



Help Me in My Unbelief!

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In Mark 9:14-29, Jesus heals the boy possessed by an evil spirit. Parallel passages occur in Matt. 17:14-21, and Luke 9:37-43. The story is essentially the same in all three accounts, but Mark has some details not found in the others. Before we attend to Mark 9:14-29, let us first examine the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke.

Peter, John and James are returning with Jesus from His transfiguration, when they encounter a crowd. A man from the crowd pleads with Jesus to heal his only son, who suffers from a spirit that convulses him and throws him to the ground. The disciples could not heal the boy. Jesus seems to have recognized the implications drawn by the crowd: the disciple's inability to heal the boy casts doubt on the message they preach; and ultimately the message Jesus himself preaches. He condemned the crowd as "an unbelieving and perverse generation," and called for the boy to be brought to him. As the boy approached, the spirit seized him; the boy cried out and fell to the ground in a convulsion. Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, and the boy was healed from that moment.

Mark has a more detailed description of the event. As Jesus and the three disciples approach the crowd, they observed that the disciples were arguing with the teachers of the law. As it turned out, the argument was over their inability to drive out a spirit from a "possessed" boy. The boy's

father described to Jesus what happens when the spirit seizes the boy; noting the disciples inability to remove it from his son. Jesus remarked that they were an unbelieving generation, and requested that the boy be brought to him. As the boy approached, the spirit threw the boy into a convulsion, and he acted exactly as the father had described to Jesus. In response to Jesus' question, the father said that the boy has been like this since childhood. Often he would be thrown into fire or water by the convulsions. The father then stated, "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus repeated his conditional statement -if you can- declaring that everything is possible for him who believes. The father immediately responded, "I believe. . . . Help me in my unbelief!" Jesus saw that a crowd was gathering around them, so he rebuked the spirit, commanding it to come out and never enter the boy again. The spirit shrieked, convulsed the boy violently, and came out. The boy seemed to be dead, but Jesus took him by the hand and the boy stood up.

Though the details of the argument with the teachers of the law are not revealed, the context indicates it must have been over the implications of the disciple's failure to heal the boy. Their inability to provide the "sign" would have raised questions about their role as the messengers, as well as the message they brought. We see this same issue occur repeatedly throughout the ministry of Jesus (Mark 2:1f; 8:11f; Matt. 12:38f; John 2:18f; 6:14; 6:30; 12:18). The fact that John the Baptist did not perform any signs, was even seen as underscoring the people's need to believe in the one who did perform signs: Jesus (John 10:41, 42). The response of faith -belief- as the ground for healing is also a theme throughout the gospels (Mark 5:21f; 5:36; 10:46f; Matt. 8:13; 9:22; 9:27f; Luke 8:50; 17:19; 18:42; John 4:48; 9:35f 11:25f).

In Mark, the father's own unbelief is more fully described than it is in Matthew or Luke. He can be viewed as a representative for the

“unbelieving generation” in Mark, as it struggles between belief and unbelief in Jesus Christ. We see this association in Jesus’s question to the crowd which the father answers, and the juxtaposition of Jesus’s remarks about the unbelieving generation, which immediately follow the father’s declaration of the disciple’s inability to heal his son and call for the boy, in all three accounts (Matt. 17:16, 17; Mark 9:18, 19; Luke 9:40, 41). Mark adds to the discussion between Jesus and the boy’s father, drawing out his personal struggle with belief and his plea to Jesus to help him in his unbelief (Mark 9:21-24). It is at this very point of the account that Jesus heals the boy (Mark 9:25). The antithesis of the father’s belief and unbelief in the Mark 9:14f passage underscores both his struggle and that of the unbelieving generation. We see in the father’s interaction with Jesus, the encounter of an unbelieving generation with the Living God.

The Greek word in Mark 9:24 for cried out -NASB- *kraōzw* is often used for crying out in an emotionally charged situation. Crying out as the father does is associated with the response of faith that brings healing (Matt. 9:27; 15:22, 23; Mark 10:48). Other associations include Jesus’s cry as he died on the cross (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:39); a woman in childbirth (Rev. 12:2); the disciples crying out in fear (Matt. 14:26); Jesus crying out in the temple (John 7:28). A further association of *kraōzw* is when evil spirits cry out (Mark 5:5; Luke 4:41). The boy himself cries out loudly as he approaches Jesus (Mark 9:26; Luke 9:39). Interestingly, it is the exact same verbal form as that used of the father’s cry in Mark 9:24, *kraōxa*. Thus, we can also say that the father’s cry is the cry of his son: “I do believe; help me in my unbelief.”

There are other parallels between the father and the son that strengthens this association. The crowd gathered around Jesus and the father (Mark 9:25), as it did initially around the disciples and the boy (9:14). Each of them -father and son- had a direct encounter with Jesus.

Face to face with Jesus, they both cry out and fall down; the boy into convulsions (Mark 9:26); the father onto his knees (Matt. 17:14). The boy is healed of his evil spirit; the father of his unbelief. The healing of the father and his son stands as a sign to the unbelieving generation; then and now.

We can also see three different reactions to the work of Christ here, paralleling the three soils in the Parable of the Sower. The crowd represents the unbelievers, seeking the signs and wonders of Christ, but deaf to his call to faith. They stand on the outskirts of the work of Christ, speculating and observing, but generally unmoved by what they see. The Word of God confronts their unbelief, but fails to penetrate the hardness of their hearts. They are the hard soil of the path. The father represents those who hear the call to faith upon their life, yet recognize their inability to respond without the help of Christ. Overwhelmed by the continuing bondage of his son, the father's attention to the world chokes his belief in Christ. He is the soil choked by weeds and the cares of the world. The boy represents those who are fully aware of the hopelessness of their situation, and have no where else to turn. He may agree that Jesus could heal him or save him; he doesn't believe it will happen to him. He is the rocky soil.

The unbelief in the lives of Christians is of the last two types: the father and the son. Christians confess an intellectual assent of the power of Christ to heal, to move in their lives and the lives of others, yet they fall into unbelief like the father when their belief is not empirically validated. They pray; they read the Word of God; they stand on its promises; but nothing changes. So the cares of the world rise up like weeds and choke the Word of God. An encounter with the true Christ reveals to them, as to the father, they had a mere expectation of God which they had called belief. In the presence of Christ, the father sees his confessed "belief" as unbelief, and cries out for help. Only the presence of

Christ can reveal this unbelief; only the power of Christ can heal it. The son sees the approaching Christ, and reacts in fear. Believers that stand at a distance from Christ, or look on from the fringe of the crowd grow accustomed to the unbelief in their lives. These “demons” have been apart of their lives so long, they recognize no other way to live. They may even believe it is God’s will for their lives. They know of their unbelief and fear a direct encounter with Christ. Long ago they succumbed to the rocky soil of their lives preventing the Word of God from taking root. With the approach of Christ, they fear their shallowness will be exposed, that even that will be taken from them. But they cannot hide their unbelief. It rises up and chokes out the cry of belief from their mouth even as it is spoken. The “demons” perform for all to see. But the Christ who came to him is gracious. He takes the boy by the hand and raises him up—healed of the demons that he had lost hope of ever being released from.

How do you respond to the approach of Christ to your unbelief; areas in your life that you cannot or do not take to the foot of the cross? Do you declare your belief, only to collapse into a plea for help as He gazes through the shallowness of your declaration? Do you remain on the fringes, and then collapse in fear as he turns to confront the demons you long ago resigned yourself to? Or do you cry out “Lord, I believe; help me in my unbelief!”