

What Does It Mean to Pray "Help My Unbelief"?

Devotional #17, Mark 9:2-29

² And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. ¹¹ And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" ¹² And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."

¹⁴ And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶ And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" ¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² 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." ²³ And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ 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." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

- Mark 9:2-29, ESV

In today's passage, we have one of the most famous responses to Jesus in all of the Gospels. The father of the demon-possessed boy responds to Jesus by saying, "I believe; help my unbelief!" What does this plea mean and how does Jesus answer it?

God is very patient and understanding with us. Psalm 103:14 says, "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." In fact, the whole reading today emphasizes the patience of Jesus in dealing with weak and dusty sinners.

Jesus takes His disciples up on the mountain where He is transfigured before them in the presence of Moses and Elijah to show them who He is and to strengthen their faith in Him. By giving His closest three disciples a glimpse of His glory, Jesus is giving them insight into His divine nature. By appearing with Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets, Jesus is directing them to the witness of Scripture to further strengthen their faith. Finally, when the disciples were on the verge of missing the real point of the Transfiguration, God the Father speaks Himself from heaven and says, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him!"

We have this testimony recorded and given to us in the Gospels so that we, too, can benefit from the experience of Peter, James and John. Their experience was not just for themselves; it was to strengthen the faith of all of us who are seeking to trust in Jesus. We have faith. We do believe. But we need help with our unbelief, because we also doubt.

This is what the man's response to Jesus was. Jesus told him, "*All things are possible for one who believes!*" The man wanted his son freed, and he did believe that Jesus was able to help him. Otherwise, he would not have gone to Him and asked Him for help. But he also knew his own heart and his own doubts, which were strong and real. Jesus responds to his plea with compassion and healing.

We need God to have compassion on us in our weakness, because we are so weak. We need Jesus to help us with our unbelief, because unbelief rears its ugly head right alongside faith in our frail hearts. Thankfully, God gives us faith and meets us in our need. He gives us reasons to strengthen and substantiate our faith, and then He heals our souls despite our lingering doubts. Let's never hesitate to pray, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"