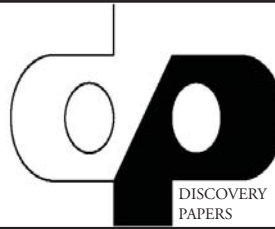


# A CRY FOR HELP

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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Mark 9:14-29  
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I think I pray best—most honestly, most vulnerably—when facing a problem too big for me to solve. If anyone in American history faced problems too big for him—or anyone—to solve, it was Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States. He wrote, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day.” What drove him to his knees? Awareness of need. He had nowhere to go, other than to God, in the face of a broken union, an intractable war, and inept generals.

In Mark 9:14-29, both the disciples of Jesus and a desperate father face problems too big for them to solve. Their need drives them, or at least has the potential to drive them, to prayer. The story connects us with our need and drives us to prayer.

The passage has been a longtime favorite of mine. Years ago, I was part of a group that was studying the Gospel of Mark. After we finished the eighth chapter, our leader said we were finished with Mark and would begin studying another book. I was miffed, because I was counting the weeks until we got to Mark 9:14-29. What I was deprived of years ago, I gladly share today.

Three of Jesus’ disciples, Peter, James, and John, have just witnessed the Transfiguration, an awesome experience in which God, on a mountaintop, validated Jesus as his Son. All is not well below, however.

Mark 9:14-29:

**<sup>14</sup>When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup>Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him. <sup>16</sup>And He asked them, “What are you discussing with them?” <sup>17</sup>And one of the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; <sup>18</sup>and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.” <sup>19</sup>And He answered them and said, “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!”**

**<sup>20</sup>They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. <sup>21</sup>And He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. <sup>22</sup>It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” <sup>23</sup>And Jesus said to him, “If You can?”**

**All things are possible to him who believes. <sup>24</sup>Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, “I do believe; help my unbelief.”**

**<sup>25</sup>When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.” <sup>26</sup>After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, “He is dead!” <sup>27</sup>But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. <sup>28</sup>When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, “Why could we not drive it out?” <sup>29</sup>And He said to them, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.” <sup>1</sup>**

## The disciples fail

Some scribes, experts in the Jewish law, have been bickering with the disciples who remained below over their inability to cast out an unclean spirit. Scribes, who were often associated with the Pharisees, a popular religious-political pressure group, have opposed Jesus to this point in Mark’s narrative. From their perspective, the disciples’ failure gives them an opportunity to press their case against Jesus. The whole scene—the disciples’ failure and the ensuing dispute—has drawn quite a crowd.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately after God declares Jesus to be his Son on the mountain, a father approaches Jesus and speaks to him about his son. Jesus, the Son of God, reflected the glory of God on the mountain. Down below, the son of a man is being tortured by an unclean spirit. The Father’s endorsement on the mountain doesn’t spare his Son from difficulty; on the contrary, it prepares him for battle. Long ago, God declared Israel to be his son, his representative on earth (Exodus 4:22). The son in Mark’s story is evocative of Israel, the son of God. Instead of fulfilling its purpose by reflecting the image of God into the world, Israel has become the abode of Satan. Satan has not only distorted the image of God in the son in this story, he has also distorted the image of God in Israel. As the father in this story grieves for his son, God grieves for his son, Israel. But help is on the way, for Jesus is all that God wanted for Israel—and more. His mission as the Son of God involves the restoration of Israel—indeed, the restoration of all humanity.

Jesus had commissioned his disciples to cast out demons, which are also called unclean spirits. When he first sent them out to do so, they were successful (Mark 3:14-15, 6:7-13). This time, they not only fail to cast out the unclean spirit, they also fail in a public way.

Jesus bemoans his “unbelieving generation,” represented in this case by the scribes, the father, and his disciples. He

has discerned that his mission involves suffering and death at the hands of his generation, which fails to believe that the kingdom of God is coming in and through him (Mark 8:31). The unbelief he observes reminds him of the cup he must drink. This generation needs him to drink the cup, though he will ask the Father to take it from him. How long will he be with this generation? How long will he put up with it? For as long as it takes—until he breathes his last on a cross for this generation and all generations. His disciples, then, must learn to follow him in “this adulterous and sinful generation” (Mark 8:38). How long will he put up with us? For as long as it takes. We too must learn to follow Jesus in our generation, with all its particular challenges.

