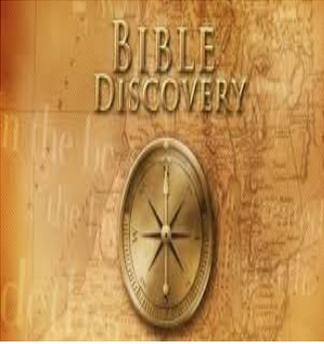


March 15, 2015

Mark 9:14-29

## *A Time of Doubt*



It's been said, *"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts."* So is a time of doubt given to only those who have faith, those who seek truth? The German theologian Paul Tillich once wrote, *"Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."* The most faithful of God's people can't walk far with God without doubt creeping into their journey especially during their wilderness experiences. After all, how can an infinite God be understood by our finite minds? Any encounter with the Creator of the Universe should shake us up, moving us from the neat little categories we've built our theology around, forcing us to gaze in new ways upon our premises of faith. Doubt raises questions, doubt demonstrates limits to our understanding, and doubt brings us before God in fresh ways demanding we throw ourselves on His understanding and direction. Doubt must never drive us from God; doubt when massaged by the Lord's Holy Spirit on our hearts, brings us into the throne room of His wonderful grace and gives us clearer vision of His presence.

In times when we're enduring wilderness experiences, just about everything's tested and called into question; doubt's often part of that experience. Our cry in the wilderness is often the cry of the father recorded in Mark: *"I believe; help my unbelief!"* The cry of that father seeking healing for his son was not the first such cry, nor would it be the last. People of faith down through the ages have experienced doubt in wilderness times.

While the father, in bringing his son to Jesus for healing, sees his doubt centered on the inability of the disciples to heal, Jesus challenges him to focus on the origin of a lack of faith – a lack of belief – that the boy can be healed! It's a condition we've each experienced at one time or another, yet the reward of discovering that belief is amazing! The wonderful theologian, Matthew Henry long ago catalogued the benefits -

***"If thou canst believe, it is possible that thy hard heart may be softened, thy spiritual diseases may be cured; and, weak as thou art, thou mayest be able to hold out to the end. Those that complain of unbelief must look up to Christ for grace to help them against it, and his grace will be sufficient for them. Whom Christ cures, he cures effectually."*** [Matthew Henry]

At its core, doubt does not keep the father from bringing the boy to Jesus, expressing a beginning to faith in the person and power of Jesus. This is in strong contrast to the problem of faithlessness which was endemic in Israel from its beginnings. And just like the Israelites of old, people continue to fail in their faith and hope; fail to see the depth, height and breadth of God's amazing Kingdom. Left unchecked, such faithlessness has its

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eventual outcome in destruction because Satan's never willing to be driven from those who've long been his slaves, and, when he can't deceive or destroy the sinner any longer, he'll cause him all the terror he can through doubt and self-incrimination.

Unfortunately, the church has often dismissed or discounted doubt as the result of an immature faith, although sitting in any congregation on any Sunday morning are many with unresolved issues of faith. It's critically important the church be a safe place to fail – a place where doubts can be raised, questions asked, without them being made to feel as though they're not measuring up! Each of us is on a journey; each of us has questions for which we are seeking answers. We must come with what little faith we have and courageously step up to Jesus and willingly confesses *"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!"*

This father's own lack of strong faith was shown in his tentative request to Jesus. He hoped, and yet at the same time he seemed to doubt Jesus' capacity to overcome the great evil that had befallen his son. I've been there, probably still have the T-shirt somewhere! But Jesus is willing to take our lack of faith that things can really change; the stubborn maintenance of the "status quo", which prevents our hearing and spreading His message of His amazing inclusive and compassionate love, which completes His redemptive work, and in the process builds in us a reservoir of faith in Him. A faith that offers not only a life that's full, but overflowing with the goodness of God.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, many wrestling with faith were documented leading to Jesus healing, cleansing from sin, restoring them once more into the life of the community – faith not simply in the person of Jesus but faith that life itself could be different. One such indication came through the situation of Jairus (John 5:35-43), a ruler of the synagogue and clear symbol of official Judaism, whose own daughter, only 12 years old, was dying. This man of considerable stature saw fit to fall at the feet of Jesus begging Him to come and put His hands on her that she might live. Mark simply tells us, "So Jesus went with him." Before they can head out, men from Jairus' home come and report the little girl has died. What does Jesus do? Again Mark has a way with words saying, "Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, 'don't be afraid; just believe.'" Of course you know how the story ends – having cleared the home of those who could not believe, who would not believe, Jesus comes into the room where the little girl has been laid out, takes her by the hand and calls out to her to get up. And she does! Perhaps Jairus believed because he had nothing else. Regardless of when we dare to believe - Faith works!

