

Mark 9:14–29

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Date: 16 August 2026

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[0:00] And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.

And he asked them, what are you arguing about with them? And someone from the crowd answered him, teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.

And he answered them, oh, faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.

And they brought the boy to him, and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy. And he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, how long has this been happening to him?

[1:05] And he said, from childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.

And Jesus said to him, if you can, all things are possible for one who believes. Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, I believe, help my unbelief.

And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, you mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.

And after crying out and convulsing to him terribly, it came out. And the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, he is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, why could we not cast it out? And he said to them, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.

[2:07] This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. As you're settling in, just by one announcement, I wanted to append next Sunday morning at 9 a.m., we are hosting Kristen Akwari, who is one of our global ministry partners who serves in the Middle East.

And so if you want to be encouraged to hear a little bit about what she's doing, we'll be upstairs at 9 a.m. This morning, I want to speak to you about struggling faith.

Father, we now come to you, the living God, with the living word open. And our desire, our prayer, is that you would make this book live to us, and you would make us alive in Christ.

Help us, we pray. We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. The struggle of faith became vivid to me during my college years.

I had caught wind of it through some other people, and there was a fellow classmate, a dear friend of mine, a member of the same campus ministry and church, that was going around declaring he was no longer Christian.

[3:30] In conversation with him, he began to cite verses to me, all taken from Paul's letters to his protege, Timothy.

And he would assert that Timothy even writes that in the last days, latter times, people will depart from the faith. A time is coming when people would not endure.

And he would just, he looked at me, and he said, those, these four words, I will never forget it.

Being, I no longer believe.

I've never forgotten that moment. And from that point on, I understood that the Christian life would be a battle over belief.

It is the primary request the Bible places on all of us to believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.

[4:33] Whosoever believes shall have eternal life. That if you confess with your mouth, believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.

It's the entry point of the Christian life. And let's not be mistaken, it may be the entry point, but it never comes easy. It is a battle.

The Bible calls it the good fight. We are to contend for the faith, stand firm, endure, persevere. And all descriptors that disclose that this will be a battle to believe.

A struggle over faith. And as young people say, I know there's some visiting from Jones High School this morning, the struggle is real. Regardless of the struggle over faith this morning from this passage, I'd like to establish this.

Having faith. Having faith brings heaven's help. Having faith brings heaven's help.

[5:46] This episode, I didn't know how to title this sermon, so this episode is derived from the naming convention of probably the most popular sitcom of all time, the late 90s sitcom.

And I just simply titled it, The One When We Didn't Pray. The One When We Didn't Pray. And allow me to separate this text under three breaks, and we'll see them together.

We see, firstly, a lack of faith. A lack of faith that's followed by a struggle for faith. A struggle for faith. And it will close with a sign of faith.

A sign of faith. I will, admittedly, spend most of my time on the second point. Let's begin. A lack of faith. Following their descent from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, James, and John are reunited with the other disciples.

They return, and what they find is a great crowd has surrounded, I just presume, the remaining nine. And they are engaged in an argument with the religious scribes.

[6:59] We aren't given the contents or the subject of the debate, but we can certainly envision it was a debate, a public debate, a verbal feud of some sort that the crowd was witnessing.

We've already seen it in chapter 7, chapter 8. And Jesus approaches, and the crowd is all of a sudden greatly amazed. It's unclear what the amazement is caused by.

Perhaps he continues to illumine from the transfiguration. Perhaps the crowd just saw the most popular figure of the day approaching. Well, as he approaches, he sees this argument that is taking place.

And he asks the disciples, hey, what are you guys arguing about? What's the big commotion? And we, the reader, expect to hear from the disciples that they are arguing about this or that.

And all of a sudden, a lone voice from the massive crowd blurts this, verse 17. Teacher, I brought my son to you.

[8:15] For he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.

What we find is a father has brought his son to the disciples to ask them to cast out this evil spirit.

We discover that the spirit makes the son mute, and it manifests its way in physical ways over him. It seizes him. It throws him down. He foams at the mouth.

He grinds his teeth, and he becomes rigid. The boy and the father are at the mercy of the spirit. And for some reason or another, the father has heard that there was a band of disciples, followers of Jesus, that had authority over such spirits.

Help is needed and requested from the disciples of Jesus. It's not an unusual request. We've already seen it for those who have been here through the series in Mark. Earlier in chapter 6, verse 7, the disciples are actually given authority.

[9:33] They're given the power to combat evil spirits. They're actually successful according to chapter 6, verse 13. Demons were cast out by them.

And they were successful until this point. And verse 18 creates all the tension we need for the entirety of the account.

