



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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“Only by Prayer”
Mark 9:2-29

It had been an awesome experience up on the mountain for Peter, James, and John, one they would never forget.

Jesus had taken them with Him—just the four of them, to get away for a little while. He did that from time to time. These three seemed to have formed an inner circle among the disciples, although it's not clear exactly why Jesus chose them. Nevertheless, He did.

So at His invitation, they had climbed a high mountain for a retreat. They may have wondered why they were there. Mark doesn't tell us exactly what was going on at the beginning of this retreat. Matthew doesn't either. But Luke tells us that Jesus took them there *to pray*.

And then it happened. Right before their very eyes, they saw Jesus transfigured, transformed into His eternal, heavenly state for a few fleeting moments, giving them a glimpse of His glory, showing them who He really is. Moses and Elijah appeared with him, carrying on a conversation with Him. Peter, James, and John didn't understand what it all meant, and Jesus' command after it was all over not to tell anyone about it until after His resurrection simply added to their bewilderment. But one thing they did know—they would never look at Jesus quite the same again!

We remember this event today on this Transfiguration Sunday. It was an incredible “mountaintop experience” for them, both literally and figuratively.

Down from the mountaintop

But you can only stay on the mountaintop for so long. So now they were coming down the mountain from this awesome, astounding experience . . . to a fuss! It seems like it happens that way a lot, doesn't it?

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John came to the other nine disciples, they found them surrounded by a crowd as some scribes—teachers of the law—were arguing with them, no doubt about Jesus' teachings and activities. When Jesus asked the disciples what they were arguing with the scribes about, a man in the crowd spoke up: **“Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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”** (9:17-18).¹

Now you can feel for this man, can't you? Who knows what all he had tried in order to help his poor son? Here is a parent with a suffering child, who has done everything he possibly can to help his child, but to no avail. Over and over he's looked for help, but he's found none. He has no doubt felt frustrated, he's probably felt angry; now he was feeling absolutely helpless.

Early in December 1993, when we were serving the Neill's Creek Baptist Church near Angier, NC, I had been visiting a church member in the hospital in Raleigh. The church secretary called me on the cell phone as I was leaving the hospital and said that my mother had called and wanted her to get word to me that my brother's 19-year-old daughter, Megan, was critically ill. I called my mother, and to my disbelief, she said they thought Megan had suffered a stroke. As it turned out, she had experienced a massive stroke in her brain stem that had paralyzed her literally from the nose down. The only thing she could move was her eyes.

As we went back and forth from Angier to Charlotte to visit Megan in the hospital, I watched my brother. He watched her on the ventilator, wondering if she'd ever be able to breathe on her own again, if she'd ever be able to do *anything* again—for a while wondering if she would even *live*. Thankfully she did live, and had some recovery, though at age 43 she's still confined to a motorized wheelchair and limited in what she can do.

As we talked one day while she was in the hospital, my brother said, "I just feel so helpless. There's not one thing in the world I can do to help her."

My brother knew how this boy's father felt.

Hoping for help

Apparently this man had heard someone talk about the marvelous miracles Jesus had been performing. As he heard these stories about Jesus, they must have kindled a glimmer of hope in him. He brought his boy, looking for Jesus. Jesus was in a retreat on the mountain, but he had heard that Jesus' disciples had gone about preaching and teaching, casting out demons and healing people as well. Shouldn't they be able to help his son?

Well, they tried. And they tried. And they tried some more. They tried everything they knew to drive out that spirit. But they couldn't.

So now, the man was telling Jesus about it, almost as if he were complaining about it: "I brought my son to You to cast this demon out of him. Since You weren't here, **I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.**" Who could blame him?

Jesus told them to bring the boy to him. When they did, the demon recognized Jesus and threw the boy into a violent seizure. It was an awful sight as he was in convulsions, rolling around on the ground, foaming at the mouth. Jesus calmly asked the father how long the boy had been this way. The father said it was from his childhood, and that the demon had often caused the boy to throw himself into the fire or water, trying to kill him. Then in pure desperation, he cried out to Jesus, "**But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us!**" (9:22).

Jesus responded to him, "**If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes.**" To this the man replied, "**I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!**" (9:23-24).

