

Help Me Overcome My Unbelief

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[0 : 00] We continue our readings from the Gospel of Mark chapter 9 and at verse 14, page 1012 in the Church Bible.

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

As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. What are you arguing 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 couldn't.

[1 : 13] 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.

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground, rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, how long has he been like this? From childhood, he answered. It's often thrown him into the 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 one who believes.

Immediately, the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. And when Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit.

[2 : 18] 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.

And 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 cast it out? He replied, this kind can come out only by prayer.

Thanks be to God. Thanks, Malcolm, for reading.

And if you'd find it helpful, you can find an outline inside the notice sheet. If you'd like to see the points and if you wanted to take notes. But it'd be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Mark chapter 9 as we look at that passage together.

[3 : 31] We're returning to a series in Mark's Gospel that we were in up to Easter. And we're up to chapter 9 there. So let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray like the psalmist that you would open our eyes that we may see wonderful things in your law.

And as you give us eyes to see, would you give us heads that can know you better and hearts willing to change and follow you. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well, the TV series West Wing was all about life in the Oval Office. And they had a pilot episode. Their first episode was a pilot episode.

And one by one, you met the main characters that would be the mainstay of West Wing for the seasons to come. Except for the main man. You didn't meet the president until just a few minutes before the end of the episode.

[4 : 33] And they were all talking about him. You kept hearing the news that Portis has had a bicycle accident. And Portis, you learn as you watch it, stands for President of the United States.

That's their name for him. Portis has had a bike accident. He's not around. And you meet these characters. And what you see is life without Portis there, without the president there.

So you meet the press officer, CJ, and she's struggling because she doesn't know what to say about the questions she's asked on the news. You met the key advisors of the president, Sam Seaborne, Josh Lyman.

And you find out they've got themselves into trouble in their personal lives. And they're terrified of what the press are going to say. And you meet Toby Ziegler, who's being harassed by lobbying groups.

And they say they're not going to leave the meeting until he meets their demands. And he doesn't know what to do. And he's got so angry with them, he doesn't know what to say. And with five minutes left of the episode, just as things are at their lowest ebb, Portis arrives.

[5 : 33] And you hear his voice. And he walks into the room. And as soon as the president walks in, everything calms down. And he's decisive. He's got authority to fix things.

He puts everything in perspective. And everything gets sorted in just a few minutes. And so in an episode where you've hardly seen him, you see how much the Oval Office needs the president there.

In Mark chapter 9, this scene, we follow Jesus down a mountainside. He'd gone up the mountain with Peter, James, and John at the start of chapter 9. And the curtain was pulled back for them and for us as we read Mark 9 on what Jesus is really like in eternity.

As his clothes went brighter than anyone could wash them. There was this dazzling, blinding, explosive brilliance. As they saw Jesus in his true holiness on the mountain.

And the glory cloud of God, the Shekinah cloud, descended. And they heard God's voice saying, listen to him. This is my son. And it means Jesus has been away from earth, if you like.

[6 : 42] He's had this, it's as though he's been up in heaven. And he comes back down the mountain now. And we see what he comes down to. And how people have got along without him. The disciples, the crowds.

And what we see is that it's chaos. And as we see Jesus arrive and get to work, the big question that the passage makes us ask this morning is, will disciples of Jesus trust that Jesus and only Jesus can save the world?

Will we trust that Jesus and only Jesus can save the world? So our first point is the darkness of the world. In verse 17, we see Jesus come down the mountain.

And it epitomizes the world without him. So there's an argument in verse 14 going on. There's the crowd. And he walks right into the chaos.

And he says, what are you arguing about? And it's this dad that he hears from. Verse 17. A man in the crowd answered, Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

[7 : 46] Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So it's very striking here, not just that there's a sickness in the boy, but there's the presence of an evil spirit.

And Mark, the writer of this gospel account of Jesus' life, he's certainly not saying that all sickness is like this, that there's a direct cause between sickness and demonic spirits.

We've already met in Mark's gospel someone with a fever, who was nearly dying, someone with leprosy. We met a woman with a hemorrhage for 12 years. We've seen people who can't hear, people who can't speak, and not directly because of evil spirits possessing them.

Because we live in a world where there's suffering. And we could say that all sickness and suffering and death have been caused in our world by the presence of sin in our world.

But we can't make a direct connection a lot of the time. And yet God reveals to us that behind what we can see in our physical universe, there is a spiritual universe.

