

Believe It And Not

Mark 9:14-29 January 21, 2026

Most Americans *believe* in God. That is, when polled, 83% of Americans believe in the idea of “God” or a “Universal Spirit.” Eight out of ten Americans may claim some level of belief, but for many it doesn’t translate to communion *with* God or the power of God in their lives. Between 2007 and 2024, the number of Americans who identify themselves as Christians has declined 16%.¹ Only 46% of Americans pray every day. Just 43% say that religion is very important in their lives.² All of those numbers are five to ten percentage points *lower* for the generations born after 1995.

And yet, 83% of our fellow citizens still say they *believe* in God. But does that ‘belief’ make a difference? What did James say? “Even the demons believe - and they shudder!”³

The difference belief makes is in focus tonight. When Jesus went to Nazareth, He was unable to do many miracles there because the people of His hometown absolutely *did not* believe in Him.⁴ Tonight, we see the temporary disruption of miraculous healing, but not because people *didn’t* believe, but because their belief was incomplete to one degree or another.

Remember: this section of Mark has been highlighting the partial belief - the blurry spiritual vision - of the disciples. Exhibit A came after the feeding of the 4,000. Exhibit B was Peter’s spiritual eye exam first on the road and then again at the Transfiguration. The theme is emphasized by the story of the man whose sight was healed in two stages.

Of course the disciples aren’t the only ones struggling with belief. Jesus says the *entire generation* is unbelieving. A sad reality and stark contrast to the clear manifestations of His Messiahship.

Tonight we see the 12, a crowd, and scribes. Jesus calls *all* of them out on the state of their belief. Zooming in, we see a distraught father who has all but lost hope. In a moment of desperate crisis, he acknowledges he believes and *does not* believe. It is a powerful and heart-wrenching scene. But it gives Jesus a chance to speak to us about true belief and the difference it makes.

Mark 9:14-18 - ¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and scribes disputing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were amazed and ran to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, “What are you arguing with them about?” ¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they couldn’t.”

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/12/08/religion-holds-steady-in-america/>

³ James 2:19

⁴ Mark 6:5-6

The father had a measure of faith. He said, "I brought him to have the demon driven out." But Jesus wasn't there when he arrived - Jesus was overnight on the mountain - so the father turned to the disciples. And I'm sure they told him they'd done exorcisms before and that it would be no trouble.

But, the spirit didn't go anywhere. It wasn't because the disciples were *unwilling* to help, they were *unable*. As one translator puts it, they "weren't strong to help."⁵ All 9 of them. Not a great start for the last exorcism in Mark's Gospel.

In that dire moment what did they do? With a frightened father holding his still-stricken son in his arms? They start *arguing* with some scribes! Now, we don't know what they were arguing about. It seems likely that the scribes were gleefully pointing out how their so-called power had failed them.

Jesus is going to rebuke *everyone* for unbelief. The scribes obviously have *no* belief. The father will admit he has, like, *half* belief. But the disciples are rebuked, too. In Matthew's account Jesus tells them they failed, "because of [their] little faith."⁶ Their unbelief was a major problem that day.

Their spiritual failure gave those on scene an excuse to be skeptical of Jesus Himself.⁷ We'll see that their failure of faith shook the faith of the father. It certainly gave ammunition to the scribes.

One exhortation of this passage is that - as disciples - we have a responsibility to live Godly, Spirit-filled lives. We're not going to be perfect. None of us live all the way up to the callings of Christ. But God forbid *our* failures of faith give the people around us a reason to disbelieve Jesus.

Mark 9:19-20a - ¹⁹ He replied to them, "You unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring him to me."²⁰ So they brought the boy to him.

Despite all He had said and done, there was *still* widespread unbelief. It's a testament to the hardness of the human heart. One scholar writes, "*Their faithlessness is symptomatic of the wider human condition, as Jesus in His ministry so often encountered it, an unwillingness to take God at His word and a horizon limited to merely human possibilities.*"⁸

Jesus wasn't only disappointed - He's also raising a valid concern. He was going to be gone soon. The disciples were the ones who were supposed to become the Body of Christ, found and build the Church, spread the Gospel from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. But here they are, unable to do something they had *previously* done! Something Jesus gave them *authority* to do!⁹

Mark 9:20b-22 - When the spirit saw him, it immediately threw the boy into convulsions. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.²¹ "How long has this been happening to him?" Jesus asked his father. "From childhood," he said.²² "And many times it

⁵ Clifton Allen *Matthew-Mark*

⁶ Matthew 17:20

⁷ R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

⁸ France

⁹ Mark 3:15

has thrown him into fire or water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

Just about every commentary rushes to say the boy had epilepsy or that his possession *presented* as epilepsy.¹⁰ This is a bad default to have. It undermines a plain interpretation of Scripture. Plus, we shouldn't attribute every illness to demonic possession. And, as far as I can tell, epilepsy can't see someone. It says, "When the spirit saw Jesus, it convulsed the boy." Putting the descriptions together we also learn that the boy is deaf and mute. No communication with him.

This is what the devil wants to do to the people of this world. To you, your family, your neighbors. He wants to *isolate* and *destroy* them. The verb used for throwing the boy into convulsions was also used of a dog tearing up a carcass.¹¹ That's what the devil does. He seeks to *devour* and destroy. When the Bible warns us that unbelievers are held *captive* by him, picture *this*.

