

Mark 9:14-32

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[0 : 00] Well, before we study that passage together, let's sing Psalm 19, verses 7 to 10, page 223 in the Psalm book. The tune is Moravia, a psalm that celebrates the greatness and the power of God's Word.

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[1 : 56] The tune is Moravia, a psalm that flows as with a power of God's Word. The tune is Moravia, a psalm that performs the greatness and the power of God's Word.

The tune is Moravia, a psalm that attains to the virtue of God's Word. The tune is Moravia, a psalm that bumps at the rich land in these umbine, Early, early from the home that love hath crucified. In Mark chapter 9 and verse 24, we read, Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.

I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief. There's no greater need ever in the church of Jesus Christ on earth than for us to be strengthened in the faith.

And that's why this verse is always relevant and always applicable as a prayer for every one of us who are Christians. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

[3 : 36] It says in the old authorised version. I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief. But this is also a relevant verse for any who are not Christians because it actually captures almost the instant in which someone has passed from death to life in the things of the Spirit of God.

It almost captures like a camera that's just been clicked at the moment of some great event. It's almost captured the instant of this man's new birth, of this man's conversion.

And if you understand and can identify and come to identify with these words, then you too will have passed from death to life, from darkness to light by the work of the Spirit of God.

So let's look at this wonderful story. Let's notice immediately before we start that it occurs immediately after the wonderful events of the Transfiguration.

For Peter, James and John at least, that was a great high spot in their experience of Jesus. For Jesus himself, it must have been an amazing moment when he heard his Father's voice.

[5 : 06] When, as it were, the rags of his suffering, of his humiliation, being a man unrecognized, recognized as the Son of God, despised and rejected, all of that kind of was taken away for a few moments.

And there he stood before his three closest disciples in the glory that he had with his Father, or something reflecting it, the glory that he had with his Father before the foundation of the world. But for Jesus, that time of glory was immediately followed by this messy encounter of failed disciples, of ugly and demonic-inspired illness, and a man struggling with unbelief.

But our Lord Jesus Christ reveals his glory just as much in this incident as he did on the Mount of Transfiguration. Let me look at this under three headings and three areas today.

First of all, what made this man an unbeliever? What was it that made his unbelief so strong? And secondly, we'll see how Jesus overcame his unbelief.

[6 : 34] And then thirdly, we'll see the evidence that he has become a true believer. So, what was it, if you like, that fed his unbelief?

How did Jesus overcome his unbelief? And what is the evidence that his unbelief has really gone? Or has essentially gone?

This man is an unbeliever. He certainly is in verse 23, where Jesus picks up on something he'd said at the end of verse 22.

He's got this demon-possessed, epileptic child, and he cries out to Jesus, if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.

And Jesus says, if you can. If you can, what do you mean? If I can. That's not a statement of belief. It's a statement of doubt.

[7 : 35] Everything is possible to him who believes. Perhaps to understand the unbelief implied in that statement, we need to compare it with an incident that's recorded back in the first chapter of Mark, where a leper came to Jesus.

We read this in verse 40. A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

Now that's an amazing statement in itself. It's not an altogether unmixed statement. He has a question and uncertainty about the willingness of Jesus, perhaps because leprosy was regarded as a special judgment of God.

But he is in no doubt that Jesus can make him clean. If you are willing, you can make me clean. But that's not what this man says.

He doesn't say to Jesus in Mark 9, if you are willing, I know that you can make my son well. He says, if you can do anything, please help us.

[8 : 54] What is it that has fueled unbelief in this man's life? Well, we can see some of the things. One thing, for instance, that has clearly fueled unbelief is the failure of the disciples.

He says in verse 18, I asked your disciples to drive out the Spirit, but they could not. Jumping over the intervening verses, he might say, I asked your disciples to help and they could not.

If you can do anything, please help us. And his unbelief is being fed because in his mind, Jesus and his disciples are all of a kind.

And because the disciples have failed to help him, he has lost any confidence he might have had that Jesus can help him. In other words, he is judging Jesus by his disciples.