[8 : 55] And in that spiritual universe, there are good creatures, angels, created by God. And there are evil creatures, fallen angels, demons, bent against God.

And we might be thinking, I've never met a demon. Why does Jesus seem to meet so many when you read about him? I think one side to that is that the spiritual forces in our world are far more active than we in this part of the world ever are aware of or acknowledge.

Thinking people in other parts of the world have no issue with that, with seeing that evil is not just a moral choice, it's a force, it's a power in our world.

We're also looking in, in the Gospels, on a unique moment in cosmic history. Here is God the Son entering our world on a rescue mission. And it's clear to us, isn't it, when you read the Gospels, that as Jesus arrives in the world, there is a concentration of angelic activity, especially around his birth, as he's tempted in the desert, and around his death and resurrection in the empty tomb.

I guess in the same way that we have that intense angelic activity around Jesus' saving mission, we also see an intensity in the demonic activity around him, as Satan does everything he can to stop people turning to Jesus and to stop Jesus going to the cross.

[10 : 24] And what Mark wants us to see with this boy is just how destructive the devil's work is in the world. Just imagine what it would have been like to be this boy's dad.

Jesus is told what life is like for the boy, and it's like death for the boy. Then as soon as the boy is brought to Jesus, exactly what the dad warned him of happens.

If you look at verse 20, 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.

So imagine it, you're raising your son, and as he grows, you realize he can't hear. He can't speak because he can't hear. But far worse, you realize about the demon, that there's something about your boy that no doctor can help with.

[11 : 29] An evil spirit throwing the boy onto the ground so that he's gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth, and then he lies rigid as though he's dead. And you can't leave him alone anywhere in case he falls too dangerously.

You can't go near a fire with him because he's thrown himself into fires and been burned. You see the burn marks on his body from when he's been driven into fire.

You can't ever take him to the beach. You can't take him to a lake because he gets thrown into water and he needs to be rescued. Just picture the despair in the boy's home.

And the boy's suffering there just gives us a picture of what our world is like, that our world is scarred by suffering and by death. And it's a glimpse for us of the spiritual reality behind the curtain.

Jesus has been teaching us already in Mark's Gospel that we have a problem we can't see and an enemy we can't overcome. The problem we can't see is a heart problem. It's been very prominent in what Jesus has just been doing with his disciples.

[12 : 37] He's explaining that our hearts are turned away from God. And that's our biggest problem. In chapter 7, it was even the devoutly religious people, the Pharisees, that Jesus spoke to.

And he used the words of the prophet Isaiah. He said, These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And without a complete transformation from Jesus, without a new heart, in effect, that is a problem that we all have.

It's the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. And even the disciples in Mark chapter 6 had hard hearts, even the ones who were already following him. And it's a problem so big we can't even see it because the way our hearts are determined to reject God blinds us to the very problem so that Jesus said to his disciples, Do you still not see or understand?

Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear? So that's the problem we can't see, but it's caused in our life by an enemy whom we can't overcome.

So it's not just that we should think of this boy and think, Oh, that's unusual. The devil was at work. Or that we should see the most evil person we can think of in the world today and think, Oh, that's the devil at work.

[13 : 54] Rather, the devil is at work more pervasively. In Mark chapter 4, Jesus warned us that the devil wants to take the word away from us when we hear it before we've had a chance to respond because ultimately his deepest desire is to turn us from trusting Jesus.

He's called the prince of this world, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the father of lies. And without God's gracious, loving, powerful help, we're under the power of the devil.

All of us. I was learning recently about what happened on the 8th of November 1983. Do you know what happened on the 8th of November 1983? Hardly any of us know what happened on the 8th of November 1983.

And historians say that it's the closest the world ever came to nuclear Armageddon that day. What was happening was NATO were doing a military exercise called Able Archer and the Soviets were aware of what was going on and were so frightened and paranoid about it that they came to believe in the Soviet Union that NATO was undercover about to launch a nuclear strike.

And they had the codes ready to launch one, to launch their, to unleash their nuclear weapons that would have caused global destruction a nuclear winter that would have meant the end of human life.

[15 : 18] But the amazing thing is that on the 8th of November 1983 almost nobody knew that was going on. People were just going about their lives. People were just raising children, going off to work.

No one knew that the unseen reality was that day everyone nearly died. And in a similar way what Mark's Gospel does is it exposes us to a reality that we're barely aware of.

we learn that behind the scenes there is this spiritual war going on for our souls and we have a spiritual enemy that we can't defeat. And the question for us is are we willing to accept what Jesus says about what's going on so that we go to him for help?

