

A Boy's Deliverance -- Mark 9:14-29

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, we are about to open Your Word. We ask for the same Spirit that moved Mark to record these stories to move our hearts this morning. May our experience here today be supernatural. May we leave here changed by Your power. In Jesus' name, amen.

In 1934 a French entomologist named Antoine Magnan is quoted as saying, "First prompted by what is done in aviation, I applied the laws of air resistance to insects, and I arrived, with Mr. Sainte-Lague, (his assistant who was a mathematician) at the conclusion that their flight is impossible." In essence, what he was saying is that if a bee flew like an airplane, it wouldn't be able to get off the ground. Ever since, for the last close to 80 years, there has been a lot of discussion about how scientifically a bee should not be able to fly.

This idea has also received a lot of attention from the scientists, as it has often been used to mock them: "Oh, you can put a man on the moon, but you can't explain how a bee flies!" So, they have done quite a bit of research and found out just how complex a bee's flight pattern is. First, there's the structure of a bee's wings. They are not smooth and rigid like the wings of an airplane. Instead, they are rough and flexible. Second, there's the movement of a bee's wings. The wings, instead of being stationary like an airplane, experience liquid movement. They bend and twist with each up-and-down cycle. Third, there's the bee's wings rate of movement. They beat 230 times a second, significantly faster than expected. Fourth, is the thorax muscle, which propels the wings. This muscle moves the wings by vibrating, similar to plucking a guitar string. With each vibration the wings move up and down several times. Last of all, scientists have discovered a bee's adjustable flight pattern with heavy loads, as they carry up to their own body weight. They are able to compensate for the increased load like a transmission. In a sense they are able to downshift when necessary.

So, although, a scientist or entomologist today would not dare to say that it is impossible for a bee to fly, they would say that how it flies is very complex and would admit that they don't fully understand how they fly. So, here's the point: bees are not paralyzed by the "impossible". Regardless of what man has said is impossible, a bee flies anyway. This is probably more than can be said of us. In fact, many in our story today were paralyzed by the "impossible".

Let's begin with a summary:

As Jesus arrived at the bottom of the mountain, he noticed a crowd gathered around His disciples and the scribes. A man from the crowd stepped forward and explained to Jesus that His disciples had not been able to cast the evil spirit out of his son. As the boy approached Jesus, the spirit threw him into a convulsion. The father desperately asked Jesus if He could do anything, to which Jesus responded, "All things are possible to the one who believes." In response to the father's expression of faith, Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the boy and to never return. After a desperate struggle the spirit came out. Later, when the disciples asked Jesus why they could not cast out the spirit, Jesus declared that the missing ingredient was prayer.

So, what did Jesus experience in this story? First of all, He experienced an attempt to humiliate. Jesus and three of His disciples (Peter, James, and John) had spent the night at the top of the Mount of Transfiguration. However the other nine disciples had been left at the bottom of the mountain. So, as Jesus comes back down the mountain to meet back up with His other nine disciples, this is the scene that Mark records. First, there is a "great multitude" surrounding His disciples (Mark 9:14). These people, as soon as they see Jesus, become "greatly amazed", run to Him, and greet Him. It is possible that they could still detect a halo around Him from His transfiguration just a few hours before. But Jesus is not flattered or distracted by their fascination with Him. His focus is on another scene. He sees a huddle that involves His disciples and the scribes. Mark 9:14 says they were "disputing".

Jesus responds to this scene by directing a question to the scribes in verse 16: "What are you discussing with them?" The question reveals some jealousy. He knows the scribes are attempting to humiliate them and thus discredit His own ministry. But the scribes are suddenly silent. After an uncomfortable pause, a man from the crowd emerges to explain what's going on. He gives a very detailed description of what has been happening to his son (according to Luke 9:38, his ONLY son) under the control of an evil spirit. Notice his description in Mark 9:17, 18. (Read) The father almost seems to glorify the work of the devil. In contrast with all that the spirit has been doing, the father mentions that Jesus' disciples haven't been able to do anything. So the scribes have taken advantage of the situation and are making a mockery of Jesus' disciples and His ministry. It seems that Jesus has finally met His match. And so after a mountain-top experience of glory, Jesus experiences an attempt to humiliate.

