restrain him without being drowned himself, trying to get him back on board the boat before he breathed in water through his clenched teeth.

Can you imagine the heartbreak of this father? Imagine the dark cloud that hung over them: never knowing when the next attack would be, never knowing what new situation, or circumstance the demon would try to use to destroy the boy. I imagine they hardly left his side, fearing what would happen.

And for how long had this gone on? Jesus asks the father, ²¹ "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood.

Jesus did not ask because He did not know. He asked to show the father that He cared; that he was interested; that he wanted to help. If this young man was in his early twenties or teens, they had lived with this awful terror for over a decade, and Jesus wanted him to speak it out and bear his soul.

What a deep pain – to have a child with whom you cannot speak, in the usual way. A child afflicted by sudden and aggressive and debilitating fits, which happen at times that will be most destructive to him.

This poor man had probably heard Jesus was in the area, people told him where to find Jesus. He was directed to the disciples, who told him that Jesus had gone up a mountain with three of the others. Desperate, he asked them to cast out this demon. They had done that before – we saw in chapter 6 that Jesus sent them out, gave them authority, and they successfully cast out demons. But now, they cannot. What has worked before does not work here. I imagine the grief-stricken, anxiety-ridden father standing there, watching, hoping that this will be the day of deliverance. There is no doubt that he had gone to the rabbis of the day, and applied all their remedies. There is no doubt he had spent a huge amount of money on following every remedy that the rabbis said would cast out demons. And, like had happened on all those other occasions, he watched, and hope faded as nothing dislodged this demon.

Now as Jesus has arrived, the man is desperate. And in the exchange that follows is the remedy for failing faith. It becomes a powerful lesson for all of us.

III. The Remedy for Failing Faith

But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, *"If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes."*

Now we see the battle going on in the father's mind. You hear in the man's words that he has faced one too many disappointments. *If you can do anything*, if you are able to do something, anything. He is not sure what the result will be, and all he can do is say, "If you can do something, then do it: help us, come to our aid, feel pity for us. Back in chapter 1, there was a leper who said, "I'm willing, you can make me whole", and Jesus responded by saying, "I am willing, be healed". Here the man does not say if you are willing, you can; he assumes Jesus is willing, but says, if you can, if you are able.

Jesus now takes the man's words, and turns them around. "If you can". Jesus is really quoting the man, and turning it back to him. He has placed the limit on Jesus – if you are able, if you can. But now Jesus turns it around – "If *you* can" If you can what? Believe. All things are possible, all things are do-able to the one who believes. If the object of faith is God's will, and the power is God's grace, then nothing is impossible. Mountains can be moved.

Jesus has turned the tables on the man. The man wanted to make it about Christ's ability and compassion. But there is no doubt about Christ's compassion or ability. Here the missing link is something in the father. What must he supply? Faith. Belief.

And now listen to the man's reply: one of the most touching, and honest, and sincere, and heartfelt

responses in all of Scripture:

²⁴ *Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"*

If it is his faith that is holding back his son's healing, it breaks his heart. He must believe. He knows he must believe. But he has been disappointed so many times. This demon has become an immovable, permanent fixture in his child's life. He has often come to think it will never go. So the man confesses that living alongside his faith, is doubt. Living together is both belief, and unbelief, trust and scepticism. So he does the right thing with his unbelief. He does not hide it. He does not pretend it is not there. He confesses it openly, and asks for help to overcome it.

I think here we have one of the simplest and profoundest cures for our own struggles of faith. Confession of sin, request for grace. Unbelief is sin, and we admit it. We bring it out. We say openly, and ashamedly: I doubt, Lord. I know I shouldn't but I do. I don't trust. I don't see how it will happen. I don't trust you will come through.

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to growing in faith is when we do not face the unbelief in our heart – we simply live with it and hope it will go away by itself. We feel guilty about it, but we do not face it, shine the light of our attention on it, take it by the scruff of the neck, and bring it to Jesus. What change we might face, what relief, what renewed boldness, what stirring of our own faith, if we would begin by coming to God and calling our unbelief what it is. Augustine said the beginning of good works is the confession of evil works.

