

## A Bridge too Far?

### Mark 9:14-29

Online Sermon: [http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

Whether one is on the mountaintop of blessings or in the valleys of trials and tribulations, keeping one's faith in Jesus is not an easy task! When we are the recipients of blessings it is easy to forget whom secured one's feet and enabled one to reach such great heights. "Swimming" in blessings, is it not easy to take credit for our "good fortune" while forgetting the frailties of life and our utter dependence on our Creator? Is it any easier to have faith when in the valleys of trials and tribulations? While difficulties sometimes force us to cry out "Abba, Father I need You," when these times are viewed as punishment from God for our repeated failures to be holy as He is holy, do they not promote in us unbelief not in God's grace but in our ability to please Him? It is not that we do not believe that God cannot remove the habitual sins that so easily entangle us but our reluctance to believe that He will get involved or "interfere" in our personal lives that weakens our faith. This leads us with a hard question to answer: is it possible to have faith in God both on the mountaintops and in the valleys? Today's sermon is going to review the story of Jesus healing the boy possessed by an impure spirit as found in Mark 9:14-29 and in doing so will show that true faith in God is not to be contingent on experiencing either the mountains or valleys of life but on the continual faith in a living Savior who will do good to those who love Him!

### Failure Breeds Unbelief (9:14-19)

Upon descent from the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John, Jesus was immediately confronted by a dispute between the scribes, His disciples<sup>1</sup> and a "large crowd ringing the combatants."<sup>2</sup> While we are not told the nature of the argument,<sup>3</sup> it was most likely the disciple's failure to heal a boy possessed by an impure spirit that led to a dispute over the theological credentials of the disciples,<sup>4</sup> Jesus' overall ministry<sup>5</sup> or what must be done to have an effective exorcism.<sup>6</sup> Seeing Jesus arrive on the scene we are told the crowds were overwhelmed

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 276.

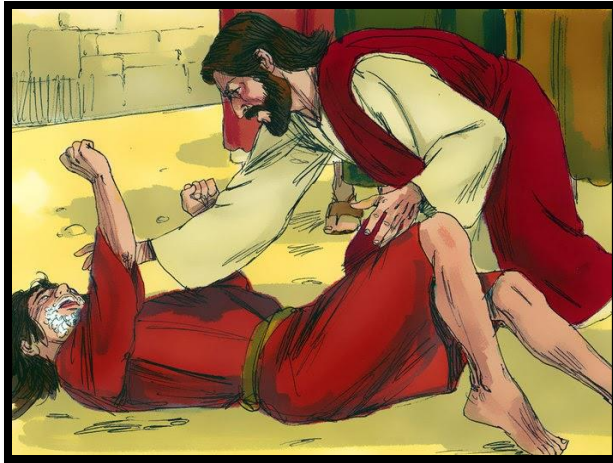
<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 354.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 175.

<sup>4</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 218.

<sup>5</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 150.

<sup>6</sup> Craig A. Evans, *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Matthew-Luke*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, First Edition. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2003), 333.



became rigid. The father had taken his son to be healed by the disciples but they could not drive the spirit out (verse 18). Either to the unbelieving crowd<sup>12</sup> or most likely the disciples<sup>13</sup> Jesus said “you unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you, how long shall I put up with you? Bring the child to Me” (verse 19).

The first thing that we learn from the above discourse is that “repetition” can become an impediment to faith. Earlier in Mark we are told that Jesus sent out the disciples two by two



with the authority to drive out demons (3:15; 6:7). Even though they had initial success (6:13-14), they were not able to cast the demon out of this boy.<sup>14</sup> The disciples learned that belief in the “infinite superiority of their Master,”<sup>15</sup> not repetition of past methods of exorcisms, was the key to seeing His power demonstrated in their lives. Likewise, singing, reading the Bible and serving one another will not lead to a closer walk with God when it is done without reverence or awe of the Recipient of our praise! While success in this world is often seen as “the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out,” for the living stones to be effective in God’s kingdom they must rely on

with wonder either due to the radiance of His face being similar to that of Moses (Exodus 34:29),<sup>7</sup> His authority<sup>8</sup> or His sudden presence.<sup>9</sup> Jesus pulled the attention away from the humiliated disciples by asking the scribes “what are you arguing with them about?”<sup>10</sup> A “confrontation between Jesus and the scribes was preempted”<sup>11</sup> by a desperate father who stated his son was “possessed by a spirit that had robbed him of speech” (verse 17). Whenever the spirit seized him, the father explained, it threw his son to the ground, he foamed at the mouth, gnashed his teeth and

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<sup>7</sup> James R. Edwards, 276.

<sup>8</sup> David E. Garland, 354.