And the failure of the disciples is a barrier to his believing in Jesus. One of our missionaries a couple of years ago met a woman in an elderly care home who was in her middle 70s.

[10 : 15] And that woman was very hostile to Christianity and to the faith that our worker was anxious to share with her.

And over the months of visiting her and patiently letting her talk about herself, her story came out. Until she was in her 20s, she'd been a regular churchgoer.

She'd thought of herself as a Christian. But then in her 20s, soon after she was married, she had a child. And the child took ill and died.

And the woman felt, as far as she was concerned, the people of the church that she belonged to showed no real concern for her.

They gave her no help. They made no real effort to understand the anguish she was going through. And she drifted away from the church.

[11 : 16] And she had branded all Christians in her own mind as uncaring and unsympathetic. And she decided on the basis of that that the whole of Christianity was empty and hollow and meaningless.

And that she had no interest in and no desire for Jesus Christ and the things of God. And for 50 years, she'd been living in that rejection.

And by the grace of God, the loving care and attention and interest and sympathy and wise speaking of a Christian woman dissolved that.

And before she died, that woman came or came back to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a frightening thought, isn't it? Those of us who are Christians because we know how imperfect our

Christianity is.

How we have good days and not so good days. How we can be short-tempered and so taken up with our own problems that we are so often unsympathetic to others.

[12 : 27] We fail to pray for people as we should. We do not love our neighbour as ourselves. We are too often like the older brother, grudging and harsh.

This man turns to Jesus and said, if you can do anything because I have just seen that your disciples can't. But then there is a second thing that surely is an element in his unbelief.

And that is that there are, we read in verse 14, teachers of the law arguing with them. This man isn't meeting Jesus in a vacuum or on a desert island.

He's meeting Jesus in first century Palestine. And we know a lot from the Gospels, don't we, about those teachers of the law, the scribes and the Pharisees. And they were in the main hostile to Jesus.

They were people whom Jesus himself characterised as blind leaders of the blind. And it was their teaching that was heard in the synagogue. It was their voices that criticised Jesus behind his back and sometimes in his presence.

[13 : 44] And surely this man has been affected and influenced more or less by the prevailing religious teaching of the day and its prejudice against the truth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And all of us are influenced by such teaching, such a religious atmosphere. In our day the religious values, the moral values, the attitudes towards religion of our society are almost entirely hostile towards Bible Christianity.

There is total incomprehension in so many circles, especially in the media, to any idea that there are such things as moral absolutes, rights and wrongs.

And anybody who holds to God's commandments and God's law is dismissed as a fanatic. Those who seek to persuade people to embrace Jesus Christ as he's offered to us in the gospel, if they dare to speak to Muslims or to Hindus or to followers of some other religion are called dangerous because they're trying to persuade people to convert and that's unacceptable, isn't it?

Just recently one branch of the United Nations passed a statement that said that trying to convert people is an attack on their religion and that religions have a right not to be attacked.

[15 : 34] If that was ever passed into law, it would have drastic consequences. And there's certainly the underlying assumption in the religious atmosphere of our day, whether it's taught by Tony Blair and his new religious foundation or by hundreds of others inside and outside the professing churches.

And that's the assumption that all religions are basically the same and all religions are really just ways of encouraging us to be nice and loving and compassionate towards everybody.

And that anything else is really incredible. anything miraculous is either dogmatic or unbelievable. I don't think that made it any easier for this man to believe that Jesus could help him.

If you can do anything, because in the back of his mind there were the criticisms he'd heard from the scribes and the Pharisees. This man's a fanatic.

He's casting out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. This man claims to be the Messiah, but we know the Messiah won't come from Nazareth and from Galilee.

[16 : 49] No prophets ever come from Galilee. And the falsehoods of the day were clouding his spiritual vision. Then of course, I'm sure this man's unbelief is affected too by the intensity and the length of the painful suffering that he has endured as a father.

Since his boy was a child, he has been wracked by this horrible epileptic possession, this demon-enforced epilepsy, which sometimes has thrown him to the ground, thrown him into the fire or water.

