

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

Help My Unbelief!

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Mark 9:14-29

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 9:14; that’s on page 844 in your pew Bibles. Every passage has its own tone and feel. Two weeks ago we looked at Jesus telling the disciples to take up their cross – die to the world, leave it all behind and follow him. That had an urgent and corrective feel to it, didn’t it? And then last week was very encouraging – it was buttressing and bracing. And now this passage is different once again. We’ve gone from corrective, to encouraging and now here to comforting. This is gentle Jesus bearing with a broken world. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 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 9:14–29 ESV)

Mark has a major emphasis and a minor emphasis. His major emphasis is the identity of Jesus and his minor emphasis is the faith of the disciples. The last story we looked at was obviously about the identity of Jesus. Jesus took the disciples up the mountain and they heard God say:

“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” (Mark 9:7 ESV)

Now, on the way down the mountain the emphasis shifts again to the faith of the disciples. This story is about their faith – small and imperfect and developing and harassed – but real, rightly focused and here generously rewarded. This is a story about real faith in Jesus in a broken and fallen world.

What Does Real Faith Look Like?

The first thing we learn is this. Real faith is often small.

1. It is often small

The key line in this story obviously is found in verse 24:

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24 ESV)

At the centre of this story, if you think of it as a picture, is the trembling, shaking, feeble hand of a man reaching out in faith for Jesus and receiving from him more than he could ever hope for, ask for or imagine.

It is beautiful, it is encouraging, it reminds us that it isn't the strength of our faith that ultimately matters, it is the goodness of our God. You have to have faith, but even small faith; faith the size of a mustard seed; can open the windows of heaven and summon down grace and power and blessing from the hand of God. Jesus said that; he said:

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20 ESV)

Obviously Jesus is speaking symbolically here. He is saying that even a small faith can tackle a great obstacle. You don't have to be a giant of the faith – you just have to believe in a God who is large and in charge.

And that brings us to our second observation about the nature of real faith and it is this: real faith is focused on Jesus.

2. It is focused on Jesus

Even though the emphasis of this story is on the faith of the disciples, Jesus is still the centre of attention – and rightly so. I love how the story begins. Mark says:

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. (Mark 9:14–15 ESV)

Now linguists and scholars wonder about that phrase they “were greatly amazed”. What does Mark mean by that? Why would the crowd be amazed? Surprised perhaps, but why amazed? Some wonder if the face of Jesus was shining – like the face of Moses had been shining when he came down from the mountain. Maybe. Mark doesn't say that but it could have been. Or maybe it was just that the more the crowd dealt with the disciples, the happier they were to see Jesus.

I suspect that was it. I find the disciples of Jesus to be a great let down – don't you? If I spend too much time looking at the disciples my faith begins to fail. Let me turn that around, if you spend too much time looking at me your faith will fail too. I am not Jesus. If you stare long enough at me you will see things that threaten to steal your faith. So don't. Don't make me the object of your faith and I won't make you the object of mine. The disciples of Jesus are always a very poor reflection of their master.

That's what we see in this story isn't it? Jesus has been away on a field trip with Peter, James and John and the rest of the disciples were down in the valley trying to carry on without Jesus but with very limited success. They tried – they were not lazy or negligent they just weren't Jesus and the crowd had figured that out – more urgently, the father in this story had figured it out. He brought his sick child to the disciples and they tried, but they couldn't do anything. Their power

was so limited and their understanding so partial that they just couldn't do anything to help this poor man.

But now he sees Jesus!

And I love what he does! He presses right through an argument to get his child before Jesus. Look at verse 16:

And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" (Mark 9:16 ESV)

There is a barrier of controversy and stupid standing between this man and Jesus – right? You have to picture it. Jesus has come down and a crowd rushes up and tries to engage Jesus in a theological argument. The scribes have obviously seized upon the inability of the disciples to heal this boy and they are trying to score points off of it. "This proves that these men are wrong! Or it proves that they are terrible sinners! If they were correct in their beliefs or more moral in their behaviour then surely God would bless their ministry!" That's a convincing argument – but this man is not interested! He presses through – he shoves people aside and he puts his son before Jesus!

