

**BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #147:**  
**WHEN JESUS'S DISCIPLES FLUNKED A TEST**  
By John Temples

The first eight verses of Mark chapter 9 tell of a marvelous scene: On the top of a mountain, Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John, assuming a divine, glorified form. The next several verses record a conversation between Jesus and the three awed disciples on the way down the mountain after the transfiguration. As they are about to rejoin the other disciples, they come upon a scene of utter chaos. Mark says:

*14 And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them. 15 Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. 16 And He asked the scribes, "What are you discussing with them?" 17 Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. 18 And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not." 19 He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me." 20 Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. 21 So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." 23 Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" 26 Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.*

Back in verse 9, there are some words that form an ominous prelude to this scene. That verse begins, “Now as they came down from the mountain....”

Probably all of us have had what we might call “mountaintop experiences.”

- It might be a great crowd of Christians singing together.
- It might be being overwhelmed by God’s majesty in the great outdoors.
- It might be an intimate, extended period of prayer when we felt especially close to God.

Unfortunately, mountaintop experiences don’t last. You have to come back down to real life, and sometimes real life is chaotic or unpleasant. If you have experienced, or are experiencing, a “mountaintop moment, a spiritual “high,” watch out! Your next experience may be a spiritual “low.” Remember:

- Moses communed with God for 40 days on Mount Sinai. It doesn’t get any better than that. However, when he came back down to the valley, he encountered the debauched Israelites worshipping the golden calf.
- Elijah triumphed over the prophets of Baal on a mountain; when he came back down, he found that Jezebel had put out a contract on his life.

Peter, James, and John had just had what we might call the ultimate mountaintop experience—seeing Jesus in glory and meeting Moses and Elijah. But now they are jarred back to reality with a chaotic scene. Dozens or hundreds of people are yelling at one another, including the nine other disciples of Jesus. In the center is a pathetic young man obviously possessed by a demon. Standing over him is his father, crying and pleading for help. Still other people are ridiculing and arguing with Jesus’s disciples because of their failure to heal the boy. One Internet commentator says, “Jesus found disputing scribes, a distracted father, a demon-possessed boy, and defeated disciples.”

The disciples had cast out demons before, but this time they failed miserably. Why? Maybe they got too cocky and relied on their own abilities instead of on God. And Jesus said that this was an especially difficult case (verse 29).

So the father was disappointed and distraught. To make matters worse, the enemies of Jesus were there and observed the failure of the disciples.

The father tells Jesus the details of the demon possession of his son, and then says, "If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (verse 22). Jesus's response is, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes."

That's the reading in the NKJV. However, I believe the translators got the punctuation wrong here. (Remember, there was no punctuation in the original Greek manuscripts; also, voice inflections are often unclear in printed text.)

I believe an exclamation point or question mark should come after the phrase "If you can" in verse 23. So verses 22 and 23 would read like this: "'If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you can! Believe, and all things are possible to him who believes.'" Jesus is repeating the father's words back to him as a rebuke of the man's lack of faith.

Several modern Bible versions punctuate the text giving this sense:

- NLT--"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."
- ESV--"And Jesus said to him, 'If you can!' All things are possible for one who believes."
- NIV--"If you can'? said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

The Lord's challenge humbled the father, and he pitifully cried out, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Burton Coffman comments: "Who is he who cannot identify with this distraught parent in his experience of faith with an admixture of doubt? Unbelief is never very far away from faith; and their name is legion who, like Peter of old, walk over tempestuous waves one moment and sink into faithless despair the next. This doubting believer properly appealed to the Lord as the only source of strengthening his faith."

When this father cried, "Help me--help my unbelief," Jesus did not say, "Come back when you have more faith." He immediately healed the boy.

After this, there was a private conference between Jesus and the nine disciples (verses 28 and 29):

*28 And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting."*

The disciples wisely asked for a post-crisis evaluation: Why could they not cast the demon out? Jesus said, "This kind of demon can only be overcome by prayer and fasting." This again suggests the failure was due to overconfidence in their abilities.

Matthew adds that the failure of the disciples to cast out the demon was because of their unbelief. It wasn't that prayer and fasting made the disciples more able to cast out demons, or that they didn't follow the proper ritual; it is that prayer and fasting are manifestations and indicators of humility and dependence on God. The nine disciples had gotten two cocky as to their ability to deal with demons. It's not saying "I can do all things" that gives us strength; it is saying "I can do all things *through Christ* who strengthens me."

Some lessons for us from this account:

- The Christian life is a series of hills and valleys, highs and lows.
- We might prefer to remain on the mountaintop, but we must come down to the valley and deal with real life with its disappointments.
- In each of us there is often a mixture of faith and doubt.
- Lack of humility is a powerful hindrance to our spiritual advancement.
- "Lord, help me" is one of the most powerful prayers you can pray.
- Finally, don't ever use the words "If You can" in your prayers to God!

--John Temples