

## Lessons Learned in the Fires of Failure

### Mark 9:14-29

**Introduction:** 1) Failure is never fun and defeat is seldom something we take delight in. It can be painful, embarrassing and humiliating. And our response can be life changing, altering our destiny. Failure can make us bitter or it may make us better. We can take it as instructive and corrective and learn from it.

- That is a mistake I don't need to repeat.
- Obviously I need to work harder if I want to succeed.
- As I move ahead I need help. I can't do this by myself.

2) It is this last lesson that the disciples need to learn, that so many of us need to learn. "I need help. I can't do this by myself," but "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). In contrast, I can do nothing at all that really matters without Him.

- I need to let my weakness drive me to His strength.
- I need to let my impotence drive me to His omnipotence.
- I need to let my limitations drive me to His unlimited resources.
- I need to let my humility drive me to His sufficiency.

3) There is an old hymn entitled "Just When I Need Him Most." The 4<sup>th</sup> stanza says, "Just when I need Him, He is my all. Answering when up on Him I call; Tenderly watching lest I should fall." The disciples have a ways to go before they learn this lesson. A father with a suffering son, on the other hand, is about to plumb the depths of this marvelous truth and in the process lead us into 3 lessons learned in the fires of failure.

4) Matthew (17:14-20) and Luke (9:37-43) also include this story of a demon-possessed boy, but Mark's account is much more detailed being twice the length of the other two. The account here gives the strong impression of a first-hand, eyewitness testimony. Most likely we have Peter

again relaying to us what he saw and remembers from this miraculous event. Once more we see the trustworthiness of our gospels.

**I. We never advance beyond our need for Jesus.**

**9:14-19**

- Mountain top experiences are wonderful and we need them from time to time for spiritual nourishment and the recharging of our spiritual batteries. However, God never intended for us to stay there. He wants us “down here” preaching the gospel to and ministering among the hurting and suffering. He wants us living with and serving real people devastated by the ravages of the Fall and sin. And, as His agents of redemptive love, we go in His Name and with the promise of His presence. To forget this is to open ourselves up to all sorts of difficulty, challenges, and even failure, as 9 of His disciples with pain and humiliation discovered.

1) We need Christ when criticized by our detractors.      9:14-16

- Peter wanted to stay on the mountain top (9:5), but Jesus was headed to Jerusalem and the cross (8:32). He leads them down the mountain (9:9) to rejoin the other disciples and to minister to the hurting on the way to Jerusalem and His passion (9:30).
- Immediately (v. 15) He finds the disciples in an argument (v. 14, 16) with the scribes surrounded by a great crowd. Further, there is a demon-possessed child they were unable to help (v. 18).
- No doubt the scribes, a religious delegation once again hounding Jesus, were “giving it” to the disciples over their failure to heal the boy. It is also quite probable they used their lack of success as an opportunity to attack Jesus and question His authority. After all, “the messenger of a man is as the man himself” (Lane, 331).

- Thus their failure reflected badly not only on them, it also reflected badly on Jesus!
- There is much for us to consider here. We never sin in a vacuum. Our spiritual failures usually have spiritual fallout. We hurt ourselves, we hurt those we love, we hurt the gospel and we hurt the reputation of Christ!
- When this happens we do not need to look to ourselves but to Christ! Criticized by our detractors for our failures, we must point them to Christ, the One who does not fail. Ever!
- We should encourage others to follow the example of the crowd in v. 15: 1) they saw Him; 2) we were amazed at Him; 3) ran to Him; 4) greeted (welcomed) Him.
- Our detractors may accurately point out our flaws and failures. Such, however, will never be found in Jesus. Oh how we need Him when enemies are nipping at our heels ready to devour us if they can.

2) We need Christ when confronted with the demonic. 9:17-18

- We are now more fully informed concerning the cause of the dispute and argument between the disciples and the scribes. To Jesus' question in v. 16, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd yelled out the answer (v. 17). And it wasn't just someone, it was the father of a demon-possessed boy. Matthew 17:15 informs us he knelt before Jesus and addressed Him as "Lord." Here in Mark he calls Jesus "teacher" and informed Him that his son has a spirit that makes him mute, he cannot speak. Verse 18 informs us that "whenever it seizes him," 1) it throws him down, 2) he foams at the mouth, 3) grinds his teeth and 4) becomes rigid. Later in verses 21-22 we learn 5) he has been like this since childhood, 6) it had often thrown him into fire and water and

7) it tried to destroy him. Thus he came to Jesus' disciples looking for help.