Look at verse 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." (Mark 9:17–18 ESV)

"Jesus! I don't care about this argument! I don't care about why your disciples couldn't do it – I just want you to do it! Will you help my son, Jesus?"

That's a picture of real faith. Small faith. But real faith rightly directed. This man knows – whatever else he doesn't know – this man knows that you have to look to Jesus. If you are weak and in need – you have to look to Jesus. Press through the noise and the stupid; do not be deterred by the frailty of the followers – GET TO JESUS! Look unto the Lord of your salvation.

Whatever else he has wrong – he has that very right.

The third thing we see in this story is that real faith is relentlessly opposed.

3. It is relentlessly opposed

The most remarkable feature of this story is the news that for some reason the disciples are now unable to do something they had previously been able to do. In Mark 6:13 we are told that the disciples:

went out and proclaimed that people should repent. 13 And **they cast out many demons** and anointed with oil many who were sick **and healed them.** (Mark 6:12–13 ESV)

The disciples had been given power by Jesus to cast out demons and to heal – but here in this story they prove unable now to do those things. The impression that you get is that the disciples are regressing. They seem to have less faith now than previously.

That is the obvious crisis of the passage. And it is interesting that Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples directly – he seems to understand how hard it is to maintain faith in a fallen and hostile world. Jesus rebukes the culture – not the disciples. Look at verse 19:

“O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” (Mark 9:19 ESV)

Isn't that interesting? I almost wondered if I was seeing that right, but scholars remark upon it too. James Edwards for example says:

Even though the disciples are insufficient for the task of healing the demon-possessed boy (vv. 18, 28), Jesus does not chastise them. Inability is simply a limitation, not a fault¹

Jesus seems to understand that it is hard to hold your faith against the relentless head winds of an unbelieving culture. He had warned them about that – back in chapter 8. He said:

“Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees (Mark 8:15 ESV)

¹James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 278.

Unbelief is contagious! You live among a stubborn and unbelieving people – you breathe that air in every day! Be aware of that. Over time, slowly but surely, it threatens to steal your faith.

And therefore, fourthly, real faith is in constant need of nourishment.

4. It is in need of constant nourishment

Jesus very tenderly takes the disciples aside for some debrief after this humiliating encounter.

They ask him why they had failed so miserably and he replies:

“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” (Mark 9:29 ESV)

Some of your Bibles add “and fasting”.

Now I don’t think Jesus is saying that the disciples didn’t pray when the father brought his child to their attention, I think it means they hadn’t been praying. R.T. France says for example:

“‘Prayer and fasting’ suggests a regime rather than the immediate response to a crisis.”²

It turns out that the disciples had been resting on their spiritual laurels, you might say and Jesus here very tenderly reminds them that if you neglect your time in the closet – if you neglect your private times of spiritual communion - you will fare very poorly in this world. You cannot simply charge into battle armed only with good intentions – you need to be clothed with power from on high. You need to get into the secret place before you come out to face the troubles and the suffering of the world.

Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples here, ‘you don’t have super powers ok. What you have is access to God because of your relationship with me. But if you neglect that relationship – or if you neglect that access – then you will find yourselves operating in this world without power.

And in a hostile and antagonistic culture, that is a recipe for disaster. Considering the headwinds that you are facing, that is a recipe for regression.

² R.T. France, *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 369.

Real faith is in need of constant nourishment.

I think that is the main point that Mark is trying to make, but it doesn't necessarily answer all the questions that we have as modern readers. I think that living when and where we do as believers we also want to know why we do not see more miracles and healings in the church today.

Why Do We Not See More Miracles And Healings In The Church?

And I think that this passage suggests a couple of answers; first of all, I think one of the answers is that:

1. We live in an unbelieving generation

We just spoke about this in terms of the disciples, but I think it is just as true – perhaps more true in our generation today. The disciples regressed in their spiritual power partly because they were operating against significant cultural head winds – how much stronger are those winds in our case today?

