



## **I Believe, Help My Unbelief!**

### **Mark 9:14-29**

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Please open your Bibles to Mark 9. As you're turning there, I'm going to tell a quick story. There are certain moments in my life when I notice a gap between what I profess to believe and what in that moment I'm actually believing in my heart. Have you ever noticed a gap like that before?

I noticed this last summer when my friend Tim Freidel from The Rock asked me, "Blake, do you believe God loves you?" At first I was thinking, "Come on. I've known the answer to this question since Sunday School. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Plus I'm in seminary right now, so if anyone should know the right answer to this question, it's me." So I said with my best theologian voice, "Yes, I believe God loves me."

Tim said, "Good. I'm glad to hear that. So then, do you believe God likes you?" When I first heard this, I was caught off guard. Was this some sort of trick question? I had a lot more trouble with this one. You might say, "Why would you have trouble with this one, Blake? If you already believe God loves you, why would you have trouble believing He likes you? After all, we all know from Facebook that a 'love' is much greater than a 'like,' right?"

To this I would say, "Yes." But I think the reason I struggled to answer this question is because in my entire life, no pastor, no parent, no mentor had ever taught me the "right answer" to the question, do you believe God likes you? So for a brief moment I was forced to think about what I actually believed about God's disposition toward me, rather than to just give a programmed answer.

Even though I had been a Christian for ten years, something very strange happened in this moment—and I'm not necessarily proud of this. In that moment, this was literally my thought process: "Well, could God like me? What would make Him like me?"

So I started to think back to some of the good things I had done recently, like witnessing, reading the Bible, praying and serving. Then I started to think back to some of the sins I had committed recently—not only external sins, but also sins of my heart, like pride and selfishness and

envy. When I put all this together and kind of weighed out my good and bad on a scale, my honest conclusion to this question was: I don't know if God could like me.

What I realized in this moment was that to a certain degree, even though I was cognitively or theoretically affirming the gospel, functionally in my heart I was having trouble actually believing it. In this moment I was believing that the only way God could possibly like me or love me would be if my good works outweighed my bad works. This is the daily battle for every Christian, right? It's not so much a battle to understand God's promises as much as it is a battle to believe in God's promises.

As R.C. Sproul put it, "It is one thing to believe in God. It is quite another to believe God." So every day we will be faced with questions like do you believe God? Do you believe God when He says that knowing Him is more valuable than making a lot of money, being super-smart or having an attractive body? Do you believe God when He says this?

Do you believe God when He says He is working your current life situation for good? Do you believe that? Do you believe God when He says, "The reason I love you is simply because I love you, not because of anything you've done or anything you have to offer"? Do you believe God when He says He can do far more abundantly than all you could ask or think? This means He can restore a relationship in your life you thought was forever broken. He can free you from a sin you thought you were forever enslaved to. He can save someone in your life you thought was absolutely unsavable. Do you believe this? Do you believe what Brandon preached last week when he said that giving up your life for Christ's sake is not only worth it, but it's the only way to truly find life? Do you believe God when He says obedience to Him is the best thing for you?

Maybe I can ask it this way. When you are tempted to look at pornography, when you are tempted to click on something you shouldn't, when you are tempted to overeat or to lash out against your spouse or sibling—in that moment when you are most tempted to sin, do you believe God when He says obedience to Him in that moment is exactly what you need more than anything else?

I'll give you one more. Do you believe God when He says nothing can separate you from His love? One of my favorite quotes is by Matt Chandler who said, "If you are in Christ, you have done nothing and you can do nothing to turn the affection-filled gaze of God away from you." Do you believe that? What about right after you've sinned—do you believe then?

Now, even though I can't read your thoughts, if you are anything like me, I'm confident you had the exact same answer to every single one of those questions: "Yes, I believe. O Lord, help my unbelief." If this is your heart's cry to all of God's promises, then you have every reason for hope, because you have a Savior Who is ready and able to help. My prayer this morning is that as we

study Mark 9, we will glorify and enjoy our wonderful Savior by resting in Him, trusting in Him and gladly submitting to Him.

