

Cast Your Doubts on Jesus

Mark 9:17-24 from the series, "Cast Your Cares on Jesus"

Message from the Master Broadcast June 22, 2008 by Pastor Daron Lindemann

Less than three months before she accepted the Nobel peace prize, Mother Teresa spoke these words to her spiritual confidant: "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." *Time* magazine called such a confession from such a spiritual hero a "startling portrait in self-contradiction — that one of the great human icons of the past 100 years, whose remarkable deeds seemed inextricably connected to her closeness to God and who was routinely observed in silent and seemingly peaceful prayer by her associates as well as the television camera, was living out a very different spiritual reality privately, an arid landscape from which the deity had disappeared. And in fact, that appears to be the case. A new, innocuously titled book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (Doubleday), consisting primarily of correspondence between Teresa and her confessors and superiors over a period of 66 years, provides the spiritual counterpoint to a life known mostly through its works. The letters, many of them preserved against her wishes (she had requested that they be destroyed but was overruled by her church), reveal that for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever" (David Van Biema, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith, August 23, 2007).

Can it really be possible for a follower of Jesus, especially one as devoted and admired as Mother Teresa, to have doubts? And if it is, what does that mean for the person's standing with God? What if a Christian wonders, as Mother Teresa wrote, "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain and loss, of God not wanting me – of God not being God – of God not existing.?" Does that indicate a loss of faith and the end of a relationship with God?

Our Message from the Master series entitled "Cast Your Cares on Jesus" continues today as we come to Jesus once more with a dilemma of life. This time that dilemma is named Doubt. As if doubt itself weren't challenging enough, along with it come these curious concerns like, "Are there different kinds of doubt?" and, "Can a Christian doubt?" and, "What does God think of me if I do doubt?" We'll find answers to all those questions today in the account of a man who brought his demon possessed son and his doubting faith to Jesus, recorded in Mark 9 beginning at verse 17. The episode begins with the man speaking to Jesus about his son: "*Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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.*"

It's not hard to imagine why this man had been so shaken up. His son can't talk, and that's during a time before typewriters, text messaging, and fax machines. Such an inability to speak renders communication much more difficult than it would today. In addition the young man suffered from seizures uncontrollable by medication. In the middle of a friendly game with the neighborhood kids he'd flop onto the ground shaking violently and foaming at the mouth, then wake up to the laughter and derision of cruel teenagers. And his father could do nothing to help. Worse yet, as if suffering a strange sickness isn't bad enough, the sickness wasn't a normal one but was demon induced. Worse than a malignant tumor or a viral infection, hell itself took possession of the young man and groped his physical functions with its evil tentacles. Desperate, the man turned to a traveling miracle worker named Jesus, who happened to be on a special mission at the moment but nine of his disciples had stayed in town. Bringing his dilemma to the disciples he pleaded with them to intervene like they had with others, and to force the powers of hell to submit to the powers of heaven. Whatever the disciples did, it didn't work this time. When Jesus and the three disciples of his inner circle – Peter, James, and John – return from his transfiguration, he finds the man and his nine disciples heatedly debating with the religious leaders of the day about the incident. Can you hear them?

“You disciples are following an imposter. He’s a fraud who is deceiving people and leading them away from the true God. Or if he is the real thing, then obviously you don’t deserve to be his disciples because you can’t cast out the demon!”

“He’s not a fraud and we’re not either. It’s just that ... well ... we need more time, and ... uh ... it was Nathaniel’s fault because he said he wrong words ... Wait a minute, how come I have to do everything, you’re the one who said we could do this alone and didn’t need Jesus here.”

To which Jesus responds, *“O unbelieving generation ... how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”* He’s both frustrated at his followers and angry at the religious leaders, lumping them all together with the term “unbelieving generation.” He sighs wearily and asks, “How long?” like an exasperated parent wondering out loud, “How many times do I have to tell you ...?” Why should Jesus stay among religious leaders who deny that he is the Son of God and their Savior? How many times must he explain it to them and they shove it back in his face? And why should Jesus continue to put up with his fickle followers who boldly profess their faith one day and then bicker among themselves the next day about who is the greatest even though they can’t even cast out a demon? Certainly Jesus can find others more faithful than these.