Now *this* was an earnest, honest prayer! In total transparency, the man made no bones about the tension between belief and unbelief that had hold of his soul. No doubt, he believed Jesus *could*; He had done it for others. But could he believe that He *would*, that He indeed *would* drive out this horrific spirit from his son?

Jesus honored his prayer, and commanded the spirit to leave and never to return to the boy. The spirit tried to hold on, but had to obey Jesus' power and command. With a loud shriek and one last violent seizure, it left the boy, and left him in such a state that many of those there that day thought he was dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, so that he stood up.

And then Jesus left, and went into a house with His disciples.

Wondering why

When they were in private, the disciples simply had to ask Him: **“Why couldn’t we drive it out?”** (9:28).

Remember, it hadn’t been long since Jesus had sent them out to preach and cast out demons and heal, giving them power and authority over demons and diseases (Mark 6:6b-13). So why didn’t it work this time?

“I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

But Jesus could.

The disciples knew there was a reason that they couldn’t, but He could.

Could it be that they were simply over-confident, based on their past successes? Were they relying on themselves, on their own strength and moral resources, rather than on Jesus’ power?

Could it be because Jesus was not physically present with them when they were trying to drive the demon out? Well, He wasn’t with them on their preaching tour, and they were able to do it then.

Could it be that the commission Jesus had given them was only good for that particular tour? Maybe it didn’t cover this situation, or had somehow expired.

Or maybe they just weren’t using the right words or formula for this particular kind of spirit.

Was there something lacking in their faith? There was certainly nothing lacking in their efforts!

Or could it be that in the busyness and press of their ministry, they were simply out of touch with God? Could it be that their activism and their activities had caused them to neglect their prayers, their communion and conversation with God on a daily basis?

“I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

“Jesus, **why couldn’t we drive it out?**”

Jesus answered, **“This kind can come out only by prayer”** (9:29).

Did it come out because of the father’s earnest but honest prayer? Or was it because of Jesus’ frequent and continual prayer times with the Father? What’s clear is that it was the disciples’ *lack* of prayer that prevented them from driving it out.

Praying in faith

Is Mark saying something to us here about the connection between faith and prayer, and the balance between prayer and action?

Commenting on this passage, Sharyn Dowd observes that in Mark 1:36-37, Simon (Peter) and the others tracked Jesus down to His place of prayer, seemingly impatient with His taking time *to pray* when there was so much *to do*. Then she says, “If the Christian community lacks spiritual power, the problem may be an overemphasis on action to the neglect of prayer.”²

“I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

We forget sometimes, don’t we, that **“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,”** as Paul described it in Ephesians 6:12?

Doesn’t Mark make it clear here? Jesus has power over the powers—the evil spirits and demonic forces that oppress and enslave human beings. If we are to share in that power, then *we must be vitally connected to Him through believing prayer!* Through consistent, earnest, honest prayer, we experience in Christ God’s power over the powers. Prayer connects us with the God who empowers us for ministry. **“This kind can come out *only by prayer.*”**

The Baptist Women of our WMU have often emphasized the importance of prayer in

missions, reminding us that missionaries tell us that's the *most* important need they have.

Now we pray because we believe, don't we? But do we really believe when we pray?

Laverne Hall tells of a prayer meeting called by the ministers of a town experiencing a severe drought. They asked everyone to meet at the town square the following Saturday at high noon, and to bring an object of faith for inspiration. The townspeople turned out *en masse* at the appointed time, filling town square with anxious faces and hopeful hearts. Clutched in their hands were a variety of objects—Bibles, holy books, crosses, rosaries. When the hour of prayer ended, a soft rain began to fall. The crowd cheered and held high their treasured symbols of faith in gratitude and praise. And in the middle of the crowd, there was one faith symbol that seemed to overshadow all the others—a nine-year-old child had brought . . . *an umbrella*.³

"I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!"

"This kind can come out *only by prayer*."

Then I look at us, at the abundant resources and marvelous opportunities God has given us, and our frequent lack of spiritual power as individual disciples and as the church of Jesus Christ—and I ask, "Why?"

Then I hear Jesus say, "*Only by prayer*."

And I respond, "Lord, I believe; help me overcome my unbelief. Help me bring my umbrella!"

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition); italics mine for emphasis.

² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 95.

³ Jack Canfield *et al.*, eds., *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1997), 198-199.