

I Do Believe; Help My Unbelief
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A parent's prayer...actually it was a...more like a scream—a desperate father crying out and calling out to God at the top of his lungs. His son was gripped by evil; something more than a chronic disease, something more than a life-long disability, something more than a rebellious delinquency, something more than even a doctor saying 'Your child will die.' This was demonic. This child was possessed by a demon that would grip him, thrash him, and try to throw him into fires, try to throw him into the lake. And his father was desperate.

And he so wanted to call down the power of God. I mean, if there was ever in his life a time he wanted to call down the fire of God—but he was no Elijah calling down fire. He was no Moses that could split the Red Sea. He was no David that could face Goliath with five smooth stones...just a dad. And he knew...in here...he didn't have what it takes to call down the power of God. For every...for every motion of confidence and faith that welled up within him, there was an equal question and there was an equal doubt. And all he could do is scream. But it was after that scream...after that scream you find the mystery, the glory, and the wonder of Jesus. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven,

We started this ministry year with the determination to read through the story of Jesus. People gathered, week by week by week by week, to just get a clear view of Jesus in scripture. For that, Father, we need Your touch. So we ask that as we read of Jesus today You would give us minds to grasp and hearts to hold the wonder, the mystery, and the glory that is His.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

The story begins in Mark, chapter 9, the fourteenth verse; and I'm just gonna start reading through it with you. We're told that when they—Jesus and three of His disciples—came back to the disciples... They had been up on a mountain; one of the most dramatic events in Christ's entire ministry. There, alone with three disciples, He had been transfigured. He had been radiant as the sun. And they had been shocked and terror-filled at the sight and the wonder. And there, right with Him, had been the Old Testament great—Moses and Elijah—and they had been talking together. And the three disciples were beside themselves in wonder and fear. And then suddenly they were enveloped in a cloud, and God had spoken to them—the God of the universe had spoken verbally, out loud, to them, saying, 'This, this one named Jesus, is My Son, My beloved Son.' And then He had given a command, the only command He gives in the gospels, out loud, verbally, direct. He says, "Listen to Him." And then, at that, there's suddenly...the cloud's gone! Moses and Elijah are gone, and the Voice is still, and there is just Jesus. He walks down the mountain with His three closest disciples.

And we come to this verse. And as they approach the other disciples, we're told that Jesus and His three companions saw a large crowd around them, around His disciples. And some scribes were arguing with them, with His disciples. These were...these scribes were the biblical experts. These were the men who had devoted their entire career to copying the scripture word by word, line by line, verse by verse, chapter by chapter; their whole life was dedicated to studying the word of God. And these theological experts, these skilled handlers of the word of God, are there debating with Jesus' disciples.

And we're told, verse 15,

And immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him,

...Jesus, approaching...

...they were amazed and they began running up to greet Him.

It was like the cavalry had just come over the hill. And they'd run up to Him and they'd greet Him; and we're told in verse 16 that He asked them a question. And He says

"What are you discussing with them?"

'What's happening here? What's this debate about?'

And one of the crowd answered Him, and said "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and he grinds his teeth, and he stiffens out. And I told Your disciples..."

'I told them!'

"...to cast it out, and they couldn't do it."

Jesus answered him. Speaking to the crowd, His disciples, and the scribes, He says

"O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!"

Typical reaction with this verse as we read it is people say, 'Jesus is a bit testy here; seein' a little bit of His humanity show up, a little bit of impatience. I mean, after all, He's come down off of the mountain, from the mountain where He's actually been talking to Moses and Elijah; and He's been glowing in His wonder and glory, and now He's with some people who are arguing and squabbling, at a time when there's an individual in great need. And you know, He's showing a little flash of humanity here.'

I disagree. I think we're seein' His divinity, and God's impatience with chronic disbelief.

They bring the boy, verse 20.

And when he saw Him,

...when this boy saw Him, immediately the spirit reacted within this boy...

...the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth.

And as the crowd is watching, and as this child is going through these convulsions, Jesus simply looks at the father and says

"How long has this been happening to him?"

'How long has this been goin' on?' The father replies, and he says

"From childhood. And it has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him."

And then he says something. He says, 'But if You, if You can do anything... Your disciples couldn't, but if You...if You can do *anything* here, take pity on us; have some compassion and help us. Whatever you can do, just try to help us!'

Jesus responds, says to him, 'If You can?' Rhetorical...He's just repeating the question. 'What are you askin', *if you can?*' He says, 'All things are possible—there's absolutely no limit to him who believes.' He said, 'If you trust, if you believe, there's absolutely no limit to what I can do here.'

