

Mark – The First Gospel

022 – A Botched Exorcism – Mark 9:14-29

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First Thoughts

In a scene that may be meant to echo Moses' first ascent and descent of Sinai¹, where the people waiting for him to return lose faith, the scene at the base of the mountain upon Jesus' return from the Transfiguration is that of chaos and a failure of the remaining disciples to carry out the task that they should have been able to do. Jesus rebukes all of them saying, "You faithless generation..."²

As moderns we want to try to explain the science behind the "spirit" that torments the boy. But to do so misses the point of the story. It really doesn't matter if the spirit is a neurological (or another physiological) defect or a demon. The symptoms and the result are tragic for the boy, his father, and by implicit extension, his family.

This narrative discusses faith. But whose faith and what is its nature? Is faith a pre-requisite for healing? What does Jesus mean when he says, "All things are possible for the one who has faith"³?

The actual exorcism and its ending is also unusual. Jesus calls the spirit the "mute and deaf spirit."⁴ And the boy appears dead, but Jesus then takes his hand and "raises" him. Do these strange details have any significance?

Finally Jesus tells his disciples, privately, that "throwing this kind of spirit out requires prayer."⁵ Does this mean that there are different types of spirits—some that don't require prayer? Or is Jesus attempting to communicate something else?

The story can be subdivided into four parts. Beginning with the end of the first section and continuing through the second is a long dialogue between the father of the boy and Jesus. Although the person around whom the action centers in this story is the boy, it is the father who is key to the message Mark wants to communicate to his audience. The climax may be considered to be the father's famous statement about faith: "I have faith; help my lack of faith!"⁶

¹ *UBC: Mark, 9:14-29.*

² *Contemporary English Bible, Mark 9:19.*

³ *CEB, Mark 9:23.*

⁴ *CEB, Mark 9:25.*

⁵ *CEB, Mark 9:29.*

⁶ *CEB, Mark 9:24.*

A. Setting the Scene

9:14 And when they [Jesus, Peter, James, and John] came to the [rest of 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 [awe, excitement] 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." (ESV)

The father would not have brought the boy to Jesus' disciples if there hadn't been precedent (3:15; 6:7, 13) of them being able to cast out demons. The crowd certainly expected the disciples to be able to do so.

What were the scribes and the disciples arguing about? Jesus asks his disciples this question. In response Jesus does not hear from his disciples, but rather from someone in the crowd, who turns out to be the boy's father. The argument seems to have revolved around the inability of the disciples to cast out the demon.

... The dispute undoubtedly concerned not only the failure of the disciples but the more basic question concerning their authorization to attempt an exorcism... The father had appealed to the disciples to exercise the power known to belong to Jesus because the principle basic to discipleship was that "the messenger of a man is as the man himself." In Jesus' absence the disciples stood in his place and were regarded as he is. It was therefore legitimate to expect that they possessed the power of their master.⁷

The crowd is "greatly amazed" (ESV) at the sight of Jesus. Since Jesus had yet not done anything, some other translations render it in ways that we might explain it today. However, "amazed" may be the most proper translation. It can be read as Markan commentary, rather than a direct part of the narrative.

Verse 15 has the character of a marginal note, presenting Mark's comment on the fact reported: in seeing Jesus, the people were astonished. The astonishment of the crowd was occasioned by the presence of Jesus, rather than by any particular aspect of the event (such as his unexpected arrival at a critical moment). In the Gospel expressions of fear and astonishment serve to emphasize the revelatory content and Christological significance of many incidents.⁸

Whatever the nature of the disease or possession, the result is that the boy suffers, and the father with him. As far as Mark and crowd are concerned, the source is directly demonic. Whether one accepts such a direct involvement of demons or not, the reality of the effects of sin are demonstrated in this boy.

No reason is given as to the cause of the disciples' inability to cast out the demon. Various reasons have been suggested:

⁷ NICNT: Mark, 9:14-15 and 16-18.

⁸ NICNT: Mark, 9:14-15.