It's brought him very close to death on a number of occasions. And for year after year, this father has surely tried everything that he could, like the woman with the hemorrhage who came to Jesus. No doubt he's spent all his money on the best physicians. No doubt he's taken him to the spiritual healers and the prayer meetings and the leaders of the synagogues.

And they've all promised him and given him nothing. And the anguish has worn him down and the failures have eroded his hope.

[18 : 18] And so he comes to Jesus and it's as if he said, I've tried everything, even before I tried your disciples. And if you can do something, please help me.

How many of us are affected in our unbelief? Whether we're Christians or whether we are unbelievers, non-Christians tonight, those influences are on all of us.

The failure of God's church. Do you realise that some of us who are ministers are perhaps most vulnerable of all to that temptation of the failures of God's church?

You see, we actually know the inside of the church. We know the failings of ministers. We know the failings of this minister, of our own. We know how imperfect the church is.

We see sharply its weaknesses as well as its achievements. and it's very easy for ministers to become beclouded by unbelief.

[19 : 29] One of the old Puritans said to ministers, beware that your ministry does not eat out the heart of your Christianity because dealing with the failings of Christians is a real challenge to faith.

It's fodder for unbelief. And you don't live in any church for very long until you see its weaknesses. And then the background climate of the world in which we live.

Well, unless we went away and lived on a desert island with no broadband access, we can't escape from the corrosive influence of society around us.

And perhaps some of us at least have sufferings on a par with what this man had. Perhaps some of you have tragic situations with your own children.

Perhaps there are other aspects of life which can be just as painful. Year after year they wear us down. The causes of unbelief.

[20 : 45] Secondly, very quickly, how does Jesus deal with this man's unbelief? Two reasons for looking at this. For one thing, we can go to Jesus in prayer and ask him to deal with us in the same way that he dealt with this man.

Because though Jesus is no longer physically here to call us to come and stand in front of him, he is with us by his Holy Spirit. And what Jesus did in the days of his flesh, he can do by his Holy Spirit today.

But also we need to look at this because we, in the famous phrase of Martin Luther, we Christians are called to be little Christs to the people around us.

And how can we help those who are in the grip of unbelief? Well, we need to see how Jesus did it. Well, Jesus listened to the man.

That's one of the great marks of Jesus. One of the huge failings of Christian evangelists and Christians doing evangelism. That we've got such a wonderful message, that's the best way of putting it.

[22 : 04] We're so full of our own talk, that's perhaps the worst way of putting it, that we rush into telling people the answer before we listen to the question.

And Jesus knew that everybody was different. Everybody has got somewhat different experiences. Sin is so complex.

Satan is so subtle. The human mind is so deceitful. The human experience is so richly diverse. that you need to deal with everybody individually. You wouldn't think much of your doctor, would you? If you went to see your doctor tomorrow and the buzzer went, you were called in and without asking you to sit down, certainly without asking you what's the matter with you or what can I do for you, if he simply opened his desk, got out a box of tablets and says, these are the tablets that I'm using this week.

Take two of these morning and evening and you'll be all right. You would very justifiably say, but doctor, you haven't even asked me what's wrong with me yet. I came to get a medical phone signed or you didn't ask me if it was my feet or my head or pain.

[23 : 26] You know, doctors don't do that. And Jesus doesn't do it either. Jesus listens to this man. He asks him questions.

He shows great sympathy. I think the question of verse 21 is as much a statement of deep compassion as it is of anything else.

When Jesus asks him, how long has your child been like this? It certainly isn't a question that's relevant to Jesus' ability to heal.

Jesus isn't saying, look, how long has the boy been ill? Because, you know, if he's had this condition for more than six months, I may not be able to do anything.

Jesus has power whether the boy has been like this for six weeks or sixteen years. to heal him. And Jesus knows that. But whatever else is in this question, I think, you know, Jesus has just seen the look on the father's face as the boy rolls about in terrible agony.

[24 : 45] And Jesus says to him, in effect, you poor man, how long have you been suffering this terrible agony? How long has your father heart been breaking, seeing your child like that?

