

Help Me in My Unbelief!

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[0 : 00] All right, well as we come to the word this morning, last Sunday just as a reminder we heard about what happened with Jesus up on the mountain. Witnessed by Peter, James, and John. They saw the glory of Jesus. They were enveloped by that bright cloud from which God spoke and gave testimony to his son.

And then Jesus ordered Peter, James, and John not to say anything about what they saw until after he had risen from the dead. Well, the next day they made their way back down the mountain only to find that Jesus' disciples, the rest of them, other than Peter, James, and John, were surrounded by this great crowd of people.

We pick up the story in Luke chapter 9, verse 37. The next day when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.

A man in the crowd called out, Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams.

It throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him.

[1 : 28] I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not. Mark, in his gospel, actually gives the most detail about what happened here, including the moment when Jesus and the three who are with him first arrive.

Listen to how Mark tells us in Mark chapter 9, verse 14. When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

What are you arguing with them about?

Jesus asked. And a man in the crowd answered, Teacher, I brought you my son. You can almost picture this. There's this commotion happening in the crowd.

Jesus' other nine disciples are right in the middle of this. And then the teachers of the law are there too. And they're arguing with Jesus' disciples. And then there's this one man here.

[2 : 37] And all the people are standing around and kind of caught up in this moment. And then all of a sudden, Jesus approaches with Peter, James, and John. And this feeling of excitement just sweeps over all of them.

And they run to him. And I can't help but wonder what they're thinking in this moment as Jesus arrives. Perhaps for the nine disciples that Jesus had left behind, you know, I imagine them feeling utterly relieved.

Like, oh, here comes Jesus. He's going to sort all this out. He always knows just what to say to the teachers of the law. And he's going to know what to do about this man's son as well.

And then for the people, perhaps, look, there's Jesus. Let's see what he has to say about all this.

Maybe he can help this man's son.

I don't know. Maybe some of them even thought that Jesus might meet his match with this particular spirit. The disciples couldn't do anything about it.

[3 : 46] And then for this man, the father of the afflicted son. You know, I imagine that he had this deep mixture of disappointment. That these disciples of Jesus couldn't help.

But maybe there was also a spark of hope with Jesus' arrival that maybe he can do what his apprentices can't.

And Jesus walks up to his disciples. At this point, as we just heard from Luke, the father comes before Jesus.

Matthew tells us that he actually knelt before Jesus. And he begins to explain to Jesus what this is all about. There's this spirit. And it seizes my son.

And when it happens, he suddenly screams. And the spirit throws him into convulsions. And he foams at the mouth.

[4 : 57] Mark includes even more details. This spirit has robbed him of speech. And when it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid.

Also in Mark, a little bit later in the conversation, the man, the father says, it has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

The father says that this spirit scarcely ever leaves him. And it's destroying him. Some translations say it severely bruises him.

It's heart-wrenching even to think about this happening to a young boy. One of the things that many have noticed here is that some of the symptoms that this boy is experiencing are the same as what people with epilepsy experience when they have a seizure.

And I think we should just talk about that for a minute. Matthew in his gospel actually uses the ancient term for epilepsy here. Quite literally, he was moonstruck.

[6 : 18] That was their word for it. Moonstruck. That's what we get the term lunatic from. And back then, it's because they associated that behavior, the seizures, with sort of the transcendent powers of the moon in their understanding of things.

So they had this very specific word to describe these symptoms. And even today, we know that people with epilepsy sometimes have grand mal seizures, which leads to convulsions on the ground and even foaming at the mouth.

And the foaming at the mouth is caused by the clamping of the jaw muscles, which makes it impossible to swallow normally. And then the rapid breathing and the shaking lead to saliva frothing or foaming in the mouth.

But we also notice that all three gospels are quite clear that what this boy is experiencing is caused by this evil spirit, this demon.

Now that might make us wonder if there's a connection between evil spirits and certain disabilities or health conditions. As Mark says in his gospel, the spirit also robbed him of his speech.

[7 : 42] It made him mute. And so naturally, we may wonder how many severe disabilities or disorders are caused by evil spirits. And I think we need to be very careful here.

First, there's nothing here to say that all mute people or all people who have epilepsy are possessed or demonized. But second, there is evidence here that demon possession can result in severe bodily harm or disability.

