

Deeper Dive: Essentials 2 Faith in Jesus

Mark 9:14-29 & James 2:14-24

1. Context: The Shape of Faith in Mark's Gospel

The story in **Mark 9:14-29** follows directly after the **Transfiguration**, where Jesus' divine glory was revealed on the mountaintop. The descent into the valley of human suffering is intentional, a narrative contrast between *divine revelation* and *human unbelief*.

N.T. Wright notes that Mark uses this moment to reveal the tension of discipleship: "*Faith is what happens when human helplessness meets divine authority.*" (*Mark for Everyone*, p. 121).

This passage exposes three kinds of faith that mirror three stages of discipleship:

1. **Faith by Association** – the disciples' attempt to act without dependence on God.
2. **Faith of Desperation** – the father's fragile, honest cry for help.
3. **Faith of Submission** – Jesus' own posture of prayerful reliance on the Father.

This narrative progression reveals that *real faith isn't willpower; it's surrender.*

2. Linguistic Notes: The Meaning of Pistis (πίστις)

The Greek word **pistis** occurs over 240 times in the New Testament. While often translated "faith," it carries a broader range of meanings including *trust, faithfulness, loyalty, allegiance, and fidelity*.

Matthew Bates (in *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*) argues that **pistis** is not just intellectual belief but "*relational fidelity expressed through loyal obedience to Jesus as King.*"

Similarly, Nijay Gupta (in *15 New Testament Words of Life*, ch. 7 "Faith") explains that faith in the New Testament is not "*believing without evidence,*" but a **trusting relationship** that produces faithful action:

"Faith is less about inner conviction and more about relational trust. It's not a badge we wear; it's a bond we live within."

This definition aligns perfectly with the contrast between the disciples' powerless "faith by association" and Jesus' powerful "faith of submission."

3. Contextual Observations: Mark 9 and the Power of Dependence

a. A Discipleship Failure

The disciples had previously been given authority to drive out demons (Mark 6:7-13), but now they cannot. Jesus' frustration ("You unbelieving generation") is directed not at the father but at His followers, who have attempted ministry without prayerful reliance on God.

Michael Gorman calls this the "**participation paradox**":

"Faith participates in divine power only through surrender to divine will."
(*Cruciformity*, p. 50)

Real faith is not control, but participation in the Father's purposes through submission.

b. The Father's Prayer

The father's words, "*I do believe; help my unbelief!*" (v. 24), capture the paradox of human faith, a mixture of trust and doubt. His faith is not perfect, but it is directed rightly. As Wright observes, "*Faith is not certainty; it's the courage to act on what little trust we have.*"

c. The Power of Prayer

When Jesus says, "*This kind can come out only by prayer*" (v. 29), He underscores that faith cannot operate independently of communion with the Father. Prayer is not an emergency measure: it's the essence of faith.

4. Theological Parallels and Intertextual Connections

The Mark 9 story resonates deeply with several Old Testament themes and narratives where faith is tested, confessed, and embodied.

a. Exodus 17:1-7 Testing the Lord

At Massah and Meribah, Israel doubted God's presence in their suffering: "*Is the LORD among us or not?*"

The disciples' failure and the father's question "*If you can...*" echo this same tension: unbelief born from fear. Yet, Jesus stands as the faithful presence of God among His people, answering the question once and for all: *Yes, the LORD is among you.*

b. 1 Kings 18:20-39 Elijah and the Prophets of Baal

Like Jesus' confrontation with the demon, Elijah faces a contest of power that exposes false faith. The prophets of Baal shout and perform; Elijah simply prays in humble trust, and fire falls from heaven.

The parallel is striking: **the disciples act like the prophets of Baal, full of effort but empty of dependence, while Jesus resembles Elijah, relying wholly on the Father.**

c. Daniel 3 The Fiery Furnace

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego declare, “*Our God is able to save us... but even if He does not, we will not bow.*”

Their faith combines **trust and obedience** even without guaranteed outcomes. The father in Mark 9 echoes this kind of resilient faith: not certainty, but loyalty in uncertainty.

d. Genesis 15 & 22 Abraham’s Faith in Action

James 2 explicitly connects to Abraham’s story:

“His faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” (James 2:22)

The Greek word for *made complete* (*eteleiōthē*) carries the sense of maturity or fulfillment. Faith grows into fullness through obedience.

As Beale notes in *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, Abraham’s willingness to act upon God’s word shows that “faith and faithfulness are not opposites but one continuous motion toward God.”

Abraham’s obedient faith stands in contrast to the disciples’ unfruitful faith and serves as the model James calls believers to imitate.

5. Faith and Works: James and Paul in Harmony

James’ statement that “*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*” (2:24) has often been contrasted with Paul’s teaching that we are “*justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (Romans 3:28).

However, scholars like Michael Bird and N.T. Wright insist these are not contradictions but complementary perspectives:

- **Paul** addresses how one enters the covenant family of God (by faith, not law).
- **James** addresses how members of that family *live out* their faith (through obedient action).

In Wright’s words (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 2, p. 798):

“Paul and James are not in conflict but in conversation, both insisting that genuine faith is faith that acts in loyalty to the Messiah.”

Thus, *pistis* in both writers is covenantal fidelity, ie, allegiance to Jesus as Lord expressed through active obedience.

6. Modern Implications: From Belief to Faithfulness

Faith that merely observes Jesus is **faith by association**.

Faith that merely cries for help is **faith of desperation**.

Faith that submits, trusts, and obeys is **faith of submission**: the kind that changes the world.

Christopher J.H. Wright reminds us (*Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, p. 127):

“Faith is not only believing that God is real, but living as though God is Lord.”

That’s the essence of **real faith**: allegiance in action, obedience in trust.

7. Reflection Questions for Further Study

1. What does the Mark 9 story reveal about the relationship between faith and prayer?
2. How does the father’s cry, “I believe; help my unbelief,” model the kind of faith God honors?
3. In what ways does Jesus’ reliance on prayer redefine what strength looks like in ministry?
4. How do Abraham’s obedience and the disciples’ failure illustrate James’s argument that faith without works is dead?
5. What modern forms of “faith by association” do you see in the church today, and how can we cultivate a “faith of submission”?

Summary

The New Testament’s vision of faith isn’t about certainty but **allegiance**.

It’s a trust that prays, obeys, and acts — not to earn God’s favor, but because it already belongs to Him.

Like the father in Mark 9, our faith may waver but when it directs itself toward Jesus, it finds power not in perfection but in dependence.

“Faith is not believing that everything will go right; it’s believing that Jesus is right and then living like it.”