



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.  
Mark 9:14-29

April 19, 2020  
English Standard Version

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## *“Belief and Unbelief”*

The 27th Sermon in a series on The Gospel of Mark entitled  
*“The King and His Cross”*

Hey. Welcome to Potomac Hills. I'm glad you've joined us this morning. This is our 6th week meeting all over Northern Virginia as a church distributed. We're blessed to be able to meet online this way. We've tried our best to make this worship service meaningful ... I hope it has been. So before I start, please turn in your Bibles to **The Gospel of Mark, chapter 9**, and listen carefully as I read our Scripture passage for today.

### **Mark 9:14-29**

*“And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> And immediately all the crowd, when they saw Him, were greatly amazed and ran up to Him and greeted Him. <sup>16</sup> And He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” <sup>17</sup> And someone from the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. <sup>18</sup> 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.” <sup>19</sup> And He answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to Me.”*

*<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> And*

Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.” <sup>24</sup> Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “**I believe; help my unbelief!**”

<sup>25</sup> 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.” <sup>26</sup> And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” <sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. <sup>28</sup> And when he had entered the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” <sup>29</sup> And He said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

**The Word of the Lord**  
**Thanks be to God**  
**Let’s pray ...**

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we need it. Thank You for giving us the Scriptures and making us Your people. You have brought us to this amazing Gospel to learn more about your Son, Jesus. We ask You this morning to give us the grace to **believe**, and not to **doubt**. Life in a coronavirus world makes it harder to **believe** every day, and we don’t expect tomorrow will be any easier. We live in a time of **great doubt**, and we find it hard to have faith when we see so much suffering around us. We need Jesus. We need the faith that comes from seeing the risen Savior. So help us to see Jesus in Your Word this morning. Help us to see the Glory of God in the miracle of faith this morning. And so we pray, speak through the Gospel of Mark, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, help us see Jesus, for in His name we pray, amen ... and amen.*

**INTRODUCTION: “Unexpected Doubt” <sup>1</sup>**

One woman wrote last year about the first time she realized her life was riddled with **doubt**. It happened when her 2-year-old daughter tumbled down a fifteen-step staircase. She cried out, “Oh Lord!” as any mother would. She wrote, “My spirit sprung to prayer with catlike reflexes as I watched my 2-year-old daughter tumble down the fifteen-step staircase. I stood helpless as her little body hurled toward the hardwood floor. She stood up without a scratch ... but my soul didn’t. In that moment, I was never more aware of the wound that had been festering for months ... that wound was doubt.”

I had been experiencing **doubt** about God’s existence and the Christianity I’d believed to be true my whole life. But until that moment, I didn’t realize how deeply that **doubt** had wrapped itself around my mind. To the casual observer, my daughter fell, I prayed, and she was okay. But for the first time in my life, I wasn’t so sure it was divine intervention. For the first time I felt ... **foolish** ... for praying. I felt silly for crying out to God in that desperate moment.

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**1** The introduction has been adapted from “I Never Expected to Doubt” by Alisa Childers, 3/6/19, [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org). Tim Keller quote comes from his book, Reason for God, pages xvi-xvii.

It was terrifying to realize **the faith** that had once been my identity now seemed more like a fairy tale than the explanation of reality. For me, **doubt** was an entirely new concept. Growing up, I watched God’s power at work in people’s lives, in **my** life. I knew God was real. I knew Jesus died for my sins, was resurrected, and was coming again. I knew the Bible was His Word, and I couldn’t be convinced otherwise. I was active in youth group, went on mission trips, and emerged as a trusted leader among my peers. I was the kid no one would have dreamed would **doubt** her **faith**. I was the kid no one worried about, the one who would be **just fine**. But now, in my early 30s, I wasn’t fine. I had just spent four months enduring the skepticism and intellectual attack of an agnostic “pastor” who invited me to be a part of a study group at church. A pastor who won my trust had dismantled my **faith**, one belief at a time.

By God’s grace and unfathomable mercy to me, my **faith** was rebuilt. But during my time of **doubt**, I suffered from an all-too-common misunderstanding about what **faith** is. I thought **doubt** and **faith** were opposites — that if I questioned what I believed; I’d somehow be a failure in God’s eyes. However, this definition of **faith** has more in common with how atheists understand **faith** than how the Bible defines it. Atheist Richard Dawkins defines religious **faith** as “blind.” In a debate with John Lennox, he said, “We only need to use the word ‘**faith**’ when there isn’t any evidence at all.” But in the Bible, “**faith**” means **trust**, not blind belief. We all put our trust in various things every single day. Every time we drive our car across a bridge, we **trust** it will hold up like it has many times before. We **trust**, not because we have 100 percent proof, but because we have good evidence to believe the bridge won’t collapse.