Jesus tells those in the crowd to bring the afflicted son to him. Only he can deal with the unclean spirit. Only he can defeat Satan. Only he can heal Israel. Only he can drink the cup.

## Nothing gold can stay

For many of us, sometime after we begin following Jesus, things fall into place. As the disciples successfully cast out demons when they first set out, we successfully, almost effortlessly, move through life, at least for a season. It's not that we don't face opposition, but our experience seems to transcend the opposition. We wield our swords, and the dragons fall. We may wonder why other people struggle so much. When you enter such a season, it's easy to hope, or even believe, that life will always be this way.

Then the season passes. When or why it passed, we can't say. Like the disciples who encountered a demon who wouldn't cooperate, we wield our sword and the dragon doesn't fall. Maybe, like the disciples, we fail in a public way. Maybe, like the disciples, others taunt us. Or, maybe we feel as if someone or something—Satan, life, God?—is taunting us. Whatever it is, we may begin to question the power and goodness, or even the reality, of Jesus Christ. And we wonder, what went wrong? Were we fools to set out on this journey in the first place? Many people who have some powerful, Christ-centered experience earlier in their lives now look back on it with a jaded eye, in part because the experience didn't last.

At certain times, especially as we set out on our spiritual journeys, God may clear the path before us in order to help us along our way. But life consists not primarily in the avoidance of opposition or the effortless triumph over opposition but in confronting opposition head-on, and not just once but time and time again. After all, our generation is no less adulterous and sinful than the disciples' generation. If we endeavor to walk in the way of the Lord, opposition will stiffen at some point. You will be thrown for a loop. Life will not make sense. Progress will seem all but impossible.

Several years ago, I helped lead a home group that the Lord used to strengthen people and bring people to Christ. At the beginning of one summer, the group grew to sixty people. There wasn't room for all of them in the house at which we met. One of the co-leaders, standing in the entryway, looked at me in puzzlement and asked, “What are we going to do? We don't have room for all these people.” We were having a great time. It seemed easy. The only problem we had was the kind you like to

have: where to fit all the people who want to come to your ministry. As the summer progressed, however, the numbers dwindled. By summer's end, the group numbered ten people. The co-leader, standing in the entryway, where he spoke to me a few weeks earlier, looked at me in puzzlement and said, “What happened? We had it going!”

One of my favorite poems, by David Frost, strikes me as true to life:

*Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.<sup>3</sup>*

Sometimes, just when you think you've got it going, the magic departs. Nothing gold can stay.

Well, the disciples couldn't help the father. How about Jesus?

## A father cries out

The unclean spirit manifests its opposition to Jesus by afflicting its host in visible ways. Answering Jesus, the father says his son has been afflicted since childhood and that the unclean spirit has thrown him into both fire and water in an effort to kill him. Similarly, Israel, the son of God, has been afflicted since childhood, since it was formed as a nation in the wilderness.

The son's condition, like that of Israel, is both longstanding and severe. It looks as if the unclean spirit, which has tormented both the son and Israel, could finish the job at any moment. The father, reeling from the disciples' failure to cast out the spirit, turns to Jesus, but only haltingly: “But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” Earlier, Jesus, moved with compassion, healed a leper and fed two crowds (Mark 1:41, 6:34, 8:2).<sup>4</sup> He also helped two other parents by restoring their children (5:41-42, 7:29-30). Based on what we know of Jesus thus far in the Gospel of Mark, we might expect Jesus to help this man, too. However, before helping a father in Mark 5 and a mother in Mark 7, he pushed their faith to the edge, making the man wait until his daughter had died and insulting the mother with an illustration that classed her with dogs.

The man appealed to Jesus, but Jesus appeals to the man: “If you can? All things are possible to him who believes.” Is this any way to treat a grief-stricken father? I mean, if a father comes to me and asks me to pray for his son, I'm going to pray for his son. I'm not going to identify him with this unbelieving generation, complain about how long I have to put up with such people, and challenge his faith while he

suffers for his son. I'm a compassionate guy! If I treated a father in our church like this, that man may start wondering whether he's in the right church. Why does Jesus challenge him in this way? The matter does not concern whether the man believes that Jesus *will* heal his son but whether he believes that Jesus *can* heal his son. God is bringing his healing, loving rule to the earth through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who believe in Jesus, therefore, share in the reign of God, who makes all things possible that serve the interests of his reign (Mark 14:36). All things may be possible for him who believes, but is belief possible for this man who has suffered on behalf of his son all these years only to have his hopes raised and then dashed by Jesus' disciples? Apparently, Jesus deems it not only possible but also necessary. So he challenges the desperate, grief-stricken father. For the third time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus pushes the faith of a parent to the edge. Maybe having your faith pushed to the edge comes with the territory of being a parent.

