

## **Mark: I Believe and Don't Believe**

**Mark 9:14-29**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*February 6, 2005*

Now turn with me if you would to the Gospel of Mark, and as we move on in the story, last Lord's Day we were up on the mountain of transfiguration, and we pick up the story now in Mark, chapter nine, beginning at verse 14 as Jesus and the three disciples—Peter, James, and John—descend from the mountain (whichever mountain that was, and it may have been Mount Hermon that they were up), and as they now descend they encounter something at the foot of the mountain. There is first of all an inquiry on behalf of the three disciples as to the identity of Elijah, perhaps because they've seen Elijah up on the mountain. And there was a Jewish expectation, because of the last few verses of the last book of the Old Testament, that Elijah would come again. And Jesus assures them that Elijah has indeed come again, speaking of course about the ministry of John the Baptist.

But just as Moses and Elijah came down from their respective mountains, Sinai and Carmel, to find trouble below, so, I think, Mark, as he writes this story, is deliberately echoing that, because now as Jesus descends the mountain, He finds trouble below. He finds unbelief, and He finds hostility. Let's read about it. But before we do so, let's look to God in prayer.

*Our Father, again we bow in Your presence and we ask for Your help. We need the ministry of Your Spirit now to unfold to us and throw light upon that which we read. Help us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and grant that in all things Your great and glorious name might be honored and glorified, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Beginning then, at verse 14 of Mark, chapter nine. This is God's holy word.

And when they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. And immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed, and began running up to greet Him. And He asked them, 'What are you discussing with them?' And one of the crowd answered Him, 'Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes

him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. And I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.' 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!' And they brought the boy to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling about and foaming at the mouth. And He asked his father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. And 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!' And Jesus said to him, "If You can!" All things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the boy's father cried out and began saying, 'I do believe; help me in my unbelief.' And when Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.' And 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!' But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. And when He had come into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' And He said to them, 'This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.'

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

I was looking this week at a very famous painting of "The Transfiguration". It was painted by Raphael, Raffaello Sanzio—late fifteenth, early sixteenth century painter of the high Italian Renaissance, born 1480 or so, and died relatively young at the age of 37. He was asked and commissioned to paint this grand painting—it's about the size of this red cloth on the wall behind us here, so-called an 'altarpiece' of "The Transfiguration". He didn't finish it. It was completed by an assistant of his. It's an astonishing piece of art. If you have an internet, you can look it up.<sup>1</sup> It's a marvelous painting. It's interesting because of what he does with light. The top half of the painting is full of light. It's the picture of the mountain, and the three disciples are there, and Jesus is there also. And Moses and Elijah are there, and there's a light that shines. It's an extraordinary light. It's not ordinary light; it's not sunlight. It's the light of the transfiguration.

But down below, there is chaos. There is darkness which almost...almost...obscures the extraordinary faces of the crowds and of the nine disciples that are left below. And this man with his son is there, pleading for his son's health. And you look at the faces and the gestures of the nine disciples, and they're helpless. There's one looking at a book, as though it's a book full of incantations, of formulae that he might sort of say and utter like a magic formula; and he's looking at the book, but there's a puzzlement on his face.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cordonata.com/art/Raphael/raphael68.jpg>

There are two disciples, and they're pointing up the mountain as though it has dawned on them that the only answer to this predicament lies in Jesus, but Jesus isn't here. Jesus has gone off, up the mountain somewhere. It's an extraordinary painting: contrast between what's up on the mountain and what's down below; and Mark, I think, is drawing that contrast here. There's this marvelous display of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ on the mountain of transfiguration, but down below there is sin and there is unbelief, and there is hostility. There's a quarrel that has broken out between the scribes and members of the crowd. And like this painting, I want us to move our eyes, as it were, across the canvas that Mark paints for us here in the telling of this story.

And I want us to see first of all, the scene at the foot of the mountain. It's like a reality check. Whatever may have been taking place on the mountain, it's another story down below. It's a bit like Ligon was mentioning this morning, about the wonderful visit of our friend, Sinclair Ferguson, and I resonated with his remarks. Let me continue those remarks, and if Sinclair is listening somewhere, his ears will be tingling now. But it was the kind—and no disrespect to Ligon's ministry whatsoever, so don't take this the wrong way, but when you have a visiting preacher it's always the same: it's the best thing since sliced bread! And I felt that, too. And for three days we were on the mountain, but you know, Monday morning was a reality check, and it was back to work, and it was back to school. And something like that is taking place here as Jesus now, and the three disciples, come down from the mountain, and they've had this exchange about the significance of Elijah.