Next Jesus experienced barriers to healing. There are three, in fact. The first is mentioned in Mark 9:19. In response to hearing the father's report, and in response to seeing the unbelief in the people's hearts, He declares, "O faithless generation". This great lack of faith is indeed a barrier to this boy being healed. The second barrier is seen in verse 20, which records, "when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him". It's not apparent who the pronoun "he" refers to. It could refer to the spirit or to the boy. It could be that when the boy saw Jesus, he tried to cry for help. But the spirit interrupted his attempt by throwing him into a convulsion. Then it could also be that when the spirit saw Jesus, he felt threatened, knowing what Jesus was capable of doing. And this convulsion was meant to be a distraction, a barrier to healing. The third barrier is revealed in verse 22. In verse 21 Jesus has asked a seemingly casual question, "How long has this been happening to him?" This boy is being shaken with great violence and Jesus appears to sense no urgency. He allows the spirit to perform. The father answers Jesus' question, stating that his son has been like this "from childhood". Or it could also be translated "from infancy". (This boy's pitiful condition is quite like ours as sinners, who have been born slaves to sin through no choice of our own.) So, in verse 22, the third barrier is revealed in the closing remarks of the father, "If You can do anything..." - words exposing unbelief and sounding a lot like those of the devil himself when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. These three barriers reveal in themselves quite clearly the reason why no one has been able to cast out this spirit.

Third, Jesus experienced calling for faith. Jesus responds to the father's desperate cry by saying, "If you can believe..." The question is not whether Jesus is a match for this spirit. The question is whether anyone will believe in Jesus' authority over the enemy. "All things are possible to him who believes," Jesus assured the father. Suddenly the father realizes that he might be the reason his son is kept in this torturous captivity. Mark 9:24 says, "Immediately the father cried out." In utter desperation he screams with tears streaming down his face, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" It is all the father can do. And it is exactly what Jesus was calling for.

Fourth, Jesus experienced setting a captive free. Mark 9:25 mentions that with all this commotion "the people came running together". The shrieks of the spirit and the screams of the father are creating a scene. And so Jesus ends the delay. He rebukes the spirit, saying, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" Instead of an immediate calm, the spirit cried out and increased the violence of the convulsions. But with a shriek he then came out. He was in utter rage at his defeat. But he could not resist Jesus' command. The spirit is gone, but the people are filled with yet another reason to fear. It appears that the boy didn't make it. He looks so still and crumpled up, that it appears the violent shaking has killed him. But Mark 9:27 says, "Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up." And everyone breathes a sigh of relief. Jesus has set the captive free.

Last of all Jesus experienced revealing a need for prayer. Mark 9:28 says that after this was over, He and his disciples left and went to someone's house. The way Mark describes it as them coming "into the house", gives the idea that this is Simon's house in Capernaum. His house had been the headquarters for Jesus' ministry in Galilee. There in the house in private, the nine disciples ask Jesus, "Why could we not cast him out?" If this spirit was indeed no match for Jesus' authority, why had they not been able to cast him out in His name? Jesus responds with a somewhat ambiguous answer. He says, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." (It is questionable whether the words "and fasting" were originally included in Mark's account) It seems unclear whether Jesus is referring to the "kind" of spirit or to the "kind" of unbelief. However if we read Matthew's account of this conversation, he clears it up. In response to the disciples' question, he records Jesus

as saying rather of matter-of-factly, "Because of your unbelief". (Matthew 17:20) It seems that the nine disciples who had been left at the bottom of the mountain had been resentful at being left behind. That night for them had not been one of glory. They had spent it in darkness, discouragement, and disappointment. Their faith had been overcome by unbelief. And so Jesus reveals to them their need for prayer. The only way for them to keep this kind of unbelief from taking over is for them to remain in an attitude of prayer.

So now that we have considered what Jesus experienced in our story today, let's consider how He is revealed as our Example. Not only does this story reveal what Jesus experienced, it also reveals what a healthy and dangerous Christian experiences. And this is the ultimate purpose of this story. It's so that we might know and experience what Jesus experienced. And so He is revealed as our Example in this story first in that He was not threatened by the enemy. You can sense Jesus' confidence in Mark 9:19. He seems surprised by everyone's fear and helplessness and speaks with authority. Notice in particular His words, "Bring him to me," spoken with certainty. Neither is Jesus threatened by the spirit's display of power. While the spirit is convulsing the boy, He calmly asks a rather casual question, "How long has this been happening to him?" And when Jesus speaks to the spirit directly, He addresses him, "You deaf and dumb spirit". It's hardly a way to address someone you feel threatened by. And so Jesus reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who is not afraid of the enemy.