Now back at the scene with the boy and his father the disciples are struggling with that. So that's our second point the doubting of the disciples. Jesus sees the boy he sees terrible need he hears the father he sees chaos all around the boy but already there's something to be suspicious about there isn't there?

When you read Mark chapter 9 why isn't it the disciples that came to Jesus and said Jesus thank goodness you've arrived can you help? No it's the dad who has to come to Jesus and he tells them what a mess they're in.

[16:37] Verse 18 he says I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit but they could not. So that Jesus sounds exasperated in verse 19 if you just have a look 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. He calls them an unbelieving generation because it's code language it evokes for them the memory of their ancestors that they were well aware of the first generation that God had rescued out of Egypt out of slavery to form his nation Israel that first generation they gave up on God they were the unbelieving generation Moses went up the mountain to get the Ten Commandments when he came down they were worshipping a golden calf and now Jesus has gone up the mountain and he's been with God in the cloud and he's come down and the disciples have found they can't help this man and his boy and Jesus tells them that their inability their incompetence is because of unbelief they are a faithless generation and next to them you've got the scribes sneering at them the teachers of the law for not doing it their way and they didn't pray they didn't have the sense to turn to God about the problem and depend on him to save the boy so that the threat of judgment is hanging over them you hear that in Jesus' words he says how long shall I stay with you how long will I put up with you and the church in any generation can look like these disciples

Jesus is not physically with us anymore he's up the mountain if you like he's gone to be with the Father in heaven and we see the world in chaos we see a desperate world and Mark wants us not to make the same mistake if we're disciples of Jesus today so a question for us is whether we misdiagnose the biggest problem in the world there are lots of problems in our world to focus on aren't there there's the horror of the invasion in Ukraine there's drug addiction in Scotland there's the migrant crisis we might think about climate change as the world's biggest problem human trafficking Islamic extremism there are problems that we want to be deeply concerned with and it's great hearing from Robbie this morning isn't it from Tearfund as we think about how we as followers of Jesus are moved to respond to people's problems at the same time if we see one or two of those problems in isolation as the biggest problem threatening humanity it might make us struggle to see well how does Jesus really connect with that how is Jesus really relevant to people in that position and we might think of other solutions and we might get frustrated with belonging to a church we might get frustrated when the mission of the church is about telling people about Jesus as we think to ourselves yeah but is that what people really need right now don't we just need to get our hands dirty in helping people maybe we need a different focus and if we think if we think that humanity's biggest problem is something else we might start to think that some people are free from problems we might see people who we know who are healthy and wealthy and successful and they drive an electric car and they've got solar panels on their roof and we think well they don't have any problems they've solved the problems and maybe we could even think well if I could be like them

I wouldn't have any problems I need a bit less Jesus in my life I need a bit more self-help so I can be like them but Jesus has been teaching us our real problem is a heart problem we can't see our real enemy is a spiritual enemy we can't overcome so that we don't become faithless and self-sufficient and instead we turn to him we're not an unbelieving generation thinking we don't need God we've got this leaving the world in chaos but the doubting of the disciples is not the only response that we see we also get this model of a great response from the dad so that's our third point the desperation of a boy's father so the dad does pray he prays to Jesus in front of him let's pick things up again at verse 22 he says it is often that is the demon it is often thrown him into fire or water to kill him but if you can do anything take pity on us and help us and Jesus invites him to show him that he trusts him if you can said Jesus everything is possible for one who believes not that God will give us whatever we ask if we believe but Jesus rather is inviting the man to consider is there anything you could ask me for that I couldn't do would it ever be that Jesus lacked the power to help and the man's response is again this great model for us of coming to Jesus verse 24 immediately the boy's father exclaimed

I do believe help me overcome my unbelief clearly he's struggling to believe if you can help me overcome my unbelief but he has enough faith to turn to Jesus and say help me help me to believe help me to trust you more and it's an encouragement if you would say that sometimes you struggle to believe Jesus can still save him because you're not saved by the quality of your faith you're saved by the quality of the one in whom you put your faith and he trusts enough to ask and maybe you need to hear that this morning the writer J.C. Ryle says rare indeed is the man who has never needed the prayer Lord I believe help me overcome my unbelief who among us never struggles to keep going as a Christian never struggles to trust that Jesus is powerful to help and is good to help and sometimes those struggles come from real experiences in our lives where things happen to us and we think to ourselves is God really powerful is God really good and it's a struggle to keep trusting God well could we still pray and pray