You see, **doubt** isn’t the opposite of **faith**. **Unbelief** is the opposite of **faith**. As Tim Keller writes in his book, Reason for God, “A **faith** without some **doubts** is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person’s **faith** can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own **doubts**, which should only be discarded after long reflection.” According to Keller, **the strongest form of faith** is the one that has wrestled through doubt. The Bible’s full of people whose **doubt** led them to greater **faith**. Today we see one of those **doubters** come to Jesus and we’ll see what happens. But since we’ve been going out of order in The Gospel of Mark for the last three weeks, let’s take a step back and remind ourselves what’s going on by looking at ...

### **BACKGROUND: The Biblical and Historical Setting** <sup>2</sup>

Once again, the setting for this passage is fascinating. One of the things that attracts me to the miracle accounts in the Gospels is that they focus on Jesus and His work for our salvation. I can’t think of anything more important for us than this ... particularly at this time ... to take our eyes off the world, off ourselves, and even off our **faith**, so that we may **focus them on Christ**. In the miracles we find that Jesus does the work needed to deliver us from weakness and condemnation, from danger and sickness, from death and from the grip of the devil. We don’t have the power to save ourselves, much less other people, but the miracles point us to our only hope, the One who can and does save us.

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**2 The background has been adapted from Mighty to Save: Discovering God’s Grace in the Miracles of Jesus by Dr. Richard Phillips, pages 157-172.**

Another thing the miracles instruct us on is how Christianity works. They bring alive a Biblical portrait **of our own condition**. We are the ones pictured by the lepers and paralytics, the sick and the dead and demon-possessed. In the miracles we see Jesus in action. We're shown **His compassion** to heal and to save ... and most of all **His ability** to heal and to save. We see here that Jesus is both willing and able to heal us ... in order to save us.

This morning's passage from **Mark 9** is another miracle given not to **impress** us, but to **instruct** us. This miracle occurs right after Jesus' transfiguration. After Peter's great confession, He takes three disciples up the mountain and was revealed to them in all His heavenly glory. With Him were Moses and Elijah, and in Luke's account it says, **Luke 9:31**, "*They were glorious to see. And they were speaking of how He was about to fulfill God's plan by dying in Jerusalem.*" Their topic was the cross as God's plan to be fulfilled by Jesus. Peter, James, and John worshiped in awe and then they heard a voice from Heaven declare, **Mark 9:7**, "*And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son; listen to Him."*" The disciples have had a mountaintop experience. I mean, they **literally** had a mountaintop experience. In fact, I suppose this is where the phrase 'mountaintop experience' comes from.

Luke tells us that the miracle our passage is concerned with begins, **Luke 9:37**, "*The next day, after they had come down the mountain ...*" They have left the glory of the mountaintop for the valley ... back into the world so to speak. Just as Jesus had left Heaven to be born into this world, so now He leaves His heavenly glory and descends into a huge crowd of people. As soon as they come off the mountain, they're plunged into confusion, and evil (there's a demon), and problems. People are arguing. There are the Scribes in **verse 14**, and they're arguing. We don't know what they're arguing about. There are disciples, and they're trying to cast out a demon, and it's not working.

In other words, they're surrounded by evil, everybody is confused, and they don't have the ability to handle their challenges. So they come off this mountain, and immediately they're plunged into this chaotic situation. This is the way for Mark to tell us something, and it's very important. The mountaintop experiences happen once in a while, and yes, they're important, but basically, life is a journey to the cross. Notice what Jesus says earlier in **Mark 9:9**, "*And as they were coming down the mountain, He charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*" He says, "Don't tell anybody about this until the resurrection." Why? Because until the resurrection, who would believe it? So the transfiguration is a foretaste of the resurrection, a foretaste of the second coming, but it's just a foretaste. It's just an episode. It just happens.

Life, however, is a journey to the cross, a long journey to Jerusalem where the Son of Man is going to suffer and die. Now this isn't just a way for Mark to say this was true of Jesus, that Jesus has this mountaintop experience, that Jesus experiences the love of God that fortifies Him for the long journey to the cross. I'm sure that's true, but what Jesus is trying to say to His disciples, is that this is true for all of us. This is the lesson here. Life is a long journey, and Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "***In this world you will have tribulation.***" He wants us to know that in this world you will continually struggle with challenges that are beyond you. The father in our story has a life of continually struggling with challenges that are beyond him. And so he has **doubts**. And today we see this **doubter** come to Jesus and we'll see how Jesus responds to him with mercy.

