

Help My Unbelief

There is an interesting, but sometimes confusing passage of Scripture recorded in Mark 9:14-29. Jesus had given authority to His disciples to heal and cast out demons. As Jesus was coming to his disciples, he saw a huge crowd around them and the scribes were arguing with them. The people, when they saw Jesus, immediately ran to greet Him. So, Jesus asked the Scribes what they had been talking about. One of the men in the crowd answered that he had brought his son who was demon possessed to have the disciples cast him out, but they couldn't.

Then Jesus asked the father how long the son had this problem, and he said, "Since childhood...but if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

It is important to understand at this point, that in the original manuscripts, there is no punctuation. Translators do their best to put question marks, etc. where they seem most logical. The New King James Version puts verse 23 this way: Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." Then in the footnote writes: "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." The New American Standard expresses verse 23 this way: "'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes."

It seems that Jesus was stating amazement at the unbelieving statement of the man who said, "IF You can do anything..." You might remember that many people who came to Jesus in faith didn't question Jesus' ability, rather His willingness, "IF you are willing, you can make me whole," they would say, and Jesus would always reply, "I am willing." They knew He was able. This man doubted Jesus' ability. Jesus knew from the beginning that this was the man's problem because he had said to him initially, "O faithless generation".

Later, the disciples were curious as to why they could not cast the demon out, and this is where things get a little confusing. Jesus said to them (as recorded in Matt. 17:20), "because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting,"

You might ask, "Why is this confusing?" I'm glad you asked. The demon later came out, but no one prayed and no one fasted! So, if this kind only goes out by prayer and fasting, where is the prayer and fasting?

There were instances in the past where Jesus could not do any mighty work because of the unbelief of those involved (Matt. 13:58). Clearly, unbelief was in play here since in the Matthew record of this incident Jesus tells the disciples that the demon was not cast out because of their unbelief. The disciples did not believe and neither did the father. No one was believing. Add to that a crowd of Scribes who were also likely doubters, and it is clear, no belief was available to heal the man's son. The power was there, but not the belief.

By this same logic (that Jesus could not do mighty works due to unbelief) it is not reasonable to say that the reason the boy was subsequently delivered from the demon was because Jesus had the power to heal Him. Jesus was previously limited by the unbelief of others and obviously, He had power. There is no record of him overriding their lack of belief. Those who did not believe, we not healed.

There was no belief available in this story, so how was this child healed? It is clear that it was not because Jesus had superior faith or power than all the others (which clearly He did). He was limited here the same way He was limited in His home town. There was a problem, and Jesus would see that it was solved.

No one fasted and no one prayed...or did they? Let's see, it is clear no one fasted, so let's deal with that first! This is quite interesting. The following excellent translations actually do not use the words "and fasting" as they are not found in the earliest manuscripts: New American Standard, New International Version, The New Living Translation, and the Amplified. This is to say that Bible scholars with amazing credentials agree that the words "and fasting" were not part of the original text in Mark. What about Matthew? In the Matthew account, the earliest manuscripts don't include the whole sentence, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." This helps us solve mystery

number one. Since the earliest manuscripts do not include the words “and fasting”, most likely, Jesus did not say, “and fasting”. This would explain how the demon came out without anyone fasting.

The earliest manuscripts of Mark do include this line, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.” So, the second question still remains, “Who in this story prayed and what did he pray so that the demon came out?” If you look closely, you will see that only one person prayed in this story, and it is the man who’s child was demon possessed. What does He pray? In Mark 9:24 we read that the father cried out and with tears prays, “Lord I believe; help my unbelief!” What happens next? The demon comes out! The proximity is too clear. Jesus had said that this kind did not come out but by prayer, and the man was the only one to pray before the boy was healed. The man prays that Jesus will help his unbelief. After he prays this, the demon is gone.

Now, if we believe that Jesus meant that in order to cast out this particular type of demon, one has to pray, then we must explain why someone did not pray before casting him out. However, if Jesus meant that this type of unbelief does not go out but by prayer, then this makes sense. The man prays that Jesus would help him with his unbelief. Jesus answered this prayer. Once the man no longer had unbelief, the boy was healed. So, since Jesus does not say, “This type of demon goes out only by prayer”, but rather says, “This type only goes out by prayer,” it is entirely possible and much more logical that Jesus was referring to unbelief when he said “type”.

This is good news for us. Unbelief is evil (Hebrews 3:12) because it gets in our way from receiving from God. Unbelief can change the whole course of our lives for the worse.

When this man asked Jesus IF He could help him, Jesus pointed out to him that He was not the problem. Jesus was perfectly capable of healing the boy, and so were his disciples. He had dealt with worse cases of demon possession than this. The problem was that neither the man nor the disciples believed! What needed to come out was the unbelief. How did the unbelief come out? It was through the man’s understanding of his need, and his prayer, “Lord, help my unbelief.”

This is good news for us. If something doesn’t seem to be “working”, we can take an honest look at our own unbelief. The problem is not with Jesus or His promises to us. If we believe and have unbelief at the same time, we need to repent of our unbelief, and pray for God to help us believe. As soon as we deal with the unbelief, we will get our answer.