



The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



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Part 25

Mark 9:14-29

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(NIV)

INTRODUCTION

We have just completed several lessons on the Transfiguration.

There, Jesus has been with ONLY Peter, James, and John.

The other disciples have been left alone.

It is Jesus, Peter, James, and John rejoining the others that leads to the following scene.

This is one of the longest stories in Mark's Gospel.

At first glance, it seems like another healing story, as we had in the first half of Mark's Gospel.

But remember – Jesus had given the disciples authority over unclean spirits (in 6:7), and they had been successful in demonstrating that authority (in 6:13).

Their failure in the story of this lesson makes this an unusual case, with a very specific lesson!

Mark 9:14 (NIV)

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

“a large crowd”

While the four others have been on the mountain, a crowd has gathered around the remaining disciples.

“teachers of the law arguing”

According to Jesus (in 8:31), the teachers of the law are among those who will reject Jesus.

Up to this point, though, they have been critical, but not dangerous.

The argument they are having is apparently over what is about to be described: the disciples' inability to exorcise this demon.

Mark 9:15 (NIV)

As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

“overwhelmed with wonder”

The words are “utterly amazed” in some translations.

This is an unusual reaction from the crowd compared to earlier arrivals by Jesus.

It is not clear why they are “utterly amazed” THIS time, but some scholars speculate that Jesus was still radiant from the Transfiguration.

Perhaps, though, it is because he shows up just as the disciples and teachers are arguing about the authority Jesus has given the disciples.

“ran to greet him”

As always, Jesus attracts even more crowds.

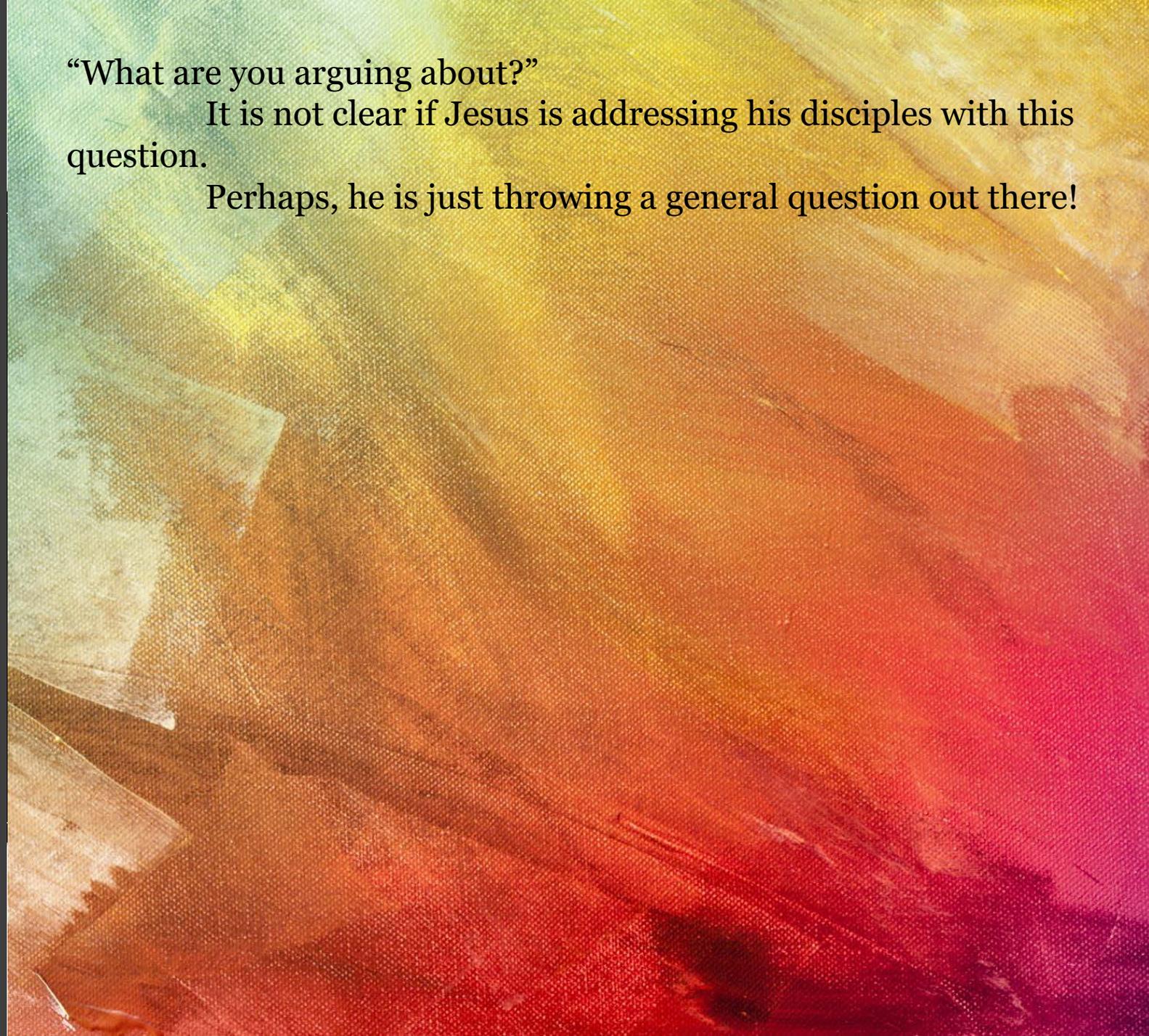
Mark 9:16 (NIV)