Please follow along as we read Mark 9:14-29:

*<sup>14</sup> And when they [Peter, James, John and Jesus] came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. <sup>16</sup> And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" <sup>17</sup> And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. <sup>18</sup> And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."*

*<sup>19</sup> And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."*

*<sup>20</sup> And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. <sup>21</sup> And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. <sup>22</sup> And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."*

*<sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." <sup>24</sup> Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"*

*<sup>25</sup> And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." <sup>26</sup> And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." <sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. <sup>28</sup> And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" <sup>29</sup> And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."*

All faith on this side of heaven is weak faith. As J.D. Shaw put it, "Real faith in God feels like weakness." Real faith in God feels like begging, because that's actually what it is. All we are is beggars for grace. Shaw goes on to say, "All that Christian ministry is is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. All faith on this side of heaven is weak faith."

There's just one question I would like to consider this morning. For the believers in this room, we can feel the weakness of our faith in God, so why can we have hope even though our

entire lives are characterized by weak faith? Or to put it another way, why can we have hope when our entire lives are characterized by the phrase, “Lord, I believe, but please, help my unbelief?”

The answer to this question will serve as our sermon outline this morning. According to Mark 9, the reason we can have hope even though our faith is weak is because in all our weakness we have a Savior Who is eager to listen, able to help and mighty to save. Let’s look at these one at a time.

## **We have a Savior Who is eager to listen.**

In order to show you how amazing this is, let me start by asking a question. Have you ever had an interaction that went something like this? Someone comes up to you and says, “Hey, I’m really struggling with this. Can you help me?” Maybe they’re talking about a relationship struggle or a big life decision. Then they go on to explain the whole situation to you. As you’re listening to them, maybe you’re eagerly waiting for them to finish so you can offer your advice. So as they’re talking, you’re thinking, “Yeah. Unh huh. Yeah. Got it. Okay.” Then they finally stop talking and you’re thinking, “Thank goodness. Here is what you need to do.” And you immediately give them your advice.

I think the reason why we do this is twofold. First, sometimes we’re just not great listeners. Sometimes it’s hard to stay engaged and listen for a while. I think the second reason is because we think we know how to fix someone’s problem, so in that moment it feels like the most important and pressing thing we could possibly do is to give them our advice to try to fix them.

But I want you to notice something both interesting and incredibly gracious about Jesus’ approach to our brokenness. When Jesus steps on the scene in verse 14, He literally has all the answers to all the problems. He knows about the father’s unbelief. John 2:25 says Jesus knows what’s in the heart of every man. He knows about the child’s demon possession. And He knows how to help both people.

Yet amazingly, even though He literally has all the answers to all the questions, Jesus’ first move is not to talk, but it’s to listen. In fact, the first three times Jesus opens His mouth in this narrative, He asks questions. In other words, instead of immediately going into problem-fixing mode, Jesus beckons the man to open up and share what’s going on. You might look at His fourth question and say, “That’s perplexing.” Jesus says, “How long has this been happening to your son?”

If you are a Type A personality, you might hear this question and say, “Jesus, what does this have to do with anything? Why don’t You just cut the small talk and start fixing their problems?” But what this text is showing us is that Jesus does not see us as problems to be fixed. Rather, He

sees us as people to be fostered. When Jesus looks at you, He does not see a project. He looks at you and sees a person. If Jesus' only concern was to fix this man and his son, He would have just walked onto the scene and started fixing things. He wouldn't have wasted time asking questions. But that wasn't Jesus' ultimate concern.

I love how one of my seminary professors put it. He said Jesus' ultimate desire is not to "merely get the dirty stuff out of you." His ultimate desire is to have a relationship with you. If getting the dirty stuff out of you was God's ultimate desire, then He wouldn't waste time asking you questions. He would just start fixing us.

The heart of God is not merely to fix us; it's to foster us, helping us know Him, love Him and commune with Him. And yes, one day God will cleanse us from all unrighteousness and we will be saved to sin no more. Praise God for that! But in this life, God's ultimate goal is not merely to fix us; it's to help us grow so that we can have a relationship with Him.

Imagine that after the service, you go out into the foyer and start having a conversation with a man you've never met before. Maybe this man was Jesus Who was secretly in our congregation this morning. As you're talking to Him, what would this interaction be like? Jesus would ask you questions. He would listen to you. He would sympathize with you. He would care for you. He would shepherd you. After about five minutes of talking with Him, you would get the sense, "This Guy really genuinely cares about me. He doesn't see me as a problem; He sees me as a person."

As we'll see in a moment, Jesus does more than just listen. He does a lot more than that. But let's take a moment to appreciate the fact that He doesn't do less than that. The fact that Jesus is eager to listen is not what makes Him our Savior, but we can rejoice in the fact that we do have a Savior Who is eager to listen.