And it's sympathy, it's a sympathetic questioning. But it's also, what should we say, a no-holds-barred questioning.

Jesus has already made a pretty stern statement in verse 19, oh unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?

He said that in response to what the man said to him, I brought him to your disciples and they couldn't heal him. It's not clear exactly who Jesus means by the unbelieving generation.

Does he mean those teachers of the law who are lurking like vultures on the edge of this conversation? Undoubtedly. Does he mean the disciples, are they part of the unbelieving generation, those who have failed to heal this man?

[25 : 59] They've seen Jesus, they've been with Jesus and yet they still haven't learnt the real lesson. Undoubtedly. But does he also include this man who's just said to him, I asked your disciples to him but they couldn't do it and there's kind of perhaps a note of accusation, a note of unbelief in this man's speech.

And Jesus, Jesus doesn't mince his words. Oh unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?

Bring the boy to me. It's interesting isn't it? Jesus doesn't say, how long shall I put up with you? Clear off, I've had enough of you. I'm not going to do anything for you if you're like that.

No he says, bring the boy to me. But, he does make plain that he is here to reveal what's wrong with the world.

And he's putting his finger that unbelief is a bad thing. Jesus is not in the business of simply affirming and consoling people alone.

[27 : 13] Jesus wounds and heals. And then also Jesus does something else that is so important for us to learn.

When he asks the man that sympathetic question, how long has he been like that? The man's sort of emotions overflow and he blurts it all out.

From childhood, 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. The man's in agony. The boy is writhing on the ground in front of him.

Surely Jesus will say, oh you poor man, let me heal the boy straight away. Nothing else matters but healing him. Oh it's true that you just said something in there that showed some unbelief, but now's not the time to deal with that.

I must help you in your agony first. That's what I guess most of us would expect Jesus to say. But he doesn't.

[28 : 17] Faced with this man in agony and the child on the ground, Jesus picks him up on what he said about Jesus. If you can do anything. And Jesus says stop.

We've got to deal with that because what you've just said, even though it blurted out in the agony of the moment, reveals that you do not believe that I have the power to help this boy.

it reveals that you have a heart of unbelief. What Jesus is saying in other words is, my friend, you have two problems, not one.

You have the terrible problem of a suffering boy, but you also have the problem of an unbelieving heart. heart. And I'm telling you that your unbelieving heart is the biggest problem and the first problem that needs dealing with.

That's a big issue, isn't it? To get people to see, to get the unbeliever to see that their biggest problem is not necessarily the presenting problem, but the underlying problem of disbelieving the Lord Jesus Christ through ignorance or prejudice or bitter experience, whatever it is, that's the root problem.

[29 : 46] That needs to be addressed. Jesus is not soft on sin. let no one dare accuse Jesus of being unsympathetic to suffering.

Oh yes, he's going to deal very quickly with this man's suffering and in a wonderfully effective way. But he has said he is not prepared to pass by unbelief.

You see, it's part of the unbelief of our society that people say, well, faith is a personal issue, everybody's got their own view on that, that's secondary. What matters is dealing with people's physical needs.

And Jesus says in effect, no, unless you realise that the biggest problem in this world is lack of faith in God. The biggest problem in this world is that they have turned, the world has turned its back on God.

Though they knew God, they glorified him not as God. Paul says in Romans chapter 1, that's the root of all the sufferings and all the troubles and all the evils of this world.

[31 : 05] So Jesus, how does he deal with unbelief? He deals with it by listening carefully and dealing with this man as an individual, responding to the specific words that he says.

He listens to him. He does it with huge sympathy. You poor man, how long has it been like this? And yet he does it with a spiritual firmness, if you like, with a spiritual manliness, if that's not an old-fashioned concept.

Jesus isn't weak and soft, desperate to be liked by this man. Jesus is a faithful physician who puts his finger on the root cause, the deepest disease.

And one last thing, Jesus draws him wonderfully. I've stressed there, I've isolated that sternness, if you like, that challengingness, that confrontation that Jesus has with this man.

