

**Believing Unbelief**  
**Mark 9:14-29**  
**ABC 10/8/23**

How dependent are you on Jesus? How much do you rely on Him? What part of your life do you find you trust yourself more than you trust Jesus & His Word. Do you walk through life relying on Jesus or relying on yourself? Are you growing in your faith? Too many of us don't truly live by faith. We don't depend on Jesus as we should. But God calls us to live by faith because **whatever is not of faith is sin** (Rom 14:23). Nothing is more important than faith. Faith is believing, trusting, relying, & being completely dependent on Jesus. Unsurprisingly, the Bible says a lot about faith. Heb 11:6 says, **without faith it is impossible to please** God. In Lk 7:50 Jesus says, **your faith has saved you**. Eph 2:8-9 tells us **faith is a gift from God**. In Rom 5:1 Paul says **we are justified by faith**. Scripture says **we walk by faith** (2 Cor 5:7), **we live by faith** (Gal 2:20), **we stand by faith** (2 Cor 1:24), we obey by faith (Rom 1:5), Christ dwells in our hearts by faith (Eph 3:17), we overcome the world by faith (1 Jn 5:4), our hearts are cleansed by faith (Acts 15:9), & we **fight the good fight of faith** (1 Tim 6:12). All true Christians are people of faith. Our faith isn't perfect, but it's sufficient, not because of our ability but because it's a gift of God (Eph 2:8-9).<sup>1</sup> Today we're going to learn how to strengthen our faith. Open your Bibles to Mk 9. In Mk 8 the disciples recognize Jesus as the Messiah & Jesus revealed He would soon suffer, die, & rise from the dead. &, shockingly, if you choose to follow Him, you too will live prepared to die for Him as you deny yourself & live for Him. In Mk 9:1-13 the glory of God was allowed to be put on display as Jesus, the God-man, was briefly unveiled & His character as God the Son showed in brilliant light. A glorified Elijah & Moses joined Jesus, discussing His coming death for sin in Jerusalem. In our passage today, it's the day after the Transfiguration & Jesus & the 3 disciples come off the mountain & are right back into real life. **14-**

**29**

**1. The Context** (14-15) Jesus & 3 of His disciples come down the mountain the day after the Transfiguration. Mark writes this from the perspective of the 3 returning disciples. What they find is a big crowd gathered around some scribes who're arguing with the other 9 disciples. The

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 9-16*, p 22

disciples were being heckled & taunted by the scribes. They'd tried to cast a demon out & failed. The scribes seem to be mocking them for their powerlessness. They hate Jesus & want Him dead & therefore hate His disciples. They probably shouted, *You're all phonies & so is your Master!* They were all so engrossed in the discussion, they don't see Jesus approach. **15**

Suddenly Jesus is there & **they were amazed** or greatly astonished. There are some who say their amazement is a reaction to the fact that Jesus was still glowing from the Transfiguration like Moses had when he descended from getting a glimpse of God's glory (Ex 34). But that seems contrary to Jesus' command to keep the Transfiguration a secret until after His resurrection (8). Plus, they would've immediately asked Him, *How come you're glowing?* But they don't. The crowd's amazement came from Jesus' immediate, sudden, & unexpected appearance. They welcomed the fact that Jesus, who was the subject of the argument between the scribes & the disciples, was now present Himself. (The disciples are probably thinking, *At last, help has arrived!* The crowd is thinking, *This is going to be good now that Jesus is here.* & the scribes are thinking, *Now's our chance to make Jesus look really bad.* The disciples see embarrassment, the crowd sees some entertainment, & the scribes see an opportunity.)