Unfortunately, he was greatly disappointed. "They were not able."

- So many lessons are here:

1. Demons are real not mythological.
2. Jesus clearly believed in the demonic.
3. Demons desire to inflict pain and ultimately death.
4. Demons are capable of inflicting suffering that manifest itself physically. This boy had symptoms resembling epilepsy (cf. Matt 17:15).
5. In our own strength, we are helpless against the supernatural powers of the demonic.
6. Spiritual victories in the past (cf. Mark 6:7-13) are no guarantee we will be victorious today, especially when we operate with faith in ourselves rather than faith in Christ.
7. When all human efforts and hopes have run their course and have been exhausted, we can turn to Jesus. In our sinfulness and weakness, He is where we should turn to to begin with, not at the end.

3) We need Christ when corrected in our defeats. 9:19

- Correction is seldom pleasant but it is often necessary. Hard words may cut but they can also cure.
- Jesus is tough and direct in His rebuke of the disciples, a rebuke that comes in the form of 2 questions. First, he calls them a "faithless generation" (*genea apistos*). This is striking being directed, as I believe it is, at the disciples. This is a word, "generation," normally used of the unbelieving nation and, in particular, it's leaders (8:12, 38). Second, by means of two rhetorical questions that are parallel

in meaning, he expressed his exasperation, frustration and weariness. One can almost feel His anguish and heartbrokenness:

- How long am I to be with you?
  - How long am I to bear with you?
- I appreciate, though I am personally convicted by, the words of William Lane, “the rhetorical questions...express the loneliness and the anguish of the one authentic believer in a world which expresses only unbelief” (332).
- Sinclair Ferguson adds, “Mark vividly captures the pressures and frustrations of Christ’s life in these verses. On the mountain top he had been faced with the spiritual short-sightedness of his disciples. Here in the valley he was confronted by [their] unbelief” (*Let’s Study Mark*, 143).
- Whenever the disciples are separated from Jesus in Mark’s gospel, they always get in trouble and experience a crisis. What a valuable lesson we learn from this. We never advanced beyond our need for Jesus!

**Trans.** We also never advance beyond something else as well.

## **II. We never advance beyond our need for faith.**

**9:19-27**

- The author of Hebrews tells us, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11:6).
- And, how much belief, how much faith do we need? A lot? Must it be perfect? No, faith the size of a tiny little grain of mustard seed will do just fine (Matt 17:20).
- They key is not the depth of our faith but the direction of our faith.
  - The key is not the potency of our faith but the person our faith is in.
  - A little faith in a great Savior gets amazing results!

1) The key is direction.

9:19-22

- Jesus tells them, “Bring him [the boy] to me” (v. 19). It is in the imperative and a word of command. The time for messing around is at an end.
- Seeing Jesus (v. 20), the spirit “immediately convulsed the boy.” He fell to the ground, rolled about uncontrollably, and was foaming at the mouth.
- Jesus learns in v. 21 this has gone on since childhood. Jesus learns in v. 22, all from the father, on many occasions it has almost been fatal. Out of sheer desperation he now turns to the only possible source of hope and help, he turns to Jesus and begs, 1) “if you can do anything?” “If?! 2) “have compassion on us and help us.” *The Message*, “Have a heart and help us!” *NIV*, “take pity on us and help us.”
- The man’s faith is weak and small. Still, he is looking in the right direction and asking the right person for help.
- Still, unlike the leper in Mark 1:40-45, he raised not a “would” question but a “could” question. The leper knew He could but would he? The father believed he would but could he? He is about to find out!

2) The key is dependency.

9:23-27

- Jesus responds in surprise and also at the point of the father’s unbelief and doubt (v. 23). If I can?! The issue is not my ability to act but your ability to believe. “All things are possible for one who believes.”
- Divine ability is not the problem. Human unbelief is. There is a reliable bridge between human frailty and weakness on the one hand and divine sufficiency and power on the other. It is called faith, trust, and dependency. Psalm 34:8 says, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes

refuge in him!” This is what Jesus is calling this father to do. It is what He calls us to do. Taste! See! Take refuge!

