

Feeble Faith Meets Strong Savior
Mark 9:14-29
September 13, 2015

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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." 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." 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. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 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." And Jesus said to him, " 'If you can'! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" 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." 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

The following statement comes from the web page of the National Institute of Mental Health, dated July 2, 2009: Mental disorders are common in the United States. An estimated 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older, about one in four adults, suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. This figure translates to 57.7 million people. Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the United States for ages 15-44.

For many people who suffer with some form of mental disorder, that disorder is anxiety, worry, or a fretful heart. In today's Gospel reading, the father was in the grip of an understandable anxiety attack. His son was in a serious crisis. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been beside yourself with worry over someone you dearly love?

Worry is a terrible burden to bear. Worry can dominate your life. It can throw a dark shadow over even your most joyful moments. Perhaps the only good thing that can be said about worry is that sometimes it drives you to your knees in prayer to the only One who can help.

That's what happened in our reading. Worry brought this father to Jesus. Unfortunately, the father's unbelief threatened his receiving the Lord's help. While worry can drive you to the Lord, it can also so overwhelm your spirit that it prevents you from having the faith God wants you to have.

With that in mind, let's look at the details of this story so we might better understand our own faith deficiencies.

While Jesus, Peter, James, and John were returning from the Mount of Transfiguration, the father had brought his son to the rest of Jesus' disciples. Try as they may, the disciples were unable to free the boy from his condition. I can imagine this might have left the father with one or more of the following thoughts:

§ Maybe the disciples were incompetent. Despite their efforts, the disciples were unable to help. There are times, when other people, people with the best possible intentions, can't satisfy our need; the doctors fail to cure the disease, the firemen don't get the house fire under control soon enough. Humans have limitations.

§ Maybe the problem was completely hopeless. The boy's condition was mysterious and very violent. Perhaps the disciples' failure let the father's despair convince him that there was no hope for his son. Have you ever encountered a problem that made you want to throw your hands in the air and cry, "This is hopeless"? Those times come because we forget that God specializes, and even delights, in defeating the impossibilities we face.

§ Maybe the Savior was powerless. That was the insinuation when the man said to Jesus, "*But, if you can do anything*" (Mk 9:22 NIV). This father was in the same place as the people of Israel during their exile to Babylon. The prophet records the words of God directed at people who had begun to lose hope in him. I can easily imagine Jesus saying the same thing to this father: *To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint* (Is 40:25-31 ESV).

Don't believe the lies of Satan when he whispers in your ear, "God doesn't care. The Savior is powerless."

The father believed, but his faith was small. However, even his weak faith was able to help him discover his unbelief. Sometimes we have just enough faith to realize how lacking our faith truly is.

If we have enough faith to recognize our weakness, we have a place from which to start

building on that weak faith. Even weak faith can give the Holy Spirit a foothold in our hearts. It's similar to rock climbing, sometimes all you need is the smallest crevice for a foothold or the slightest crack for a handhold.

The father was distressed by the realization of his own unbelief. He cries out: "*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*" (Mk 9:24 NIV). Distress is what we should all feel when we are faced by our worry and anxiety. After all, worry and anxiety are actually just manifestations of unbelief.

Unbelief is a serious sin. It was unbelief that kept the Israelites out of the Promised Land for forty years. Unbelief can also disrupt our lives, not just physically and mentally, but more dangerous, unbelief can disrupt our spiritual lives.

Unbelief can cause us to doubt God's omnipotence. Omnipotence means that God is all-powerful. There is nothing, be it natural or supernatural, that is beyond God's control. If there were anything more powerful than our God, then our God would be worthless. But that is not the case. The Bible says everything we need to know about God's supremacy in the first verse of the book of Genesis: "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*" (Gen 1:1 NIV).

Unbelief can cause us to doubt the value of biblical promises. Here are just a few of God's promises to his people:

§ John 10:10 – *I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full.*

§ Revelation 2:10 – *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

§ John 14:1-3 – *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*

These are only three of God's wonderful promises to us. Scripture is full of God's promises. Not one of them has ever been broken and not one of them will ever be broken.

Unbelief can also make us doubt the power of Christ's blood. We can begin to lose confidence in our Savior. But that unbelief is just another of Satan's lies. The author of Hebrews writes: *How much more will the blood of Christ ... purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God* (Heb 9:14 ESV).

Unbelief can make us doubt the very truth of Scripture. The Bible must be either all true or all false. If only one thing in God's Word can be proven false, then all of Scripture is subject to doubt.

Some Christian denominations have taken upon themselves to decide that not every

part of the Bible is truly God's Word. Therefore, they feel they can delete the parts they don't agree with. However, the Bible testifies to its own accuracy. The psalmist says: *All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal* (Ps 119:160 NIV). And saint Peter writes: *For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* (2 Pet 1:21 NIV).

As serious as the boy's condition was, his father came to realize that the condition of his own faith was the more serious matter. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the man came to understand that the condition of one's faith life is more important than the condition of one's physical life.

Have you seen yourself in the man in our text? Have you found any solutions for your particular area of life where your faith is weak? All of Scripture has been given to us to help us draw closer to God – to bring our lives, and our faith, in line with God's plan for us.

The lesson from today's reading can bring relief to a doubting and anxious heart. No matter what the present condition of your faith, you can bring that faith to the Lord. There's no need to be shy. God loves and respects even a weak faith. The Bible assures us that: *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out* (Is 42:3 NIV).

Bring your weak faith to the One who can help in any situation. Bring your faith and say, "Jesus, I believe, please help my unbelief." I guarantee you that Jesus can help. He not only can help, he will help.