

SESSION 2

DEMONS

▶ ***The Point***

Demonic forces are real, but Christ is greater.

▶ ***The Passage***

Mark 9:17-29

▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

Ever had a hex placed on you? How about a curse? I have. My father is an evangelist. I was there the night his preaching was disrupted by a couple, all dressed in black, praying out loud to Satan. They were reciting the Lord's Prayer—backwards. It didn't stop there. I learned Satanists had been sending letters decorated with pentagrams to churches where my dad was preaching. We also learned the Satanists were putting hexes on our family.

I was afraid—but my dad wasn't. When I asked him about it, he said: "Son, truthfully, I was afraid at first. But Jesus is greater than any spiritual power, and He said He has given us all authority in Him to defeat the enemy."

Wow. That answer brought me peace because it proved to be true. In the Gospel of Mark, we read of another father and son facing demonic attack. They were also afraid. Yet, when Jesus entered the situation, the people became amazed and the demons trembled.

▶ ***The Setting***

Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, where they witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. (See Mark 9:2-8.) In their absence, a man brought his son to the other nine disciples, hoping they would be able to drive out a spirit possessing his son. When Jesus and the three disciples returned, they found a group of scribes disputing with the other disciples over the disciples' failure to drive the spirit out of the boy.

What does the Bible say?

Unclean spirit (v. 25)—An unclean spirit is a demon that causes physical and/or mental problems for a human being. People possessed by demons were considered ceremonially and morally unclean.

Mark 9:17-29

¹⁷ **And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”**

¹⁹ **And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.”**

²⁰ **And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.**

²¹ **And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood.**

²² **And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”**

²³ **And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can!’ All things are possible for one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”**

²⁵ **And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, 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 **And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.”**

²⁷ **But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.**

²⁸ **And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”**

²⁹ **And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”**

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes



Notes

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 21 of the PSG: **“What do you typically do when you feel afraid?”**

Note: To be more specific, you are asking what your group members typically do to shake off or process their feelings of fear. Do they hide? Do they try to distract themselves? Do they confront what’s making them afraid? And so on.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 22 of the PSG.

Introduce the reality of demons and demonic attacks by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” on page 22 of the PSG: **“Demonic forces are real, but Christ is greater.”**

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): *The Screwtape Letters*, written by C. S. Lewis, is a fictional collection of letters written from an experienced demon to his less-experienced nephew. The book is written from a Christian worldview, yet each letter offers advice and strategies for the temptation and corruption of a human “patient”—making the book an interesting exploration of demonic activity. Read one of these letters to your group to help them connect with the reality of spiritual warfare, along with the need to actively stand against evil.

Note: The complete text for *The Screwtape Letters* is available online, and you can find a link at our blog: biblestudiesforlife.com/adultextra.

PRAY: Transition into the study by praying for wisdom and clarity as you and your group members engage a difficult topic. Ask the Holy Spirit to keep you focused as a group on what’s most important.

Dotted lines for taking notes.



STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

Dotted lines for taking notes.

Mark 9:17-22a

¹⁷ And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸ And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” ¹⁹ And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ^{22a} And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him.

GUIDE: If time permits within your group meeting, consider reading Mark 9:1-16 out loud in order to set the immediate context for Jesus’ encounter with a demon. (Or, give group members a couple minutes to read on their own.)

READ: Mark 9:17-22a on page 23 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 23 of the PSG: **“What have you been taught about demons and demon possession?”**

Note: As in the previous session, allow people to speak freely, and then rely on God’s Word and the remainder of this study to replace any false teachings with biblical truth.

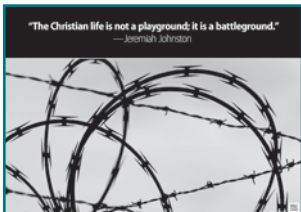
LEADER PACK: Display Pack Item 2, “Battleground,” to illustrate the reality of spiritual warfare. Encourage group members to share reasons why we sometimes forget the seriousness of our struggle as we follow Christ.

TRANSITION: Move your group toward the next passage of Scripture by reading the final paragraph on page 23 of the PSG:

The apostles were powerless to help because of their lack of faith—but not Jesus. He was unfazed by the situation. Right in the middle of that desperate moment, Jesus offered the father and the gathered crowd the most welcoming of words: “Bring him to me.”

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What strikes you as most interesting about these verses? Why?



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Mark 9:17-22a Commentary

Evil spirits—demons—seek to destroy us.

[Verses 17-18] Simon Peter, James, and John had accompanied Jesus to the top of the mountain for what is traditionally called Jesus' "transfiguration." (See Mark 9:2-8). The other disciples had remained in the valley, where they had been joined by a large crowd and some of the Jewish religious leaders. The crowd was excited to see Jesus arrive and rushed to greet Him. Recognizing there had been an argument going on between the disciples and the religious leaders, Jesus asked what the dispute was about. (See vv. 15-16.)

