

Faith and Prayer

- Mark 9:14-29
- One of my vivid memories from childhood is being with my mom and my little brother, driving home from visiting my aunt, and my little brother having a seizure in the car. His eyes rolled back in his head and I was sitting next to him in the front seat with mom and I yelled. She saw what was happening, slammed on the brakes, thankfully there was no one behind us, and pulled into a driveway. She carried Eric to the front door with me trailing along, and she pounded on the door until a frightened older woman opened it, and Mom frantically asked her to call for an ambulance. Meanwhile, she had her finger in Eric's mouth, trying to keep him from swallowing his tongue. Which we learned later is impossible, but Mom had a chewed-up finger to remind her of her effort. I drive past that house every week when I go to visit my mom, and I always think about that day. Eric was fine, just a spiked fever that caused a convulsion (Jesse knows about those, right?), but at the time, we thought he was dying. What struck me most that day was the sense that my Mom was going to do whatever it took to get help for my little brother. She was like that his whole life.
- Let's look at this text today under three main points: Story, Faith, and Prayer.
- **Story**
- Jesus and the three have left the Mount of Transfiguration and returned to where the other disciples have been very busy. When they arrive, they find a disturbing scene. Probably sounded like a mob scene, a riot, from a distance. And in a way it was. The nine disciples are surrounded by the crowd, the scribes, and the demon possessed. Same three groups that have been attending to Jesus' ministry the whole time! The crowd is eating popcorn as they watch the Scribes arguing with the disciples, what else is new, most likely about demon-possessed boys and ineffective followers of Christ. Again we see that when the disciples, then and now, are not walking closely with Jesus, they get into trouble. And again we see that Jesus is our advocate, and with a word he commands the Scribes to direct their questions to him, rather than to his followers. A reminder that those opposed to our faith have taken up arms, ultimately, not against us but against the Lord! He can handle it.
- That's when a man in the crowd reveals the source of the conflict, as he tells Jesus that he had brought his son to him, his only child Luke tells us, because his son was possessed by a spirit that kept him mute and caused him to have great seizures, even trying to kill his son by throwing him into water or into fire. He had not found Jesus but some of his disciples, and he had asked them to cast out the demon. But they were not able to do it. At this we see the humanity of Jesus and the very real frustration he feels toward those who do not believe. Some think he leveled this angst to his disciples when he said, "How long am I to be with you, and put up with you?" But he starts that question with, "O faithless generation." Whenever Jesus speaks of "this generation" in Mark's gospel, the reference is never to the disciples. James Edwards writes, "Jesus does not chastise them. Inability is simply a limitation, not a fault." No, Jesus is angry with the unbelief of the crowd and of the Scribes. But that does not keep him from acting. The boy is brought to him and immediately goes into a violent seizure, clearly provoked by

the spirit that is in him, as Mark reports in verse 20. Edwards writes, "The initial result of the presence of Jesus is not peace, however, but conflict; not resurrection, but suffering." Eduard Schweizer writes, "This indicates how the presence of God can produce storm and stress before anything constructive is accomplished."

