

Help my unbelief!

- Mark 9:14-29
- This is much more than just a story about a father and his son and their encounter with Jesus, as you will see. Here's a question I would pose to you as we begin. Is it OK for a Christian to say, "I know that I have eternal life."? John answers that question for us in **1 John 5:11-13**. The main reason that John writes this first letter is to give the followers of Jesus confidence in the fact that we can know that we know Jesus. Why is it important that we have assurance of our salvation? Look at **1 John 1:1-4**. Our fellowship can be affected if we do not have assurance of our salvation. John says to his readers, hey we want to have fellowship with you who did not get the chance to see and hear and touch Jesus like we did, because our fellowship, and yours, is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. We declare the eternal life to you that was with the Father and is given to US. The other way we are affected if we do not have assurance of our salvation is in our joy. ***And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.***
- Before we look at the story, let's make sure we are on the same page about what assurance is not. If you have assurance of your salvation, that does not mean you never have doubts. Every born again believer will struggle with doubts from time to time. But doubts are not the defining characteristic of a person who knows Jesus. If you struggle constantly with doubts about your salvation, that may be an indication that in fact you are not saved. And a believer doesn't wear his doubts proudly on his sleeve, as though the more doubts you have, the greater your intellect must be. No, we need to track down our doubts to their source, and as we will see in the story, if the source of our doubts is unbelief, we have to repent.
- The background to this story is that Jesus and his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, have just been on the mount of transfiguration. So here they are, still on a high from their mountaintop experience, and suddenly they hear a commotion. They look down the road and there they see the other nine disciples embroiled in a heated argument with the scribes. The scribes were clearly the aggressors, and as the story unfolds we can guess that they are gloating over the fact that the disciples had not been able to cast the demon out of the young man. They were most likely enjoying the fact that they had the nine separated from their leader, because their track record against Jesus was pretty dismal. In fact, they had never had any success whatsoever in tripping Jesus up or trapping Him in some way, though they had been trying for nearly 2 and ½ years. So this was a great day for them...for a few minutes. Then Jesus showed up and I can imagine they growled and shook their fist like you do when victory is snatched out of your hands at the last second!
- I love what Jesus does here: He confronts the scribes. He didn't have to do that. He could have quietly pulled the disciples away and asked, "What was that all about?" But He waded right into it and asked the scribes, "What are you discussing with them?" Jesus defended His disciples. He did it then. He does it now. He was not the least intimidated by the scribes. He confronted them when they were having their way with the disciples. He was not the least intimidated by the demons. He cast them out when they were winning over the disciples. He was not intimidated by death and the grave. He defeated them that held the disciples, all of us, hostage because of our sin. This is an important part of our understanding assurance of salvation. We look to Jesus. "This is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and that life is in His Son." (1 John 5:11) The life is in Jesus. If you are looking at yourself for assurance of salvation, or if you are looking at your good works for assurance of salvation, you are looking in the wrong place. Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot look at what we have or have not done for assurance of salvation; we must look only at what Jesus has done. That's why Paul can say unequivocally, "There is therefore now NO condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:1) This

eliminates the antinomians who would say that if I pray a prayer (“Make a decision for Christ”), then I can live any way I want to. No, those who are in Christ Jesus walk according to the Spirit. But the GROUND of our assurance is Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. That is where we stand.

- Jesus asked the scribes a question. We are still waiting on their answer! The scribes knew that they had an absolute lousy track record with answering Jesus’ questions. They never got one answer right. They failed every exam He ever gave, so they decided to just sit this one out. But someone from the crowd answered Jesus. It was the father who was part of the scene that had erupted before Jesus showed up. He had brought his son to Jesus, only to find that Jesus was not there that day. So he had asked the disciples for help. His son had all of the classic signs of severe epilepsy, but this was no ordinary epilepsy. It was demonic possession. The seizures were bad enough. But the demon has also taken the boy’s ability to hear or speak. Not only that, the demon has tried to kill the boy many times by throwing him into fire or water. How long has this been going on, Jesus asks? Since childhood. That tends to make you think that this is no longer a child but a young man, still in his father’s house. Maybe a young man of 13 or 14. This has been going on for years; the father can never leave his son alone. (By the way, Luke tells us he is his only child). So you can imagine his profound disappointment to be able to finally take his son to Jesus and when he gets to where he was told he would find Jesus, all he found were nine of His disciples who could not help him, no matter how much they tried. But notice what happens. As soon as Jesus hears the father’s complaint, He says, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Jesus speaks one of the strongest rebukes of His ministry. And to whom is he speaking? To the whole culture. O faithless generation! And what provokes that response? Unbelief! We will see that even clearer in a moment.
- Jesus asks for the boy to be brought to Him and as soon as the demon in the boy sees Jesus, it throws the boy into a seizure. The Greek word there for convulsed means to tear from side to side, to mangle. The demon has tried to kill his son many times by throwing him into fire or water. Then there is an exchange between the father and Jesus, and I prefer the ESV here: the father says, “But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” It reminded me of the leper in Mark 1 who knelt before Jesus and said, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus was moved with compassion and said, “I am willing,” and He healed the leper. The leper said, “If you will, you can.” THIS man said to Jesus, “**If you can**, you will!” And Jesus rebuked the father for his unbelief. Now, remember, the man’s son is writhing on the ground at Jesus’ feet, in the throes of a demonic attack, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus is GOING to deliver the young man and heal him. But FIRST He deals with this man’s unbelief. Do you see that?
- The sin of unbelief is exceedingly wicked and sinful. There is no question that this is a wicked demon. All demons are wicked. But this one is particularly bad and apparently powerful. Jesus makes a distinction at the end of the story when the disciples ask why they couldn’t cast it out: “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer (or prayer and fasting).” This kind. This was a wicked and powerful demon who had controlled a young man’s life for years. But Jesus was more concerned with the sin of unbelief in the culture and in this man’s heart. Spurgeon said, “the sin of unbelief will appear to be extremely heinous when we remember that it is the parent of every other iniquity. There is no crime which unbelief will not beget.” Unbelief led to Adam and Eve’s original sin. Unbelief kept Moses out of the Promised Land. Unbelief made Gehazi a leper. Unbelief led Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit and drop dead at Peter’s feet. It is one thing to have occasional doubts. We run to Jesus and His Word with those! But it is quite another thing to hold onto unbelief. It is a deadly sin that will destroy us.
- Notice this man’s response to Jesus’ rebuke. He cried out with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” There is a humble response which tends to indicate a tender heart. The man clearly listened to Jesus and understood the point that Jesus had just made. In this whole mob of people,