“What are you arguing about?” he asked.

“What are you arguing about?”

It is not clear if Jesus is addressing his disciples with this question.

Perhaps, he is just throwing a general question out there!



Mark 9:17 (NIV)

A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.”

“A man in the crowd answered”

The father of the subject of the argument speaks up.

He doesn't care about the argument, he just wants his son to be healed.

“I brought you my son”

Technically, he brought him to the disciples left behind when Jesus went up the mountain.

The man seems to understand that the disciples act with Jesus' authority – suggesting that they, too, have a reputation at this point.

Bringing his son to Jesus' disciples IS bringing his son “to Jesus.”

“a spirit that has robbed him of speech”

This is just the first of numerous descriptions of the demon.

Mark 9:18 (NIV)

“Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

“throws him ... foams ... gnashes ... becomes rigid”

Not only has the spirit made the boy mute, the father lists several other symptoms.

In coming verses, we will also see that it:

Induces violent convulsions (9:20)

Throws the boy into water or fire (9:22)

Makes the boy deaf (9:25)

All of this resembles a modern diagnosis of epilepsy.

In Matthew, it explicitly says he suffers “seizures”, but then also refers to it as a demon:

Matthew 17:15 ... 18 – “Lord, have mercy on my son,’ he said. ‘He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ... Jesus rebuked the demon”.

In antiquity, this was called “falling down syndrome”.

But the Greek word for “have a seizure”, “seleniazomai”, comes from the Greek noun for “moon” – “selene”.

The word literally translates, “to be acted upon by the moon”, or “to be moonstruck”.

The ancients believed the condition was caused by the transcendent powers of the moon.

This might happen through voluntary involvement in black arts, or by more random demonic contact.

Mark 9:18 (NIV)

“Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

“disciples ... could not”

Literally, it says they “lacked the strength”.

But remember – they HAD been very successful at exorcism earlier!

This raises the question of why THIS occurrence is resistant.

It also sets the stage for Jesus to display superior strength.

In both 1:7 and 3:27, Jesus had been referred to as a “strong man”.

Mark 9:19 (NIV)

“O unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

“O unbelieving generation”

Jesus is clearly frustrated!

Remember Jesus’ original proclamation to “Believe!” :

Mark 1:15 – “The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

There is a deep problem of unbelief still present.

Thus, the work of freeing people from Satan’s oppression is hindered.

“How long shall I put up with you?”

Who is “you” here, we might ask! The father? The disciples?

It is a plural “you” in Greek – suggesting it is not the father, but the disciples who Jesus addresses.

However, we will see in 9:24 that the father confesses to unbelief, so the frustration may be addressed EVERYONE.

The reference to “staying” seems to adopt God’s viewpoint, anticipating Jesus’ return to the Father.

The frustration Jesus expresses may have to do with the fact that a fully believing, widespread response to him is taking a long time!

“Bring the boy to me”

The disciples may have failed, but Jesus WILL do it.

Mark 9:20 (NIV)

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

“threw the boy into a convulsion”

Violent reactions of unclean spirits have been seen before when they encounter Jesus – 1:23-26; 3:11-12; 5:6-13.

Note that here, “THE SPIRIT saw Jesus”, and IT convulsed the boy.

This is evidence that in Mark’s telling of the story, it is NOT simply an illness, but a possession.

Mark 9:21 (NIV)

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"
"From childhood," he answered.

"Jesus asked"

Jesus asks about the duration of the problem.

This seems odd – why would Jesus ask this question before healing?

Jesus probably wants witnesses to know how severe and difficult this case is.

It will demonstrate Jesus' power all the more.