Now, Christ is not walking among us physically today, so you won't be talking with Him in the foyer unless He returns in the next 20 minutes or so. But you will talk to someone in the body of Christ today. In fact, we are the body of Christ. So as part of the body of Christ, are you modeling the character of our Savior? Are you quick to listen and quick to ask questions? Or are you quick to try to fix others?

If you say, "I'm sorry, I'm just a fixer. I have a special gift for noticing problems in people," I would actually say praise God for this. Praise God for the fact that He has given you the ability to see areas for growth and given you the desire to help others grow. There are some people in my life I'm so thankful for who have taken the time not only to listen to me, but also to challenge me. This is a blessing. This has helped me grow in my faith.

But here's my challenge for you. The next time you're interacting with someone and are tempted to immediately try to fix them, challenge yourself to follow Christ's example and first ask

just one question before you offer your advice. Again, you don't need to refrain from offering your advice entirely, but asking one question before going into fixing mode can go a long way to making someone feel valued, heard and loved. Also, when you hear from them, it will help you give better advice as well.

## **We have a Savior Who is able to help.**

So what hope can we have even though our faith is weak? Why can we have hope when our whole lives are characterized by, "Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief"? First, we have a Savior Who is eager to listen. He cares. Then the second reason we can have hope even when our faith is weak is because we have a Savior Who is able to help.

I've noticed when I'm hurting, it is so helpful to have someone who is eager to listen. This so rare. But Jesus is eager to listen. Even though He knows everything about us and even though He has all the answers, He still asks us questions because He wants a relationship with us. But in all of our hurting, in all of our sin and in all of our unbelief, we are longing for more than just a listener. In all our unbelief, we don't only just need a hearer, we need a healer. We don't only need someone who will listen to us, we want someone who can actually help us.

This is what the man in Mark 9 was longing for as well. Notice in verses 22-24, there's only one word repeated twice. Do you see it? It's the word 'help.' In verse 22 he says, "*If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*" In verse 24 he says, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

Have you ever had a moment in your life when you go to God in prayer, saying, "Lord, I feel like I don't have the strength to pray right now. I don't even have the words to pray right now, but can You please just help?" This is where this man was. He didn't have any answers. He didn't have anything to offer. He didn't have any strength. Literally the only strength he could muster up was just enough to say, "Help!"

The reason why this passage has been so encouraging to so many Christians is because it shows us that Jesus doesn't only hear weak prayers, He also helps weak pray-ers. In those times when all the strength you have left is just to pray, "Help!" Jesus comes near, He helps and He blesses this prayer.

Look at the condition the man was in when he came to Jesus. He didn't come to Jesus with profound words. You might ask, "Well, did he have it all together?" No. This man did not have it all together. In fact, when this man came to Jesus, the text tells us he had doubts in his heart, desperation in his words and, as the New King James Version says, he had tears in his eyes.

You can imagine someone walking up to you with tears in their eyes, with desperation in their voice, with doubts in their heart. You might think, "I don't know if I want to talk to someone

like that.” But that’s not true of Jesus. He was not afraid of this man’s doubts. He was not afraid of this man’s neediness. He was not afraid of his emotions. None of these things turned Jesus away. The reason why they didn’t turn Jesus away was because Jesus did not come to help people who have it all together. He came to help people who admit they don’t.

Back in Mark 2, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor; it is the sick. I did not come to save the righteous, to help those who think they have it all together. I came to save sinners—those who admit, ‘I’m a sinner. My faith is weak. I desperately need a Savior. Help!’” That’s the kind of person Jesus is more than happy to help.

You might ask, “Well, how does Jesus help us? How does Jesus help me when I’m struggling to believe? How does He actually help me when I’m struggling to believe His promises?”

I think a good illustration of this the story of the Cherokee grandfather, which some of you may have heard. The Cherokee grandfather told his grandson, “I have two wolves fighting inside me—one good and one evil. And son, you have the same two wolves fighting inside you.” The grandson, with wide eyes, asked, “Well, which one will win?” The chief responded, “It will be whichever wolf you feed.”

You could easily replace the wolves of good and evil in this story with wolves of belief and unbelief. Which one will win on a day-to-day basis, on an hour-to-hour basis? The answer is whichever one you feed. So you might ask, “Well, how do I feed my faith?” In Mark 9, the only time this man’s faith was strengthened was when he came close to Jesus. How do we feed our faith? It’s whatever brings you closer to Jesus.

