

"The Nature of Faith" - Mark 9:14-29

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith is the one critical element all Christians must possess.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

It is by faith that we apprehend our salvation.

*For by grace you have been saved **through faith**, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

So, faith is essential. We are saved by faith. We are sanctified by faith. We look forward to our hope in glory by faith. And faith is a gift granted to us by a gracious God. Does our faith have to be perfect? No. Will we sometimes face doubts? Of course we will, but we Christians must hang on tenaciously to our faith. And we must pray that the Lord would increase our faith, just like the short prayer we will encounter in verse 24:

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

It seems to me that we need to do our best to understand the nature of faith. What does it mean to have faith? What if we don't have enough faith? What are the risks of having misplaced faith?

As we come to the middle of Mark, Chapter 9, we are going to find a lesson about faith. I want to encourage those of you who think your faith might be a bit weak. Of course, it's weak! Not one of us is in possession of perfect faith. But because your faith is a gift of God, it is sufficient faith.

Let me remind you of the context. As this story begins, Jesus, Peter, James, and John are descending the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. The three disciples were witnesses to His glory as He stood on the mountain conversing with Moses and Elijah. Now that had to be a peak spiritual experience for those three boys, don't you think? I'm sure they were absolutely buzzing with wonder. But after witnessing this pristine glory of God, they were immediately going to be confronted with human failure.

Verse 14 sets the scene:

And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them. (Mark 9:14)

When Jesus went up on the mountain to pray, He left 9 of his disciples behind. A crowd had gathered around them. I suppose that's not surprising, as folks would assume that where the disciples were, Jesus would be too. Among the crowd was a group of Jewish scribes and they were having a good old time disputing with the disciples. Scripture doesn't tell us exactly what the argument was about, but I'm pretty sure it had to do with their failure as disciples of Jesus. And so, by extension, it had to do with Jesus. "Who do you think this fellow is? What gives Him the right to do what He does? By what authority does He say all these things?"

So, you have an argument going on and a whole bunch of people gathered around watching the dispute. But when Jesus arrived, the crowd lost interest in the argument.

Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. (Mark 9:15)

I wondered about why the crowd was amazed. That word in the Greek, *ekthambeō* (*ἐκθαμβέω*), is a very strong word. It means to be utterly astonished. You might say, blown away. I can only assume that they didn't expect Jesus to show up. So, when He did, it was like Elvis had arrived, and they rushed to Him.

Jesus, though, confronted the scribes. Jewish scribes were experts in the Law, and by this time, they were the sworn enemies of Jesus. They followed Him around, not so that they could learn, but so they could discredit. They were hell-bent on destroying His reputation, His authority. Along with the Pharisees and Sadducees, they were looking for opportunities to get rid of Him.

And He asked the scribes, "What are you discussing with them?" (Mark 9:16)

Now, I'm not sure that our New King James gives us the best sense of what Jesus said here. This wasn't a friendly chat. This was an argument. Literally, it is "What dispute you with them?"

"What are you arguing about with them?" (Mark 9:16, ESV)

But the scribes don't get a chance to answer, because, from out of the crowd comes a desperate man. Matthew tells us that this man comes suddenly to Jesus and kneels before Him.

Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. 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." (Mark 9:17-18)

It sounds like the boy was an epileptic, but Scripture clearly tells us that he was demon-possessed. Demons are a reality. They were in the world then and they are in the world today. They are always doing the work of Satan, but today they do so covertly, disguising themselves as angels of light. They like to stay hidden, because doing so works wonderfully in an "enlightened" culture like ours.

But when Jesus was engaged in His earth-walk, they pulled out all the stops. They had always been at war with the Lord, but when Jesus entered His creation, they ramped up their activity to a fever pitch. Jesus unmasked them. Jesus exercised His authority over them. Those rebel angels didn't have a chance.

According to the father boy was also mute, so folks would have considered him insane – it was just the nature of the culture. This desperate man came to the disciples seeking Jesus. But of course, Jesus was up on the mountain. So, he turned instead to the disciples.

Now remember, Jesus had given His disciples authority over demons, but in this case, they were completely unable to cast the demon out. The scribes must have loved it and I'm sure that was what the argument was all about. I'm sure the scribes were mocking them.

Why were they unsuccessful? Jesus gives us the answer in the next verse.

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." (Mark 9:19)

Catch that? “O faithless generation.” The disciples failed because of a lack of faith and Jesus expresses His exasperation with them. How long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?

Now, in those two statements is an implied warning. Jesus was only about 6 months from the cross. These guys, these ordinary men, these disciples would be responsible for establishing the Church. They had better get it together!