So we don't want to deny the effects of the spirit altogether because it clearly can happen and did in this boy's life. Neither do we want to take it to the other extreme and assume that all or even most disabilities are caused by evil spirits.

If we look at some of the other accounts of evil spirits in the New Testament, demon possession, one thing that seems obvious is that when a person is possessed by an evil spirit, they do seem to lose some measure of control over their own bodies to the spirit.

The spirit seems to be able to make them do or say things that they wouldn't otherwise do or say. And so did this boy have epilepsy or was it just the demon having its way with him?

[9 : 18] We don't know exactly. Could it have been both? One of the disturbing things mentioned here that really points to the spirit as an explanation for all this is in Mark's gospel, Mark 9.22, where Mark tells us what the father said, it has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

So this is a deliberateness. If he just had epilepsy, you know, we wouldn't see that. But this is clearly more than just epilepsy.

One of the worst things I think though we can do from this account is to begin assuming that most disabilities or illnesses that we see in people are demon caused. And then even worse, to try and cast demons out of people with disabilities who aren't possessed.

Sadly, this has happened far too often by people in the name of Christ. There's more than one reason why a person may come to have a serious illness or disability.

And nowhere does Jesus teach that it's always an evil spirit. Though we see an account such as this that it could be. Well, after explaining the boy's condition to Jesus, we hear the father say these words back in Luke 9 verse 40.

[10 : 48] I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not. And here's probably where the argument and the commotion began. This raises questions for us, doesn't it?

Why couldn't the disciples drive out the demon? At the beginning of this very chapter in Luke 9, the first verse, we heard about how Jesus gave the twelve power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out.

And so what's going on here? Why are they not able to do what they had been able to do before? Did Jesus just give them power and authority to do those things for the duration of that missions trip and now that they've returned they no longer have it?

I imagine the disciples themselves being somewhat baffled and even embarrassed by this. Like it worked before.

Why isn't it working this time? I'm doing, I'm saying the same things I did before, but it isn't working. How come it isn't working? And the teachers of the law are probably all over this.

[12:09] Finally, something that has Jesus' name on it that seems to have failed. And then the father. Did he feel just deeply disappointed and disillusioned that they couldn't drive it out?

Well, most of these questions aren't really answered here, but we do get some ideas and some hints as things unfold. At this point, Jesus says something quite unexpected.

You unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied. How long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.

That's not what we're used to hearing from Jesus in moments like this. Jesus usually seems to meet this kind of human desperation with compassion and tenderness. But instead, Jesus seems to rebuke everyone with a tone of frustration.

I imagine different ones in the audience, the crowd, the disciples, the man, all wondering, is he talking about me? Is it because we couldn't cast out the demon?

[13:27] Who is this pointed at, these words? Well, in Jesus' own words, he points it at this generation, which seems to include all of them.

He says they are unbelieving and perverse. Now, nowadays, perverse has taken on more of the meaning of sexual impropriety.

Jesus is not talking about that, but about general depravity, corruptness, twistedness of the people. And this is a lament.

There's a sense of holy frustration here as Jesus, the very Son of God, comes face to face with people who are just bent away from God and who utterly lack faith in him.

And this lack of faith, as we'll see in a moment, is present both in Jesus' disciples and in the father of this boy.

[14:28] So, Jesus summons the boy and as the boy is coming, the demon inside of him does what it has often done. Back in Luke 9, verse 42, even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion.

Or if we flip over to Mark and read it from his words, so they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion.

He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, how long has he been like this? from childhood, he answered.

It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. If you can, said Jesus, everything is possible for one who believes.

God is so right here we see that there is the lack of faith, there is a faith struggle of some kind in the boy's father. I mean, we might blame the disciples who tried to cast it out earlier and failed for his doubt, but at the end of the day, his faith needed to be in Jesus.

[15:57] It needed to be in God. And he does express a lack of faith as to whether Jesus is able to do anything for his son. And Jesus basically says, of course it can happen for anyone who believes.

Everything is possible for one who believes. And then we come to these favorite words of mine in Mark's gospel. Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe.

Help me overcome my unbelief. I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief.

Sometimes we recognize our own lack of faith, but we feel powerless to remedy it. We believe to some degree, but what can we do about the doubt that's still there in our heart?

what can we do except cry out to Jesus for help to believe as we ought to with a full faith? I'm convinced that this is one of those prayers that God loves to hear.