It's a mosaic that Mark is painting for us with a variety of different people, and there are six different sets of people and faces that we can look at. First of all, there's a large crowd. Not quite sure where this is, because at the end of the story they enter into a private house, and then the next story they're in Capernaum on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. But a large crowd... and maybe this crowd has actually come from Capernaum, and come from the villages and towns around the northern parts of the Sea of Galilee in order to find Jesus, and in order to see something more of His ministry. And this large crowd, we read in verse 15, when they see Jesus descending from the mountain they are amazed, and they began running up to greet Him.

Now, it's not as though Jesus is now still glowing like Moses glowed when he came down from the mountain. It wouldn't make any sense. In verse 9 he tells the three disciples not to tell anything of what's happened up on the mountain yet, because people will misunderstand, but if His face was all of a glow it doesn't seem to make sense that He would tell His disciples that. No, what Mark seems to be saying is—and it's an incredibly strong word that is being employed here, a word that is full of emotion. They truly are glad to see Jesus. They've come to see Him. Perhaps, Mark doesn't record it, perhaps many of them have come with their ailments of their own, with sick folk of their own. They've come to see Jesus, but Jesus hasn't been there, and all that they've had, as it were, is the argument

with these self-pontificating scribes. And now at last Jesus has appeared, and they're so, so glad to see Him. And perhaps there is in their hearts the thought that 'Well, everything will be fine now that Jesus has come.'

And then there are these teachers of the Law, or, in some of your translations 'scribes.' They were, for the most part, interpreters of the Law. They were kind of theological lawyers, if that's not a contradiction in terms. In a theocratic state they were the ones that you would go to for answers to all kinds of questions of legality and casuistry, and they pretended to have all of the answers, but evidently they did not have the answer to this particular problem that is before them, and an argument has broken out.

There's a man there, a father, and he has a boy, a young son in a terribly distressing condition, and in a way that's quite extraordinary for the Gospels. I don't know whether you picked that up as we read the story together. Mark explores the condition of this boy to an extent and detail that isn't true of many other miracles. There's a graphic description of what is wrong with this boy. It looks, at least externally, as though he has some form of epilepsy. The father is dejected. He's at his wit's end. He brought his son to the disciples, the nine disciples that were left below, disciples of Jesus. He had some to them in all expectation that they would be able to heal his son, but they haven't been able to do it. There's the pathos of those words, "and they could not do it." They couldn't do it. They couldn't heal him, and he's dejected. He has nowhere else to turn now, and it's a picture of a man whose heart is broken and his spirit is despondent. He's at the end of his tether. Maybe some of you can empathize with that man tonight.

And then, there are the disciples, the nine disciples left on the bottom of the mountain. And you can imagine what they might have been up to. You know, Peter and James and John, it's all right for them to go up with Jesus, up to the top of the mountain to do who knows what, but we'll show them! We'll perform some mighty miracles, and when they come down we'll have something to say. I'm reading into the text, but can't you imagine that something like that may well have been going on?

And they're silent now. In Raphael's picture of the transfiguration their faces are quite a picture. Go and have a look at it. It's a wonderful picture. Some of them are distressed. Some of them are angry—angry that God's promises seemingly have not been fulfilled in their ministry, and they're embarrassed and they're disappointed.

And there's an evil spirit abroad, an emissary of Satan, some deathless creature whose mind is permanently set in opposition to all things godly and righteous; and wherever they go, these deathless creatures, in Calvin's famous phrase, "they drag their chains with them." And wicked and evil they are, and Jesus is on the earth now, and Satan has sent these emissaries in great numbers, it seems,

when Jesus was incarnate. And there seems a particular malevolence about what this spirit has been doing in this young boy's life: words like "often" in verse 22; and "from childhood" in verse 21; and the graphic description that Mark seems to give of this condition of this boy. And does your eye flit from one part of the canvas to the other in this mosaic that Mark is painting for us in this scene below the mountain? There is Jesus. There is Jesus. And Mark seems to be moving in the picture, in verse 15, as this crowd is rushing forward to greet Jesus; it's as though Mark is saying, 'Yes, turn your eyes upon Jesus, and look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.'

But now our eyes begin to focus on Jesus, and He's saying something. He's beginning to speak; and you know that when Jesus begins to speak you need to pay attention, and you need to listen, because something of extraordinary importance, something life-changing is about to occur as Jesus begins to utter these words. And He speaks to various parts of this mosaic: He speaks to the disciples; He will speak to the father; He will speak to this malevolent spirit; He will go back and speak to the disciples again.

Jesus walks into this scene and we hear Him say something quite astonishing in verse 19: "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?" It isn't immediately clear whom Jesus is addressing at that point, and there are some commentators (particularly modern commentators) on Mark that seem to suggest that Jesus is particularly addressing the crowd there, and not the disciples. I still think that Jesus is probably addressing the disciples, especially the nine disciples who have so dismally failed in their attempt to heal this boy.