One man told Jesus that his son had a **spirit** that caused the boy to be **mute**. The spirit controlling the boy was so powerful that it seized the boy's body and threw him down. The boy would foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and his body would become rigid. Obviously the spirit had complete control over the young man. Since Jesus and three of the disciples were gone when the man arrived, he had asked the remaining disciples to drive the spirit out of his son. But these disciples were not successful. The disciples had successfully performed exorcisms before (see 6:13), so they may have presumed they could help this man and his son.

[Verse 19] To whom was Jesus referring when He said, "**O faithless generation**"? He could have been concerned about the unbelief of the crowds, the religious leaders, or His own disciples. Earlier, the religious leaders had criticized His supernatural power in casting out demons, claiming that power came from Beelzebul rather than God. (See Mark 3:22.)

In any case, Jesus quickly ordered that the young man be brought before Him. Rather than continuing the debate going on when He arrived, Jesus acted decisively.

[Verse 20] When the young man was brought to Jesus, the spirit **convulsed the boy**. The convulsions caused the boy to fall to the ground and roll around. He began to foam at the mouth as well. Mark did not report what the spirit thought about Jesus, but the spirit apparently knew he was in the presence of Jesus. In an earlier exorcism, an unclean spirit identified Jesus as "the Holy One of God!" (1:24). That demon also convulsed the man he had controlled as he was driven out by Jesus' command. (See vv. 25-26.)

[Verse 21] Before Jesus acted, He asked the father for more information. Jesus was not merely a magician doing tricks. He related to the sick and demon-possessed as human beings. He cared about the boy. Jesus wanted to know how long the boy had been afflicted. The father replied that his son had experienced these symptoms since childhood. We don't know exactly how old the boy was, but he might have been controlled by the demon for many years.

[Verse 22a] The father mentioned some more examples of the spirit's control over his son. The spirit had **often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him**. The demon's intention was apparently to kill the boy.



STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

Mark 9:22b-27

^{22b} But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”²³ And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”

²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, 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 And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.”²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

READ: Mark 9:22b-27 on page 24 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 24 of the PSG: **“What strikes you as most interesting about these verses? Why?”**

GUIDE: Encourage group members to read the final two paragraphs on page 24 of the PSG in order to engage Jesus’ declaration that “Everything is possible for the one who believes.”

Note: To conclude that topic, ask a volunteer to read aloud John 14:13-14 and 1 John 5:14-15, both of which are included at the top of page 25 in the PSG. These verses provide a biblical clarification for Jesus’ words.

RECAP: Read aloud the second-to-last paragraph on page 25 of the PSG:

In Mark 9, the issue wasn’t Jesus’ ability—He is all-powerful. Instead, the issue was the father’s faith. To that end, the father responded to Jesus with one of the most transparent statements in the gospels: “I believe; help my unbelief!”

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 25 of the PSG: **“When have you felt like the father in these verses—wanting to believe but struggling to do so?”**

TRANSITION: As we conclude with verses 28-29, we’ll learn from Jesus why His disciples were unable to cast out the demon and gain victory themselves.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What are some obstacles that cause us to struggle with our faith?

Mark 9:22b-27 Commentary

Only Christ has authority and power over demons.

[Verse 22b] The father hoped Jesus could help his son. He prefaced his request with **“But if you can do anything.”** Likely he’d heard of Jesus’ prior exorcisms, but perhaps the failure of Jesus’ disciples to help his son prompted this cautious request. The father also appealed to Jesus’ **compassion.**

[Verse 23] Jesus responded to the father’s anguished request by quoting his comment, **“If you can!”** Jesus responded to the father’s uncertainty by affirming a strong link between belief in Him and the possibility of a miracle. **“All things are possible for one who believes”** needs to be understood in the larger context of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. Jesus often talked about the importance of faith in Him and the problem of lacking faith. But Jesus also stressed that our requests to God should be consistent with the character and will of God. (See John 15:7.) Jesus didn’t mean to offer the frustrated father or us a blank check. But Jesus did mean the father’s faith was an important factor. Notice Jesus didn’t mention the need for the boy to have faith, perhaps because the boy did not have the mental or spiritual maturity to exercise faith.

[Verse 24] The father’s honest reply to Jesus’ comment about the need for faith reflects his spiritual situation. On one hand, the father did **believe.** We cannot be sure exactly what he knew or affirmed about Jesus’ identity, but he had enough faith to approach Jesus on behalf of his son. On the other hand, the father confessed he also experienced **unbelief.** How you and I respond to this father’s confession may depend on our spiritual journeys. Some readers might be mature Christians who rarely have reservations or doubts about God. Other readers, however, might resonate strongly with this moment in the father’s spiritual pilgrimage.