Again we see instruction on what brings doubt to the detriment of our faith – fear! We hesitate to ask of God because we fear He may not respond, we fear we may be left embarrassed in front of our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues. We fear what will be thought of us. Through fear, the problem of faithlessness assumes centre stage. Here in our story, the father's struggle to believe became the symbol of our inherent resistance. Just as the disciples feared the ridicule of the Scribes, feared their failure and in the end failed we

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must overcome fear or face the same consequence. In response, Jesus' prayer became a basis of hope, if only can become the prayer of all of us. The focus is placed squarely on doubt: "Why could we not cast it out?" Remember that when Jesus sent the disciples out on mission, He gave them *authority to cast out devils* – and they'd successfully done so? Mark's message to us this morning is that the demon of faithlessness which produces fear, the inability to hear from God and follow God, is significantly more entrenched than any demon of illness to be overcome and it is we, as the disciples of Jesus, ourselves who are its victims.

So what is the cure to this illness of faithlessness that lets doubt creep in and destroy our peace and our fellowship with Christ? Jesus made clear the only solution was moving closer to God, drawing deeper in faith. It was the disciples' own demons of despair, futility and distraction that blocked their capacity to share Jesus' vision of hope and to hear his message of real life through integrity. When doubt creeps in to our hearts, what demons do we hold?

### ***Doubt calls us to action!***

Yes, doubt's part of our journey, but doubt's not our destination—any more than the wilderness is where we want to be. It's not intended to be where we settle down. There's a big difference between doubting and giving up. There's an immense difference between wrestling with faith and throwing it aside. There's a chasm between moving through doubt and getting stuck there, becoming a cynic. We tend to think of doubt as the opposite of faith, but in reality apathy or staunch disbelief is the opposite of faith. Jesus shows us the healthy

way of understanding doubt is that the key to doubt being a journey rather than our destination is caring foremost about God, seeking His direction in our lives, and wanting to move to faith: *"I believe. Help my unbelief."*

Often our own lack of belief in the possibility of God's Kingdom being found in real terms in our own lives in this world in which we live prevents us pursuing Christ in faith. The good news is the doubt we experience in such wilderness moments can actually stimulate us, spurring us on to deeper faith. Frederick Buechner wrote,

***"If you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."***

(Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* [New York: Harper & Row, 1987], pg. 20)

If I'm truly concerned about God, my life in God, then my doubt won't destroy my faith, but deepen my concern spurring me to resolve it.

Jesus' answer to how we resolve it is *prayer*: time spent alone with God – the same answer adopted by Jesus in moments of crisis and choice. God's intent is that the profound need for *prayer* was not simply the crying need of the disciples, but the urgent non-negotiable need also of the community of all believers. Prayer brings us into the presence of God – the one place the enemy fears to tread. As we pray, confessing our doubts to God, we may conclude one of the marks of a strong faith is our struggle with doubt. Perhaps, in the same way the struggle of a butterfly occurs as it emerges from a cocoon, our struggle is essential to the strength of becoming new in Christ. So, if doubt's a part of our wilderness experience, what do we do with our doubts? Let me leave you with three quick guides we must follow:

1. **We must conclude authentic faith begins with intellectual honesty**, and doubt is the foundation of that honesty. Ask the questions and continue to search. Don't let your doubts stop you from approaching God. Pray to God, *"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."*
2. **We must stay involved with other Christians**. Gathering with fellow believers is a powerful way we share our burdens, finding support to move through our periods of doubt.
3. **We must continue to seek faith in Christ**. Never avoid our doubts as if that will cure us rather, continue in honest relationship to God. The prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, says, *"When you search for me, you will find me"* [Jeremiah 29:13]. Jesus taught, *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you"* [Matthew 7:7]. When we do these things, our periods of doubts and questions lead us to faith.

In the early days of John Wesley's ministry, when he experienced a difficult times of doubt and uncertainties, he'd go to his friend Peter Boehler. Boehler told Wesley: *"Preach faith until you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith."* In other words, act as though you've already overcome your doubt through faith; then, as you act in faith, faith will grow even as you draw nearer to Jesus and let Him have His way in you.

Do you struggle with doubt – about yourself, about your faith? Have you considered leaving it with Jesus, giving Him your burden and letting go of the frustration of sorting it all out? Jesus is waiting to hear from you; He wants you to know that if you will take that first step and knock on the door of faith, He's ready to open the door and come in and strengthen you. For support and encouragement, give us a call at 519-317-8659 or send us an email to [office.mbbc@xplornet.com](mailto:office.mbbc@xplornet.com). We'd love to hear from you and pray with you.

Blessings,

*Pastor Dave*