<sup>9</sup> Walter W. Wessel, “[Mark.](#)” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 702.

<sup>10</sup> R. Alan Cole, 218.

<sup>11</sup> James R. Edwards, 277.

<sup>12</sup> David E. Garland, 354.

<sup>13</sup> Walter W. Wessel, 702.

<sup>14</sup> David E. Garland, 354.

<sup>15</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “[The Secret of Failure.](#)” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 42 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1896), 99.

Jesus for their success. Too many of today’s Christians are merely “moving in ruts,”<sup>16</sup> mechanically repeating the same words and actions without even acknowledging it is through the power of Christ that they were freed their sins (Romans 8:2) and enabled to do greater miracles than Jesus ever did (John 14:12-14)! Not giving God the honor and the glory for success in ministry leads to failure and subsequent decrease in faith for without God nothing is possible (Matthew 19:26)!

The second thing that we learn from the above discourse is that failure can destroy our faith! Imagine how humiliating it must have been to be in front of such a large crowd and command a demon to exit a boy only to have nothing happen? When they asked Jesus “why couldn’t we drive it (the demon) out?” were not the disciples pleading for Jesus to not take His Spirit from them but to renew their former ability to cast out demons again?<sup>17</sup>



At no time is Satan more successful in planting seeds of unbelief into our minds than during our failures! To sing, pray, read the Bible and help the poor and not see the fields ripen is not only discouraging but makes us feel like “WE” have in some way personally failed to serve our God. Amidst perceived defeat the “father of lies” (John 8:44) tells us that “ineffective service” is proof that our Creator has written us off as

being altogether worthless. Flooded with negative feelings of depression, pain, stress, anger, frustration and grief; it is very difficult to have faith even as small as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20)! To combat these lies we must not forget that Christ’s love is not contingent on our holiness (Romans 5:10) but His and it is Christ alone, not us, who is responsible for ripening the fields all around us (1 Corinthians 3:6)!



The final thing that we learn from the above discourse is how important it is to find out why our service is not producing any fruit. The disciples were told they had failed to cast the demon out because they had not first prayed to God for help.<sup>18</sup> Since we are promised that whatever we ask in the name and of Jesus is always granted (Matthew 7:7), failure means that we either asked with the wrong motives (James 4:1-3) and/or for things against His will. No matter how much effort

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, [“The Secret of Failure,”](#) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 42 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1896), 99.

<sup>18</sup> James R. Edwards, [The Gospel according to Mark](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 281.



we put into serving or praying to God, by chasing “our dream” instead of “His will,” our service will produce little or no fruit. To know what His pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2) is Scripture states one must examine one’s heart (1 Corinthians 11:28) and confess any sin (1 John 1:9) that one is cherishing, or God will not listen to us (Psalms 66:18). When it comes to habitual sins this might seem like an impossible request but can be accomplished by drawing nearer to He who created and sustains all life (Colossians 1:16). With tears in one’s eyes and great boldness we are to approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) and as one draws nearer to God He will not only draw nearer to you (James 4:8) but also cleanse and purify your heart. The moment we submit to God’s will our faith increases because the fruits of our labor are guaranteed!

### **Trials and Tribulations Breeds Unbelief (9:20-24)**

When the boy was brought to Jesus the demon threw him into convulsion, fell to the ground and rolled around foaming at the mouth (verse 20). While these actions were symptoms of epilepsy,<sup>19</sup> they were not merely due to a physical condition but were the byproduct of the



demon<sup>20</sup> whom recognized Jesus as “the More Powerful One (1:7) whose chief mission was to bind the strong man and liberate the captives (3:27; 1 John 3:8).”<sup>21</sup> Instead of speaking immediately to the spirit, Jesus began the exorcism by asking the father “how long has he been like this?” (verse 21)<sup>22</sup> The father responded, “from childbirth it has thrown him into fire or water to kill him, but if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us” (verse 21). “If you can” said Jesus, “everything is possible for one who believes” (verse 23). At the heart of this

exorcism was the struggle for faith, not just a struggle with a demon!<sup>23</sup> Expelling demonic forces with a single word was one matter but a lack of faith on the part of the scribes, crowds, disciples and a desperate father was quite another.<sup>24</sup> It is at this point that the father said one of the most profound and truthful statements ever spoken by humanity,<sup>25</sup> “I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief” (verse 24).

From this part of the story we learn that trials and tribulations can breed unbelief. To see his “defenseless son experience convulsions, foaming at the mouth, outcries, lockjaw and body

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<sup>19</sup> James R. Edwards, 277.

<sup>20</sup> R. Alan Cole, 218–219.

<sup>21</sup> James R. Edwards, 279.

<sup>22</sup> David E. Garland, 355.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> James R. Edwards, 279.