How far have we been blown back? Do we have the same strength of faith as our parents? Do we have the same strength of faith as our grandparents? I don't think so, and why is that? At least part of the answer is that we are dealing with far stiffer headwinds and resistance. Its hard to believe in a culture where increasingly, no one else believes.

Charles Taylor, the famous Canadian philosopher says that over the last several generations the conditions for faith have changed radically in this culture. He divides Western history into three eras – pre-Enlightenment, post Enlightenment and late Modernity and he says that in the Pre-Enlightenment world it was impossible not to believe. No one was an atheist in the 15th century – not in this culture! You might have been a heretic but you were not an atheist. Everyone believed and the culture pressured you towards belief. In the post Enlightenment – say, in the 16 and 1700's – it became possible all the sudden NOT to believe. Philosophers like Rousseau, Voltaire and Immanuel Kant worked hard to make unbelief respectable and to a great extent they were successful. It was now possible NOT to believe in our culture. There was still some pressure

towards belief, but there was also a respectable space maintained in the culture for unbelief. But now in the period of late modernity – which we live in – the tide has changed entirely. Now, most people in the West DO NOT BELIEVE. All of the socializing institutions in the West – government, education, media – are dominated by an aggressive form of unbelief – therefore, Taylor says, now it is virtually IMPOSSIBLE to believe.

That's the progression he traces out in his book *A Secular Age*. This culture, in the last 500 years, has moved from impossible not to believe, to possible not to believe, to impossible to believe and that's where we live now. We live in a culture where it is VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO BELIEVE and that has to explain – in large part why we see so few miracles in the church today. Our faith is small – VERY SMALL. Our doubts are big. VERY BIG. But I think the encouragement of this passage is that even small faith – faith like a mustard seed – when it connects with a good God can bring about a marvellous outcome.

God hasn't changed. He hasn't been affected by the changes in our culture. He is still large and in charge. And he is good.

The second thing I think we can say on this question is that sometimes we don't get all the miracles we ask for because miracles can be a dangerous distraction.

2. Miracles can be a dangerous distraction

We see that in the text as well. Look at verse 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." (Mark 9:25 ESV)

Jesus wanted this miracle over and done with before any more people had gathered to see it. This is very typical of Jesus' attitude towards all miracles and healings; he saw them as both a blessing and a potential curse. Obviously they were a blessing to the people receiving them but they could also become a massive distraction. Once people tasted a miracle they didn't want anything else. They didn't want teaching, they didn't want preaching – they didn't want the things that could lead to eternal life, they just wanted another miracle. Jesus had strong words for such people, he

said:

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (Matthew 12:39 ESV)

It is not a good thing to clamour after signs and wonders, Jesus said. You should be focused on the death and resurrection of the Christ – that is what Jesus has been trying to get the disciples to focus on. He didn’t want them to believe because of miracles. He was critical of such folks. He rebuked those people saying:

“Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” (John 4:48 ESV)

Signs and wonders can be a distraction and they can become an addiction that actually leads people away from saving faith. There can be no doubt that this is part of the reason why we see so few miracles and healings in the church. We are simply not mature enough to handle it.

If God granted a miraculous healing today in our service, I suspect we would be very thankful. We would sing a little louder and my guess is that we would be a little fuller come next Sunday. And should God grant another miracle then I suspect it would become a full blown circus in here within the month. I would be pulling my white spandex jumper out of storage, signing a book deal. People would be abandoning their churches all across the country in order to come here and “catch the fire”.

Jesus is not interested in that – in this story he gets the miracle done as quickly as possible and as quietly as possible – lest it become a distraction and a deterrent to saving faith.

Thirdly, I think that the reason we don’t see as many miracles as we might is that:

3. Contemporary Christians are often too busy to pray

We are a busy and distracted people; which we think is a reasonable excuse – except that it isn’t.

