

A while back, I went to preach in Indianapolis. After dinner the pastor took me back to my hotel in downtown Indy. As I made my way toward the door to the hotel, I heard gun shots ring out. Frantically, I tried to pull out my hotel key card and get into a side door. Turns out there was gun fight that broke out in the street. That was a first for me and I hope a last.

Definitely NOT what I was expecting. But you know what, life often surprises us with battles that we didn't see coming. Maybe this morning you feel like you're in a fight. Maybe there's some difficulty that has caught you by off guard. Let me ask you this morning, how are you responding to the battles you are facing, the trouble in front of you? Are you pressing into faith or caving in fear? This morning we are going to look at a story that gets at the heart of faith in the middle of a struggle.

Turn to Mark 9

We're going to break into the story just as Jesus, along with Peter, James and John are coming down from a holy moment on the Mount of Transfiguration and joining the rest of the disciples who are in the middle of what feels like a mess.

### **Mark 9:14-18**

<sup>14</sup> When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. <sup>16</sup> "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. <sup>17</sup> A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. <sup>18</sup> Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

Jesus comes up on his disciples who are engaged in a heated argument with the teachers of the law – the religious elite of the day. And there is a huge crowd gathered around them. It's not difficult for me to imagine Jesus' frustration. "What are you arguing about?" But before the disciples can say anything, one of the men in the crowd speaks up. "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit... I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." You might wonder why he was asking the disciples to cast out the evil spirit. Well, Luke 9, which also records this encounter, begins with Jesus sending out the disciples and telling them to cast out demons and heal the sick. And Luke 9:6 tells us they healed people everywhere. Word on the street was these disciples could work miracles. So this father came looking for help, expecting some relief. But the disciples could not drive out the spirit. So when Jesus shows up, he asks for Jesus' help. <sup>19</sup> "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

Unbelieving generation. How is that possible? They had watched Jesus act with kindness and compassion. They had seen him perform incredible miracles. They had listened to him and marveled that he taught with such authority. And yet, they still refused to believe.

<sup>20</sup> So they brought 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.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. <sup>22</sup> "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."

The agony of this...from childhood this boy has been tormented. He's not a child anymore, he's grown. But from the time he was a child until he stands before Jesus on this day, it's been one continuous attack. One crisis after the other with one goal – destruction. It's been so long since things were normal. There's no peace and no rest. Not a moment that this father can take his eyes off his son for fear of what will happen to him. Nothing will break you down and make you desperate before God, like watching your kids hurt or suffer. And this Dad knows that if something doesn't happen soon, his boy will be dead. So he pleads... *But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.* Can you hear the desperation? the fear? the anxiety? maybe it won't ever end. But Jesus if you can do anything...anything at all...I'll take whatever you can do. Just please have mercy on us. Take pity and help. Have you ever been there? Desperate. Broken. Afraid.

<sup>23</sup> *"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."*

I'll be honest, it's super hard for me to believe that this is a rebuke. I don't hear a snarky comeback. I believe that in tenderness and compassion Jesus looks at this broken desperate father and says: "if you can? is not the right question, my friend. you see, I can do anything. But you have to trust me, you have to believe." He isn't scolding him, he's calling him to trust. And Jesus' words fanned into flame the fire of faith in this Dad. and so the scripture says...

<sup>24</sup> *Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* Other translations put it like this: 'I believe! Help my unbelief.' There must have been something about seeing Jesus, that lit a spark of hope in this father.

He heard something in Jesus' voice or saw something in His eyes that resonated with him. I don't know. But something moved this father to cry out without hesitation: *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

I can't tell you how much I love this. There's no pretense here – desperation will do that to you. He's honest with Jesus. I do believe – it's not perfect faith – but it's there. Mixed in is unbelief. But Jesus, I don't want to be taken down by unbelief, so help me overcome my unbelief. And that spark of faith was enough to move Jesus to action. Verse 25 says

<sup>25</sup> *When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."*

<sup>26</sup> *The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead."* <sup>27</sup> *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.*

All it took was a word from Jesus and this son and his father were released from a lifetime of agony and torment. Can you imagine what that felt like? Release. Freedom. Healing. Wow!