They undoubtedly tried in various ways to heal the boy, but they were inadequate to the resistance they encountered. They possessed the power of God only in personal faith, but during Jesus' absence an attitude of unbelief and self-confidence, based on past success, had exposed them to failure.⁹

... The reader is presented with the examples, on the one hand of the unbelieving and bickering teachers of the law (representing the Jewish establishment's rejection of Jesus) and the powerless disciples (who also show a lack of faith)...¹⁰

The ability to drive out the evil spirit is connected with the ability to believe. The Greek word is *pisteuō* (v. 23), here translated as "believe" but also sometimes translated as "have faith." Rather than a concern for knowledge, the word has to do with relationship, specifically the relationship between human beings and God... Jesus has a relationship with God that gives him the power to drive out the spirit. By contrast, the disciples do not. Perhaps because of their earlier success, they think that they do have confidence in God; their inability to heal the boy bears witness that they do not.¹¹

B. Dialogue with Jesus

9:19 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!"

Who is Jesus calling a "faithless generation"? The father? The disciples? The scribes? The crowd? Some combination, or all of them? Commentators have various thoughts (c.f., commentary quotes above).

From this point on, the disciples are out of the picture altogether until the private scene in 9:28 "in the house." Thus, the disciples' failure is not blamed on their lack of faith, but on the faithlessness of the father and the crowd. They are the ones Jesus addresses as "O faithless generation" in 9:19.¹²

The language used in Jesus' rebuke in 9:19 (see note¹³), *O unbelieving generation*, is intentionally similar to the terms used to describe the unbelieving Pharisees in 8:12 and the persecutors of Jesus' followers in 8:38, showing that this episode urges the readers to follow Jesus completely and to avoid the unbelief typified by the teachers of the law.¹⁴

⁹ NICNT: Mark, 9:16-18.

¹⁰ UBC: Mark, 9:14-29.

¹¹ Feasting: Mark, locations 9453-9460.

¹² Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

¹³ UBC: Mark, note for 9:19. "The term for 'generation' is used in 8:12 and 8:38 with reference to those who deny and oppose Jesus."

¹⁴ UBC: Mark, 9:14-29.

Jesus' poignant cry of exasperation is an expression of weariness which is close to heart-break (cf. Chs. 3:5; 8:12). This is brought into sharp relief when his exclamation is seen to be a personal word addressed to the disciples, who alone had failed at the crucial moment.¹⁵

When Jesus calls the disciples, the crowd and the scribes a "faithless generation" (v. 19), is this reproach a judgment on the failure of the disciples to cast the spirit out of the child? Since the crowds and scribes are clearly included in the denunciation, is it possible that Jesus is not rebuking the disciples for their failure, but rather reprimanding the whole lot of them for their arguing? Perhaps Jesus' chastisement is not a rebuke of their failure per se but of their faithless and divisive response to failure.¹⁶

The humanity of Jesus (ever-present in the Markan account) again rises. Jesus sounds exasperated and perhaps even worried. He knows his time is growing shorter, and the understanding of the people, including and especially his disciples, seems as shallow as it was when he began to teach.

The boy is brought to Jesus and "immediately" the spirit, recognizing Jesus, send the boy into convulsions. Instead of casting out the demon, Jesus continues to engage the father in dialogue. Why does Jesus do this rather than immediately cure the boy? During the dialogue, Jesus (and we) learn more about the suffering the boy has undergone. What do we learn from this?

By reducing the son to complete helplessness the unclean spirit betrayed his malicious intent to destroy the child and his utter contempt for Jesus.¹⁷

This dialogue includes both the exhortation to faith and details about the boy's condition, which serve to make it clear that this was a desperate need and that the power of evil was truly present. But the point of giving these details is to say that in just such a difficult situation Jesus' followers are expected to trust in Christ and to deal with the need as he did.¹⁸

Towards the end of the dialogue the father reveals skepticism about Jesus' ability. Perhaps his faith had been diminished by the inability of the disciples to cast out the demon.¹⁹

At the same time, his words contain a concealed accusation against the powerlessness of the disciples, which has led him to doubt Jesus' ability to offer real assistance to his son.²⁰

Jesus seems to call the father out on his lack of faith. And what precisely does Jesus mean by "all things are possible for one who believes"?