Provoked by Jesus, the man cries out, birthing honest and vulnerable words of faith. The man's faith may be weak, but it is honestly weak. If Jesus calls for faith, the man neither pretends he has it nor tries to create it in order to ingratiate himself to Jesus. He simply cries out—with the faith he has, not the faith he doesn't have. He professes faith, but he acknowledges weakness and seeks help in a new way. Earlier, he asked Jesus to "help" his son and him by casting out the unclean spirit. Now, he asks Jesus to "help" his unbelief. At first, he didn't ask for help with his faith. He didn't want that kind of help. He didn't know he needed it. Jesus, though, knew he needed it and drew out of him words that have encouraged countless numbers of seekers and followers ever since: "I do believe; help my unbelief."

If the son in the story represents Israel as a whole, the disciples could see themselves in the father. Peter, representing all the disciples, believes that Jesus is the Christ, but he doesn't believe in Jesus' mission (Mark 8:27-38). He needs to cry out like the father: "I do believe; help my unbelief."

## Words of faith

If we have occasion to identify with the disciples, who failed to cast out the unclean spirit, we will also have occasion to identify with the father, who wanted the disciples to cast out the spirit. Many of us, like the father in the story, have been plagued by conditions, afflictions, or addictions for years. Perhaps, we've been haunted by thoughts we can't dispel and nightmares that keep coming back. Whatever it is that is out to get us looks as if it could finish us off at any moment. We wonder how much more of this can we take. We've denied the need; we've tried to think our way out; we've appealed to experts. We've sought help, as the father sought the help of the disciples, but help has failed us.

When you've dealt with something for so long and tried so much, it's easy to lose hope that anything can help. When we turn to Jesus, we do so haltingly. We appeal to his compassion, hoping that maybe, just maybe, he can help us. Let's face it, what we perceive to be the response of God to our prayers often feels like a non-response, a silent slap in the face. The silence of God at times is all but

unbearable. We pray; he does nothing. Or so it seems. The silence of God, and his apparent inactivity, challenges our faith. Compassion? What compassion? What's going on?

Maybe, as we appeal to Jesus' compassion, Jesus is appealing to our faith. We want Jesus to help us with our problem; he wants to help us with our faith. Faith? After all we've been through, after all the times our hopes have been raised and crushed, even by his followers, he wants faith? All things may be possible, but he seems to want the impossible. He seems to want faith we don't have. Could it be, through compassionate silence, inactivity, or provocation, he's giving birth to that which we really need? Jesus' response, or non-response, meets our desperation in order to birth words of new faith. We couldn't have birthed such words on our own. We wouldn't even have associated such words with faith. But they erupt from us: honest and vulnerable words that go something like, "I do believe; help my unbelief." When we cry out for Jesus to help us with our faith, he's already helped us with our faith, for faith is nothing if not honest and vulnerable.

Help with faith is not the help most of us want, however. If truth be told, most of us probably want to get by without faith. We'd rather not trust, and we'd rather not find ourselves in places that compel us to trust. If we need something, we'd rather have a foolproof formula. Alas, many of us have tried the formulas, even formulas derived from the scriptures, and they have failed us. No, we need help with our faith, and Jesus, moved by compassion, gives it to us, sometimes through silence, sometimes through inactivity, sometimes through provocation.

Kathleen Norris writes of spending some time at an abbey late one night: "Suddenly, words welled up from deep inside me, words I did not intend to say—I *want to know motherhood*. Stunned by my boldness, and the impossibility of the request—I have known since adolescence that motherhood was beyond my capacities—I began to weep."<sup>5</sup> Where does such a prayer come from? Provoked by her condition, but in defiance of her condition, words of honest, vulnerable faith erupted from her.