Jesus is facing unbelief. He's facing the consequences of a fallen world. He's facing an Eden that has been, to all extent and purposes, almost destroyed. And it had failed them in their hour of need. And this man has been left, as it were, in this distressing condition, and Jesus is touched by it. He's overwhelmed by it; in a sense, He's almost angry about it, righteously indignant about it. And He speaks to the father of this boy. He asks him how long the boy has been like this.

Now don't be fooled by this question as though Mark is telling you nothing of any great importance. Now from a medical point of view, it would be necessary, I'm sure, to have the history of this patient, and it would be necessary to know: is this something that has just occurred in the last few days, or is this something that has occurred from childhood? It would certainly affect diagnosis, and it would certainly affect the course of treatment, but that isn't what Jesus' concern is here.

Jesus in fact is asking this question not for the sake of this boy with whom He will deal in a minute, but actually He asks this question for the sake of the father because He wants to draw out from the father something. He wants to minister to the father as much as He wants to heal the boy. He wants to draw from these

distressing providences in the life of this family something that will be of immense significance pastorally for this father. And all of us who are parents tonight can understand that: that things happen to our children that affects us as much as it does them, and sometimes it affects us more than it does them. Jesus is discipling the father here.

And listen to this conversation now, because as you look at this painting everything else now seems to almost blur and disappear, and all that we are conscious of now is the conversation between Jesus and the father—and listen to this conversation, because the heart of the story lies in this conversation. It's not the healing of the boy—that's almost incidental to the story. It's the conversation between Jesus and the father. And as they talk, the boy has suffered some kind of epileptic fit. The evil spirit in the face of Jesus Christ has shown his enmity, and the father has cried out and said, "If you can do anything, take pity and help us!"

You can imagine: that that kind of cry from a father is something that you and I might expect from him...to come to Jesus and say, 'Now if You can do something, will You please? I beg of You to do it!' But he's used a little preposition, he's used a little word, and Jesus wants to correct this little word. He has a little course here in grammar—I'm not sure what language they were speaking, maybe Aramaic, but whatever it was, Jesus now engages in a little course of grammar. And you get a little irritated...some of you don't like grammar at the best of times, but not in these circumstances, not when your son is having an epileptic fit in this condition. What kind of Savior is this? What kind of Messiah gives a lecture on grammar when the boy is having convulsions?

But Jesus is in control of the entire situation here, and He will deal with the boy in due course. But this is something of immense significance. The father has said to Jesus, "If You *can* help us...." Not 'if You *will* help us.' Now that would have been a possibility for him to say: 'If You *will* help us...', because it is not always Jesus' will to do precisely what we want Him to do. His will is not our will, and you and I know that. We know that to our pain on so many occasions, that our course and our trajectory doesn't always integrate with the course and the trajectory of our Father in heaven, and it would have been reasonable for the father to say to Jesus, 'If You are *willing*, do this', but that's not what he says. He says, "If You *can* do....' He's questioning not His willingness but His ability: Are You able to do something here? And Jesus says to him, "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Now, it would have been interesting if Jesus might have taken offense at this remark and embarked on a lecture on divine sovereignty and a lecture in Calvinism, even! And He would have been within His rights to do so. But, no. Watch the pastor's heart at work. This man, this father now needs to be coaxed, as it were, to understand something: that everything is possible to him who believes. And the man blurts out this famous statement that all of us know and all

of us have repeated on some time or another: "I believe; help my unbelief." And isn't that the description of how many of us here tonight feel? We do believe. 'Lord, I believe You. I do believe. If You dig down into the recesses of my heart, I do believe. I do believe. But *my* life is a riddle, because so much of what I say and so much of what I do, and so much of the ways in which I respond and react to the circumstances of life betray that I don't believe.'

Now, this is an extraordinarily abused text: "*Everything is possible to him who believes.*" What does that mean? What does that mean tonight? "Everything is possible to him who believes." It's like the text, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." You know, that's the text of the loony left...if you're on the left somewhere, that's the text you always want to quote about Jesus: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

"Everything is possible to him who believes." Everything: what does that mean? You see, some are saying, some interpret this passage and they say, they claim that if this father could only have believed that his son was going to get better, then he would have got better. Is that what Jesus means? But it cannot possibly mean that. It can't possibly mean that. Think of Paul and the thorn in the flesh. Do you think he didn't believe? Is that the problem? He prayed three times, and he prayed with earnestness and conviction—the Apostle Paul!—that God would remove this thorn in the flesh. And God said, "No."