Some of us may identify more with the people's response to the evil spirit. This spirit was clearly more powerful than they were. And we all have a natural fear for things and people who are superior to us, whether it's strength, talent, position, or wealth. And on our own we do well to fear the enemy. The powers of Satan are stronger than us. But notice what Jesus says in Luke 10:19. (Read) Jesus is speaking to the seventy disciples who have just returned from a missionary tour. He gave them the same authority that He had over the evil spirits; in fact, "over all the power of the enemy". "Nothing," Jesus says, "shall by any means hurt you." Praise the Lord. What Jesus gave to the seventy disciples He has given to us today. And so Jesus reveals in our story that a healthy Christian is a dangerous Christian, who is not afraid of the enemy. This doesn't mean that we go looking for evil spirits. Jesus did not go looking for demons to cast out. The people always came to Him, seeking to be set free. And He exercised His authority for their sakes.

Second, Jesus is revealed as our Example in this story in that He called for faith. Notice that Jesus waited for someone to intercede for the boy. He searched for someone to express faith in His authority over this evil spirit. The disciples failed Him. The father initially expressed unbelief. Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus asked the father how long his son had been like this was to give the father time to reach the point of desperation. Because it was in his desperation that the father cried out, "I believe!" Finally someone responded to Jesus call for faith. Finally someone was able to intercede for the boy. And naturally Jesus would look to the father who was the boy's spiritual guardian. Also notice that Jesus didn't call for some great sacrifice or human effort. Faith was all that was needed – faith in Jesus' authority over the enemy.

And so Jesus reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who lives by faith. Here is a law of the universe: faith in God's Word makes the impossible possible. How often we underestimate the power of God's Word. According to Psalm 33:6, 9, everything we see in the sky at night was made by nothing more than God's Word. "He spoke, and it was done. He commanded and it stood fast." When someone believes that God's Word is able to do what it says, nothing is impossible! How often we get mixed up on what faith really is. It's not just trust. Trust is formed as a result of repeated experiences. If someone repeatedly shows himself to be honest, then I come to trust him. Faith is not born out of repeated experiences. It certainly is strengthened by experiences. But what awakens faith is hearing God's Word. Notice what Romans 10 says. Let's read verses 9 and 17. (Read) When we hear what God has done for us in His Son Jesus Christ, something arises in our hearts. It's called faith. We hear the Word. We hear how Jesus' life, death and resurrection has saved us for eternity. And it awakens faith. For some of us it might take hearing it 100 times, before we actually understand and grasp it to the point of responding in faith. But it is that faith which carries us through the rest of our lives. We live by that faith. Jesus says, "Nothing is impossible to him (or her) who believes." Faith in what God's Word says overcomes the world. Indeed it overcomes all the power of the enemy.

Last of all, Jesus is revealed as our Example in that He called attention to a lack of prayer. In speaking to the nine disciples, Jesus in essence told them that the reason they couldn't cast out the spirit was because they had stopped praying. As the amount of prayer dropped, the amount of unbelief increased. There's an inverse correlation between prayer and unbelief. This is a drawing of a very basic barometer. It measures the barometric pressure, and helps predict the weather. As the pressure pushes down on the liquid in the reservoir, the liquid in the tube goes up. So it was with the disciples. As they left off praying, their unbelief became greater. And actually, Jesus reveals that unbelief was the greater enemy, not the spirit.

And so Jesus reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who is learning to pray more. Notice what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. This is a great Scripture to memorize. Our family enjoys singing this as a Scripture song. (Read) In my mind I can hear Abigail walking around our house singing, "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing...." What a blessing. Notice that prayer is surrounded by rejoicing and giving thanks. It's not a mournful time of lamentation. Prayer is talking to God like a friend. It's being reminded of all that He means to you. The more we pray, the less unbelief we will have and the more we will see God do the impossible in our own lives.

I've pondered the words of the father spoken as a prayer of desperation: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" He came as he was – with faith as well as unbelief. He didn't wait for all his unbelief to turn into faith. And in this condition Jesus accepted him. This man saw the power of God. A great miracle took place. Most of us are not pillars of unshakeable faith. We are a lot like this man, often torn between faith and unbelief. Let us follow the example of this father. Let us not be paralyzed by our unbelief. Let us be like the bees who fly anyway, regardless of whether the scientists think it's possible or not.

Come to Jesus, expressing what little faith you have, while also admitting your unbelief. Don't wait for all your faith to turn into unbelief. Pray anyway. Come to Jesus as you are in your time of need. Say, "Lord, I believe You can. I believe You want to. Yet I'm overwhelmed by the enormous size of this problem. I come to You just as I am asking for deliverance and fall down at Your feet." God will never ignore such a prayer. He will rebuke your enemy, the enemy of your friend, the enemy of you family. Never forget, "All things are possible to him (or her) who believes."