So let's dive in and look at this miracle, which is given in response to this most fundamental of prayers, short and to the point, starting with Jesus finding out when the disciples tried to heal this boy, they were unable to do so. And so this father was faced with ...

**v. 14-19: THE CHALLENGE OF FAITH**<sup>3</sup>

*“And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> And immediately all the crowd, when they saw Him, were greatly amazed and ran up to Him and greeted Him. <sup>16</sup> And He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” <sup>17</sup> And someone from the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. <sup>18</sup> 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.” <sup>19</sup> And He answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to Me.”*

Put yourself in this man's place and try to understand what his life is like. His boy lies sleeping, curled up in his covers, in the shadows of the dying light of a small oil lamp. The father runs his hand over the boy's head, gently stroking his hair. As he does, tears slowly slide down his face. Tears for the trade the boy will never learn. Tears for the wife he will never love. Tears for the children he will never look at as they lie sleeping in their beds. Satan has robbed his son of all these things. The father's role as a parent has been reduced to that of a caretaker. He too has been robbed. He's been robbed of the simple joys of parenthood. Robbed of all the dreams and aspirations that fathers have for their sons. Robbed of all the little-boy noises, of all the childish questions, of all the playful laughter, of all the father-and-son talks. Anxious questions haunt his mind, *“What will happen to him when his mother and I die? Who will take him then? Who will feed him and look after him?”*

His heart sinks for he knows the answer to these questions ... no one. No one wants a deaf mute prone to violent seizures. The boy looks so peaceful, lying snug in his bed. But his life is anything but. The seizures that come upon him are sporadic and sudden. And when they attack, he is thrown into a frothing fit, grinding his teeth and foaming at the mouth like a rabid animal. When the seizures fade away, the boy finds himself encircled by worried eyes. As he gets up, the people back away and scold him for being out on the streets.

Understandably, he's a child who's always off by himself, a lonely island surrounded by silence and the stares of others. The neighborhood kids are warned to stay away from him. Another robbery. His playmates are stolen along with his childhood. His life has been picked clean of anything of value, and he stands looking like some decrepit building ... vacant, vandalized, and slated for demolition. Around every corner lurks the potential for destruction.

A cruel spirit lies in wait for him like a bully waiting to pounce on a kid coming home from school. It sneaks up on the boy, jumps him from behind, and mashes his face into the dirt

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**3 The Exposition of the text is adapted from my sermons, “The Need for Perspective” 9/2/01, “Pleading for Faith” 4/16/06, and “The Need for Kingdom Truth” 2/2/14, all preached here at Potomac Hills. And the sermon, “Jesus on the Mount; Jesus off the Mount” by Dr. Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 7/2/06, The Tim Keller Sermon Archive, Logos Bible Software 8.12. And the books, Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of the Son of God (previously published as The King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus), by Dr. Tim Keller, pages 129-133; New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark by Dr. William Lane, pages 327-336. Preaching the Word – Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior (Volume 2) by Dr. R. Kent Hughes, pages 20-27; Help My Unbelief by Fleming Rutledge, pages 3-9; and Moments with the Savior by Ken Gire, pages 187-191.**

— all the while delighting in the tyranny. This is our adversary, the Devil. This is who he is. In all his cowardice and cruelty. This is his way — to push and shove and bully. Like a ravenous lion the Devil roams about, seeking whom he may devour. Seeking someone he can get his paws on and sink his teeth into. Preying on the weak, the innocent, the defenseless. Savagely. Viciously. And as a lion stalks other animals, Satan singles out the youngest, most vulnerable, and ruthlessly runs him down.

When the father hears that Jesus is in town, he hopes that this Redeemer can somehow bring his son back from the clutches of Satan’s paws. He falls on his knees and clasps his hands in a desperate plea. He begs as only a parent in deep pain can. But when he arrives, he discovers that Jesus is off with a few of the disciples having a mountaintop experience. So he turns to the only people available, but sadly, he discovers that, at least in this case and on this day, Jesus’ remaining followers are powerless disciples.

Now one of the great challenges for those who follow Christ is unbelief, and before we get to answering the prayer of the father, we have to see that first Jesus overcomes the unbelief of those around Him. The disciples who had been left in the valley when Jesus went up to the mountain with Peter, James, and John had already tried to cast the demon out of this boy. But they **couldn’t**.