- v. 24 The father “immediately” responds, “I believe; help my unbelief.” You have got to love his honesty and humility. I believe but I know my faith is weak, partial, incomplete. Still, I trust you Jesus and only you. If you don’t deliver my son then he will not be delivered. I have not where else to turn. Help me in spite of me!
- v. 25
  - The crowd begins to build due to all the commotion (v.20).
  - Seeing this Jesus “rebuked the unclean spirit (demon)” saying, “You mute and deaf spirit (new information), I command you, come out (aor. imp.) of him and never enter him again.” Jesus banishes the vile demon and places a “do not trespass sign” over his soul reading:
 

“Demons warning! No trespassing. Violators will be sent to the Abyss immediately!”
- v. 26 The demon has no choice but leaves making one final show: 1) he cried (screamed) out; 2) convulsed the boy again, “terribly” this time, and 3) came out. The boy collapsed like a corpse and most thought he had died.
- v. 27 However, Jesus took him by the hand, lifted him up and he arose. Literally the text reads, “Jesus raised him, and he was resurrected.” By raising this boy Jesus provides insight into the meaning of his own death and resurrection. Satanic powers bring death, but divine power brings resurrection life. This is what dependent faith can see!

### III. We never advance beyond our need for prayer.

9:28-29

- It has been quite an interesting time for the disciples. They should have learned a lot. In fact contrasting the Transfiguration with the healing of the demon-possessed boy proves instructive.

<b>Transfiguration</b>	<b>Healing of the boy</b>
On the mountain top	In the valley
The kingdom of God on display	The kingdom of Satan on display
A Son is radiantly glorified	A son is terribly demonized
A Father is honored in His Son	A father is horrified by His son
The disciples are confused and lacking understanding	The disciples are defeated and lack power
A lesson about the future	A lesson about faith
A display of divine power	A directive for human prayer

- So it is time to stop, think and evaluate. What went wrong? What didn't our attempt at "binding the strong man" (3:27) work?

#### 1) Failure should lead us to ask questions of ourselves. 9:28

- Introspection is a healthy spiritual discipline when it causes us to examine our weaknesses and confront our limitations.
- Self-sufficiency may be viewed as a great strength by the world but it is deadly to our spiritual lives.
- The disciples failed and they failed big time. It was public, became the source of ridicule, cast doubt on their Master and mission, and filled them with self-doubt.

- So when Jesus “entered the house” for a time of private reflection and debriefing they asked the question troubling their hearts, “Why could we not cast it [the demon] out?” Their question betrays a sense of confidence in their own strengths and abilities. It suggests a spirit of pride rooted in past accomplishments (6:7-13) that they believed should have been sufficient for this encounter. We did it before and we will do it again. But it didn’t work this time. Why?
- Failure leads them to question themselves. This is a good thing.

2) Failure should drive us to God in humility. 9:29

- To their question Jesus responds with a simple but powerful spiritual insight: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” [“and fasting” which is found in some translations is most likely not in the original manuscript].
- The phrase “this kind” refers to casting out demons and other spiritual conflicts of this nature. He is not saying some demon exorcisms require prayer but others do not. He is saying that when we take the spiritual battlefield if we go in our own strength, power, pride and self-sufficiency we have lost the battle before it ever begins. No, faith bridges the gap between divine omnipotence and human weakness and that faith is experienced and exercised through prayer. Could this be why prayer is one of the most difficult of the spiritual disciplines? Could this be why we don’t see greater things in missions, our churches and our personal lives? Is this why Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.”
- The power of prayer is obviously not going to be experienced if we don’t pray. Tim Keller points to the prayer of the father in verse 24 as a model and notes it is characterized by 1) honesty, 2) helplessness, 3) hopefulness, 4)

specificity and 5) passion. I would add to this 6) persistence (“help” is present tense) and 7) urgency (“help” is an imperative).

- Taken together these character traits of believing prayer can be summed up in one word: “humility.” It all looks to Jesus. It all depends on Jesus. If He acts, I’m delivered. If He doesn’t, I am lost. Faith expressed in prayer says I would not have it any other way.

**Conclusion:** Lessons learned in the fires of failure may hurt us, but they can hurt us in a good way if they drive us to Jesus, increase our faith, and humble us in prayer. Today we do not have Jesus with us in the flesh, but through the gift of prayer He is only a word, no, a thought, away. Let us all remember what Jesus said, “Thomas, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). We believe Lord. Help us in our unbelief. Give us that “shield of faith, with which we can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one” (Eph 6:16).