He has given us means of grace to bring us closer to Him, things like prayer, reading God’s Word and being around other believers. Are you serving in church? Have you partaken in baptism and communion? Maybe what brings you closer to Jesus is getting out in nature and enjoying His beauty. Maybe it’s singing worship songs or listening to worship songs. Maybe it’s listening to or reading sermons. Maybe it’s enjoying the gifts God has given you, saying, “I’m not going to suppress this gift; I’m going to use it for His glory and I’m going to thank God for these gifts.” Maybe these things bring you closer to Jesus.

What feeds your faith? Whatever brings you closer to Jesus. So if you want to strengthen your faith, ask yourself, what are the things in my life that bring me closer to Jesus? How much am I actively filling my life with these things?

Faith takes work. If we want to fortify our faith, we must feed our faith. If we’re not feeding our faith, we shouldn’t be surprised when our faith is starving. But here’s the good news. Just as belief is starved by fasting from grace, unbelief can also be starved by feasting on grace. As one pastor put it, “Our unbelief is starved by our attentiveness to grace.” When Jesus sees you sinking

in the quicksand of unbelief, His primary goal is not merely to listen, not merely to sympathize, but to pull you out and help you. The primary way Jesus helps is by giving faith-fortifying means of grace. So what are you doing with these means of grace? Are you filling your life with them or are you neglecting them?

I'll say one more thing before we move on to the third point. I want to point out one thing from Mark 9:22 that's very easy to miss, but this stood out to me more than anything else the first time I read it. I'll read verse 22, leaving one part out. The father says, "*It has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything...help us.*" What is missing?

According to verse 22, this man was not only struggling to believe one thing, but two. He was not only struggling to believe in Jesus' power, but also in His care. He doesn't only say, "If you can, help us," but he also says, "If you can, have compassion on us and help us." In other words, this man was wondering, "Even if Jesus does have the power to help, would He really help someone like me? Would He really help someone so full of sin and so full of doubt? Could Jesus really have that kind of compassion?"

You might be wondering, "Is that word compassion a pretty tame word?" No. This word for compassion actually means gut-wrenching compassion. It's the same word that's used in the story of the prodigal son. Luke 15:20 describes what happened when the father first saw his son. I imagine him looking out a window, then when the father saw his sinful, rebellious, backstabbing son coming from far off, the father was filled with...what? Rage? Fury? Anger? No. The father was filled with love and compassion. He ran out to meet his son, embraced him and kissed him. He welcomed him.

That's the description of compassion—*splagchnizomai* in the Greek—and it's the same word used here in Mark 9. It's the kind of love and compassion that sees the absolute worst about someone, yet still gladly chooses to bless them. The father in Mark 9 says, "Okay, I'm not only struggling to believe in Jesus' power, but is it really possible that Jesus could have this kind of love and compassion for someone like me?" What we learn from Jesus' response in Mark 9 is that there is absolutely no depth of sin and no weakness of faith that could possibly stop God's determination to love and bless His children.

One of my favorite quotes is by J.I. Packer who wrote, "God's love for His children is based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about you, so that no discovery can disillusion Him about you and thus quench His determination to love and bless you."

In other words, weak faith is not a roadblock to Christ's love, nor is it a roadblock to His willingness to help us. Jesus does not say, "I won't help you until you strengthen your faith." He says, "You won't be able to strengthen your faith until I help you. So come to Me."

I'll read one other quote, then we'll move on to the third point. One pastor put it like this: "God already knows we are doubters, that we struggle with doubt, that we struggle with unbelief. Our calling is not to pretend we have no doubts, but it is to come to Jesus with our doubts."

So why can we have hope, even when we're struggling to believe? Why can we have hope, even though our faith is weak? It's because in all our weakness we have a Savior Who is eager to listen to us and able to help. But not only is He powerful enough to help, He is also willing to help. He cares about us.

## **We have a Savior Who is mighty to save.**

Then the third reason we can have hope even when our faith is weak is because we have a Savior Who is mighty to save. I'll open this point with an illustration on faith I read in Tim Keller's book [The Reason for God](#). I'm going to change the illustration a little bit, because Tim Keller obviously needs my help to make his illustrations better, right?

Seriously, picture two people standing on the edge of a cliff. We'll call these people Ben and Jerry. Tim Keller called these people Person A and Person B, so you can already see how this illustration is far superior to his. I'm not condoning Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream which is filled with fat and sugar.