This is the immediate cause of the problem that Jesus confronts upon His return from the Mount of Transfiguration. The crowd is watching. His disciples were supposed to be able to drive out demons, but they failed. And because their ministry is supposed to be an extension of Jesus’ ministry, we see that His authority has come into question. Because of their failure, the crowd is wondering if Jesus isn’t fake too. We’re meant to see **the tension** as everyone looks at Jesus to see what He’s going to do. And, as usual, Jesus does the unexpected, He cries out, **verse 19**, “*O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to Me.*” We need to be clear here that Jesus was referring to the disciples, though I **doubt** the crowd was any less stubborn or faithless. The disciples who had stayed behind tried to heal this boy, but they **couldn’t**, evidently because of their unbelief.

Now don’t think that Jesus bears any less sorrow for us as His heart is still wounded by our unbelief. He has given us **faith** to know that we’re His, and yet we’re so often unwilling to **exercise that faith**. And how does Jesus overcome this **lack of faith**? Well, it’s the rest of Mark’s Gospel that gives us the answer ... as long as it takes. Jesus overcomes our unbelief by patient love and long-suffering grace. The Apostle Paul wrote in **Philippians 1:6**, “*And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” With complete assurance, Paul wants you to know that God will continue His work in you until it is finally finished. And to see how this plays out, we have to turn to the next passage, where we hear ...

#### **v. 20-24: THE PRAYER OF FAITH** <sup>4</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *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.* <sup>21</sup> *And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood.* <sup>22</sup> *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.”* <sup>23</sup> *And Jesus said to him, “If you can’! All things are possible*

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<sup>4</sup> Galen Dalrymple quote is taken from “Daybreaks,” an email devotional by Galen Dalrymple, 8/29/00.

for one who believes.”<sup>24</sup> *Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”*

At this moment in time, this is the father’s last shot at helping his son. He’s been let down by the disciples and his shaking **faith** has been further shaken by their failure to heal his son. He just doesn’t know any more if Jesus is really the answer. After all, His disciples weren’t much help, were they? But what choice does he have? He has just a little faith ... **and a lot of doubt**.

The boy is rolling around on the ground, foaming at the mouth, as this drama between the crowd and the disciples, and between Jesus and the father rolls on above him. We already know something about Jesus that the father doesn’t know. We’ve seen Jesus in the earlier miracle accounts in the Gospels. And Mark has already told us that Jesus has power over the demons and they’re terrified of Him. But the father isn’t aware of this cosmic drama being played out around him. He’s just like any other frightened parent of a sick kid; he’s bewildered, helpless, desperate. Just like you and I would be if this were our son rolling around on the ground. He’s brought his son to Jesus’ disciples hoping for help, but their failure has caused him to lose most of that hope.

And now we see that the father’s words to Jesus clearly show that he isn’t expecting much, **verse 22**, *“But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”* We’re looking at a human life about to be **obliterated** by an evil power, and we’re made aware that the father is now **doubtful** of Jesus’ ability to do anything about it. **The outcome hangs here, on this point**. Heaven and earth hold their breath. The demon has already deployed his weapons; the boy is thrashing about in terrifying fashion. Jesus, we already know, can vanquish this evil power with a mere word. ... **But He delays**.

The disciples have failed, the scribes look on with scorn, the crowd is being entertained by this 1<sup>st</sup> Century reality show, and no one knows what to expect as Jesus repeats the father’s words back at him, *“If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”* And in a split second, hope returns. The father reaches out and grasps with all his might at the giver of life and health and hope. He puts himself into Jesus’ hands. And in words that have been called **the greatest cry of faith ... in the entire Bible** ... he places himself at the mercy of God ... and so, in this, one of the great prayers of the Bible, we read, **Mark 9:24**, *“Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”*

Note while Jesus was lamenting the disciples’ **unbelief**, the miniscule **faith** of the father is rewarded. Why? Because **he admitted his struggle with faith**, and **he asked for help**. He said, *“I believe; help my unbelief!”* And Jesus answers that simple, but profoundly honest prayer. This father’s cry is our cry, *“Lord, we do believe — help our unbelief!”* A confession like this is not a **symptom** of the disease. It’s the first **sign** of the cure.

