

I DO BELIEVE—HELP MY UNBELIEF!

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

The prayer we're going to study in this message is very short. The title of this message is itself the entire prayer. It is one of the most succinct and in some ways wisest prayers in the Bible.

We are used to praying to our Savior, Jesus, knowing that he is seated at the right hand of God, unseen yet attentive to us nonetheless. In this text, however, the man who prayed was speaking to Jesus during his earthly incarnation. We shouldn't let this difference in circumstance keep us from the helpful lessons about prayer in this father's cry to Jesus for help.

In some ways this message, among the eleven in this series, comes the closest to home for me. I probably identify more with the events leading up to this prayer than any other. In this setting we will see a father praying for his son. I pray most often because of the needs of my family.

Mark 9:14:

When they came back to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

Immediately prior to this Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John on a retreat up on a mountain. Jesus was dramatically transfigured before them, with Moses and Elijah standing beside him. Now Jesus and these three disciples were going back to join the other nine.

Verses 15-29:

As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

“What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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.”

“O unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

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.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "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."

"'If you can?'" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

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

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

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

Demonic suffering

The two central figures in this story are the father and Jesus. I want to begin by asking you to put yourself in the shoes of this father, from what we know in this short account. His son's condition had existed since childhood, which suggests that the boy was probably now at least in his teens. He was rendered mute by his condition at a time when no cogent sign language had yet been developed. His inability to speak would have rendered communication between father and son difficult. In addition, he was subject to seizures at a time when no medications existed to treat them.

Even more horribly, we are told that this malady was brought about not by ordinary causes but by a demon. Hardship can make a person stronger; it can teach good lessons and lead to faith. But demonically induced pain is only deadly. Jesus said of the devil that he is the father of lies and has been a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). The hurt he inflicts has no purpose other than death.

Additionally, the suffering young man's condition, which would be bad enough in itself, also frequently endangered him by causing him to fall into water or fire, and made him vulnerable to other dangers in the world.

Put yourself in the place of one who parents a child with a physical disability such as blindness or lameness, with the worry that your child's problem is going to endanger him or her physically. Imagine parenting a child with mental and emotional disabilities, worrying that he or she is going to be cruelly taken advantage of by unscrupulous predators who want to use children sexually or scam the resources of such vulnerable members of society.

Finally, we observe that the father brought his son to the disciples, and they couldn't help. That may be more familiar than we'd like to admit. There are times when people come to the church looking for help, and we don't know what to do to help them. So disappointment with the people of God is added to the problem.

What do we learn from this story about Jesus when he received the man's petition? His interaction with the father and his son is the center of the story. But for the sake of context, let's first observe Jesus' interactions with the crowd: the disciples, the Jewish religious authorities, and the assembled onlookers.

When you're in over your head, pray

In verse 19 we are told that Jesus exclaimed in a way that must have expressed annoyance if not anger, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I put up with you?" I'm convinced he was speaking to these surrounding observers, not to the man and his son. He was frustrated with his followers. They had been unable to deal with the problem, and instead of reacting rightly to that circumstance, they had become defensive. Just a few verses farther on they will be described as arguing about who is the greatest among them. The nine who had been left behind when Jesus took Peter, James, and John must have felt like second-string apostles, if you will. They were unable to deal with the problem presented to them, and there was probably some blame casting among them:

"It was your fault."

"Well, if you had said . . ."

"How come I have to do everything?"

The religious authorities were rubbing salt in their wounds and almost certainly maligning their master. These nine were failed disciples of a failed messiah, on the defensive, and they had to be wondering what Jesus was going to say when he returned. Then there was the crowd of onlookers. They appear to have been enjoying the circus of sorrow and religious argumentation. All of these—disciples, scribes, and onlookers—made up the "unbelieving generation" that caused Jesus' frustration. No one expressed love. No one was attending to this hurting man and his desperate son.

Let me say a word about why the disciples failed to cast out the demon. They came and asked Jesus afterward, "Why couldn't we cast it out?" They clearly expected to be able to succeed. Historically there was a dramatic increase of the demonic during Jesus' lifetime in the environs of Judea and Galilee where he carried out his ministry. Many people experienced harassment from demons, dark thinking, enticement to evil, and physical maladies as the powers of hell fought against the presence of God incarnate among his people. In most cases, the disciples could in Jesus' name deal with demon-ruined lives. In fact, in verse 38 in this chapter, they discuss a man who is not even a follower of the Lord who is able to use the name of Jesus to cast out demons. They had experienced success in rolling back the darkness by bringing the light. "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name," they rejoiced (Luke 10:17).