Well, OK, maybe you have the temerity to go to the Apostle Paul—it would take some courage to go to the Apostle Paul and say to him, "You know, Paul, the reason is you didn't believe enough. You know, you didn't have enough faith, Paul. That was the problem. If only you'd have gone four times, or five times, you'd have seen it removed."

Paul was a sinner. It's possible, I suppose. But not Jesus. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane...do you remember His prayer? "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from Me." That was His prayer. And the Father said, "No. It is not possible. It is not possible." And you dare not, my friend, go to Jesus and say He lacked faith; that the reason why His prayer wasn't answered was because He didn't have enough faith.

So what does Jesus mean when He says everything is possible to him who believes? Everything! Everything! Everything! Could I, if I believed enough, teleport to the other part of the universe—the other side of Unis, to the fourth quadrant...you know, where Captain Kirk is? If I had enough faith, could I wake up tomorrow and discover that I had ten million dollars in my bank account? If I had enough faith? "Everything is possible to him who believes." Could I bring my grandfather back here tonight, who died when I was seven, and ask him about Anton Bruckner, whom he loved, and whom I love? Because I would love to do that. And if I had enough faith, if I had enough faith, could I bring him back here, and I could spend the evening talking to him about Brookner? "Everything is

possible to him who believes.” Could I grow my hair back? If only I had enough faith?

Do you see how silly that is? It's good to laugh, because sometimes we laugh at our silliness and the ugliness of what some preachers will say from pulpits to those whose spirits are at an end, and wrack them even more in torture because of seeming lack of faith when God has said, “No, this is not the way.”

It means that it is possible for me to care for a boy who is possessed by an evil spirit, and take the losses and crosses that come with it; to speak like Job in a time of bereavement and loss and say, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”; to turn the other cheek, and to go the second mile. And it means it's possible for me to overcome evil with good, and it's possible for me to be poor in spirit and to mourn for my sin, and to be pure in heart. That everything that God can ask of me, whatever duty, whatever command, it is possible for me, if I believe, to bear any burden, to cross any river, to endure any pain, to suffer any loss, to pass through any shame. Everything is possible to him who believes.

And what do you have to do? Believe. That's all. Just trust Him, that's all. Not lay everything on the altar, not attain spiritual perfection, not experience some kind of Holy Spirit baptism...you know, later Jesus will go into a private house, and He'll begin to address the disciples because they're asking the question now, “Why couldn't we do this? Why couldn't we do this?” And you notice the answer that He gives? “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” It's when you come to an end of yourself and you cast yourself upon the Lord, that then...that *then* the answer will come in a way that brings glory and honor to our God.

It's interesting, you know. In this story there's a word that's used of the convulsions and the shrieking of this young boy as he suffers this...what looks like an epileptic fit. And it's a very strong word in Greek: And Paul uses this word; he uses it in another context entirely, but borrows, I think, from the metaphor and the language that's used here. He uses it in Romans 8, when he's speaking about the spirit of adoption that enables us to cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ And it's interesting that Paul is using the word. He's using the word when we are at an end of ourselves, when we are crying, as it were, in convulsions; when we have absolutely nothing of ourselves to offer, and we're at the end of our tether and we're crying out to the Lord—in that instance, as we cry to our Father in heaven, the Spirit witnesses with our spirit in our weakness, in our poverty, in our dereliction.

And you see what Jesus is saying to these disciples? ‘You know, the reason why you couldn't do this is because you were probably so full of yourselves. You were probably so full of yourselves, and what you needed to do was to do it in a way that brings glory to God: by prayer.’ Because what is prayer? Prayer is an



acknowledgement that we can do nothing. Prayer is an acknowledgement that in and of ourselves we can do absolutely nothing. God must do it! The Lord in His sovereign power must come and exercise!

And so Jesus turns from the father, and He turns to this evil spirit, and He rebukes the spirit and commands the spirit to depart. It's a little sign that...it's a little cameo, it's a little foretaste of what Jesus has actually come to do, in part; that the strong man has come to the house, and is now casting out the demons that have occupied it. And He's saying, 'This house is Mine! I am restoring this broken Eden and making it into the beautiful garden that I intend it to be.' He is spoiling principalities and powers, and triumphing over them as He casts this demon out.

And at the end of the story it's not the little boy, it's not the father who is at the center of the story. What fills your vision as you gaze at this portrait is something of the immensity of Jesus Christ, the One who displayed His glory on the mountain has now descended into the valley and pit below and has displayed once again that incarnate glory which is His.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, as we bring this Sabbath Day to a close, we thank You for Your word and for this beautiful picture of our Savior. Now write it, we pray, upon our hearts; and grant, O gracious God, that at an end of ourselves we might cast ourselves wholly upon You. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.*

Please stand, receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace be with you all. Amen.*

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