The father cries out, and it is a cry. The word literally has the idea of 'he screamed.' And he says, 'I do believe. I really do believe. But help my unbelief. I really do believe. But help me, in the reality that I also doubt.'

Os Guinness, a British writer, begins a book on doubt that's entitled "God in the Dark." He begins the book with an account, a story, of a man showing up on his doorstep in London. The man had traveled halfway around the world to be there. And as he stood on the doorstep and Os Guinness opened the door, the man began to talk to him. And he said, "I'm desperate. I'm at a loss as to what to do." He says, "If there's no God, if there really is no God, I can't live. I can't live with that worldview, that mindset, that sense of this-is-all-there-is and there's nothing beyond this." He says, "If there really is no God, I can't handle it. I can't live." And he says, "Can you help me? Can you help me trust in a God?"

It wasn't an idle question for that man. As he pressed the issues, the scars of razor blades on his wrists stood out. In past times, when he had asked that question and hadn't found a God he could trust...

Guinness goes on from there in his book to talk about doubt, and he does so in his typical English, clear, methodical fashion. It to me is a classic book on doubt. It's one of my top ten favorite books. As he goes through seven different what he calls 'families of doubt' and he talks about what they're like, and how we have to deal with them, and how they grip us, and how you have to answer to them... Like, for example, the doubt of...that grows out of having a false view of God. I mean, some of us are unable to trust God because the God we have in our mind, the God we think of when we hear that name 'God' is not worthy of trusting. We have yet to really see the God of scripture. We're operating off some distorted view of what God must be, that we grew up with or we picked up in pieces of opinion in conversation. And that God isn't worth trusting; and so when we're called to really believe, we can't. We step back in doubt, and hesitate.

And then there's the doubt that comes from forgetting, like the disciples who had seen Jesus feed four thousand, and then feed five thousand, starting with just a few loaves of bread. And then they find them selves with only one loaf, and they're panicked—'we don't have enough food.' And they forget what He's already done in their experience. And we get like that. We hit a challenge and we forget what God's already done. And we hesitate; we hold back, because we're not sure what to do. There's a doubt there, because we're forgetting.

And then there's a doubt that comes from a lack of growth, if you want to put it that way. Our faith has been sitting on the couch watching TV for decades. It's grown flabby. And the best we can do with the minor challenge that faces us is 'I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.' We're not able to step out with that vibrant, strong, confidence that is built from experience and growth in the faith. And so we hesitate and we doubt.

There's a kind of doubt that just grows out of unruly emotions. Our minds can put it together, and we can think it through, but man...we panic. And pretty soon it's like there's a riot within, and fear is taking control; and panic and anxiety. And we can't bring the crowd, the mob, together underneath confidence. Instead, it rules us, we panic, and find ourselves wrestling with doubt.

All kinds of reasons; and we could sit over a cup of coffee at Kaladi's and we can discuss those reasons, and we can be intellectual with it. And we can be very refined about the discussions of doubt and how we can explain it and how you deal with it. But I tell you what...when it's there and the crisis...it's desperate. And when you most need to call down heaven and you find that you're no David, you're no Moses, and you're no Elijah, and all that you have is a tiny little rag of doubt-ridden faith it is desperate. And there is a scream deep within. *"I do believe. Help my unbelief!"*

After the scream, we're told in verse 25, that Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering. I mean, you've got a boy convulsing on the ground, foaming at the mouth; you've got a father screaming at the top of his lungs; there's already a crowd; and now a bigger crowd is literally running to see what is happening. Jesus responds.

He rebuked the unclean spirit, and He said, "You deaf and you mute spirit, I command you, come out of him, and do not enter him again."

And after crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!"

And everyone goes silent. Jesus simply took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.

There's moments when you're reading scripture, you need to stop. And you need to see what's there. This is one of those places. 'Cause right here in this passage you are seeing the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus, who can take whatever little doubt-ridden faith we bring and work with us. He doesn't need a David marching out to Goliath with five stones. He doesn't need an Elijah calling for fire from above. He doesn't need a Moses parting the Red Sea. He can take you and me and all our...all our doubts and work with the tiniest, tiniest, tiniest shred of faith that is there. That's glory, that's mystery, that's wonder. That's something beyond David; that is something beyond Moses; that is someone beyond Elijah. And *that is good news.*

The disciples, as they move away from that incident and they come into a house—verse 28—they want to debrief on this incident. The men on my staff who come from the military would say they need an after-action review here. And that's what they're gonna have. And they get together and as they're in this house with Jesus they question Him privately. And they say, *"Why could we not drive it out?"*

You see, they had driven out demons already. God, Jesus had given them the authority. He had sent them out on a mission and they had been all over Galilee casting out demons. They had done this over and over again. They had the authority and they had the accomplishment. And they're sittin' there and sayin' 'Why couldn't we this time, Jesus? Why couldn't we pull it off now?'