When the demon is brought before the Lord, he doesn't speak. It's possible the spirit itself was mute based on what Jesus says later. But it cannot hide its intentions from the Son of God. In His presence, all was laid bare, and the demon *must* reveal his presence and submit to judgment.

Does it seem strange that Jesus let this convulsion play out for a moment? The kid is suffering terribly while the Lord talks with the father. It reminds us of the time Jesus has a back and forth with Peter walking on the waves *while* the storm battered the boat.

Both of those moments remind us of how important the faith issue is to God. We usually prioritize feelings. He prioritizes faith. The boy needs physical help. Jesus is *going* to heal him. But their *faith* is the most important problem. And so the Great Physician deals with that first.

But whatever faith the father had was terribly shaken. He came asking for exorcism. Now he's downgraded his request. "If you can do *anything*..." He's no longer directly asking for healing. The disciples failed, why would the Rabbi do any better?

Mark 9:23 - ²³ Jesus said to him, " 'If you can'? Everything is possible for the one who believes."

The New King James phrases this differently, but linguists are confident Jesus quoted the man back to him.¹² The Lord is calling out the man's faltering faith.

God does *not* need to prove Himself to us. If you want proof of the existence of God, watch the sun rise tomorrow morning. Or take your pulse right now. Consider the flow of human history or the love that exists in your heart for your husband or wife, son, or daughter.

¹⁰ Robert Utley *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark And I & II Peter*

¹¹ France

¹² Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

Our problem is when we stop believing in what God can do. We limit Him in our minds, for one reason or another. We limit His care for us or His ability to intervene in time. There is no limit to what God *can* do. There *is* a limit to what He *will* do. While God may choose not to act on everything we want, it is never because He lacks the power to do so.

Mark 9:24 - ²⁴ Immediately the father of the boy cried out, "I do believe; help my unbelief!"

A logician would say this answer makes no sense. But we've *all* felt this way and probably feel this way *right now* in some area of our heart. This is a tension all of us experience.

But what a treasure this verse is. One of the greatest prayers in all of Scripture. Certainly the most honest. Though the man was wavering in faith, we see here that he *confessed* and *repented*. He says, "Yeah, I'm starting to give in to unbelief. But I recognize that *You* are right, Jesus. And I'm turning from doubt to devotion, right now, but I need You to help me."

If you're struggling with doubt, you can step out of it into faith right now. You might not suddenly *feel* different, but you can do what this father did. Choose to say that God is true. That He is able. That He is no liar. And then ask Him for help and trust that He will.

Mark 9:25-27 - ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was quickly gathering, 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." ²⁶ Then it came out, shrieking and throwing him into terrible convulsions. The boy became like a corpse, so that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus, taking him by the hand, raised him, and he stood up.

The demon may have been able to withstand the disciples, but he was no match for the King. He *would* obey the word of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Some suggest that the boy really did die, but I don't think for a minute that Jesus would've allowed the demon to kill this child after commanding him to come out. No, the Lord was in charge.

Mark 9:28 - ²⁸ After he had gone into the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

Yeah. Why *couldn't* they? They'd done it before. Jesus specifically gave them authority to do so.

We'll see why in a moment, but this is an important doctrinal moment: No one has the categorical *gift* of healing or *gift* of exorcism where they can just exercise that power by their own will. There are some people out there who claim to be faith-healers, that they can cure people of things on demand. But that is *not* what happens in the New Testament.

In 1 Corinthians, when Paul talked about Christians miraculously healing people, he said, "Do all have *gifts* of healings?" Three times he references those gifts as plural.¹³ Those are specific moments and situations God works through, not a capability a human wields at liberty.

Mark 9:29 - ²⁹ And he told them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer."

Some manuscripts have "and fasting," at the end of this verse. But it wouldn't really fit the context. And Jesus specifically said the disciples *cannot* fast as long as the Bridegroom was with them.¹⁴ What seems to be going on is that the disciples have slipped into a sort of Samson mentality. We know they've been distracted by human concerns more than spiritual concerns. So that day when the father brought his son they thought, "Well we have strength because we had it before. Jesus gave it to us and that's it we've got His power on command forever."

But that's not how it works. *All* Christians must continue in an attitude of devotion and dependence on the Lord. We don't just coast on one interaction from 2 years ago and think we'll be strong enough for the new challenges ahead.

These guys were famously not strong enough to even *stay awake* during prayer times. Let alone facing a demon. And one that, according to Jesus, was a particularly *difficult* demon to cast out.

When the father came and they realized that their faith was weakened, they should've immediately gone to *prayer* - seeking God's empowering and intervention. *Instead*, they went to *arguing* with the trolls who came to hassle them. That was not a good use of their time.

But listen: It's not about how *much* we pray - that if we pray a certain amount we get more power. Or if we fast we juice up with supernatural strength. It's about an attitude of dependence on the Lord. Recognizing that the wellspring of life is in Him.¹⁵ And that our part is to *believe*. A living faith in a Living Savior.

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote:

"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?"¹⁶

All of us carry beliefs and unbeliefs in our hearts. The Christian life is about walking by faith. That the things we believe not only change our perspective and understanding, but that they drive us into communion with God, service to Jesus, dependence on His leading, His wisdom, His callings, and then experiencing what a *difference* that kind of belief makes in our lives.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30

¹⁴ Mark 2:19

¹⁵ Psalm 36:9

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis *A Grief Observed*