

Mark 9:14-29 – “I Believe! Help My Unbelief”

How often do we feel like we're walking through life and there's no light? How often do we feel like we're all alone, like God is far off, that He's listening to other people's prayers, that He's taking care of them and has forgotten about us? We know this isn't the truth. With head knowledge we know God's promises; we know that we're His blessed, chosen generation, that we're His people and He'll never abandon us, and yet, there are times in life when it feels like He has. During these times, when it seems like all hope is lost, it's good for us to follow the example of the father in our Gospel reading; praying, **“I believe! Help my unbelief.”**

If anyone ever knew the darkness of despair, it was the father in our Gospel reading. This man's son was possessed by a spirit that made him mute. And not only that, it tried to kill the boy by throwing him into fire and water. This spirit plagued the boy from childhood. His whole life was tormented by this spirit, and so was the father's. Helpless, all he could do was watch as his child suffered. As parents, there's no greater hurt that we feel then when we see our children hurting and there's nothing we can do about it. It tears us up inside to see them in pain, suffering, illness and disease. Our only hope is that we can comfort them, if even just a little bit. The father had a glimpse of hope when he heard about Jesus.

Jesus healed many people with all kinds of diseases and ailments. He cleansed people with leprosy and healed many who were paralyzed. He cast out demons and even raised the dead. Hearing about all these miracles, the father had hope. So, he brought his son to Jesus.

At first, he asked the disciples to heal his boy; something the Lord enabled them to do before. When Jesus sent out the 12 earlier in Mark 6, He gave them authority over the unclean spirits, and they cast out many demons as they went along proclaiming the Gospel. But, this demon they couldn't cast out. They couldn't help the boy. And again, the father despaired.

When Jesus approached all the commotion, He asked what was going on and the father spoke up, explaining his great need. Filled with hopelessness, he asked Jesus one last time for help: **“If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”**

“If you can.” These words prefaced the father's final request. **“If you can.”** These words have a sense of doubt in them, a sense of unbelief. **“If you can.”** This man questioned Jesus. Did he really believe Christ could help after His disciples had already failed?

For many, unbelief begins with failed hopes and dreams. Struggling through life's darkness, we question the goodness of God. We question whether or not He cares and loves us. We question whether or not He's really all powerful, and if He is, why doesn't He do something? Why doesn't He stop all the evil? Why doesn't He stop all the pain and hurt? Why doesn't He stop all my pain and my hurt?

We all know someone who's turned from the Lord because of the bad things He let happen in their life. People lose their job for no apparent reason, and after struggling to make ends meet, they lose their house as well. People who live active and healthy lives out of nowhere become terminally ill. A child dies after a long painful fight with cancer, taken before they can enjoy fully what life has to offer. A friend is taken in a tragic way, dying in a car crash caused by a drunk driver. There's no shortage of terrible things happening in this world. Just take a quick look at the headlines and you'll see more tragedy than you can handle. For many, these terrible things drive them to unbelief. They become angry with God asking why. Why did He allow bad things to happen to good people? Why did He allow bad things to happen to me? They want nothing to do with Him. Some even hate our Lord. Maybe you've even questioned the Lord's goodness in times of your suffering.

The father in our Gospel had his doubts. He wasn't sure Jesus could help. And yet, Christ answered the darkness of the father's despair with the light of His life. Responding to the man's doubt, Jesus said, **“If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”** Those who trust in the Lord will receive all of the Lord's blessings, even if those blessings seem impossible. These blessings include deliverance from pain and suffering, deliverance from the seemingly never-ending darkness and despair of life, deliverance even from death.

Hearing Jesus' words, the father asked for what he lacked. He asked for the faith to trust in Christ, to trust in the goodness of the Lord: **“I believe; help my unbelief!”**

On our own, it's hard to believe. On our own, it's downright impossible for us to believe. With our own strength, we can't trust in the Lord's goodness when all we see around us is despair. No amount of positive thinking on our part will give us the hope that is strong enough to carry us through the dark times of life. The faith we need to trust in God's goodness

and mercy must come from Him. Like the father, we must pray, **“I believe; help my unbelief.”** And graciously, the Lord answers this prayer, through the working of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit of God who gives us the faith we need to trust in our Savior. This truth of faith we confess every week as we speak the Creed. When we say, *“I believe in the Holy Spirit,”* what we’re really saying is, *“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”* It is the Spirit of God, working through the good news of the Gospel, working through the gracious promises of our Lord, who gives us belief and keeps us in that belief. The Lord has chosen us for faith; faith that trusts in Christ our Savior; faith that trusts in His salvation won on the cross.

Our Lord hasn’t left us alone in the darkness of despair. He came to us, to live in this darkness, so that He might overcome it with His light. Born in that stable He grew up and lived in our sin filled world. He knew the struggles of temptation. He knew sorrow, mourning the death of loved ones. He understood suffering and pain, and all of this He took to the cross.

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah speaks about the suffering our Lord endured. Jesus didn’t turn from the pain and suffering of the cross. He knew His suffering and death was the only way to save you from death. He gave His back to be beaten and flogged. He faced those who struck Him in the face. He endured being spit upon and mocked. He willingly died on the cross to overcome the sin and death that plagues us. He gave up His life, so that you would have life, so that you’d be delivered from the darkness of despair and brought into the light of His everlasting life.

The Old Testament reading for today ends with these words, **“Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.”** God hasn’t abandoned you. He hasn’t left you alone in your despair. He sent His Son to suffer and die to save you from your despair. Christ endured more suffering than any of us could ever imagine. His pain was more than any of us could ever bear. The weight of the whole world’s sin and despair was on His shoulders, and He willingly carried it so that you would be saved from it.

There are times in life when it seems like there’s no light. There are times in life when it seems like there’ll be no relief from pain and suffering. Like the father in our Gospel, we might be despairing; we might question God’s mercy and goodness toward us. But during these times we still trust in the name of the Lord. During these times we hold fast to our Savior, knowing that He can, and He does save us from all that afflicts us. The light of His salvation is there, even in the darkness of our sin and death, and nothing can take that from us.

We’re God’s people; His blessed, chosen, generation. He’s inclined His ear to us and He listens to our prayers. God provided us the light that we need when we’re in the darkness of despair. He’s given us His Son, who died and rose so that we might have life and salvation. This is what the Lord blesses us with. He’s chosen us for this everlasting life. With Spirit-worked faith, we trust in this life, always praying, **“I believe! Help my unbelief.”** Our Lord is faithful, He will do this. He will bring you out of the darkness into His marvelous light.