## **2. The Dialogue** (17-24) Jesus then asks, **16.**

The question here is, *Who is the 'them'?* Mark doesn't specify. Who is Jesus addressing? Some think Jesus is asking His 9 disciples, with the crowd listening in, *What's the argument with the scribes about?* But this question may also be translated this way: *Why do you question them? Why do you argue with them?* It could be that Jesus goes after the scribes directly & comes to the rescue of His disciples. Whatever the case, we don't hear another thing from the scribes in this passage. With one question, Jesus shuts them down. But His disciples don't answer & the crowd says nothing until one of the crowd steps forward. Because of his personal involvement he probably feels obligated to explain. **17-18**

The distraught father answers Jesus. Mt tells us he got on his knees before Jesus (17:14). Luke records him saying, **I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy or child** (9:38). Try to picture this. The boy was intimidating to the disciples because they couldn't help him. He was

heartbreaking to his father & must have been terrifying to himself. The horror of these continual attacks upon the boy is frightening. In vs 22, we learn the demon has made several attempts to kill the child by burning or drowning him. No doubt he's covered with scars from burns & with bruises from being violently thrown about. To add to it, the demon has made the child deaf & dumb (25). How terrifying would it be to be this boy. Satan hates God & therefore hates the image of God in man. So his demons seek to do anything they can to destroy those who are made in God's image. This father is asking for help in a very serious situation. He says, **Teacher, I brought You my son.** **Teacher** can also be translated *Master*, showing respect. The phrase, **I brought You my son,** states his intention. He'd brought his son to be delivered by Jesus but Jesus wasn't there. Finding Jesus gone, the father asked the disciples to exorcise the demon. The disciples had been given authority & power to do so & they'd done so in the past. Mk 6:7, 13 tells us, **Jesus summoned the 12 & began to send them out in pairs, & gave them authority over the unclean spirits... & they were casting out many demons...** Having cast out demons before, the disciples accepted the father's request, but their attempt to cast out this demon failed. **They could not do it.** Why not? We'll get to that because the failure of the disciples & their need for greater faith is the theme of this episode.<sup>2</sup> Next we see one of the moments in the gospels where we see the struggle, pain, heartbreak, & sorrow, of Jesus as He lives among those with no faith. **19**

This is a dramatic, deep response. The **O** in **O unbelieving generation** proves Jesus was deeply moved. It expresses His personal pain & indignation. Who is this faithless generation? It could be the scribes, the crowd, the father, the disciples, or any combination of these. While some limit the address to the crowd, others say it is directed only toward the disciples. But it's certainly true of all who were there. The disciples' failure is on center stage here (18), at the end of the episode (28–29), & throughout this section of Mark. Yet a sweeping term like **generation** is unlikely to be limited to the disciples. The entire generation of Jews in Israel were faithless, represented on this occasion by the father, the crowd, the self-righteous scribes, & the disciples themselves. Jesus then asks, **how long shall I be with you?** His ministry had lasted 2+ years. He's soon to head to

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<sup>2</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 397

Jerusalem to die. **How long shall I be with you?** How are we to understand this? Maybe Jesus said these words to Himself as much as to anyone else. No doubt He was becoming increasingly eager to return to His Father. *How long must I remain here?* He knows His time with the disciples is drawing to a close. He continues, **How long shall I put up with you?** It had to be painful for Him to put up with those who were so slow to catch on to who He was & why He came. It was hard for Him to endure those who failed to depend on Him. Plus, in His humanness, Jesus might have been tempted to doubt whether His soon-coming suffering & death would be worthwhile. Satan may have whispered in Jesus' ear, *If they don't trust You while You're with them, how do You expect them to trust You after You've returned to heaven?* The thrill-seeking crowds followed Jesus to watch what He'd do. The gloating scribes followed Him in order to accuse Him of a capital crime. & although the disciples knew He was the promised Messiah, they were still confused about the full nature of His person & the purpose He was walking towards. Regardless, Jesus didn't vary from His mission, nor succumb to Satan's temptation to despair. He was on earth to do His Father's business & nothing would keep Him from His mission. Look at what Jesus said next. **Bring him to Me!** (19). Jesus clearly indicates He's going to do something. The disciples had failed but now God's power will be shown in Jesus. Interestingly, **bring** or *be bringing*, has a plural subject, meaning it was directed to the crowd. The boy wasn't with the father. Perhaps he'd been taken to a place of safekeeping not far away. But now Jesus says, *Get him & bring him to Me.* Even though Jesus' deity is veiled again, even though He looks just like a man & not the God-man, the demon instantly knows who Jesus is. He is almighty God, Creator of everything & has all authority over heaven & earth. This demon knows what's going to happen. Look at **vs 20**.