This response makes it clear that to regard as conditional the *possibility* of the requested miracle is to be unbelieving.²¹

This story does not teach that if one has enough faith, one can cure epilepsy. The story does not claim that those with enough faith will never have a debilitating condition in the first place, or if they do, they

¹⁵ NICNT: Mark, 9:19.

¹⁶ Feasting: Mark, locations 9393-9396.

¹⁷ NICNT: Mark, 9:20-22.

¹⁸ UBC: Mark, 9:14-29.

¹⁹ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

²⁰ NICNT: Mark, 9:20-22.

²¹ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

can will it away themselves. Rather, it teaches that people are safe, and saved, in the company of those who throw themselves on God's compassion.²²

The **everything** that is **possible** in 9:23 does not convey that believing will magically produce anything one might desire but rather means that Jesus' power is available by faith to meet any need that arises *in the course of ministering in his name*.²³

Some listeners may hear Jesus' statement, "All things can be done for the one who believes," and infer that unanswered prayers must result from lack of faith. Jesus says all things "can be done" (v. 23), but listeners know that, for inscrutable reasons, all things are not done. Sometimes healing does not occur. Sometimes prayers seem to go unanswered. ¶The difficult reality is that belief, no matter how strong, and prayer, no matter how fervent, do not guarantee a particular outcome.²⁴

The father's response to Jesus' challenge is the famous quote, "I believe; help my unbelief!" What should we make of this? What does it tell us about the nature of faith?

His cry expresses humanity and distress at being asked to manifest radical faith when unbelief is the form of human existence. At the same time that he affirms his faith, he associates himself with the rebuke addressed to the disciples: this generation is always unbelieving. The ambivalence in his confession is a natural expression of anxiety in the earnest desire to see his son released, but it is also a candid plea for help at that point where his faith is ready to fail. The exchange between Jesus and the father established the personal relationship necessary for the accomplishment of the release.²⁵

... The response of the father allows us to explore the interplay of faith and doubt, belief and unbelief. While it is nice to imagine that we ourselves are full of faith, and that our churches are filled with people who never experience doubt, the reality is that most of us have the tentative faith of this father. Our faith begins with "if." Yet this father is celebrated for acknowledging the admixture of belief and doubt in his own life. Standing in front of Jesus, with his own child suffering from possession by a spirit, this man is willing to announce both his belief and unbelief all at once, comingled.²⁶

Perfect faith is not required. The father does not permit his doubt to paralyze him. Instead, he moves closer to Jesus. He acknowledges the limits of his own power and asks Jesus to do the rest. Jesus responds with compassion. Jesus may have rebuked the disciples and crowd, calling them a "faithless generation" (v. 19), but he has no harsh words for the father. As William Placher observes, "In our story, Jesus does not say to the father, 'Well, you'll have to try harder.' The father having begged for faith, Jesus simply cures his son. So we take our fragile, half-broken faith to God, and in God's grace it suffices."²⁷

C. Exorcism

^{9:25} *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*

²² *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9354-9357.

²³ *UBC: Mark*, note on 9:24.

²⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9506-9510.

²⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 9:23-24.

²⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9397-9401.

²⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9491-9496.

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.

In a narrative oddity, Mark reports that a crowd is gathering, when there already was a crowd gathered (v.14). The reason for this placement is uncertain, but perhaps Mark is emphasizing the point that Jesus sometimes has reason to avoid the crowd when he performs his healing works.

In response to the father's admission of faith *and* its lack, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit. This word, *rebuke*, is the same word used when Peter tried to rebuke Jesus and Jesus rebuked Peter in turn (8:32, 33). In Jesus' rebuke, it is interesting that he calls it the "mute and deaf spirit" when the father initially described it as a "spirit the make him mute" (v.17) only. Perhaps Jesus' description is Mark's way of recalling an earlier narrative that involved muteness and deafness (7:31-37). Jesus' rebuke is quite emphatic: commanding the unclean spirit to leave *and* to never return.