Martin Luther was perhaps the busiest man in the history of Christendom. He had 6 kids, he and his wife took in orphans, they housed seminary students and he translated the Bible into German

– multiple times! He wrote enough books to choke a camel and he orchestrated the largest religious reformation in human history – and yet he woke up almost every morning of his life at 2 am to breath in the Psalms and to pour out his heart to God. Even though Martin Luther left the monastery – metaphorically speaking – he never entirely left behind the monastic hours. Luther once said:

“I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”³

The busiest man in Christendom spent almost every morning from 2 am to 5 am in prayer. Now, prayer for him meant breathing in the Bible and breathing out praise and petition. He meant by prayer roughly what we mean by private devotions. But here’s the point: he spent 3 hours – every day up on the mountain in the presence of God – before facing all of the chaos and disaster down below. That was his routine and it was the absence of such a routine that Jesus identifies as part of the problem with the disciples and that I imagine he would identify as part of our problem again today.

So what should we do?

What Should We Do?

As I said most scholars believe that Mark’s emphasis here in this story is on the life of the disciple – the last story was talking about the identity of Jesus – this story is talking about the life of the disciple. It is meant to inspire practical application. So here it is. Given what this story is saying, here is what I think we should do.

1. Press through distractions and disappointments

I love the picture of the father in this story. He wants to get his son to Jesus but there is a cloud of distraction and stupid between him and the Lord. There are a bunch of people trying to engage Jesus in theological controversy and a bunch of other people trying to explain away their own pathetic lack of power – this brother doesn’t care for any of it. He presses through – he will not

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/35269-i-have-so-much-to-do-that-i-shall-spend>

be deterred by the faithlessness of the culture or the incompetence of the disciples – he just wants to see Jesus.

He presses through! And you need to do the same.

Are you confused by the culture? Are you disappointed by the church? PRESS THROUGH!

I understand that your friends do not believe; I understand that we've got more heresy, hypocrisy and stupidity on the loose in the Evangelical church than at any point previous in our history. I understand that, but I'm telling you this: PRESS THROUGH.

Because Jesus is still good, and still God all the time.

Press through.

And closet yourself – like Martin Luther - in the presence of Almighty God.

2. Closet yourself in the presence of God

Now, I'm not suggesting that you wake up at 2 in the morning – Martin Luther went to bed at 8:30 - but I am suggesting that you stop hiding behind the excuse that you are too busy. If you want to have power on the horizontal plane then you need to spend time on the vertical plane – that's a fact in every century. That's the secret that Jesus shared with his disciples after their embarrassing failure in the valley. He said, "Guys, you do not have power in and of yourself. You can only live and minister out of your relationship with me." So, you better nurture that relationship, you better attend your Divine appointments, because if you do not then you will fail when faced with spiritual and cultural opposition.

So it doesn't have to be 3 hours – we aren't all Martin Luther, but there is no reason it can't be 30 minutes.

So here is a very practical challenge: whatever time your alarm clock is set at now, wind it back 30 minutes. For the next 30 days spend your first 30 minutes alone with God. Read at least one

column of the RMM Bible Reading Plan – read one chapter of the Bible and breath that back to God. Even if you are a slow reader one chapter will not take you more than 10 minutes. Praying it back to God will not take more than 10 minutes – that will still leave you 10 minutes to make a cup of coffee and settle into your comfy chair. You can do this. You need to do this if you want to live and move in the power of God.

So press through and have that closet time with God. And then, when you are there, in his glorious presence:

3. Ask the Lord for grace and mercy

The Bible says that sometimes:

ye have not, because ye ask not. (James 4:2 KJV)

You didn't show up for your audience with the King. He was prepared to be merciful, but you were too busy to keep your appointment. So you have not, because you asked not.

Sometimes its just that simple.

That's the encouragement of the text - you don't have to be giant of faith. There are no giants of faith in this story. Just a dad with a very frail faith in Jesus. Just a dad who pressed through the noise and distraction and laid hold of Jesus and who prayed: I believe Lord; help my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

Just a dad who reached out to Jesus and received.

That is where all miracles begin. That is what true faith does, because this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.