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# ‘If you can?’

# Mark 9:14-29

Reading the Gospel of Mark can feel at times like a ride on a rollercoaster. The book moves at a fast pace, with highs and lows frequently side by side, as is the case in Mark 9. In verse 14, Jesus returns with Peter, James and John from the mountain where he has just been transfigured. They come across the rest of the disciples who are embroiled in an argument with ‘the teachers of the law.’ We are then told that the dispute has been caused by the disciples’ failure to heal a demon-possessed boy with symptoms similar to those of epilepsy.

The American scholar Tim Gombis has written about the serious consequences of this failure: ‘The disciples are Jesus’s chosen agents of blessing to God’s people, called to extend Jesus’s kingdom ministry. Their unfaithfulness, however, prevents others from experiencing the liberation and healing power of God’s kingdom.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Jesus responds to this scene with words which convey the extent of his exasperation and which have strong echoes to God’s frustration with the wilderness generation, spoken to Moses in Numbers 14:11: “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?”

Jesus goes on to speak, in verse 23, of the power of God which can work in the lives of those who trust him. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” But we then discover that the belief Jesus asks of us is not an unbending faith free from any doubt. The boy’s father, weary after so many years of watching him suffer has only this to say: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”

After the boy’s demon has been cast out, the disciples have a private moment with Jesus when they ask him what went wrong. He replies that, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

It’s likely that Jesus is not speaking here of the demon being in a special category that created exceptional demands, but rather that any encounter with spiritual evil requires more than human strength. The disciples can only cast out the demon with the power of Jesus, power which is made available through prayer. As RT France comments, ‘The disciples’ problem, on this understanding, has been a loss of the sense of dependence on Jesus’ unique ‘authority’ which had undergirded their earlier… success.’ [[2]](#footnote-2)

**For discussion**

1. We can all, no doubt, identify with the words of the boy’s father in Mark 9:24: ‘I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.’ How does this statement help you understand more the sort of faith which Jesus wants from us?
2. Commenting on this passage, Tom Wright notes that the disciples ‘have turned a corner in their pilgrimage; now it’s getting harder. People today often suppose that the early years of a person’s Christian pilgrimage are the difficult ones, and that as you go on in the Christian life it gets more straightforward. The opposite is frequently the case. Precisely when you learn to walk beside Jesus, you are given harder tasks, which will demand more courage, more spiritual energy.’ How does this view fit with your own experience of following Jesus?
3. What lessons does this passage offer about the connection between prayer and being ‘agents of blessing’? Can you think of ways you can make prayer a part of your personal mission for God, either in SBC or your witness at work or to friends and family?
4. One line of the new SBC vision speaks of our desire to be a ‘**A courageous church:** willing to trust God for the sake of mission, embracing creativity and trying to perceive the new thing He is doing, investing rather than burying our talents.’ How does this passage change your understanding of what it means to be a courageous church?

1. Timothy Gombis, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Mark*, Zondervan, 2021, 313 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. RT France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark,* Eerdmans, 2002, p370 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)