Then having admitted it is unbelief, we ask for help. We ask for grace. We ask for God to intervene to turn doubt into faith. Let me give you three prayer to pray to grow in faith:

- 1) Ask God to show you His nature again. You may not be able to always know what God will do in the situation. But you can know what kind of God He is. You can know how He is disposed towards you. In the case of the disciples – they could have remembered

Isaiah 61:1 *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;"*

- 2) Ask God to remind you of His works. You may not know what God is going to do, but you can be reminded of how He has acted in the past – towards His people in Scripture, in church history, and in your own life. The disciples could have remembered Christ had already done this, and desired to do this.
- 3) Ask God to remind you of which faithful promises your situation falls under. God's promises are what your faith lives on, and His promises cover every situation. The more specific the promise, the better. They could have remembered the very promise quoted in Luke 9:1

Luke 9:1 *Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases.*

Help my unbelief that this spouse of mine will ever be saved. Help my unbelief that this joblessness will ever end. Help my unbelief that my physical ailments will actually have a purpose. Help my unbelief that my child will ever love the things of God. Help my unbelief that I will ever overcome this sin. Help my unbelief that I will find godly companionship. Help my unbelief that I will be useful to you in my latter years.

How do I do that? Lord, remind me of who you are, the kind of God you are, the way you are disposed to your children. Remind me of how you have worked and answered prayers. Remind me of your promises. And then, just as if you wanted reminders of family memories, you'd open an album, or if you wanted reminders of a man's saying, you'd open a quote book, so if you want to be reminded of God's nature, God's works, and God's promises, you open the Word. And you don't do a lucky dip. You search, and search intelligently – with helps, aids, commentaries, Christian books, pastoral counsel.

Spurgeon wrote: There was once a good woman who was well-known among her circle for her simple faith, and her great calmness in the midst of many trials. Another woman, living at a distance, hearing of her, said, "I must go and see that woman, and learn the secret of her holy, happy life." She went; and accosting the woman, said, "Are you the woman with the great faith?" "No," replied she, "I am not the woman with the great faith; but I am the woman with a little faith in the great God."

This is the answer to the disciples' question later on.

²⁸ *And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"*

²⁹ *So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting*

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Why could we not cast it? Jesus tells them, this kind only comes out by prayer and fasting. Well, what happens in prayer and fasting? There we fix our minds on the attributes of God. There we recount the works of God. There we speak to God of His promises and ask His kind faithfulness to be upon us. What emerges from true prayer is faith.

That's why the account in Matthew says,

Matthew 17:19-20 ¹⁹ *Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"* ²⁰ *So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.*

Prayer is one of those places where you come with faith, and leave with more than you came with. And the nine disciples had simply not prayed enough. Their faith in the person of God, His works and His promises was not adequate to the task. This is why Jesus was exasperated with them. This is why He said, *"O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?"*

Jesus expected more from them, because He prayed like that. He spent hours before the Father. He at times, spent whole nights in prayer. Though He was God in flesh, He was a man full of faith. He was full of faith because He remained deeply acquainted with the Father's nature, the Father's works, and the Father's promises.

IV. The Reward of Faith

²⁵ *When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!"* ²⁶ *Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead."*

²⁷ *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.*

Before this can turn into another mob scene (remember – we are no longer in the time of public proclamation, but of private preparation), Jesus acts decisively. He gives a command to this evil spirit, a command to leave and never return. And the demon gives one last act of defiance as the

sovereign power of Christ tears him from this body. The demon's last stand leaves the boy almost unconscious, weakened to fainting. Compassionate Jesus, as always, touching, connecting, empathising, takes the boy by the hand, lifts him up.

He is a new boy. He can speak and hear. He will never be convulsed again. His family can really begin again with a new person. No more fears around water or fire. No more wondering what the boy is thinking. Jesus has given them, by grace, a new kind of life.

And I want you to see that all this came from a spark of faith. The man had some faith, and some unbelief. But he made a critical choice, and that was to side with faith – to confess doubt and ask for grace to overcome it. And Christ, who does not snuff out a smouldering wick, or break off a bruised reed, took what was there, and helped what was lacking.

It was a lesson to the nine, who had probably mixed pride and self-confidence in with their lack of faith.

If it were up to some educationalists, every Christian who has ever lived would be part of the Hebrews 11 faith hall of fame. Not everyone is held up as a model in Hebrews 11, because not everyone is a model. Those who run with endurance, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith can join those ranks.

So what can you do? Begin by giving yourself to more prayer. Prayer grows faith and faith grows prayer. Give yourself to those three prayers – asking God to show you His nature, show you His works, show you His promises. Then apply them to particular tests God is bringing into your life. Instead of explaining them away, rationalizing them, or treating them as you did when you were in the world, come at them with faith.