Not wanting the boy to suffer for the sputtering faith of others, Jesus said, *“Bring the boy to me.”* The Bible reports that as the boy approached Jesus the demonic spirit threw him to the ground and he began rolling around in a convulsion foaming at the mouth. The demon, now drawn closer to Jesus, resists the Almighty knowing full well that Jesus has power over it. Jesus turned to the boy’s father, despairing again at the humiliation of his son, and asked, *“How long has he been like this?”* It sounds as if Jesus is seeking information like a doctor to make a better diagnosis, but he’s doing much more. He’s meeting the father’s doubts by allowing the father to express his hurt and pain, to define what causes his hopelessness, all the while looking right at Jesus intently listening, compassionately receptive. “How long?” Jesus had asked before in frustration at lacking faith. Unable to dismiss people he loves, and unwilling to turn on his heels and leave them to the devil’s power, Jesus stays one more day, for one more sick person and one more sinner. “How long?” Jesus now inquires because he knows that doubt can be as powerful and as deceptive as the devil himself. “Tell me about what you’ve been through. Talk to me about what it’s like to be a father who can’t help his son. How many times have you wished it would be different? How many places have you dreamed of taking him but you can’t? How many sleepless nights have you held him tightly, strongly while he convulses in your arms? Tell me because I can help. I can make it different.”

Doubts begin to dissipate when we see that Jesus cares, like the misty clouds giving the sign of the rainbow as the sunlight beams its hope that signals the end of a storm. Realize, then, that there are different kinds of doubts. There is honest questioning that curiously seeks answers, there is a disturbed faith that isn’t sure it knows what to believe, there is despair in myself that isn’t convinced I am worth helping or saving. Then there are doubts that deliberately challenge God and rebelliously mock what he claims to be true, not looking for help or hope and insisting it can’t be found in God. The difference between the two is that the first kind of doubting is the doubt of a child, a believer in God, a person with a saving but sensitive faith. The second kind of doubting is the doubt of an unbeliever, a mocker of God, a person without saving faith who believes only in himself or herself and doesn’t need forgiveness or salvation.

One pastor told his congregation during the sermon that it was wrong to ask questions and have doubts. After the service someone asked, “Is God afraid of questions and doubts, or is it just that we’re afraid, pastor?” It’s

okay to be afraid of your doubts. It's okay to have doubts. It's okay to ask questions of God. As long as you bring your doubts to the Lord. ***Cast Your Doubts on Jesus***. Nicodemus came to Jesus with questions about his miracles. Zacchaeus wondered about Jesus and climbed a tree to get a better look. Nathanael wasn't too sure that the true Savior could come from Nazareth. Mary questioned the angel about giving birth to God. Doubting Thomas went down in history as the disciple who couldn't believe Jesus had risen unless he saw him with his own eyes. None of them had lost their saving faith. Their concerns and questions came from hearts eager to find answers in Jesus and open to listen to God's Word. Jesus told Nicodemus that God so loved the world. Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus for dinner and promised him salvation. The angel of God gave Mary a sign to be sure of the virgin birth. Jesus came back to let Thomas see him and touch him and proclaim, "My Lord and my God." Doubts disappear when we take them to Jesus like the man whose son now flailed on the ground at Jesus' feet foaming at the mouth. "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us," he pleaded with Jesus.

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Believing in Jesus means replacing the word "if" with the word "because." You can say to Jesus, "Because you died for me, please forgive my sins," and "Because you rose from the grave, take my mother's soul to heaven to be with you forever," and "Because you promise to be with me, make me less afraid," and "Because you promise to help me speak as your witness, give me the right words to say." Everything is possible. ***Cast Your Doubts on Jesus***.

Hearing these encouraging words from Jesus, the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" He meant, "I know that you care and believe that you can help, but there is so much more I have trouble believing. I know defeat more than victory, I know pain more than healing, I know disappointment rather than contentment. Help me to believe in what you can give. Help me live with greater faith!" ***Cast Your Doubts on Jesus***. Rather than going to your faith to make your faith stronger, go to Jesus. Rather than determining that you are going to do better, admit that you can't do better without Jesus. Rather than giving up when a dilemma is having its day with you, give it to Jesus.

A man's car slid off a road and ended up in a ditch. A farmhouse was nearby so the motorist asked the owner if he had a tractor he could borrow to get his truck back on the road. "Nope, but I got my mule, Blue," said the farmer.

"I doubt a mule is strong enough to pull my truck out."

"You don't know Blue," said the mule's proud owner. So Blue was hitched to the truck. "Pull, Blue!" The truck didn't move. And the farmer then called out, "Pull, Elmer!" The truck moved a little. Then the farmer yelled, "Pull, Biscuit," and the truck was free.

"Thank you so much," said the truck owner. "But I have a question. You called your mule by three different names. How is that?"

"Simple," said the farmer. "Blue is blind. And if he thought he was the only one pulling, your truck would still be in the ditch!"

Do you have doubts that need to be addressed? Good. Christians can indeed doubt and at the same time believe. As long as we believe that we don't face our doubts alone. ***Cast Your Doubts on Jesus***. He's not afraid of anything. And, he can do anything. Everything is possible for you and Jesus. Amen.