[23 : 25] Lord I believe help me overcome my unbelief that's the model prayer and it's a great prayer it's a great prayer because Jesus is the one who gives faith as a free gift he's the one who gives it so the disciples are faithless but the father here models the right response to Jesus that's our third point the desperation of the father and it leads to our fourth point the deliverance of the life giver so the spotlight is again on Jesus and just look at how impressive he is it was on him when he came down the mountain if you look back up at verse 15 it's striking he's come with three disciples in verse 14 to join the other disciples but look at verse 15 as soon as all the people saw Jesus they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him I take it he's not transfigured anymore and he can still overwhelm people with amazement when they see him it's extraordinary and then our attention was we were distracted by the chaos and this boy's suffering and the dad and the disciples and the scribes but now the spotlight goes back onto Jesus and he just speaks and it's as though everything can get resolved halfway through verse 25 you deaf and mute spirit he said

I command you come out of him and never enter him again what valuable words never enter him again and the result verse 26 the spirit shrieked convulsed him violently and came out so we've heard about an enemy we can't overcome and then we see Jesus so strong that the enemy can just be driven away it has to obey him and Mark wants us to see that deliverance from Jesus when he delivers you it's nothing less than a journey from death to life so he shows us that in verse 26 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 he looks as though he's dead Jesus is the life giver and he just raises him and restores him and picture the relief that day imagine the hugs from his dad on the way home picture his dad carrying him back into the village and through the front door back to a mum who for years has had this grief inside her for the son who'd never been himself and the dad presents the boy colour back in his face in his right mind

I wonder if even the burn scars have gone from his body from falling into the fires and the dad can say to the mum it's over Jesus came down the mountain we met him he did it how does he do it well we shouldn't think it was easy because either side of the story Jesus has told us that he can give life to the dead dead because his life will be taken from him he's been teaching that he's on his way to Jerusalem because he's on the way to the cross he sees our spiritual deadness and knows the only way to give us the gift of spiritual life is for him to be spiritually dead abandoned by God on the cross he's diagnosed us as being spiritually deaf like this boy who can't hear and when Jesus cries out on the cross he knows that the father will not speak to him so that he can endure that deafness being unable to hear his father in heaven and open our ears to hear

God as our God and saviour so he takes hold of this boy's hand and raises him to life as he heads to die for him and for us and all that's left is a last scene alone with the disciples and they ask him why they were powerless to help and drive out the demon Jesus gave them authority in chapter three to drive out evil spirits why couldn't they drive out this demon but Jesus reminds them that the power was never their own verse 29 he says this kind can come out only by prayer so folks as Jesus comes down the mountain we see him as a magnificent saviour and the challenge is to trust him him and only him to save the world if you are someone who hasn't yet trusted him to save you then you could ask him to do that you could say to him that you know that in your heart you've not loved God as you should and you've not loved other people as you should and you could ask him to be your saviour and you could even say to him

Lord I believe help me overcome my unbelief today would be a great day to do that but as a church this chapter invites us not to drift from trusting Jesus and that he can save the world the disciples have drifted from that with him not there and do we sometimes fall into this trap of self-sufficiency as a church we might look at the church today and see great training programs you can do courses you can get people on resources you can put in people's hands and think yeah if we just keep rolling those out the world will be saved we might look at the church and see great organization better administration better structures and think now we've removed some of those organizational bottlenecks the church can really grow we might look at the church and see great music people coming and enjoying a great worship experience and think you know now the bands have got better will really save our city we might look at the church and see great preaching or listen to great preaching online and think you know if only my friends could just hear the podcasts

[29 : 50] I listen to then they'll want to know God and God does take up our efforts and use them it's a wonderful thing about God that he uses means it's a humbling thing but Mark chapter 9 would invite us to ask ourselves do we pray do we pray in deep dependence on him recognizing that unless Jesus gives people a new heart nothing we do will deliver them only Jesus by his spirit can bring someone into his kingdom so the choice of Mark chapter 9 is will we trust our God-given talents our techniques or will we get on our knees and ask Jesus to save the world knowing that our prayer to him can be as simple and childlike and as unimpressive as Lord we believe help us overcome our unbelief Amen we're going to spend some time responding to God's word together the band are going to come and lead us we're going to sing we're going to sing to be a an our ■■■■ our

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