I don’t know for sure why their faith failed. They had cast out demons before. They had ample evidence that the Lord had given them authority. Maybe the presence of the scribes made them nervous. We can only speculate.

But when Jesus calls you to do something, He will give you the power to do it. He will never require you to do something without giving you the means to accomplish it. You must believe and you must act on your belief. It is a matter of volition; you must decide that Jesus is faithful.

Now, I suspect these disciples probably tried to cast out the demon by their own authority rather than Jesus’ authority. That will never work. Ever.

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. (Mark 9:20)

This demon wasn’t going to give up easily. In the presence of Jesus, the demon immediately demonstrated the power he had over the boy.

So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" (Mark 9:21)

Now, this is interesting. Why even ask the question? Is there a sort of statute of limitations on exorcisms? “If it’s been more than five years, we’ll need to use a different technique.”

Jesus didn’t need to know the answer to the question; He is God and God knows everything. But He is giving the boy’s father an opportunity to express his pain and, in fact, He is building a relationship with the guy. Jesus cares about people, not just their problems.

So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 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." (Mark 9:21-22)

Can’t you just feel the anguish that permeates this man’s being? His only son is suffering horribly, and he is helpless to do anything about it. But he did exactly what we all must do when we are helpless to solve a problem. He turned to Jesus. “Please, if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." (Mark 9:23)

Now, the Greek here is a little difficult and various translations render it quite a bit differently. For example, the English Standard Version reads like this:

And Jesus said to him, "If you can"! All things are possible for one who believes." (Mark 9:23, ESV)

So, by that translation, the first phrase “If you can!” is an exclamation. It’s like He’s saying: “What do you mean ‘if I can’. Of course I can. The question is, do you believe I

can?" Then Jesus gives us the take-home lesson: All things are possible to him who believes.

Now, I need to take a short rabbit trail to make sure you understand exactly what is being said here because there are those "name-it-claim-it" prosperity preachers who will use this to claim that you can have anything you want if you just have enough faith. You can do anything you want to do if your faith is strong enough. You can cure any disease. You can have as much money as you want. You can have that new G-4 personal jet.

This is not about what you want; it is about what God wants. This is not about your will; it is about God's will. The promise of scripture is this:

*Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything **according to His will**, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (1 John 5:14-15)*

Jesus wants this human father to trust Him. Jesus wants this desperate human father to place his faith in the Son of Man. And the guy responds with what has to be one of the most honest, transparent, poignant statements of faith in all of scripture.

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

An honest man! Oh, that we should be so honest! "I do believe, Lord, to the extent that I can, but my faith is so weak, it is so pathetic. Please, come help me; wash away my doubts!"

Do you realize that the Lord never expects perfect faith? It's good, because perfect faith would be impossible for us. The strength of our faith is never the issue. The issue is the Person in whom you place your faith.

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!" 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. (Mark 9:25-27)

This demon didn't give up easily. He gave it one last, violent shot. But no agent of hell can ever prevail over God the Son. The boy was freed from bondage. His father's prayer had been answered. The demon was vanquished.

And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." (Mark 9:28-29)

These two verses give us a great deal of insight into the disciple's problem. "Why could we not cast it out?" Obviously, they tried to do it on their own. "After all," they reasoned, "Jesus gave us power to cast out demons back in chapter 6." They had success before. They were confused as to why they didn't have success this time. But Jesus said, "You guys will never be able to pull something like this off on your own. You need prayer. You need fervent prayer ... afflicting your souls.

And when Jesus talks about "this kind", I do not believe He is referencing a particular class of demons that are more stubborn than the rest. He is talking about all demons.

We have to depend on Jesus for everything. It's really easy to forget. Preachers are always forgetting it. We often think that if we could just wrap the gospel up in a flashy new package the people will come to Christ. Some sort of clever presentation. Maybe a flashy multi-media show. With rocking music and maybe a few coarse jokes thrown in.

*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.
(Romans 10:17, ESV)*

I pray that I never forget to preach the Word of God. I pray that I will always depend on Jesus as I do so. And I pray that you will hold me accountable.

Faith is a gift given by a gracious God. So, if you don't have sufficient faith, pray for more! But again, it is never the amount of faith you have, but Who your faith is in. So, with whatever faith you can muster, believe that you are a sinner, because that's what the word of God says. Believe that while you were still a sinner, Jesus died for you, because that's what the word of God says. Believe that Jesus was raised on the third day so that you can have a living relationship with Him. Confess Him as your Lord and your God and seek His will in every aspect of your life. Believe Jesus is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

And don't neglect your conversation with Him. Pray, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."