

“When Faith is Willed Through Gritted Teeth”

Based on Psalm 22 and Mark 9:14-29

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Mar. 1, 2026

One of the biggest misconceptions about faith is that it is somehow an all or nothing proposition – that either you believe or you don’t...that either you trust God or you don’t. I think one of the things that has led to this misunderstanding is the black and white language so many Christians seem to use to talk about their faith: “God is always with me...God will never let me down...God has always seen me through every hardship. Since I gave my life to Jesus, God has always blessed me... Just pray and ask God and He will give you the desires of your heart...”

But my experience – along with the experience of those in our two passages for the morning – is that faith is a much gray-er proposition, that it is much more riddled with doubt, uncertainty, and times when we just aren’t sure. Our Psalm for the day, Psalm 22, features a speaker who is clearly doubting, struggling, and trying to hold onto belief and trust when he’s not feeling God’s presence at all.

The opening line of this Psalm should sound very familiar to us, because it is the very line Jesus, himself, quotes as he was dying on the cross: “My God, my God...why have you forsaken me?” Some translations say, “why have you abandoned me?” The Psalmist feels completely cut off from God: “I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night but find no rest... I’m a worm, not a human being; I’m scorned by everyone...Bulls surround me...lions attack me...Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me...” We don’t know exactly what this writer was experiencing, but there is little doubt what he feels. He seems to be going through his own sort of crucifixion experience: “All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment...” – eerily similar to what Jesus endured on the cross.

But what I want you to notice in this Psalm, where abandonment by God seems the dominant experience of the writer, is how he wills himself to believe and trust, even and especially when his current experience suggests that he is alone and forsaken. After crying out “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me,” in the very next paragraph he says, “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One... In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.” And

then, after all those lines about being surrounded by lions, bulls, dogs, etc. the very next section says, “But you, Lord, are my strength...Come quickly and deliver me...Rescue me from the mouth of the lions...I will declare your name to my people. I will praise you!”

Can you hear the back and forth? The writer is wrestling here – wrestling with himself, wrestling with his uncertain faith; he’s even wrestling with God. Faith, for the Psalmist, is not black and white at all – not even close! He wants to believe as he goes through some very difficult hardship. But he is drowning in pain, suffering, and fear, and he sees no sign or reason to hope. And “yet” – and “yet” is the key transition word in this Psalm – he calls to mind God’s actions in the past, particularly those actions he has heard about from his ancestors. “In You our ancestors put their trust, and you delivered them. They cried out to you and were saved...” So, he is calling on God to do NOW what he has heard from his ancestors God did in the past.

Then, in the second half of this psalm, the writer starts declaring what he will do – and “will” is the key word here. The psalmist wills himself to believe and to cling to his faith in the very midst of his abandonment. “I *will* declare your name to my people; in the assembly I *will* praise you...I *will* fulfill my vows...” I call this ‘faith through gritted teeth.’ The writer is not at all certain that God is there. He is filled with doubt as to whether God will answer his plea. But he grits his teeth, puts his head down, and screams, ‘I’m going to keep believing in you, even though you don’t seem to be giving me any reason to believe right now!’

Have you ever felt this way – where you had to will yourself to believe? When your life was unraveling, the center wouldn’t hold, and you just couldn’t seem to find God anywhere in your situation? There are times where faith is not at all a certainty for us. There are times when we have to “fake it ‘till we make” with belief. That’s why one of my favorite gospel stories has always been Mark 9:14-29. It’s the story of a loving father whose son has been terribly sick for years. Maybe it’s epilepsy; maybe it’s demonic possession; maybe it’s mental illness. But whatever it is, this father has tried everything he could possibly think of to get his son help for these seizures. He probably went to priests and rabbis. He undoubtedly made sacrifices and offerings at the temple. He was at the point now

of even trying a little alternative medicine through faith healers. And so, he seeks out the latest healer he has heard about – Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus comes along and asks what’s going on. The boy’s father tells Jesus the story, ending it by saying, “But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

Now, it’s impossible for us to know the tone with which Jesus replies to the father, but what he says is, “If you can...? Everything is possible for one who believes.” Is Jesus insulted that the father would question or doubt his power? Or is Jesus more smiling and winking at the loving father in a more encouraging way? We’ll never know. But what we do know and need to focus on this morning is what the father says in response to Jesus. It’s the crux of the entire story and of everything I’m trying say in this message this morning: “I believe! Help my unbelief!...I believe! Help my unbelief!”

These may be my favorite 5 words in all of scripture – I believe! Help my unbelief!” What do these words tell us? They tell us that faith is *not* black and white. They tell us that trusting in Jesus is *not* an either/or thing. These two tiny sentences jammed up together are two sides of the same coin. Faith and doubt, belief and unbelief are not separate or opposites. They are a part of one whole. For those of us who are human, who live on this side of heaven, these two forces will always be at work within us. You can’t have one without the other. Some seasons we may feel full of faith and hope and trust in God. But during other we might be riddled with doubt and uncertainty, unable to fully trust our broken lives to Jesus. And during those times, we may well have to *will* ourselves to believe through gritted teeth, like the Psalmist in Psalm 22, or like this desperate father did in Mark 9. “I believe...Help my unbelief!”

I don’t know about you, but I wish someone had helped me understand this truth earlier in my life. I spent a lot of years thinking that I was a fake or less than a “real Christian” because of how much I doubted, questioned, and struggled to believe that God was loving, good, and at work in my life. I became a closet doubter, thinking I would be shunned by the church and other “believers” if they knew just how much help I needed with my unbelief.

I wish we Christians were more honest and up front with our doubts and struggles to believe. Because we aren’t and because so many Christ-followers

seem to put on a happy face and smile through their hidden misery, we doubters wind up feeling worse and more alone. My mom was one of those smile-all-the-time, happy Jesus people. We, in her family, knew how much horrible crap she'd been through in life – including her own father's suicide when she was just 14. But nobody out in the world even had a clue, thanks to her commitment to putting on a happy face and to positive thinking.

I spent my entire adolescence and early adulthood thinking my mother was a fake, until she died in a car accident and we found her journal. Man, my mom was riddled with doubt. She had all kinds of seasons of unbelief. Reading of my mom's struggles to believe in and trust God through the challenges and changes of her life made me feel so much closer to her and way closer to God. I think, for her, a smile was her way of gritting her teeth and willing herself to believe. My mom was a woman of deep and profound faith, AND she struggled with doubt and unbelief a ton. And she wasn't the only strong Christian who did.

Listen to this journal entry from someone you may have heard of...

"My God, I have no faith. I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd my heart, afraid to uncover them because of the blasphemy. If there be God, please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me, and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great, nothing touches my soul." These words were the private thoughts of...Mother Theresa.

"I believe; help my unbelief." Sometimes, folks, the only faith and trust we can muster is through gritted teeth. And that's ok. The Psalms are filled with such people in such moments. Heck, the savior himself doubted his father and struggled to trust in his plan. When you or someone you know is struggling to believe, don't feel the need to talk them out of their doubts or talk them into faith and trust. Show them, instead, that you are comfortable just sitting with them in the darkness, for in so doing you may also show them that God is comfortable sitting there too. Sit with them in their darkness because that's where all humans will find themselves at some point in their lives. It's no sin, and it's no lack of faith

to struggle with doubt and unbelief. We're in good company: the Psalmist, Jesus, Mother Theresa, and even my mom. "I believe...help my unbelief." Amen.