But in this case they had no success. Jesus spoke of "this kind" in his reply, as if what they encountered in this young man was different from what they had seen most of the time before. His conclusion was, "The dilemma you found yourselves in should have resulted in prayer." We see elsewhere in the New Testament that there were strongholds that were longstanding, deeply engrained, very terrible. Perhaps another example of the same

thing would be the demonized man who lived naked in the tombs in the region of the Gerasenes, cutting himself with stones, inhabited by a legion (Luke 8:26-39).

When Jesus encountered these strongholds, he asked questions before he took action. When he commanded such demons to leave there was a convulsion. The Gerasene demonic was set free from his legion, but a thousand pigs ran off a cliff to their deaths. In this case, a mute spirit shrieked in a loud voice as it was banished from this young man's life, and the young man fell before them as if dead, only to have Jesus help him to his feet again.

What these disciples encountered was something beyond their competence. It was not the usual thing. And the Lord's instruction to them was to pray.

Most of us have ordinary competences of various kinds. We can be good friends, decent employees or employers, fine neighbors. We have been given spiritual gifts, and most of the time we have some sense of how to use our gifts, how to be helpful in church, how to do the reasonable thing. Use of these ordinary competences normally leads to predictable outcomes. But what happens when we encounter something that's much more than we're ready for, some entrenchment of darkness, some vicious stronghold, some sad life in which things are so confused, broken, and dark that we find ourselves in over our heads? Well, we can look around for somebody to blame. We can run and hide. We can get defensive. There are many bad choices we can make. But the good choice is to pray. When we find ourselves not knowing what to do, we ought to gather together as believing people and seek the Lord in earnest prayer, listen carefully, put our arms around the sufferer, and wait for guidance from God.

Now let's return our attention to what Jesus said to this father and what he did for the young man.

The need for more faith

Jesus said, "Bring the boy to me." That in itself is worth underlining in your Bible. What should you do with people you love, about whom you are burdened with concern? Bring your burdens about them to the Lord.

The father did so, but immediately a crisis occurred: the boy was gripped by a seizure and fell to the ground foaming at the mouth. The demon, drawn closer to Jesus, was resisting the Righteous One. Surely the father began to despair. He had seen this so many times before. Once again his son was humiliated in front of others. He would wake up and look around and not know what had happened to him. The father looked from the present to the past and saw only his son's pain, the family's pain, the victory of the demon. He looked as far as he could into the future and found no reason to hope.

We might have expected a word of tender understanding from Jesus, but he asked the father, "How long has this been going on?" It sounds as if he were trying to get information to make a better diagnosis. But in fact he was saying, "Tell me about what you've been through. Talk to me about what it's been like to be a father to this son, and how many times you've wished for it to be different. Tell me about all the places you've taken him. Tell me about all the sleepless nights." And the father spoke to Jesus about the years since childhood, about the need for vigilance, about the threats of fire and water.

At the end of his speech he said, "If you can help, would you have pity on us?" And Jesus challenged him: "What do you mean, 'If you can'? What kind of language is that? All things are possible to the one who believes." And suddenly it became clear that this man had two problems. He had the problem of his son, but he

also had the problem of his own hopelessness. Jesus invited the father to turn his attention from the despair of the circumstances he knew so well to the saving love of God that he had given up on.

Then the man spoke the prayer that is our central text: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” He meant, “I do believe that you care, that you can help. But there is so much that I don’t believe. I’m so much more acquainted with the struggle than I am with the victory. I have so much more evidence of demonic success than I have of divine intervention. Help my unbelief.” This short prayer is wise because it acknowledges connection and calls for help. This man didn’t determine to do better, he cried, “I can’t stop not believing. I can’t make myself better. I don’t know where to go. I’m lost. Help me in my unbelief. Only you can give me faith where I have no faith.” He was calling for help rather than walking away in despair.

Again, as I mentioned earlier, these themes are closer to home for me than anything else we will talk about in this series. I can feel hopeless when I review the past. I have specific fears for the future. I know the destructive power of evil. I hate the gut-wrenching feeling of impotence when I don’t know how to be a successful father. Hardships that lead to despair often speak louder than Jesus’ words, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” But Jesus loves and saves fathers who suffer with their children’s sorrows today as surely as he did in ancient Galilee.

It’s hard to trust God in extremity. There is no use determining to have more faith. That’s not where faith comes from. But this prayer “Help my unbelief” is wise and true and strengthening. This story commends this father’s experience to us. May we turn to God and reach for help rather than turn away and give up.

What is the outcome of asking for help in unbelief? It’s going to result in more belief, in joy and restoration. God is going to meet our need in his time. His ways are not predictable, but he answers prayers like this. Let’s rejoice at the end of this story—a son made whole—recognizing it is God’s plan for us as well.

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