[Verse 25] Jesus did not comment on the father’s confession of belief and unbelief. As the crowd quickly gathered around them, Jesus **rebuked the unclean spirit.** The spirit was unclean because it opposed God.

Jesus commanded the unclean spirit, **“Come out of him and never enter him again.”** Mark’s account is the only place in any of the four Gospels that details Jesus adding the command to a demon not to return. In a parable about unclean spirits leaving a man, Jesus indicated the possibility that they might return unless the man had committed himself to God. (See Matt. 12:43-45.) Here, Jesus did not want the evil spirit that was leaving the boy to come back.

[Verses 26-27] The evil spirit obeyed Jesus’ command. Jesus had complete control over this demon. The demon’s departure, however, impacted the boy. **After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out.** The boy was **like a corpse.** Once the unclean spirit was gone, the boy’s body seemed lifeless, and most in the crowd thought he was in fact **dead.** Jesus took the boy by the hand and helped him stand up.



10 minutes

STUDY THE BIBLE

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Mark 9:28-29

28 *And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”* **29** *And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”*

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity “Personal Assessment: Prayer” on page 27 of the PSG.



Prayer is a critical tool in our battle against evil. Use the following questions to get a sense of how deeply our prayers reflect your faith in God.

Do you primarily pray during moments of crisis, or do you pray regularly throughout each day?

[Crisis] _____ [Regularly]

Do you pray primarily for your will to be accomplished, or for God’s will?

[Your will] _____ [God’s will]

How often do you express your trust and confidence in God’s authority?

[Rarely] _____ [Regularly]

READ: Mark 9:28-29 on page 26 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Encourage group members to read through the first two paragraphs on page 26 of the PSG to introduce the topic of faith.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 26 of the PSG: **“Why is faith in Jesus essential when dealing with evil?”**

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: **“Demonic forces are real, but Christ is greater.”** As time permits, encourage volunteers to share any final thoughts and questions.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What are the practical differences between trying to fight evil versus allowing Jesus to fight evil for us?

Mark 9:28-29 Commentary

We overcome Satan's attacks through faith and dependence upon Christ.

[Verse 28] Jesus left the crowd behind and went with His followers into a house. This is one of four instances Mark mentions in his Gospel in which Jesus took His disciples into a house to privately teach them. (See Mark 7:17; 9:33; 10:10.) The disciples wanted to know why their efforts to cast out the demon had failed. When Jesus appointed the Twelve as apostles, He gave them “authority to cast out demons” (3:15), and they had indeed done that before. (See 6:7,13.) So the disciples were puzzled and maybe embarrassed that they could not help the father and his son. The disciples’ query, “**Why could we not cast it out?**” was therefore a natural question.

[Verse 29] Jesus’ reply indicated that this kind of exorcism could only be performed successfully through the power of God. The ability to cast out demons was not a mere magic trick anyone might learn. In the Book of Acts, a man named Simon mistakenly thought he could purchase the spiritual power to perform miracles. (See Acts 8:9-24.) Nor was this ability something a person could presume he or she had the authority to perform apart from constant, complete dependence upon God.

Jesus stressed the need for **prayer** when dealing with the kind of unclean spirit that had inhabited the boy, and by implication, when dealing with any and all demons. Prayer is directly related to our faith. Faith is strengthened through the practice of prayer to God. Prayer deepens our relationship with God as well. The disciples apparently believed that because they’d previously been given the ability to cast out demons, this power was theirs to use at will. They believed because they were able to do so in the past, they would be able to cast the unclean spirit out of the boy in this instance. But the ability to cast out demons comes only through complete reliance on the omnipotence and sovereignty of God. Such power cannot be assumed; it must be sought through prayer each and every time it is exercised.

Jesus’ main point—that the casting out of demons requires complete and prayerful dependence upon God—is as relevant for Christians today as it was for His original disciples. While most Christians today will probably never be faced with the need to drive a demon out of a person, we can respond to and overcome life’s difficulties, including the attacks of Satan and the forces of evil (both demonic and human), by relying completely on Christ as our Lord and Savior. Christians realize we cannot save ourselves; we are saved only through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Furthermore, we cannot live the Christian life well without a full, continuing commitment to Christ through faith and dependence upon Him alone.



Note: previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles “The Jewish Tradition of Fasting” (Summer 2015), “To Believe” (Spring 2014), and “Prayer Customs in First-Century Judaism” (Spring 1996) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: *Bible Studies for Life*.