The author Henry Drummond said that there’s a difference between **unbelief** and **doubt**. **“Doubt** is ‘can’t believe,’ **Unbelief** is ‘won’t believe.’ **Doubt** is honest; **unbelief** is obstinate. **Doubt** is looking for light; **unbelief** is content with darkness.” And so *“I believe; help my unbelief!”* is a wonderful prayer ... the kind of prayer Jesus loves to answer. And He answers this prayer with ...

#### **v. 25-29: THE POWER OF FAITH**

<sup>25</sup> *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.”<sup>26</sup> And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.”<sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.<sup>28</sup> And when he had entered the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”<sup>29</sup> And He said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

With tears streaking his face, this father looks into Jesus’ eyes and appeals to Him, “**I believe; help my unbelief!**” And so Jesus **acts** decisively ... **casts out** the demon ... and **heals** the boy. There’s a tense moment as the father and the crowd stare at the boy lying motionless on the ground. It’s a moment begging for belief. Not just what will **happen**? But what do you **believe**?

With His eyes on the crowd Jesus reaches down, grabs the boy’s hand, and pulls him to his feet. The crowd breathes a collective sigh of relief at the incredible uprooting of evil that had wrapped itself around the boy’s life. Jesus hands the boy over to the emotional embrace of his father. Thus the Redeemer returns the stolen goods to their rightful owner. To a tearful father He gives back his son. And to the son, He gives back his childhood.

In this passage, Jesus came down from the mountain to encounter a force that must be overcome. He defeats Satan and the powers of darkness. Jesus’ ministry in the world requires Him to face, battle, and defeat the devil. This pattern started at His baptism when the voice from Heaven pronounced Him God’s Son. Then, immediately after, Jesus was tempted by the devil. Now the pattern is repeated after the transfiguration. The voice from Heaven pronounces Him God’s Son and He faces and defeats Satan and the power of darkness. Here we see that the devil’s work is to enslave and distort people. People made in God’s image but twisted into the devil’s image. The symptoms presented here resemble a severe form of epilepsy. The boy convulses and foams at the mouth, falling to the ground. But there is far more than that. Mark tells us that he was also deaf and mute. He adds that the demon has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

This is an all-too-vivid picture of what the devil is doing to people in this world. We’re not up against a silly man in a red costume casting little darts our way. The devil’s powers work within us, within **our** hearts and within **our** minds, leading us to self-destruction. They scar and destroy men and women made to bear God’s image in the world. So don’t think you’re lucky to avoid such a fate simply because you don’t show the symptoms this boy does. Many people, most people, are firmly in the grip of possessions stronger than this. Their minds have been captured by the demonic forces seen in everyday events and everyday life. They’re the powers of materialism, ambition, sexuality, and plain old selfishness. And if that describes you, in any way, then God’s image is being just as efficiently warped as it was in this boy’s life. Your destruction is more terrible because of the ease with which it is accomplished and the lack of effort it takes from Satan.

Now I know that’s harsh language ... but I also know it’s true. ... **But know this**; the battle described in this passage is between Jesus and the devil. We’re not direct participants in this fight ... rather **we are its object**. We don’t give military aid to Jesus, nor does He need it. Our work is to stand firm and in the words of Moses, **Exodus 14:13a**, “*Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will work for you today.*” And look at the rescue ... **verse 27**, “*But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.*” In **Luke 9:42**, it says, “*But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his*

*father.*” The emphasis here is on the ease with which Jesus succeeds. Up to now, the demon’s power over the boy has gone unchallenged, but also unchallenged is Christ’s power over the demon. With a word of rebuke, the devil’s servant is chased from the field of battle. Which forces us to consider ...

### **CONCLUSION: THE OBJECT OF FAITH <sup>5</sup>**

What were the disciples supposed to learn from this event? Perhaps this miracle reveals that the task Jesus came to perform, dying on the cross, is also the source of victory over all that oppose Him. Jesus came into the world, and came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, to confront the devil and unbelief.

How much do you have to believe to be a *bona fide* Christian? What **is** a believer? What is an unbeliever? Which are you? Don’t jump to conclusions too quickly; just because you’re watching a sermon on the Sunday after Easter doesn’t necessarily mean that any of us are people of great faith. My guess would be that a lot of us this morning are hanging on by the thinnest of threads. And to us, Jesus would say ... “*All things are possible for one who believes.*”

Believes what? Believes that all things are possible? Believes in faith healing? Believes in belief? No – none of those. The faith which is brought forth by Jesus’ dialogue with the father is not assenting to some **theological proposition**. It’s not agreeing with **some religious principle**. It’s not acquiescing to some **spiritual program**. It is a radical trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the One “*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*” (Romans 4:17), the One who creates faith **where there is no faith**.