Still desperate and still honest, the father cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" To this request Jesus immediately responds by exorcising the boy. This demonstrates three things: (1) Jesus does have the faith for which nothing is impossible; (2) inadequate faith on the part of either victim or advocate does not prevent miracles; and (3) the answer to the father's prayer that Jesus help his unbelief is the miracle itself, which would certainly destroy any doubts the father had about Jesus' power.²⁸

The portrait of the faith of this father invites listeners to a richer understanding of belief. In contemporary Christianity, belief is often understood as intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. In this story, however, the question is not whether the father can affirm a specific creed or statement, or whether he follows a particular faith community. In this story, belief is portrayed as a matter of trust: trust in the power of God to transform situations that are hopeless by human standards.²⁹

The result of the exorcism is so violent that immediately afterwards the boy appears as one dead. So much so that those who saw were quite sure he was dead. But Jesus takes the boy by the hand to raise him up. The word "arose" is related to the word for resurrection.³⁰

In 9:27, Mark says that the boy's convulsions left him in a condition looking like death but that Jesus lifted him to his feet. Jesus' action foreshadows of his own victory over death in his resurrection and symbolizes that the power of Jesus is this lifegiving power.³¹

That malicious action was repeated at the moment of exorcism with such violence that the boy took on the appearance of a corpse—so much so that most of the people said he was dead. The expression "became as one dead" implies that he was not dead, although there was clearly room for discussion concerning this (cf. Ch. 5:39-42). But the accumulation of the vocabulary of death and resurrection in verses 26-27, and the parallelism with the narrative of the raising of Jairus' daughter, suggest that Mark wished to allude to a death and resurrection. The dethroning of Satan is always a reversal of death and an affirmation of life. There is a nuance in this instance, however, which must be appreciated. There appears to be a definite heightening of demonic resistance to Jesus which can be traced in the sequence Ch. 1:23-

²⁸ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29.

²⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9496-9500.

³⁰ *Anistemi* (G450), same word used about Jesus rising again in 8:31.

³¹ *UBC: Mark*, 9:14-29.

27 — Ch. 5:1-20 — Ch. 9:14-29. In this instance the disciples are powerless before the demon's tenacious grip upon the child and Jesus is successful only by the costly means of death and resuscitation. The healing of the possessed boy thus points beyond itself to the necessity of Jesus' own death and resurrection before Satan's power can be definitively broken.³²

D. Epilogue

9:28 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."

Although Mark gives the answer to why the disciples were unable to cast out the demon – they didn't pray – we are still left wondering what exactly that means.

A withdrawal to a house where Jesus may be questioned in private by the disciples is recorded in Chs. 4:10; 7:17; 9:28 and 10:10, and on each occasion these conversations provide supplementary teaching reserved for the disciples alone. In the house Jesus emphasizes the theological point of an incident. In this instance the final conversation relates to the central theme of the unit, for the epilogue qualifies the faith of verse 23 as the faith that prays.³³

Whose faith and prayer? The one doing the casting out, the one asking for it, or the one who is afflicted? Commentaries offer various possibilities.

Since the Markan Jesus has not prayed in this particular story, this must be a reference to the necessity of a regular practice of prayer. The disciples' power for ministry depends upon the quality of their time spent in the presence of God. ¶In 1:36 "Simon and those with him" pursue Jesus out to his place of private prayer, demonstrating that they have little or no patience with someone who merely prays when there is so much to do. This may reflect a problem in the Markan community that the evangelist addresses using the disciples as bad examples. If the Christian community lacks spiritual power, the problem may be an over-emphasis on action to the neglect of prayer.³⁴

The dialogue between Jesus and the father of the demoniac boy in 9:23-24 provides an object lesson for Mark's readers on the importance of strong faith in Jesus. This function is verified by the final and climactic word in 9:29 that prayer is the means for Jesus' followers to acquire the faith and resources to conduct the required mission.³⁵

In response to the inevitable question of why they had failed, Jesus explained to the disciples that such malign evil spirits can be expelled only by a full reliance upon the unlimited power of God expressed through prayer. This response contains at least the implicit criticism that the disciples had failed because they had not acted in prayer and sincere faith... The disciples had been tempted to believe that the gift they had received from Jesus (Ch. 6:7) was in their control and could be exercised at their disposal. This was a subtle form of unbelief, for it encouraged them to trust in themselves rather than in God. They had

³² NICNT: Mark, 9:25-27.