I encountered the words of the father in Mark 9:24 early in my spiritual journey and drew strength from them. They were so honest. They were so vulnerable. They felt true. The father's words of faith helped me believe that I didn't have to suppress my doubts but that I could confront them honestly and that maybe they were acceptable to God. The words of honest, vulnerable faith that Jesus helps you birth will encourage others, as the words of the father encouraged me.

So, how does Jesus respond to such words?

## Jesus honors the father's faith

Jesus honors the man's faith, such as it is, by casting out the unclean spirit. If all things are possible to him who believes and Jesus casts out the unclean spirit in response to the father, then the father's vulnerable and desperate profession and petition represent faith. The man's cry for help with his faith is itself a cry of faith. Although in the end, the man asked for help with his faith, not help with his son, Jesus casts the spirit out of his son. Jesus first helped the man's faith by challenging him; then he helped the man's faith by casting out the spirit.<sup>6</sup>



Earlier, the father cried out. Now, the unclean spirit cries out. Is it a cry of victory or a cry of defeat? If the spirit sought to destroy the man's son, it appears as if it has succeeded. Most observers thought the son was dead. After Jesus took the son by the hand, however, he stood up. He wasn't dead; he was free.

Israel, the son of God, is all but dead because of Satan's influence. Israel needs to be born again, so to speak. Earlier, Jesus raised a girl from the dead (Mark 5:41-42). Now, Mark employs death and resurrection language in connection with a son. Jesus has already predicted his own death and resurrection (Mark 8:31, 9:9). The healing of the son, like the healing of the daughter before it, foreshadows the death and resurrection of the Son of God. In the death and resurrection Jesus, God defeats Satan and raises Israel, first represented by the disciples of Jesus, to new life.

Before submitting to death, however, Jesus first went to a place called Gethsemane to meet with God. The story of the father's encounter with Jesus in Mark 9 prepares us for Jesus' encounter with God in Mark 14. In Mark 9, Jesus told the father, "All things are possible to him who believes"; in Mark 14, Jesus prayed, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36). If all things are possible to him who believes, who believes more than the Son of God? Yet, despite the Son's prayer, it is not possible for the Father, for whom all things are possible, to remove the cup. The Son of God must drink the cup. He must be killed. He must defeat evil by letting evil do its worst to him. The Father honored the prayer of his Son not by removing the cup but by raising him from the dead.

Faith consists not in believing that God *will* do something but that God *can* do anything—anything that serves the establishment of his healing, loving rule in and through his Son. Faith therefore entails believing that God can be trusted to do what's best, even if what's best means drinking a cup you wish he'd remove.

Why weren't the disciples able to cast out the unclean spirit? Because, Jesus tells them privately, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer." The strength of the unclean spirit is evident in that it had staying power: it had afflicted the son since childhood. The disciples, before they recognized Jesus as the Christ, had effectively confronted demons. Now, after Peter's confession, the opposition stiffens. The road to Jerusalem, and then to Gethsemane and Golgotha, will not be an easy one, neither for Jesus nor his disciples. Satan will not give up ground without a fight. Prayer—special, focused prayer—will be needed each step of the way. The Scriptures make it difficult for us to extract foolproof formulas, because changing circumstances call for changes in approach. What we can extract is the need for faith—honest, vulnerable, trusting faith—which itself adapts as we face different struggles.

The disciples, who believe that Jesus is the Christ but don't understand the mission of the Christ, who have lost their touch in the face of stiffening opposition, would do well to cry out to Jesus in the words of the one they were trying to help: "I do believe; help my unbelief."

## Encouragement for faith

Jesus honors honest, vulnerable faith, sometimes by answering our prayers immediately, sometimes by answering them later, sometimes by answering them slowly over the course of years or decades, sometimes by assuring us that the answer we want is not the answer we need. After all, the answer Jesus himself wanted, when he prayed in Gethsemane, was not the answer he needed—because it wasn't the answer we needed.

Don't be surprised, then, if the answer looks like defeat, not victory, like a dead son instead of a free son. For victories that come in the guise of defeat echo the death (defeat) and resurrection (victory) of the Son of God, which point forward to the final establishment of the kingdom of God, when Satan, sin, and death will be banished to the outer darkness.

In one way or another, Jesus honors our faith. By doing so, he encourages our faith, spurring us on to trust him for even greater things, to drink the cup when the time comes, even though we would pray for the Father to take it from us.