It's unclear why tormenting or killing the boy would be to the demon's advantage. But demons are evil & destructive creatures, whose actions are always malicious. The ever-present danger of death for the boy adds urgency to the situation.<sup>3</sup> Don't focus on the wrong thing here. It would be easy to concentrate on the demon but it's only the backdrop to seeing the power, authority, & compassion of Jesus. The moment this demon saw Jesus, what'd he do? With unbridled hate for

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<sup>3</sup> Strauss, p 398

God the Son, the demon instantly threw the child into uncontrollable, violent seizures in a final attempt at killing or hurting him. The tenses of the verbs are graphic. The boy was continually being slammed on the dirt, rolling on the rocks, & foaming at the mouth. It wasn't a pretty or tranquil scene. In order to help the father & his son, Jesus draws the father out by asking in vs 21, **How long has this been happening to him?** The father said, **From childhood.** Jesus doesn't need this information but in drawing the father out, Jesus allowed him to unburden himself & to recognize the desperate need of his son's plight. Imagine how the father felt each time the boy was attacked. What was it like as a father, to see your only son maimed with scars from being burnt, wallowing in the dirt, staring with terror-filled eyes while foaming at the mouth? His son couldn't talk nor hear a word. Yet he could see & perhaps could plead for help through his eyes. Can you imagine the pain & heartache of this father? The father continues. **22a**

This demon often threw the boy into a fire to burn him alive or into a body of water to drown him. He required constant attention. How that father must have hurt. Consider too how Jesus felt. He cared like no one else had ever cared. There never has been compassion like that of Jesus. This divine compassion is what drew out the father's desperate cry at the end of **vs 22, But if You can do anything, take pity on us & help us!** It seems the father knew Jesus could deliver his son but his faith had been badly shaken by the disciples' inability to help. The failure of the disciples spilled over onto Jesus. The father was no longer certain that Jesus had the power for this demon. He is battling with his faith. He's uncertain, doubtful, & wavering. The father pleads, **Take pity on us & help us!** Deliverance for the son will also be deliverance for the father. How does Jesus respond? **23**

Look at this carefully because it's a key to understanding the heart of Jesus. The father just said, **If You can do anything,** & Jesus responds, *You say, 'If you can' to Me, but that isn't the issue. Of course I can. The burden is on you because everything is possible for him who believes.* Jesus is challenging & encouraging the father to believe & have faith. *Will you trust that I am able?* Later Jesus said, **With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God** (Mk 10:27). Do you believe Jesus is able, *yes* or *no*? He's the Creator of the universe. He left Heaven to