Jesus, I brought him to you, represented by your group, and they were not able.

They couldn't do it. They were of no help. Powerless, unable, inadequate, insufficient. Though they had the authority, they could not do it.

The disciples' inability seemingly gives way to some frustration in Jesus. And in disappointment, he repeats the language often used to describe the people of Israel of old.

[10:43] Oh, faithless generation, how long? How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? It's a statement of lament. He's saddened by it.

And longing. He desires something greater for them. It's anguish at their disbelief. The disciples' lack of faith and understanding.

When will they get it? There are people with eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, hearts but do not understand.

The disciples in that moment exemplify a picture for us. A lack of faith. See, for Jesus, it is the absence of faith that is the issue.

He's been in search of faith this whole time in the book of Mark. There's been a trail that we are to be following along. We are exhorted to believe or have faith in the gospel.

[11:48] Chapter 1, verse 14. When Jairus' daughter is deceased, he's told, do not fear, only believe. Have faith. Seeing the faith of the friends of the paralytic drop through the ceiling in Mark chapter 2.

He extends forgiveness and healing. Why? Because he saw their faith. The woman who bled for 12 years with no solution.

When she reached out and grabbed the hem of Jesus' garment. All the power left him. What he applauded was, daughter, your faith has made you well.

Jesus is in search of faith. He's calling us to believe. What is faith? What is it? Well, it's simply this. It's man, humanity, us in our weakness. Trusting God's promises in his word. An acronym that I was taught.

[13:00] Faith. F. Forsaking. A. All. I. I. T. Trust. H.

Him. Forsaking all. I trust. Him. Faith. It's a cognitive choice. A spiritual desire. The acceptance of the promises of God.

It's an earnest response to the call of God on your life when he says, you are mine. And you say, I am yours. It is trusting God and taking him at his word.

And what we're to see in these first verses is that we are to link a lack of faith, the lack of faith of the disciples with their lack of effectiveness.

Though the faith of the disciples is nowhere to be found and it brings disappointment, it won't prevent Jesus from doing something. This is the amazing thing. You don't even have to believe him.

[14:01] You don't even have to trust him. And out of his mercy, he'll intercede. And do something for you. And often he does. The inadequacies of his people will not inhibit his good work.

Well, the lack of faith that we see now leads into a father's struggle for faith. Struggle for faith. In the moment, Jesus tells the father to bring the boy to him.

And upon arrival, the spirit inside of him is provoked by the presence of Jesus. So he convulses the boy, casts him on the ground.

He's rolling and foaming at the mouth. That all which was described in verse 18 is now demonstrated in verse 20. And Jesus asks the question to the dad, how long has this taken place? Well, from his childhood. Modern medicine will tell us that these symptoms are just diagnosed epilepsy. Seizures.

[15:05] These are apparent seizures the young boy is experiencing. But the Bible tells us it goes beyond the mere, it's beyond a mere physical explanation.

It's actually a physical illness that is rooted in a spiritual reality. The boy being possessed is actually host to a spirit that prevented his faculties, his physical faculties, from working.

Both from speaking and hearing. The boy could not communicate his pain. The boy could not hear words of comfort. And we discover that it's a condition that's been with the boy from a young age.

The spirit is a violent spirit. It's sought to destroy the boy, whether to burn him alive or to drown him to death. It's merciless and it's brought the father nothing but misery.

And this is not to say that all forms of epilepsy are demon possession. That's not the conclusion we're to draw. Far from it. Rather, it is to show us that sometimes there are spiritual realities that show up in our physical bodies.

[16:22] In the same way that the Holy Spirit may instill in you visible joy and gladness and compel you to dance, sing, or cry. There are demonic spirits that can manifest themselves physically in people.

And what is demon possession? I'm sure that's the question you might be asking because it's the question I'm asking. And I don't have the time and it's not my aim to go on into a treatment of demonology and exorcisms.

But at a minimum, what the text does show us is this. That when demon possession happens, an individual's faculties are submitted to evil.

And that person is rendered helpless. It defaces the image of God in an individual and seeks their ultimate destruction.

For this boy, it's manifest physically and destructively. And our danger in our day is we disregard the spiritual realm entirely.

[17 : 29] Oh, this is just some psychological disorder I'm seeing. This is some hormonal imbalance. This is just a mental illness. And though those may be true, it does not explain this situation.

We're reminded that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.

And what I want to say about this is perhaps modern medicine could help with the epilepsy. But I can guarantee this.

Only Jesus could handle the demon. Only Jesus could handle the demons.

Only Jesus deals with evil. Only Jesus binds up brokenness. Only Jesus repairs and restores eternally.