- Now at this point in Matthew and Luke, Jesus casts out the demon and the boy is restored. But Mark gives us much more detail by relaying the wonderful conversation that reveals the heart of the father. His only child has suffered with this demon since he was a very young. And it had been a long road of pain and suffering for both of them. The father obviously could never leave the boy for a second, or the demon's attempt at murder would have been successful. But the father could only save the boy from those destructive attempts by the demon; he had no power to help his son beyond that. Sinclair Ferguson says the father "could not speak of the inner despair he must frequently have felt." This is when he reveals both his hope in Jesus' compassion, and his own weak faith.
- **Faith (verse 22b-24)**
- The father cries out for help by saying to Jesus, "If you can do anything..." And Jesus responds, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." It is a mild rebuke at the same time that it is a call to faith. Jesus reaches out and reveals the need in the man's heart. Matthew and Luke pointed the story to the miracle, but Mark pointed it to faith which preceded the miracle. Jesus knows he can cast out the demon with just a word, but what is more important in this moment is evoking faith in a father's heart. And in his disciples' hearts. The problem is never God's unwillingness or God's inability, but it is always human unbelief. Why does Jesus reveal the father's weak faith? Because it is the need. We cannot put our trust in miracles, because they come and go and are ultimately only temporary solutions to a permanent problem. We can only put our trust in a person, and there is only One worthy of that trust.
- Some people would say we believers are guilty of "blind faith." Tony Evans says, "But faith isn't blind when you know who you are following. Have you ever taken a medical prescription you couldn't even read to a pharmacist you didn't know, and then swallowed the medicine he gave to you? Of course, you have. Was that blind faith? No, you took it because the person who gave it to you had the title M.D. after his or her name. That physician was qualified to prescribe the medicine you were given. Jesus has a title after His name. It's not MD, it's L.O.R.D.!! You can trust Him. It's not blind faith."
- Edwards writes, "The sole bridge between frail humanity and the all-sufficiency of God is faith." And true faith always recognizes its own inadequacy. The father cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" That leads us to the miracle and then the importance of prayer.
- **Prayer (verses 25-29)**
- Jesus sees the crowd running towards him and he turns and rebukes the demon and commands it to leave the boy and never come back. The demon protests with a violent departure, leaving the boy immobile and appearing to be dead. The hostage is now set free, but it looks like the cure was worse than the disease, and the crowd pronounces that to be the case when they say, "He is dead!" Then Jesus, as we have seen before with

Peter's mother-in-law, reaches out and takes the hand of the boy, lifts him up, "and he arose." (verse 27) The word Mark uses there is resurrection. The three disciples had just been asking what it means to be raised from the dead, and Jesus answers with this boy, and points them to his own death and resurrection to come.

- Later in a private place, the disciples asked their Master, "Why could we not cast it out?" We have seen it several times and there are more to come, the inadequacy of the disciples in their ministry with Jesus. This is just another example and a reminder that the servant of the Lord is always inadequate in his own strength. It is a reminder that the Lord calls us to do what we cannot do, because the ministry is not ours, but the Lord's. This should not drive us to despair; rather it should drive us to our knees!
- Jesus puts the key in their hands when he says, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." This is the first call to prayer in the Gospel of Mark, and we will see several others. Walter Grundmann wrote, "Prayer is faith turned toward God." The disciples had heard Jesus pray and had seen him pray but this was the first time they have heard him speak to them about this key. Later in chapter 11, Jesus will say to them, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:24-25) In that passage, Jesus connects prayer with faith and with forgiveness. And in this passage, Jesus brings prayer into the context of faith, and connects it, prayer with faith, to spiritual power.
- After R. A. Torrey had been a Christian for more than forty years, someone asked him to visit a family and pray for one member who was dying with typhoid fever. God revealed to Torrey that the man would live. He told them that when he arrived. The doctor, who was there, said, "That's fine for you. But he cannot live. He will die." Dr. Torrey said, "That's fine for you. But he cannot die. He will live." Later that night, he showed the final signs of impending death. Then he recovered. In his book, *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power*, Dr. Torrey emphasized that he could pray for every sick person to recover, but he could not believe and not doubt for every sick person to recover. He could only do that when God revealed it, when God gave him the faith that a person would live and not die. Only then could he pray without doubt, believing in his heart that it would happen. If God reveals to you that he is going to do something, you should believe it and not doubt it. If God reveals to us that he will do a marvelous thing when we step out in faith, we should step out in faith. If we don't step out in faith, we will miss the marvel.
- As we close, and as we stand just inside the threshold of a new year, may I ask you something? In what circumstances in your own life can you cry out like the father in this story, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!" This is not a rhetorical question. I really want you to answer, preferably by writing the answer down in your notes, or on the flyleaf of your Bible. What do you face right now in your life for which you need God's help, His power, His intervention? Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes!" What crisis in your life seems impossible to fix, and you have, if you're honest, given up hope? Would you write that down? Because there is one thing I know without a shadow of a doubt. Jesus loves you just as much as he loved that father and his son.

- Have you got something written down that you honestly are crying out to God for? Ok, now write this as a prayer beside it: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." Prayer is faith turned toward God.
- Prayer