be born a man. He came to die for you. Do you trust Him? Will you believe He's sufficient for your need? Your answer should be *Yes* but it has to be conditioned. *Yes*, God is able to do anything & God can do the impossible. But He will only do that which is consistent with His character & according to His perfect will. The point is not that with enough faith God will do whatever you want. No, it's that God has the power to do anything. It isn't the amount of faith that's important; it's the object of that faith. With the faith of a mustard seed you can move mountains (Mt 17:20) because that faith is in the sovereign Lord of the universe. In the same way, the absence of faith is a hindrance to success. In Nazareth, Jesus couldn't do any miracles because of their unbelief (Mk 6:5). God takes over when people let go & put their trust in Him. This is one of the most abused vss in the Bible today. People have ripped it from its context & made it the rationale for saying all their wishes will come true if they have enough faith. There are some who teach that their faith actually controls God; that if you believe enough, God has to do what you ask. That is false. That is not found in the Bible. That's a manmade, man-centered religion. Faith depends, it doesn't demand. The fact is faith must never go further than God's clear word. Whatever goes beyond God's word is not faith, but something else.<sup>4</sup> For example, if you're concerned over your child's health & you want their recovery, but you say, *I'm praying in faith, so God must answer my prayer to heal my child*, that's not faith. That prayer goes beyond God's word. Certainly, He can heal your child, but He hasn't told you He'll heal your child. True faith prays believing Jesus can heal, but also trusting He may choose not to heal for His glory & your own good. This vs doesn't mean that faith can accomplish anything but that those who have faith *will set no limits to the power of God*.<sup>5</sup> Who does Jesus have in mind when he singles out **him who believes**? Does He refer to the miracle worker's faith or the faith of those who seek miracles? The answer is both. Unlike the disciples, Jesus possesses unlimited power because of His faith. Jesus reproves the father for putting limits on what He can do to help him. The father belongs to the unbelieving generation, but we see him straining to have faith. Unlike the people at Nazareth, who refuse to believe, the father's unbelief

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<sup>4</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, p 25

<sup>5</sup> A. E. J. Rawlinson, *St. Mark*, p 124

is repentant. He is unable to believe but is desperate enough to ask for a miracle & for a faith that expects the impossible.<sup>6</sup> Again, God alone sees the big picture & will always do what's best. True faith in God & His word always submits to God's will. Do you trust God & His Word or do you trust yourself? Now there are times, sadly, when we fail to believe the promises of God's Word & fail to trust that God can do the impossible. But we should never cross the line of presuming we know more than God or God must do what we want. Remember what Jesus said in Mk 14:36? **Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.** God is able to do the impossible, but He will only do that which is consistent with His character & according to His perfect will. **Jn 14:13-14** says, **Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.** Is that a blanket promise that if we tack on *in Jesus' name* to our prayers we'll get whatever we want? No. **In my name** means *according to My character & consistent with who I am. Ask anything according to My will & according to My character & the answer is yes.* Trust God. He will always do what's best. To grow in faith is to believe God is able. He can do anything but He will always do what's best, according to His character & perfect will. What happens next? **24**

The father realizes his own faith is wavering & cries out, **I do believe; help my unbelief.** The dual statement reflects 2 sides of the same coin. **I believe** is a conscious decision, despite his wavering feelings, to step out in faith. **Help my unbelief** is a recognition that his faith is still weak & that only in the power of God will he have sufficient faith. Ironically, this 2<sup>nd</sup> cry is an act of faith, since calling on God for greater faith is trusting in Him rather than in ourselves, which is the essence of true faith.<sup>7</sup>

The father wants to trust Jesus, but wants help with His doubts. He had faith in Jesus but he also knew his faith was imperfect. He had doubts. The father's answer show us this is a sincere profession of faith: **I do believe.** But it's also a request, **Help my unbelief.** What's this mean? *Come to my aid so I can overcome my unbelief.* Like our faith sometimes, the father's faith is frail. In this

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<sup>6</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 356

<sup>7</sup> Strauss, *Mark*, p 399

crisis, the father is desperate & at the brink of despair. Though imperfect, the father believed Jesus & His Word, that God can do anything. Even in his imperfect faith, the father's heart turns to depend on Jesus & His Word. The declaration, **All things are possible to him who believes** (23) is the lesson Jesus intended to teach. This wasn't the 1<sup>st</sup> time He'd spoken of the importance of faith (Mk 5:34–36; 6:5–6), nor would it be the last (Mk 10:27; 11:22–24). The lesson that faith is essential to access the power of God applied to all the unbelieving crowd, the father, who was struggling to believe, as well as to the disciples, whose faith was weak & wavering. The disciples especially needed to learn this lesson, since after Christ's death, they would need to access divine power through believing prayer.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. The Exorcism 25**