[18 : 43] We can imagine the duress this father was under. Constantly alert. Always watchful. There was someone inside his son trying to claim his very life.

Committed to his very destruction. Whether you imagine sleepless nights. I can never leave my child unaccompanied. Never alone. Envision the weight on the father.

The weight he must have been under. All desperation. All the despondency. Without hope. Without help. And now Jesus is standing before him.

And his mind is racing. I've heard this, Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Your disciples couldn't do it. Can you? Can you do it? I've heard things about you. Are you the one everyone says you are? If you can have compassion and help.

[19 : 46] And the desperate cry. This is the surprise of the whole passage. The desperate cry is met by something utterly astonishing. Because here for the first time.

Jesus seems to demand faith as a prerequisite for this exorcism. Other times Jesus. Yeah I'll take care of it. But here in this moment.

He throws out a question. He throws out a question. If you can do anything. Have compassion on us and help us.

Verse 22. And Jesus says to him. If you can. All things are possible for one who believes. And here in verse 23. This is it.

Here is the grandest invitation. You've heard about me. Great. You know what I can do. Great. Do you believe?

[20 : 50] It's a universal invitation. It's a grand invitation. It's the call for faith. This is the moment. The summons that Jesus makes on the Father.

Will you believe? When all else has failed. When your desperation cannot fall deeper. Will you believe? You are asking can I? You're wondering if I can.

I'm telling you I can. I am able to do what you are asking. I am Jesus the compassionate one. I am Jesus the able one. I am Jesus the willing one. I am Jesus the supreme one.

I am the one who exercises authority over all heaven and earth. I can. But will you believe? Will you believe? Unless we get carried away in promises of prosperity.

Assurance of health and wealth and comfort and ease. I think of this sinfully and go anything? Well I have a few things I would wish for.

[21 : 51] That's not the point of the passage. At least not this one. None of those are promises. Promised. Rather an invitation is given.

That assures the desperate dad. That though the disciples were unable. He being the son of God. Is certainly able.

I have all the ability. I have all the super powers. Do you believe that? And what Mark wants to point out here. Is not.

Oh there's endless possibilities. All things are possible. No. No. No. That's not what Mark is making the case for. It's not the possibilities. He's trying to show us the person.

The reason there's possibilities. Is because of the person. In whom all things are made possible. See the next. I mean. We're drawn to the possibility of all things.

[22 : 48] Mark wants to draw us to the person. The possibilities are endless. Why? Because the person is limitless. Namely the Lord Jesus Christ. All things are possible.

Only in Christ. Why? Because all things were created by him. And for him. All things are possible for Christ. Why? Because all things were created. For him.

And. Through him. All things are possible. Why? Because he is before all things. And in him all things hold together. Why are all things possible? Because he is.

The source of all things. And the next line rings out as our battle cry. The struggling. The cry that the struggling shout.

When there's insurmountable odds. And the dad. In his hopeless. Humility. In his desperation. He strains.

[23 : 46] He struggles. For faith. For faith. I just need a little. Just a tad. A bit.

And what I'm requesting is impossible. But here is a man that I want to believe can make it possible. So he begs for help. And while he is both simultaneously a believer and a doubter.

A struggle for faith. Pleading for salvation for his son. I believe. Help. My unbelief.

Father's faith was far from perfect. It was a feeble faith. A frail faith. A delicate faith. And essentially what the father is saying. I'm trying Jesus.

I'm trying. But I'm doubting all at the same time. I'm aware of my circumstances. And my insufficiency. I believe a little.

[24 : 46] I want to believe a lot. And in a beautiful vulnerable moment of honesty. The father reveals the heart of us all. We all have hearts.

One writer puts it this way. That are mixtures of both belief and unbelief. Faith and unbelief somehow can find themselves in the same heart.

Calvin. Because when you're not sure how to explain it. It's always good to reference John Calvin. He writes this. He declares that he believes the father. And acknowledges himself to have unbelief.

Two statements that appear to contradict each other. But there is none of us. That does not experience both. In and of themselves. The father's faith.

Though weak. Small. Frail. And feeble. Was a true. Sincere. And genuine faith. It is this faith. That pleases God.

[25 : 48] And it is this faith. That prompts compassion. Jesus doesn't despise this faith. Rather responds to it. And what we need to see here.

Is that the struggling faith. Was actually a sufficient faith. Jesus never said come to me when your faith is perfect.

When it's flawless. He accepted even a doubting faith. Don't be misled. Don't be misled to think that you have to be strong in faith.

No. Be encouraged. That even if your faith is struggling. Or straining. Jesus welcomes you. And what hope there is for us. What good news there is for us.

