

PRAYER AND FAITH:

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. ¹⁶ "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. ¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." ¹⁹ "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. ²² "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." ²³ "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁹ He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer." Mark 9:14-29.

In the beginning of this story there is an argument going on about delivering a boy from an evil spirit. The disciples of Jesus have tried and have failed, and this seems to have ignited the squabble. Jesus had deputised them to cast out demons. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons. Mark 3:15. They had some success, ¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. Mark 6:12-13. This, it seems, was a far more difficult case. The disciples are found totally inadequate and with a large crowd gathered around, they are now undergoing a bit of public shame and embarrassment. The teachers of the law, the theologians, were no less useless when confronted with this situation.

Mark describes the boy's affliction in graphic detail. ¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." Mark 9:17-19.

So, Jesus arrives during a noisy dispute and declares, ¹⁹ "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." Mark 9:19. The use of the phrase, "how long", is a kind of lament, but it also expresses some urgency. However, Jesus doesn't try to express his frustration but immediately takes action to rectify the situation.

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In verse twenty we see that when evil spirits are confronted with Jesus they react in some way. Praying in this sort of situation is asking for the presence of Jesus to be present by the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse twenty-three we see Jesus demanding the faith of those who believe to drive out this spirit. I like how David E. Garland in his commentary on Mark puts it, **"At the heart of this exorcism is the struggle for faith, not the struggle with a demon"**.

However, when the spirit comes into the presence of Jesus, the spirit exerts its power by throwing the boy into frightening spasms so that he falls to the ground and foams at the mouth. We now see the absolute desperation of a loving father. In verse twenty-three Jesus demands faith as a condition for deliverance from this spirit.

The response of Jesus is fast and direct, ²³ "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Faith puts no limits on what God can do. The father is straining to have faith and says in verse twenty-four, ²⁴ Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!". Even though he has doubt he pleads for help.

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁹ He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

In verses twenty-five to twenty-seven, we see Jesus doing battle with the spirit as he commands it to leave the boy and never return. The presence of Jesus throws the spirit into a fury and the boy convulsed violently. After this the boy looks like he is dead. Then Jesus reached out his hand and helped him up. Interestingly here, Jesus uses resurrection language. He lifts him to his feet could be translated, "he raised him up". Wow! Jesus drives the evil spirit out and gives the boy new life.

In the final scene, the disciples want to review their failure in the privacy of a house. Mark's account does not tell us about the reaction of the crowd or of the father. Everything is now focused on the disciples. While the exchange with the father focuses on faith, the conversation with Jesus emphasizes the importance of prayer. The phrase, **"This kind can come out only by prayer."**, implies that the disciples failed because they had not prayed. They were too busy arguing among themselves and with their opponents to pray.

Now, Jesus did not offer up a prayer during this exorcism but relied on his enduring prayer life and his relationship with God. Mark's gospel hints that Jesus regularly engaged in prayer. ³⁵ **Very early in the morning,**

while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Mark 1:35. ⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. Mark 6:45-46.

Faith requires humble trust. The father comes to Jesus conflicted and hesitantly not with demanding and bold swagger. He is like a man desperately treading water in a deep ocean, pleading for Jesus to rescue him. He still expects everything from God but nothing in his own strength. Here is something for us to note. As David E. Garland comments, **“Jesus is not put off by the humble honesty of one who says, I believe but I am not certain of it. He grants what is asked”.**

Faith comes as a gift and is sustained by the power of Jesus, the same power that casts out the evil spirit that held the boy captive. As the father did not think his own faith was enough, he asked for the help of Jesus. So, we must all rely on Jesus to help us be faith filled. God will always offer help for faith as well as healing. Jesus calls us to go down to where cries of help are the loudest because that is where we can put faith into practice.

We should also never forget that people come to get help from Jesus, not us. The father says to Jesus, **“7 A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought YOU my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Mark 9:17. He did not bring him to the disciples. Jesus responds by saying, ¹⁹ “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to ME.” Mark 9:19.** We must always acknowledge and direct those in pain to Jesus. That is why this prayer is recited repeatedly, **Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**

We all face enormous challenges that put us in desperate need of God. There isn't a single challenge you face that does not have a spiritual component, doesn't call for spiritual strength, spiritual insight, or the need for God's direct enablement. So, what does intense prayer involve? We must pray with intensity. Intensity also means that we pray with dependence, radical dependence. That's what gives it its intensity. That's what we found in the story we read about Jesus and his disciples. Take another look at the final few words: **28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn't we drive it out?” 29 He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.” (Mark 9:28-29).**

Do you see what Jesus was teaching them? Intense prayer, the kind that unleashes God's power, is dependent prayer. Which means you are not expecting anything to come in the flesh. To expect things in the flesh means that you are expecting breakthroughs in your own strength, in your own power, through your own abilities, through your own wisdom, through your own resources. You're not really looking to God.

That's not a single prayer. That's a lifestyle. That's a way of living. Did you catch that? Jesus didn't say, “Why didn't you pray here, on the spot, before you tried? He didn't say, “Why didn't you pray for the right prayer to cast out demons? He said, “This breakthrough can only come about through prayer”. Then he took care of it without praying at all. Do you get his lesson? There are areas of your life where you need God's power to be unleashed, but it can only come through prayer.

Not in a spirit that demands, but a spirit that depends. And it is to be a daily dependence. The Bible is very clear on this. In Zechariah we read, **“Not by might, nor by power, but my Spirit” says the Lord Almighty Zechariah 4:6.** Faith and dependent prayer are built on days, months and years of following Jesus and keeping close to God. It's not faith in a one-off prayer, but faith built over a long period of time. Gradually over time we learn that God is not a silent God who does not want to be heard or experienced. He is also not a resistant God who needs to be manipulated into paying attention to us. He is also not a reluctant God who has to be convinced to do something good for us. No, we come to realise that God is a God of compassion.⁸ **The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. Psalm 103:8.**

Finally, prayer is a crying out to God, a simple conversation, listening and waiting in the presence of God who loves us. Once we learn these aspects, we can make prayerfulness a daily practice and build up our faith and as the Apostle Paul says, “pray without ceasing”. The important thing is faithfulness in prayer. Make it a part of your daily life. Pray for others, not just yourself. Always begin with gratitude and thankfulness. Slowly the distractions will diminish, and you will find yourself in the presence of God. It's not hard to find. Once there, you may find that it is possible to remain in an attitude of prayer and gratitude throughout the day. Then prayer and faith will grow together.