"From childhood"

This is not a recent development, but a long-term issue. It implies that other exorcists had also tried and failed. Also, that the "boy" is probably approaching manhood.

Mark 9:22 (NIV)

“It has often thrown him into the fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“if you can do anything”

The man is desperate!

The condition is potentially fatal.

It is so severe, the father isn't confident that Jesus will be able to help, either.

His expectations have been lowered – perhaps even by Jesus' disciples' failure.

The man DID have enough faith to bring the boy to the disciples in the first place!

This demonstrates for us that a collapse of expectations can happen in our prayer life.

The pressure of an unchanged reality shakes our confidence, and causes us to reduce the scope of our prayers.

We reduce our expectations of what prayer can achieve.

The challenge of prayer is to face the facts of reality while maintaining a large and daring expectation!

Mark 9:23 (NIV)

“ ‘If you can?’ ” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

“ ‘If you can?’ ”

Jesus continues in frustration over the lack of faith.

“everything is possible”

And conversely, little is possible for the one with NO faith.

But does this mean that WE have to wind up the intensity, volume, or emotional energy of our faith in order to get God to act?

NO! This is what the prophets of Baal tried to do in 1 Kings! :

1 Kings 18:26-29 – “Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. ‘O Baal, answer us!’ they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time of the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.”

But Jesus teaches that prayer is NOT made effective by showy prayers:

Matthew 6:7 – “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

Mark 9:23 (NIV)

“ ‘If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

It is not FAITH that is powerful, but GOD.

GOD performs miracles, not FAITH.

Faith in FAITH is idolatry.

Jesus teaches that even small faith allows God to accomplish great things:

Matthew 17:20 – “I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

Our confidence must be in GOD, though, not in FAITH.

God promises to act powerfully, **CONDITIONED BY** our faith.

Mark 9:24 (NIV)

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!"

"I do believe, ..."

The statement demonstrates the paradox that faith and doubt can co-exist.

Notice that Jesus will act on this PLEA for faith!

He shows mercy on the man who confesses this mixture of faith and doubt.

But this cannot be an excuse for continued faithlessness.

Some people believe faith is an on/off thing – you either have it or you don't.

This story conveys the opposite.

Mark 9:25 (NIV)

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

“saw that a crowd was running”

Notice that Jesus acts quickly when he sees a crowd gathering.

“rebuked the evil spirit”

Jesus now addresses the demon directly.

“I command you”

The demon had been able to ignore the disciples’ command, but now they face Jesus!

“never enter him again”

This will be irreversible!

Matthew describes the belief that demons could return to reinhabit victims:

Matthew 12:43-45 – “When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.”

Not this time, Jesus commands!

Mark 9:26 (NIV)

The spirit shrieked,
convulsed him violently
and came out. The boy
looked so much like a
corpse that many said,
“He’s dead.”

“convulsed him violently and came out”

This gives tangible evidence of the success of the exorcism.

Jesus’ command causes an upheaval.

“looked like a corpse”

The boy appears to have been killed!

But this is more proof of the removal of the demon – remember that it used to thrash him around.

Has Jesus’ help actually killed the boy, though?

From the words in the text of this verse and the next themselves, it is possible that it had.

In which case, what happens next would be even more astounding!

Mark 9:27 (NIV)

But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

“lifted him to his feet”

The Greek is literally, “raised him up”.

The boy can stand on his own, demonstrating complete restoration of health.

But it HAS been traumatic, even unpleasant, but great deliverance can sometimes be so.

If the boy was, in fact, dead, this is another preview of Jesus’ resurrection.

The language of “raised him up”, which is the literal translation of what Jesus does for the boy, suggests foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection.

It is the same Greek used for the resurrection.