<sup>25</sup> Walter W. Wessel, 703.



rigidity”<sup>26</sup> must have been absolutely heart wrenching for the father. Then to take his son to those who were casting out demons only to find out they could not do the same for his son left the father with little hope. It is precisely in our trials and tribulations that our faith gets tested and either refined or weakened. While we know we are to consider it pure joy when we face difficult times because the testing our faith produces perseverance and spiritual maturity (James 1:2), do we not in our pain and anguish seek any means of escape? We go to doctors,

psychologists, financial experts and numerous self-help books to mitigate or preferably remove our undesirable circumstances. It is only when we cannot find a cure anywhere else that we go to the Great Physician Jesus and ask Him to remove our cup of infirmities. When Jesus’ response is “not yet” or “no” this our faith weakens. It is only when we are like the father and cry out “help me with my unbelief” that Jesus either heals or gives us the strength to endure!

### Jesus can do Anything (9:25-27)

When Jesus saw a crowd running to the scene to avoid as much publicity as possible, He rebuked the impure spirit by saying “you deaf and mute spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again” (verse 25).<sup>27</sup> While the deaf spirit had made it impossible for



the boy to hear, it could not “avoid hearing the authoritative command of Jesus!”<sup>28</sup> It is at this point that the spirit shrieked, convulsed the boy violently and came out and left him looking like a corpse and presumed dead (verse 26). Even though the father’s faith was small it was adequate for by “yielding his insufficiency to the true sufficiency of Jesus” he demonstrated great faith.<sup>29</sup> Mark does not contradict the opinion of those who thought the boy died during this exorcism<sup>30</sup> but only confirms that like the raising of Jairus’s daughter (5:42-42) the moment Jesus

<sup>26</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 277.

<sup>27</sup> James R. Edwards, 277.

<sup>28</sup> Craig A. Evans, 334.

<sup>29</sup> James R. Edwards, 280.

<sup>30</sup> Craig A. Evans, 335.

took the boy by the hand<sup>31</sup> he was alive and able to stand (verse 27). This exorcism is not only a preview of “Jesus’ own death and resurrection”<sup>32</sup> but also the fulfilment of His promise in verse 23 that “all things are possible for one who believes.”

“The sole bridge between frail humanity and the all-sufficiency of God is *faith*.”<sup>33</sup> For God to work in and through our lives we must believe and not doubt (James 1:6) that whatever we ask of in His name will be granted. While this is easy to “believe” in our minds, in our hearts that is quite another matter! Like the father in this story, our lives can become fraught with so



many difficulties that hope becomes but a mere fantasy. When we feel like we are drowning in sorrow, weary and burdened with debilitating pain Jesus tells us to come to Him and He will give us rest (Matthew 11:28-30). God’s word assures us that if it is in His will and we have faith even as tiny as a mustard (Matthew 17:20) seed in His sovereignty, then Jesus will perform a miracle and grant us healing. Jesus has no limitations for He alone controls all things seen and unseen (Colossians 1:16). While rest does not always come in the form of physical healing

like the son in this story, in times of trials and tribulations Jesus promises He will never leave nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5) but give us the strength to not only endure (1 Corinthians 10:13) but feel unspeakable joy during our pain (1 Peter 1:8)!

### A Bridge too Far? (9:28-29)



When Jesus had gone indoors the disciples asked Him privately, “why couldn’t we drive it out” (verse 29). In response Jesus stated, “this kind can come out only by prayer” (verse 29). The disciples could not drive out this demon because they simply forget to ask the source of their power for help!<sup>34</sup> Like the disciples we have been granted the authority to perform miracles greater than Christ did while on earth but only when we acknowledge and give the Father credit for what only He can do!<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Walter W. Wessel, 704.

<sup>32</sup> James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 148.

<sup>33</sup> James R. Edwards, 280.

<sup>34</sup> David E. Garland, 357.

<sup>35</sup> Walter W. Wessel, 704.

“Prayer is faith turned to God,”<sup>36</sup> for unless we are constantly aware of our own inadequacies and acknowledge His supremacy our requests will remain forever unanswered. “The power grows out of one’s relationship to God in prayer and comes as a gift of grace, not as a prize for self-mortification.”<sup>37</sup> Prayer is not primarily a way of getting what we want but the opportunity to align our will with His so that what we ask might be granted.<sup>38</sup> Whether we are on the mountaintops of blessings or in valleys of tribulations to keep our faith secured our cry must always be “Abba, father I need you, help me with my unbelief!” Without both prayer and faith anything we ask of God will always to a bridge to far!

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<sup>36</sup> James R. Edwards, 281.

<sup>37</sup> David E. Garland, 357.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald J. Kernaghan, [Mark](#), The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 178.