When they 1<sup>st</sup> saw Jesus arrive on scene, the crowd all ran to welcome Him. Then it seems as Jesus dealt with the father & his possessed little boy, the crowd may have given them some space. Yet as a miracle becomes imminent, they all run to Jesus again. But Jesus isn't interested in ratings or popularity. He doesn't want to be a showman, but a Savior. So before the gathering crowd grows too large, Jesus acts. The King of all kings rebukes the demon. The Lord of all lords knows exactly who this demon is. It wants to pollute this child with every abomination the Lord hates. It's a demon which is able to cause deafness & muteness. So the One with all authority over all heaven & all earth commands this demon to come out **& do not enter him again**. He's guaranteeing this boy & his dad are free from this torture now & forevermore. What happens? Look at vs **26**.

This demon has no choice but to obey the one true God. But in defiant hatred, it utters a blood curdling scream as it throws the boy down into the dirt to roll around in ongoing, horrifying seizures, spasms & shakes, only to finally depart, making it appear as if the boy had died. Most of the crowd watching, potentially some disciples, & even the father, may have actually thought the boy was dead. He now lays on the ground, foam still dripping from his mouth with his eyes staring blankly at nothing. You can hear the crowd, right? *Jesus killed him!* But vs 27 tells us what really happened. **27**

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<sup>8</sup> MacArthur, p 28



Jesus saved this boy's life & rescued him from a life of torture. The demon was defeated. With divine tenderness, Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, & restored him. The boy is now vibrant with life & **he got up**. Lk 9:42 adds more tenderness. After restoring the boy, Jesus **gave him back to his father**. *Here he is, Dad. Your son has been completely restored.* His son can hear & talk again, play with friends again, all with no fear of being thrashed about, burned alive, or drown. There will be no more stiff, teeth-grinding seizures, & no foaming at the mouth. Lk 9:43 tells us, **they were all amazed at the greatness of God**. **Greatness** describes splendor, majesty, & magnificence. It's the word Peter uses to describe the divine majesty of which he, James, & John just saw in the Transfiguration. Unknowingly, the crowd watching this event saw a glimpse of the kind of majesty Jesus will display at His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. Mark tells us nothing of the father's or the crowd's reaction to the boy's deliverance. Everything focuses on the lesson for Jesus' disciples. So why couldn't the 9 disciples cast out this demon?

**4. The Solution** This is the question the disciples ask in vs **28**.

The Lord & His men have moved indoors & can talk privately. They'd already been given delegated authority from Jesus as apostles to cast out demons & they had already done so previously. So why couldn't they force this demon out? They were perplexed & embarrassed by their own failure. The Greek text tells us they'd repeatedly tried to cast it out. Why couldn't they do it? Jesus answers them in vs **29**.

What does that mean? It's puzzling since prayer hasn't been mentioned up to this point in the story. Mark doesn't even refer to Jesus praying before the exorcism. Yet faith has been a central theme of this whole episode & there's an intimate connection between faith & prayer. Faith is the issue both in Jesus' indictment of the **unbelieving generation** & in His discussion with the boy's father. Prayer is more than just communicating with God. It's acknowledging one's dependence on Him for all of our needs. Jesus' disciples evidently thought their authority came from their own status as Jesus' disciples. Jesus reminds them that they have no power on their own. It's only by faith through prayer that they can tap the infinite power of God. The implication is that encouraged by their earlier successes, the disciples depended on their own power & neglected to pray. The

lesson for them was that humble, dependent prayer is the road that faith takes to the power of God. If they had faith the size of a mustard seed (Mt 17:20), they would've been able to unleash the power of God & overcome any difficulty. The disciples' power will come by believing prayer. The disciples' failure set them up for this invaluable lesson on the necessity of believing, persistent prayer.<sup>9</sup>