Kathleen Norris, who prayed to know motherhood, came to know motherhood: "When, a few months later, through an improbable set of circumstances, I found myself caring for a seventeen-month-old niece with a bad case of chicken pox, I was amazed to realize that my prayer was being answered in a most concrete, exhausting, and rewarding way. I also sensed that the prayer would continue to be answered in many other ways throughout my life."<sup>7</sup>

The Lord honored her faith, not right away, and not in a way that she could have predicted.

## Join the fray

What do we learn from the disciples and from the father in Mark 9:14-29? We learn to pray—honestly and vulnerably—for both personal needs and for the needs of the world. We learn best when we find ourselves in similar predicaments: with immense personal or ministry problems we can't solve. We can be thankful, then, that personal problems are mostly unavoidable. They find us out whether we want them to or not. Ministry problems, on the other hand, are avoidable if you choose to avoid ministry, if you choose to hang back instead of joining the fray. We can be thankful, then, that when Jesus helps us with our personal problems, he also motivates us to tackle the world's problems. The Apostle Paul says that God comforts us in our affliction so that we may comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Jesus helps us with our personal problems by challenging our faith, birthing new faith, and honoring our faith. When he helps you in this way, you know you can no longer hold yourself back.

Therefore, you enter the fray to take on the demons that have invaded our world and devastated both humanity and creation. You will fail, of course, as we all do. You'll wield your sword, and the dragons won't fall. Then, in the service of the kingdom of God, you will feel your missional need, just as you felt your personal need. Many of us are like the disciples: we believe (that Jesus is Lord), but we need help with our unbelief (understanding and participating in his mission). When the fighting gets fierce,

when the opposition stiffens, when you feel your need, remember: “This kind can only come out by prayer.” You learned to pray for your personal need; now pray for your missional need.

When I come to church on Sunday mornings to prepare for our worship services, I often glance over at Room A-15 as I walk by. Every Sunday, a group gathers there at 7:30 a.m. to pray for this church and for the world. I know, if I’m preaching, that they’re praying for me, and for all who will be attending our worship services. As I walk by, I often sigh in thankfulness to God for those folks.

John Knox, who founded the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, was a man of prayer. Mary, the queen of Scotland, said, “I fear John Knox’s prayers more than an army of ten thousand men.” On his deathbed, he asked his wife to read to him the prayer of Jesus in John 17. Hearing the prayer of Jesus, he began to pray, not for personal needs but for the needs of the kingdom. He prayed for those who had rejected the gospel, for those who had recently come to Christ, for protection for those facing persecution. As he was praying for the world, he died. What a way to go!

Feel your need, especially your need for faith, and fall to your knees, where the battle for the world is fought and won. Lord, we do believe. Help our unbelief.

<sup>4</sup> The word translated “take pity” (*splannchnizōmai*) in Mark 9:22 is the same word that is translated along the lines of “have compassion” in Mark 1:41, 6:34, and 8:2.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 122.

<sup>6</sup> Mark reports that Jesus rebukes the spirit after seeing the crowd gather. Jesus doesn’t rebuke the spirit because the crowd gathers; he rebukes the spirit because of the father’s faith. The presence of the crowd, however, influences the timing of the rebuke. Jesus, concerned that word of his power not spread too widely and too soon so as to provoke an untimely showdown with authorities, acts in such a way to minimize witnesses

<sup>7</sup> Norris, [122.]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Literary structure:

A Crowd saw Jesus and was amazed (14-15)

B Condition of son: possessed with a spirit (17-18a)

C Disciples (literally) not “able” to cast out spirit (18b-19)

A’ Spirit saw Jesus and threw son into convulsion (20)

B’ Condition of son: from childhood, thrown into fire and water (21-22a)

C’ Was Jesus (literally) “able” to cast out spirit? (22b-24)

A” Jesus saw crowd and rebuked spirit (25)

B” Condition of son: became like corpse, Jesus raised him up (26-27)

C” Why were disciples (literally) not “able” to drive out demon? (28-29)

<sup>2</sup> Mark doesn’t say why the people are “amazed” when they see Jesus. On the mountain, Jesus’ garments became radiant and exceedingly white. Mark doesn’t report that Jesus’ appearance returned to normal. Perhaps he intends us to understand that Jesus was still reflecting the glory of God in a physical way or that his appearance was somehow different after his experience on the mountain.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (1923).