His response is to say, 'This kind, this kind of demon...' Evidently there's various kinds, and there's some that these men could cast out with a word, given the authority that they had. There were some that they could rebuke, and they would flee, just given what they already had. They didn't need to do anything other than just exert the authority God had given them. But this kind was different. This was a demon type they hadn't run into before. And as Jesus speaks to them, He says, "This kind cannot come out with anything but prayer. You can't deal with this one unless your faith calls out and says, 'Help us.'"

Been there so often in pastoral life. Growin' with the church, and you learn to handle one experience, one situation, and you kinda get it, and you say 'Ok, we know how to handle that.' And God teaches you some lessons and some principles of application, and you learn how to rely on Him in a situation, and move forward and solve that problem and move on to the next. And then you hit that problem that it seems like nothin' is workin'. And the things you've always done before, you've handled this before but you can't get through it, and it's just compounding on you and you're not sure what to do with it. And you get in arguments, and somebody says, "Well, try this." "No, try that." And pretty soon everybody is arguing about it. And the crowds gather. How we gonna handle it?!? And everybody forgets... "Why don't we ask God? Why don't we pray?" 'Cause maybe this is one of those that we can't deal with unless we pray.

Interesting thing when you read that in this particular verse, in this incident, is because then you start scanning back through the passage and you say, "Where's the prayer that casts this demon out?" And the first thing I do is say, "Ok, what exactly did Jesus pray? What were the words He used so that He could cast out that demon?" And you go through the passage and you'll find there is no point in here that Jesus prays!

And so some theologians say, "You know what? Jesus probably started His day like He always did, in prayer. And it was that private prayer all alone, early in the day, that set the base for Him to be able to do this throughout the day." And others will say, "No, it wasn't prayer in the early part of the day. It was a prayer Jesus offered silently in His heart when He was confronted with this." But fact of the matter, those are arguments of silence, and you will not find in this text in any place where Jesus prays. And remember, this is a demon that can only be cast out by prayer.

So where is the prayer? It's the father, saying "Help us. I believe, but I have unbelief. Help me." And the one...the one being in the whole universe that can take whatever little shred we can bring—Jesus works with that prayer.

This passage...it stirred in me stuff that I didn't expect to have happen as I worked through it this week. It brought back memories long tucked away. It brought the memory of being in a parking lot here in Wasilla, back around 1980, with a desperate father. And as the cold wind blew, we sat in the parking lot with our arms on each other and we prayed for that man's son. Eighteen years old at the time, and running on cocaine...and the father and the mother totally at a lost as to what to do, totally at the end of themselves, not knowing anything—"How do we handle this? What do we do?" And all I could say is "We gotta pray." And we stood in that parking lot, arm on arm, and we prayed. And over the next twenty-five years I watched that young man be hounded by Jesus, gripped by Jesus, changed by Jesus. And he now pastors the largest church in Alaska.

The mom that came to me one day and said, "I don't know what to do with her. I'm at my end. And I've prayed, and I've prayed. I don't know what to do; I don't know what to say. I don't know what we...I don't know what we can try. She's making every wrong decision, and it's messing up lives. Not just her life—she's messing up other lives." This woman was like a sister to me. Her daughter was like a niece to me. Our kids were like cousins. She said, "What did I do?" And all I could say was "Go home. Get all alone. And start to pray. And you pray, and you pray until you run out of words, and you run out of even comprehensible thoughts, and you run out of faith, and the doubts come gushing. You pray until you can pray no more. And then, pray some more. And when you're past where your words can carry you, and when you're past where your faith can carry you, let's hope Jesus meets you."

And then there was a day, years later, when I stood at the front of the sanctuary and I watched the father walk that woman, the daughter, down that aisle, resplendent in wedding gown, to meet this fantastic young man. And in the front row was a mother whose joy could not be contained.

And then there's the spot where I stood, and when my daughter needed me to pray at my best all I could do is struggle with doubts. And all I could say was "God, I do believe in You. But help my unbelief." And the glory and the wonder and the mystery of Jesus is that He will take that shred of doubt-ridden faith and He will work grace. That's good news. And I've tasted it.

Our Father in heaven,

I pray and I ask that for every person in this room who cries out to You, no matter how doubt-ridden their faith, that Father, You would meet them with the reality, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus.

In His name we pray, amen.