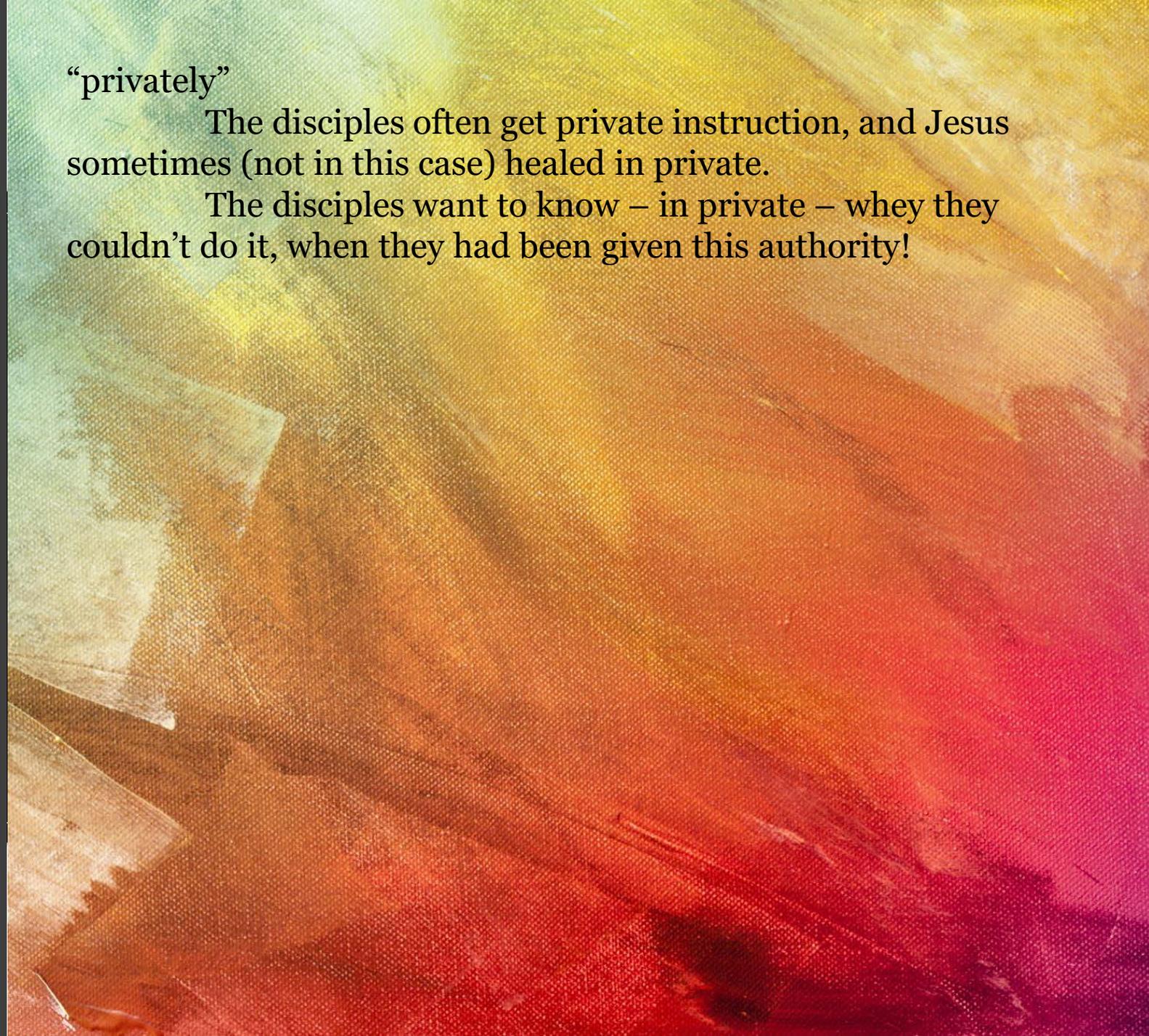
Mark 9:28 (NIV)

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

“privately”

The disciples often get private instruction, and Jesus sometimes (not in this case) healed in private.

The disciples want to know – in private – why they couldn’t do it, when they had been given this authority!



Mark 9:29 (NIV)

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

"this kind"

Interesting language! This demon is somehow different!

Note that this demon has focused on isolating itself from the outside world, by making the boy both deaf and mute.

If the demon ITSELF has made ITSELF deaf (Jesus calls it a "deaf and mute SPIRIT"), perhaps it made itself immune to the words spoken in the exorcism – it couldn't hear them!

"only by prayer"

In other words, by speaking directly to GOD, not to the DEMON.

Although ... Jesus HAS addressed the demon, and it has heard.

But Jesus has just shown at the Transfiguration that Jesus IS God's power made tangible.

The disciples' failure implies that they were still, to some extent, relying on the rituals and formulas THEMSELVES, and not on GOD HIMSELF.

Faith in GOD is not faith in the process/procedure!

Mark 9:14-29

(NIV)

SUMMARY

Ultimately, this entire story has been about FAITH.

The disciples are learning to place faith in God, and God alone.

The father (and we) have learned that faith can heal even if it mixes with doubt.

But at the same time, the story also teaches that failing to pray, or being weak in prayer, can also make faith ineffective.

The exorcism has also served as an “enacted parable” – a preview of what will soon happen to Jesus:

The young man appeared to die, and Jesus “raised him up” and he arose.

Just as Jesus, GOD’S Son, will die and be raised.

This event provides the segue into the next passion prediction, to be covered in the next session.



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