This man asks Jesus, starting at **verse 22**, “*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*” <sup>23</sup> *And Jesus said to him, “If you can!” All things are possible for one who believes.*” <sup>24</sup> *Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”* ... that is, “I’m trying but I’m full of **doubts**.” Then Jesus heals the man’s son. **This is good news**. Through Jesus we don’t need perfect righteousness, just **repentant helplessness**.

Jesus could have told the man, “I am the glory of God in human form. Purify your heart, confess all your sins, get rid of all your **doubts** and your double-mindedness. Once you have surrendered to Me totally and can come before Me with a pure heart, then you can ask for the healing you need.” **But Jesus doesn’t say that**. The father says, “I’m **NOT faithful**, I am riddled with **doubts**, and I cannot muster the strength necessary to meet these challenges. But please help me.” **That’s saving faith** — **faith in Jesus** instead of faith in oneself. Perfect righteousness is impossible for us, and if you wait for that, **you will never** come into the presence of God. You must admit that you are **NOT** righteous, and that you need help. When you can say **that**, then you’re approaching God in faith.

I love the words Mark uses to describe the healing of the boy, **verse 27**, “*Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.*” This is the **Easter affirmation**. Mark is telling us that even in the case where God’s power is most likely to be thwarted — in the case of death itself — that’s the point at which the power of God, proven in the Resurrection, manifests itself in those who **believe**. Because it’s in the hard times that God comes to you, when you plead

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**5 Some great books on doubt are** Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt is not the Enemy of Faith by Barnabas Piper; When Faith Fails: Find God in the Shadow of Doubt by Dominic Done; Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism and Making Sense of God: Finding God in the Modern World both by Tim Keller; Doubting: Growing through the Uncertainties of Faith by Alistair McGrath; and God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt (updated version of In Two Minds) by Os Guinness.

with God to **do something** ... and honestly appeal to Him, with a broken and halting voice, ***“I believe; help my unbelief!”*** The only question is whether or not you **believe ... in Him ... even if it’s just a little bit**. In fact, our lives are often **defined** by our **unbelief**. **But Jesus comes anyway**, and He touches us, and heals us, and saves us.

And that’s **grace** because **we’re getting what we don’t deserve**. Mark brings us that same message of grace over and over again. And now we see it with a father who can’t stop crying when he watches his little boy run and jump and play with his friends. **It’s all of grace from beginning to end ... that’s the message**. Mark tells the story of how **Jesus revealed that grace**, died to provide it, rose again to bestow it, and will return to establish its presence over all of creation. The church **must show what such grace looks like** ... starting by bringing that grace to those among us **who are afraid to admit they don’t have the faith they pretend to have**.

You are the people of God, and through the telling of this story, Jesus Christ has arranged a meeting between Him and you this Sunday after Easter. It’s out of my hands. It’s in His hands. He’s not waiting for you to **figure it all out**. He’s not holding back to see if **you have enough faith**. He’s come right up to you, even when you’re lying on the ground or foaming at the mouth, in order to draw out whatever small amount of faith you might have left.

Are you a believer or an unbeliever? No matter how great your **doubts**, no matter how **inadequate** your emotions, no matter how often you feel you’re just **going through the motions**, you wouldn’t **be watching** this morning if you didn’t have some amount of faith, however **small** that faith may be. That’s the Holy Spirit of Christ already at work in you. And it’s enough. In **1 John 5:4-5**, the Apostle John reminds us, *“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith.”*<sup>5</sup> *Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”* And so now we have the infinite privilege of praying, ***“I believe; help my unbelief!”*** Well knowing that when we pray that prayer, in the fullness of time, Jesus Christ will speak the Word **that will banish the enemy forever**.

You see, this story in **Mark 9** is not so much about the healing of a little boy, or the pleas of a desperate father, as it is about sinners in need of a savior ... someone who is able to **use what little faith we have** ... and do amazing, miraculous, Easter-like things with it.

So, with whatever faith you have ... you should pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I’ll close.

*Our Lord and our God, thank You that You have given us a King. In this passage, we see Your Son. This morning we ask you to increase our faith. Take what little faith we have and make it grow, make it effective, make it as real as the garbage man coming on Tuesday. Give us the courage to face everything in our life that’s out of our control, and that’s everything, and pray, ***“I believe; help my unbelief!”*** Make Your Son the object of our faith, so that we will know and believe that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever. Amen.*

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**John 16:32-33**

*“Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me. I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*