We can learn from the disciples' example of what happens to those who neglect prayer & try to operate on their own power. They didn't depend on Jesus. They trusted their own gifts, position, & prior successes. They were confident because they're Jesus' apostles but they didn't depend on Him. Jesus says this demon can't be removed except through dependent prayer. Matthew tells us Jesus told His men they couldn't cast out this demon **because of the littleness of their faith** (17:20). They had cast out demons before but they forgot that they can do nothing without Jesus. They forgot to depend on Him. They forgot to ask. They forgot it wasn't their power but His power. They had faith to some degree or they wouldn't have attempted to cure the boy. But they lacked sufficient faith in Jesus & His Word to employ the power Jesus had given them in dependent prayer. How about you? Are you depending on Jesus or yourself? Our need for greater faith is illustrated both in the failure of the disciples to cast out the demon, noted at the beginning & end of the episode (17, 28–29) & in the father's struggle for greater faith in the middle (22–24). The father's cry, **I do believe; help my unbelief** should resonate with us all. Our faith in God is challenged by difficult circumstances. We want to believe, & we do believe, but our faith wavers when the storms of life arrive. Like Peter, who has faith to get out of the boat but is then distracted by the wind & the waves (Mt 14:25–33), we have faith but we often slip into the waters of doubt & despair. It's at this point we need to claim Jesus' promise, **All things are possible to him who believes** (23). When our faith wavers, it isn't because we aren't striving hard enough to succeed or aren't confident enough in our own abilities. It's because we've gotten our eyes off Jesus. Jesus' words here echo those of Paul: **I can do all things through Him who strengthens me** (Phil 4:13). We can accomplish whatever God wants us to accomplish when we acknowledge that we can accomplish nothing on

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<sup>9</sup> MacArthur, p 30

our own. Mustard-seed faith is a little bit of faith in a very big God. Jesus calls the disciples, & us, to more prayer, to a greater dependence on God in all things. The most powerful servant of God is the one who recognizes that **when I am weak, then I am strong** (2 Cor 12:10). Doing great things for God means seeking His guidance, being led by His Spirit, & allowing His power to work through us.<sup>10</sup> This story shows that the disciples are just like the rest of us: plagued by failure, too ready to engage in arguments, & undisciplined in prayer life. This story is a challenge to grow in your faith. Small faith is the kind of faith that believes Jesus when you already have something in your hand, when provision is already made. Greater faith trusts God when there's nothing to eat & no money to buy more food. It trusts God when your health is gone, work has dried up, your reputation is questioned, & your friends have abandoned you. It trusts God while the storm is still howling & the pain continues. Jesus will soon be leaving His men & living by faith will mean depending on Jesus even though He will be unseen. How's your faith? Is it growing? This story is an exhortation to trust God's Word & rest in His character. Even with imperfect, small faith, take your stand upon God's Word & trust Him. Jesus honored imperfect & weak faith, as long as that heart continued to depend on Him & His Word alone. This story is also a warning to mature Christians. Don't be like the disciples who trusted in their own resources, their own experience, their own gifts, & their own past successes. You can't serve Jesus, live the Christian life, or do anything for God's glory unless you do it in dependent faith. Paul says, **I have been crucified with Christ; & it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; & the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me & gave Himself up for me** (Gal 2:20). Our prayer life isn't just a religious exercise. It's the *sense of complete dependence on God from which sincere prayer springs*.<sup>11</sup> Finally, this story is a call for you to cry out to Jesus for more faith. Faith is a gift from God. Cry out to Jesus to open your heart & turn to Him in faith. He has to cause you to seek Him. & when He's working in your heart, you'll see yourself as a sinner who deserves His wrath for your sins. But, by faith, you'll know Jesus

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<sup>10</sup> Strauss, pp 401–402

<sup>11</sup> CEB Cranfield, *Mark*, p 305

as the One who died for your sin & rose from the dead, to give you abundant life now & eternal life forever. How dependent are you on Jesus? Does your prayer life show it?