<sup>28</sup> *After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"*

<sup>29</sup> *He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."*

Something happened here that was significant and the disciples wanted to learn from it. They wanted to know what went wrong. And I think there are at least 3 important truths that we can learn from this encounter.

Here they are:

1. There's a spiritual battle
2. The struggle for faith is real
3. Prayer is essential for victory

**1. There is a spiritual battle** – a real enemy who has proven strategies and a singular purpose – death and destruction.

This incident in Mark 9 is not a parable – it's not just a story that Jesus told to make a point. It's a real situation with real people who had a real problem. And that problem is as real for us today as it was when Jesus walked the earth. There is a spiritual battle.

You might look at me this morning and say (maybe not out loud) please tell me you don't really believe in the demons? I mean this is 2024. Do you really believe in some ancient superstitious malarkey like there's a real devil and all his minions out to get us? Let's be honest, our ideas of demons are sensationalized by what the movies. Hollywood has warped our perception about something Jesus was very clear about. Yes, there is a real devil and real demons. And I believe that because Jesus did. Many of his miracles involved casting out demons. He told us the devil was real and even told us what his agenda was. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that we are at war with a crafty and powerful enemy.

Jesus told us in **John 8:44** that the devil is the father of all lies. In **John 10:10** Jesus calls him the thief who comes to steal and kill and destroy.

**1 Peter 5:8** warns us to be alert and sober minded because our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

We learn from **1 Corinthians 7:5** that he tempts the saints, specifically with illicit sex.

**2 Corinthians 2:11** tells us that he turns unresolved anger into bitterness in the hearts of God's people.

**2 Corinthians 11:3** says He deceives and leads people astray.

**1 John 3** tells us that hatred and murder come from him.

Satan and his demons are real and they are actively scheming to destroy you and everything God wants to do in you and through you. That is precisely why the Apostle Paul wrote in: **Ephesians 6:10-12** <sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Some of you know what I'm talking about. You are worn out from the fight. And maybe you're starting to feel like something is wrong with you. But we should not be surprised by the battle. Jesus told us that in the world we would have trouble but take heart, he said, I have overcome the world. But others of you need to hear this: the surest way to lose a war is to deny or ignore the fact that there is a war going on. If you want to experience the abundant life that Jesus died to purchase for you, if you want to walk in the power of the resurrection and live in victory over sin, you're gonna have to fight! But that means you have to be aware of the battle that rages around you.

Maybe, for you, it's just believing that God really loves you or that your past really is forgiven.

Whether you recognize it or not, it's war. The enemy is hell-bent on destroying you, on stealing your joy, on robbing you of your faith. He will do everything he can to distract you and cut you off from the only One who can give you the abundant life that is found in God. So hear me loud and clear today – we are at war and you better get your head in the game if you don't want to be destroyed.

Here's the second truth that I think we can learn from this

## **2. The struggle for faith is real** –

Faith is necessary, but it's not easy.

In response to the father's plea for help, Jesus lays out the condition for his help - faith. He says to this desperate man "Everything is possible for one who believes." And in that moment, with his son's future hanging in the balance, this broken father blurts out "I BELIEVE" But he doesn't stop there. He adds one more confession – "help my unbelief." He's got faith, but there is doubt mingled in. In Jeremiah 17, the Lord says to the prophet: cursed is the man who trusts in man, but blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord. And Jeremiah's response is not unlike this father. Jeremiah says: the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Do you hear that? Jeremiah says to God, I trust you, but I can't say I'm 100% trusting you because my heart is deceitful and wicked. God is looking for honest faith not perfect faith.

This father had 2 things on which to base his faith and say "I believe." Jesus' word and Jesus' presence. He had **Jesus' Word**

"everything is possible" He heard Jesus say: I can do anything. My power is unlimited. And the sound of Jesus' voice stirred faith. And He had **Jesus' presence**. He's standing there face to face with Jesus, eye to eye with the Savior of the World. And the compassion in those eyes gave him hope.

This is not new, and it's not novel. But you need to hear and heed this: Just like this father, we have access to the Jesus' Word and His presence. If you expect to live by faith and experience the abundant life, you will need to be actively, daily hearing the Word. You have no hope of withstanding the lies of the enemy if you don't know the truth of God's Word. So read it, meditate on it, memorize it.

And if we are going to fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith, we are going to need to learn to abide in his love, dwell in his presence, gaze on his beauty, and worship Him.