And by the way, we British people, I was going to say we English, excuse me for the insult, but us English, perhaps are especially prone to avoid confrontation.

[32 : 22] It's not polite to criticise people. It's not polite to point out problems and we tend to gloss over them. Jesus was not like that.

But don't let that emphasis I've made there blind you to the wonderful grace and love of Jesus. Jesus confronts this man in order to draw him to faith.

Jesus confronts, look, I'm not going to let you get away with saying if you can do anything. That's not acceptable. But then look at the next sentence that Jesus gives. Jesus says everything is possible for him who believes.

Jesus could have said unless you believe or if you continue in such unbelief your son will never be healed. That would have been to put the fact negatively.

but Jesus puts it in a wonderfully positive way. Everything is possible to him who believes. And Jesus is there if you like showing him the pathway that leads to deliverance and to bliss.

[33 : 31] Everything is possible to him who believes. Jesus is telling him the truth but he's telling it to him in a way that is kind of drawing and making faith irresistible.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is faithful and wise. He is stern and positive. He challenges in order to draw, never in order to drive away.

How Jesus deals with unbelief. And then of course the man says, I do believe. And we come to our third and last point.

The evidence that this man really has come to faith. And of course it's in this amazing statement of verse 24. I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.

If the man had just said, I do believe, yes I believe, so please heal my son. We might say, well of course he'd say that, wouldn't he? Of course after what Jesus has said, everything is possible to him who believes, of course he's going to say, I believe.

[34 : 41] And we wouldn't know whether he really meant it, or whether it was just covered love, whether it was just saying whatever it took in order to get what he wanted.

But he doesn't just say, I do believe. He confesses his sin. And he repents of his sin. His sin is the great sin of unbelief.

And he calls it my unbelief. And he wants to be rid of it. And he looks to Jesus. I know this is a slight paraphrase if any of you are familiar with the original here, but it's a good paraphrase.

Help me overcome my unbelief. He's confessing his sin. He wants to be rid of it. He's seeking the help of Jesus. Those are all most healthy signs of a true, humbled, honest, anxious, longing to be holy heart.

They are in a couple of words wonderful evidence of a new attitude to unbelief and to faith, to Jesus.

[35 : 55] Lord, he doesn't say, if you can help me, with my unbelief, I'd be very grateful. He knows his statement. He believes that Jesus can help him. Lord, help me overcome my unbelief.

And so when he says, I do believe, we can be confident in it. But what about you? Where are you in all that range of human experience that perhaps we've touched on tonight?

Are you an unbeliever who's sort of hovering around the edge of Jesus Christ, perhaps brought up in a Christian home, church background here in Aberdeen as a student?

You've never made a clear commitment. You weren't at the Lord's table this morning. And you're kind of there. And yes, sometimes you feel very close, other times you're a bit cynical about the whole thing.

my friend, if you're waiting for the day when you feel that you've got a perfect faith, as if you had to wait till you could come to Jesus and say, Lord, I believe and there's no longer any unbelief, I'm ready.

[37 : 06] Then you haven't understood this passage or your own heart or the whole message of the gospel. If you held back this morning because your faith is so weak and uncertain, then you need to think hard because Jesus, when somebody comes to Jesus and says, Lord, I do believe, but there's so much unbelief in my life, please help me overcome my unbelief.

What does Jesus do? Jesus rebukes the deaf and dumb spirit and the boy is healed and goes away with his father.

Look carefully at your unbelief, but remember that unbelief is not in itself a barrier to coming to Jesus.

All of us in this life struggle with unbelief. The question is not, is there any unbelief in your heart? The question is, do you believe?

believe in the teeth of those doubts, over those influences that prompt unbelief? And will you come to Jesus weeping, trembling if necessary, terribly ashamed of that unbelief, but will you come with this prayer, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

[38 : 39] love. And if you've been a Christian for goodness knows how many years, if you've been to so many communions, you can't remember the number, and you rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he's the love of your life, then you won't need me to tell you that this is still a great and a necessary prayer for you to pray tonight.

Lord, I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.