this is the man who had the most reason to be distracted: it was his son writhing on the ground. But it was this man who was most attentive to what the Lord was teaching that day. Spurgeon wrote, "It is very noticeable that the man did not say, "Lord I believe; help my child!" Nor does he say, "Lord I believe; now cast the devil out. Not at all. He perceives that his own unbelief is harder to overcome than the demon. And that to heal him of his spiritual disease was a more needful work than even to heal his child of the sad malady under which he labored." Then we see three things here, and I am indebted to Phil Johnson for his outline who says this man summarizes the whole doctrine of assurance in this one statement.

- The ground of our assurance: that's Jesus Himself. Expressed in the father calling Jesus Lord. This perhaps is the most important point about the doctrine of assurance. It is never gained by looking inward at my own heart or looking outward at my own works. You will never find assurance within yourself but only in Christ. Not what I have done for Him but what he has done for me! This man understood the imperfections of his own faith but he looked to Jesus. You can be so consumed with the imperfections of your own faith that you take your eyes off of Christ. No wonder some don't have assurance. They are looking at themselves! Jesus is the only proper ground of assurance.
- "I believe." That is the root of our assurance: faith. Though this man's faith was small, just mustard seed size it would seem, he was desperate for help and that led him to Jesus. Jesus rebukes the man for doubting Him: "IF you can! You doubt MY power?" And the man understood. He received the rebuke and humbled himself, and that is why his profession of faith also includes a confession of unbelief. Lord, I believe! Think about this. The man's son was in a desperate state and for years the father could do nothing to help him. Then one day he hears about Jesus and is able to take him to where Jesus is, but the Lord is not there. The nine try to help but can do nothing. Jesus arrives but so far all he has said has been a stinging rebuke. If you were a bystander just taking all of this in, you might be tempted to say that Jesus was being hard on the man! Maybe you would even expect this man to walk sadly away after Jesus' rebuke. But this man was also looking into the face of compassion. He saw hope for his son. And he cried out with a confession of faith, "Lord, I believe!" We are reminded again of what a miracle faith is. It is a gift of God. "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Romans 8:7-8) Faith and humility and submission to God and His Word are the most unnatural things in the world. This man's faith was elementary at best. But saving faith does not have to understand profound doctrines. It is childlike trust, Jesus said, that saves. Phil Johnson says, "The vitality of saving faith does not lie in the quality of our works or the quality of our theology...but in its object: Jesus. And in the fact that faith itself is energized by the Holy Spirit."
- "Help my unbelief." That's the means of our assurance: grace. I think that it is true that as long as we are living in this world, and therefore in these tents that we are all walking around with, faith has to co-exist at the same time with the remnants of unbelief in our hearts and minds. That's why we struggle with growing in the Lord, with sanctification. As soon as we place our faith in Jesus we begin to see our own wretchedness. The flesh wars against the spirit, the Bible says, and so our flesh wars against faith. This man says what we all should say quite often: Lord, I believe; help my unbelief! This is not a man glorying in his doubts. He is crying out for help. He recognizes, I think, the evil of unbelief. Listen to Spurgeon again: Too many in the church of God regard unbelief as if it were a calamity commanding sympathy, rather than a fault demanding censure as well. . . . Doubts are among the worst enemies of your souls. Do not entertain them. Do not treat them as though they were poor forlorn travelers to be hospitably entertained, but as rogues and vagabonds to be chased from your door. Fight them, slay them, and pray God to help you to kill them, and bury them, and not even to leave a bone or a piece of a bone of a doubt above ground. Doubting and unbelief are to be abhorred, and to be confessed with tears as sins

before God. We need pardon for doubting as much as for blasphemy. We ought no more to excuse doubting than lying, for doubting slanders God and makes him a liar.”

- Phil Johnson says, “Assurance is not only the privilege of every believer in Christ, it is our duty. And it is a thousand times more presumptuous to doubt God’s Word than it is to believe it.”
- I ask you again: can a believer say, “I know that I have eternal life.”? Oh, yes!