[17:15] do you struggle to believe? Or to take Jesus at his word?

These words, I think, are for us in those moments. Jesus, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief.

sometimes all we see is the grim and seemingly hopeless realities of sin and brokenness all around us.

We see it in the lives of the people we love. We see it in our community, in our country, in our world, and it's overwhelming.

And we lose sight of God and his goodness and his power. Well, when Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit.

[18 : 24] You deaf and mute spirit, he said, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently, and came out.

The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, he's dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

If we go back to Luke's gospel, we read that Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. There was an astonishment that just swept over all of them.

They had just witnessed something of the majesty, of the awesomeness of God. His power was unleashed when Jesus spoke.

[19 : 25] And this deeply entrenched and stubborn spirit came out at the command of Jesus like it had no choice in the matter. One minute this poor boy was writhing on the ground in pain, and the next moment he was back to normal, as good as new, standing with his dad.

Amazing. Well, Luke doesn't mention this in his gospel, but Matthew and Mark do. Later, after this is over, the disciples asked Jesus privately about why they couldn't cast out the demon.

Matthew 17 verse 19. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, why couldn't we drive it out? Jesus replied, because you have so little faith.

Truly, I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

I bring in this part of Matthew because it answers that question we asked earlier about why they couldn't cast it out. And it seems it wasn't because they didn't have the authority and power to do it, but because they lacked faith.

[20 : 52] because you have so little faith, said Jesus.

Were they trying to invoke the name of Jesus to cast the spirit out, but at the same time not inwardly believing that it would work? There was a lack of faith in these disciples of Jesus.

and I think it's a lesson for us as well. Not that we've all been given power and authority to heal and cast out demons, but how often do we invoke the name of Jesus and claim the name of Jesus and yet don't really believe and have faith in him as we should?

God. Maybe we're coming at an issue or problem in our lives with everything that we've got at our disposal except we're just not really trusting God or looking to him for the solution.

We're meeting it with our own strength and our own resources, everything we have, but deep down are we doubting that God would really care to intervene? They couldn't cast it out because they lacked faith.

[22 : 14] And then if we flip over to Mark's account, we read a little bit more about this, Mark 9, 28. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, why couldn't we drive it out?

He replied, this kind can come out only by prayer. Now, there's lots of discussion about this answer. Is Jesus saying that there's different kinds of demons, some stronger or more resistant than others. Some of the disciples can simply cast out with their words like Jesus did and others that require prayer. A lot of people have proposed all kinds of things from these words and some things are more wild than others.

But a lot of this is just speculation and guessing. I think the most important part of this statement of Jesus that we don't want to miss is that prayer is required to drive demons out.

And this says even more about where the disciples failed in the first place, doesn't it? Did they not pray and ask God to remove it? They invoked the name of Jesus, it seems, but not in a prayerful dependence on God kind of way.

[23 : 30] how often do we do the same thing? Do we go through the motions, say the words, but is our heart actually engaged?

Are we really looking to God and talking to God, asking for His help because we know we need it in a situation? are we believing that He has what we need to deal with what He's put before us?

I find myself convicted, as I read all this, of my own unbelief and lack of faith, of my own forgetfulness to pray and to talk to God about the things in front of me.

How often do I worry about things and forget? How often do I look at my own troubles as insurmountable until I'm past them?

How often do I look at the lives of people I love and resign myself that there's not likely to be a breakthrough or change for them? Maybe I've prayed for them in the past, but is there any point to praying for them again?

[24 : 54] about the same thing? That's why these words of the Father and Mark are so precious to me. I believe.

Help me overcome my unbelief. I can't think of a better response to all of this than that prayer. So let's pray it together.

Father in heaven, Holy Spirit, God, we forgive us our Lord. Would you forgive us for our lack of faith, all the ways it shows up in our lives this past week.

Forgive us for the unbelief in our hearts. We believe, God, we thank you for the love. Help us in our unbelief. Help us with our doubts.

Grace. We thank you for another glimpse of your greatness and your awesome power and your love here in these words. And we thank you that your name and your power is unrivaled.

[26 : 07] We ask that you would increase our faith, Lord. Refine it. Make it grow. And we want that for your praise and your glory.

Amen.