I can't tell you how many times I repeat this – "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." I trust God, but I've got questions. But I do not want to miss out on what God wants because I have questions. I want to obey Proverbs 3:5-6 "trust in the Lord with all my heart and not try to lean on my own understanding. And I have to fight to trust and believe when I cannot see.

Faith isn't something that just happens to you, it is a deliberate choice to trust. And it takes work to fight the lies of the enemy. But it's not blind faith – it is anchored in a person, tethered by a trustworthy Word, and validated by a host of witnesses who have gone before us.

### 3. Prayer is essential for victory

The disciples were genuinely confused. They clearly expected to be able to cast out this demon. But clearly they failed. So they ask Jesus *“Why couldn’t we drive it out?”* And he replies very simply *“This kind can come out only by prayer.”* But what does he mean by that?

First, I think Jesus is identifying their lack of faith as the reason for their defeat in this spiritual battle. Remember earlier in the story when Jesus bemoans their lack of faith? Verse 19 *“You unbelieving generation,” ... “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”* He was talking to the disciples. And when he said to the father *“Everything is possible for one who believes.”* That was for the disciples too.

In Matthew 17 we have another record of this story, and Jesus responds to their question by saying: *“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.”* Matthew 17:20

Faith as small as a mustard seed. That’s pretty small. And Jesus declares that even small faith can move mountains. That’s because it’s not the size of your faith that matters, but the object of your faith. You see, apparently the disciples thought they could handle the situation. Maybe because of prior successes, maybe because Jesus had told them to cast out demons. And it was their misplaced faith that kept them from experiencing the power of God. Jesus said, *“this kind can come out only by prayer”* Let me dig into this for a minute.

**The absence of prayer reveals a lack of faith.**

Your prayer life may be the best gauge of your faith.

Our fervency in prayer, or the lack of it, may be the best indicator or where we’ve placed our trust. Listen to me, if you’re not praying about it, you’ve decided you can handle it. Your prayerlessness screams *“I’ve got this!”* Or worse yet, you’ve given up on God. You’ve stopped believing in His ability or willingness to help. Either way, prayerlessness is a sure sign of a lack of faith. I cannot think of a better demonstration of faith and trust than prayer.

**Prayer doesn’t just reveal your faith, prayer builds your faith.**

Prayer is so much more than unloading a list of demands. Prayer is so much more than asking. It’s not just crying about what’s wrong. It’s thinking deeply how great God is and giving Him praise. It’s being honest about where you’ve sinned and receiving His cleansing and forgiveness. It’s taking time to recall and remember what He has done and telling Him how thankful you are. Prayer that is focused on God and not on my circumstances will build a robust belief that my powerful God can do anything and that my loving Father will do what is best. Because in the end, it’s about faith in God, not faith in an outcome.

**The prayer of faith accesses the power of God.**

Only one person prayed in this story. And it wasn’t the disciples. Do you know who it was? The father *“if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”* That simple, imperfect, pitiful, DESPERATE prayer changed everything!

You know what I love about that prayer? The father didn’t tell Jesus what to do. He didn’t name it and claim. He didn’t bear

down and “believe” God for a miracle. He surrendered himself and his son to the mercy of God. In essence, he said to Jesus “whatever you can do, I’ll take it.” And he called out for Jesus to respond in compassion to his great need. The prayer of faith isn’t always a bold ask, it’s often just humble surrender. It’s trusting that “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3) will do what is best.

I trust you, I believe, help my unbelief.

Does any of this resonate with you this morning? Can you see the spiritual battle that rages around you and within you? Maybe it’s in one particular area or maybe the attack is on many fronts. Are you having to fight for faith? Are you struggling to believe the promises of God this morning? Then would you be willing to be honest with God and pray like this Father?

God, whatever you can do, just have mercy and help me. I believe, help my unbelief.

That’s how we are going to end our time this morning.

What do you know about who God is and what he’s done that assures you He is trustworthy? Call that out to Him. Say it:

God I know that you are \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you need His mercy? Just like the father in this story, ask you Father in heaven for help,

God, would you be merciful and help me?

Name it, where do you need his help? \_\_\_\_\_

Now, leave it with him and confess your trust,. Weak and flawed as it may be, just like the Father say,