³³ NICNT: Mark, 9:28-29.

³⁴ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

³⁵ UBC: Mark, 9:14-29.

to learn that their previous success in expelling demons provided no guarantee of continued power. Rather the power of God must be asked for on each occasion in radical reliance upon his ability alone.³⁶

The prayer in this story comes on the lips of the stricken boy's father, who prays for faith in words that Mark's readers of every generation have used in their own paradoxical moments of simultaneously believing and not believing: "I believe; help my unbelief." Whatever faith this man needs, for himself or for his son, comes not from the depths of his own being, but from the God who answers prayers like this and who gives faith and trust to frightened souls and doubting hearts.³⁷

When Jesus' disciples question him privately about the reason for their failure to cast out the spirit, he explains, "This kind can come out only through prayer" (v. 29). Indeed, the father's plea to Jesus for healing is much like a prayer. Of course, Jesus' response to the disciples does not mean that if only they had remembered to pray first, then they could have expelled the demon. Prayer does not function as a magic formula, always yielding the desired result.³⁸

Of tangential interest is that some manuscripts add "and fasting" at the end of v.29.

The stress that prayer alone is efficacious, however, is striking because in Judaism the recitation of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-6), and of Psalms 3 and 91 was considered a powerful agent against evil spirits. In the early Church the efficacy of fasting was championed and this emphasis has left its mark upon almost the entire manuscript tradition of verse 29.³⁹

Summary

A few final thoughts before leaving this story.

This child's possession, in many ways, reflects the difficult situations and evil circumstances faced by disciples of Jesus, who long to make a difference. His circumstance also invites us to consider the many injustices and oppressions people face in our communities and around the globe. Symbolically, the child's suffering could stand for other forms of injustice and oppression, and so remind us to pay particular attention to the varied injustices that affect children disproportionately: hunger, war, discrimination, modern-day slavery, sexual exploitation.⁴⁰

If the church lives as the continuation of the incarnation, the body of Christ on earth, then it will not keep safe distances from injustice by only making pronouncements, signing petitions, and lobbying for legislation. The church will take victims by the hand and build relationships. Might it be that the failure to do this— the failure to touch the child— was the beginning of the disciples' inability to cast out the spirit?⁴¹

Rather, prayer points us back to the God who is the source of all power and all healing. Prayer is an expression of faith, giving voice to our dependence on God and our need for God. In prayer, we cease looking at ourselves and look instead to God. In this, the father proves himself a model of faithful

³⁶ NICNT: Mark, 9:28-29.

³⁷ Feasting: Mark, locations 9350-9354.

³⁸ Feasting: Mark, locations 9500-9504.

³⁹ NICNT: Mark, 9:28-29.

⁴⁰ Feasting: Mark, locations 9405-9408.

⁴¹ Feasting: Mark, locations 9410-9413.

discipleship, and his story brings good news to those who struggle to believe: faltering, fumbling faith is enough, for God carries us the rest of the way.⁴²

This incident brings us back down from the glorious height of the transfiguration experience to the earthly sphere, where the power of evil is confronted and where unbelief is a constant danger. In the same way that the disciples are brought back into Jesus' earthly mission here after the transfiguration that prefigures and symbolizes Jesus' resurrection, so Mark's readers were to realize that they, after the resurrection of Christ, were called still to an earthly mission of faith and of proclamation of Christ against the forces of evil. This exorcism, the last one mentioned in Mark, shows the power of Jesus (portrayed in the transfiguration) in action in practical terms and means that it is in such ministry (and not in visionary experiences) that Christ's power and glory are properly to be seen in the life of his followers.⁴³

⁴² *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9511-9514.

⁴³ *UBC: Mark*, 9:14-29.