What delight this must be for us. A flickering candle. He will not snuff out. Or quench. A bruised reed. He will not break. The weakest of faiths.

[26 : 46] Are even sufficient faiths. And the cry of the desperate father. Leads to the command of Jesus. The spirit that was seeking to steal, kill, and destroy.

Is now cast out permanently. From the boy. In his last act.

The spirit seemingly tries to kill him. And leaves him as a corpse. Seemingly dead. The unclean tried to kill him.

But Jesus kept him. And what appeared to be death. Was but deliverance from the devil. Jesus took him by the hand. Lifted him up.

And the child arose. The father struggling for faith. Received back his son. A son who is as good as dead. Now given new life.

[27 : 47] Because all things are possible. For one who believes. A lack of faith. A struggling faith.

And finally. And most quickly. A sign of faith. The final two verses illustrate some lessons that are learned the hard way. Certainly memorable for the disciples.

They would have captured and documented. They wanted this captured and documented. And they probably would have referred it to. Hey, remember that one time when we didn't pray. Matthew, Mark, Luke all record this episode of the disappointing disciples.

Followers of Jesus that were fumbling and failing along the way. And this failure becomes a lesson for us all. An essential lesson if we are to live as effective Christians.

And in private there the disciples asked Jesus, Hey, why couldn't we handle this demon? And Jesus simply responds. That this particular occasion or this particular demon required prayer.

[28:51] The disciples failed because they had not prayed. Jesus had demonstrated prayer for them already in chapters 1 and 6.

Presumably in those chapters it was the disciples pulling Jesus away. Hey, Jesus, there's a lot of stuff to do. A lot of sick to go visit and heal. A lot of demons to cast out. A lot of teaching to be done. Let's leave prayer aside. And it's not difficult to envision these disciples because I see it in myself. Given authority.

People were now marveling at them. Their popularity was increasing. Their applause was getting louder. Their heads were getting bigger. And soon they began to be self-reliant.

We've done this before. We can do this with our eyes closed. We can perform this with ease.

Spiritual dependency is now spiritual interdependency.

[29:57] Pride and presumption well up to the top. And prayer is the first thing to go. I am now a professional apostle. I am now a pastor.

Pastor, I don't need to pray about these things. I have the credentials, the degrees. I seemingly have the power. We've graduated from this prayer stuff.

Let's go into the halls of the educated. And let's go contend for the faith. Let's go debate the learned. Let's go argue our way, which they went and did.

And the disciples are indicted for their prayerlessness. See, prayerlessness is just the absence of faith. A lack of faith.

Because with no faith comes no power. When we discard faith, we dismiss the very Jesus who is our help. Faith is most evidently, most simply demonstrated through prayer.

[30:56] There's so much to say about prayer. But it is the chief exercise of faith. In other words, you want to show your faith?

Then pray. Prayer is the ultimate sign that one has faith and believes. Prayer is the sign of faith. To be prayerless is to discard faith. And this is the fundamental lesson the 12 learned that day.

Failure to pray renders us powerless and useless. If you choose to proceed without prayer, you forfeit my very presence, my very help, the very power which is necessary to accomplish God's mission in the world.

It is no wonder that following Jesus' ascension into heaven, what are the disciples doing? I have no idea what I should do. But I better, I've learned this lesson. I'm going to, let's just shack up in a room and let's pray.

Pray. It's no surprise that the early church was always found praying. They knew the consequences of proceeding without prayer. You must pray.

[32:06] We must pray. I must pray. It is a sign of our genuine faith in the Lord Jesus. I can't help but think of Christians today.

We're approached for help. Oh, I can help. I have the resources to help. I could help alleviate your burdens. I could help cover the costs.

I could provide relief for difficulty. And I look at all my resources and I can help. We're well-meaning. Do our best.

Do all we can. Yet in the end, little has changed or occurred or help ineffectual. Perhaps it's because we fail to pray. When prayer is absent, so is all our power.

A lasting lesson to us all. As I close, it's a marketing campaign from the Bible. ISO. In search of.

[33:12] The listing that the Lord Jesus has put out on the pages of Scripture is, I am in search of faith. And without faith, it is impossible to please God.

For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Even when faith is absent, he draws us.

Even when faith is a struggle, he receives us. And as we exercise faith, he empowers us for his service. Having faith will always bring heaven's help.

Father, now as we come to you and we respond, we want to respond in faith. As we sing these words of this song, we are reminded that it is nothing in us that makes us desirable or able.

But it is always, ultimately, exclusively, but Christ. Yet not I, but Christ. And so, Lord, give us faith.

[34 : 31] We believe. Help our unbelief, we pray. We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen.
Amen.