But imagine this high cliff and there you see Ben and Jerry standing on top of the cliff. That's safe, right? But unfortunately Ben is a little bit clumsy, he trips and falls off the cliff. As he's falling, he sees a tree branch and thinks to himself, "I could grab that branch." But then he thinks, "Nah. I don't need to. In fact, I'm 100% sure I can survive this fall without any help. I'll just make sure that when I hit the ground, I do that ninja roll thing you see in movies, then I'll beat up all the alligators at the bottom. Yeah, I've got this. No doubt in my mind." Unfortunately, despite Ben's unwavering faith in himself, he falls to his death. It's a very morbid illustration, but it's Tim Keller's, not mine, so don't blame me.

Then you might be wondering, "What happened to Jerry?" Well, in a wild sequence of events, he also happens to trip and fall off the same cliff. As he's falling, he sees the same tree branch and thinks, "If I grab that branch, I think it would save me. I'm not 100% sure, but I do know there's no way I could survive this fall on my own." So Jerry grabs the branch and he prays it won't break. Fortunately, despite his weak faith, the branch holds and Jerry is saved.

Here's the question. Why was Jerry saved, even though his faith was so much weaker than Ben's? The answer, of course, is that Jerry was saved because it is the object of your faith, not the strength of your faith, that saves you. Weak faith in a strong Savior is infinitely more powerful

than strong faith in a weak savior. The reason why we can have hope even when our faith is weak is because the God we have faith in is very strong.

Now, you might say, “That was a really nice illustration, but can you show me where you’re finding that in the text. Personally, I like to base my beliefs on Scripture and not on Tim Keller illustrations.” If that’s you, then look with me at Mark 9:29 for a moment. When the disciples ask Jesus, “Why couldn’t we cast out this demon?” Jesus responds by saying, “This kind can only be driven out by prayer.” In other words, Jesus says, “Only God has this kind of power. So if you want to access this kind of power, you need to go to God first.”

We all might say, “Well, that seems very reasonable. I need to go to God first,” because He’s saying only God could do something like this. So if you would, look back with me at when Jesus prayed to God to cast it out. That’s verse...ah, where is it? Do you see where Jesus prayed to ask God to cast out the demon? Oh wait. He never prayed, but He still cast it out. What’s up with that?

Was Jesus lying when He said that this kind can only come out through prayer? No. He was saying that this kind can only come out through God. Jesus did not need to access God through prayer, because Jesus is God. The reason why our Savior is mighty to save is because Jesus is God. He’s the all-powerful God. Worship Him.

In all likelihood the father in Mark 9 had probably spent years looking everywhere for salvation. He probably went to doctors and healers and even the people who were closest to Jesus, saying, “Can you heal my son? Can you save my son?” But no one could bring the salvation he so desperately longed for.

Remember last week when we looked at the Mount of Transfiguration? Picture this father at the bottom of the Mount of Transfiguration—literally and figuratively at rock bottom—and he had no one else to hope in except Jesus. He’d gone to everything and everyone else, but he had no one else to hope in except Jesus. For him, salvation looked bleak if not impossible, but little did he know that it is precisely when you have nothing else and no one else to hope in except Jesus that you are closest to salvation.

What about you? To what or whom have you looked for salvation? Have you hit rock bottom? Have you gotten to the point where you say, “I cannot earn God’s approval on my own. I can’t keep living for the approval of man; it’s so tiring and wearisome. I looked to this person to fix my brokenness, but that didn’t work. Actually, it just left us both more broken.”

Where have you looked for salvation? Have you gotten to the point where you’ve looked around and said, “Man, I have nothing else and no one else to hope in except for Jesus”? If you have, then in that moment you are the closest to salvation.

Here's the thing. We're going to be hard pressed to find anyone who's actually eager to listen to us. Have you noticed this? I have found it to be so in my life. I don't know if this is just a millennial thing or not, but sometimes it's hard to find someone who's actually eager to listen. Maybe I'm just boring, but sometimes people just want to talk. It's very rare to find someone who's eager to listen. Even if you do find someone who's eager to listen, chances are slim to none that they're actually also able to help.

I've noticed that the best counselors do two things. One, they listen. And two, they can actually help you. But it's super rare to find someone who's both eager to listen and ready to help. I know a lot of people who give good advice, but they don't listen. And I know a lot of people who listen, but they don't have the wisdom to give good advice. It's rare to find someone who is eager to listen and able to help.

There's only one Person Who is eager to listen, able to help and mighty to save, Someone Who can actually fix the brokenness and Who can forgive us for our sins. That is Jesus. Have you trusted in Him? Have you looked to Him? Have you worshiped Him?

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