

**Psalms 116:1-9(ESV)** <sup>1</sup>I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. <sup>2</sup>Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. <sup>3</sup>The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. <sup>4</sup>Then I called on the name of the Lord: “O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul!” <sup>5</sup>Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. <sup>6</sup>The Lord preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. <sup>7</sup>Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. <sup>8</sup>For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; <sup>9</sup>I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

**Isaiah 50:4-10(ESV)** <sup>4</sup>The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. <sup>5</sup>The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. <sup>6</sup>I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. <sup>7</sup>But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. <sup>8</sup>He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. <sup>9</sup>Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. <sup>10</sup>Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

**James 3:1-12(ESV)** <sup>1</sup>Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup>For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. <sup>4</sup>Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup>but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

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## Possibilities

**Mark 9:14-29 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup>And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. <sup>15</sup>And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. <sup>16</sup>And he asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” <sup>17</sup>And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. <sup>18</sup>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.” <sup>19</sup>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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood.”<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”<sup>24</sup> Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.<sup>28</sup> And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”<sup>29</sup> And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

We’ve all seen countless rocks in our lives—big ones, medium sized ones, and little ones. Certainly, the pebble-sized ones are most often seen. But we’ve all run across some medium sized rocks—and by that, I mean rocks that exceed four feet in diameter. Rocks that size can’t be easily moved. And then there are the really big rocks. I remember seeing one large stone when I was in Arizona that was way over 50 feet high. And it looked exactly like a little pebble you might pick up on the road—except for its extreme size. I read a story about the famous sculptor—Michelangelo—back in my college days. He was out examining large slabs of marble that had been hewn out of the quarry. He found the one he wanted and chiseled the gigantic, 17-foot high, statue of David pondering his upcoming battle with Goliath.

This David figure was carved by a 26-year-old Michelangelo more than 500 years ago. It was—and still is—considered to be one of his masterpieces. When Michelangelo was asked how he was able to produce such a stunning piece of art from large, shapeless piece of marble, he answered, to the effect, “I simply removed all the parts of the marble that weren’t David, and the result is what you now see.” Michelangelo and the other great artists we’ve heard about were able to look at a formless piece of marble and see Possibilities. Possibilities as to what work of art that shapeless stone could be turned into. It’s almost as though these artists had a form of x-ray vision that permitted them to see the figures that were contained within the quarried marble. While most of us see nothing but a rock in its raw state, artists see Possibilities of what the rock might become.

As we examine our text and the account of the afflicted boy, how many possible outcomes of this story can we imagine? We can imagine that the father had brought his son to other exorcists to release him from his possessed state. The boy himself was probably in no condition to be able to help himself. The disciples who couldn’t cast the demon out were greatly puzzled why their exorcism ritual hadn’t worked. So, what now? Just give up? Try again? Try something different? Many possibilities that just might have produced a desirable outcome had already been exhausted. What else could they do? Some folks, lacking in imagination, might deduce that everything had already been done—that there was nothing else to try. Just leave the boy and his father as they were—no better or worse off than when they first came to the disciples.

In our time, medical practitioners would try drugs to control the violent outbursts, psychological sessions to help the boy, and even surgical procedures before placing the lad in some

facility to prevent him from hurting himself and others. It's not likely that many of our modern medical professionals would consider an exorcism to resolve the problem. If any reputable professional suggested exorcism today, he or she would likely no longer be reputable. Back in Jesus' day, there weren't all these vast medicines and individual counseling sessions available. And I don't recall ever reading about medical facilities being available for people afflicted like this young boy. Still, there were probably some drugs that were available that would have kept the young boy in an everlasting stupor for the rest of his life. One other obvious possibility was to just let the boy throw himself into the fire and water and commit suicide. That would deliver his body of the demonic possession that afflicted him. The point is that there were other possibilities; however, none of them would seemingly resolve the possession issue in a satisfactory manner.

It's interesting to observe that the father of this boy wasn't guessing regarding his son's affliction. He knew the lad was possessed by an unclean spirit. It's likely that this wasn't the first time that an exorcism had been attempted—because we're told that the boy had been afflicted since childhood. So, the failure on the part of the disciples was just another disappointment in an endless line of them. The father was hoping this exorcism would work, but when it didn't—he wasn't ready to give up. It's at this time that Jesus appears on the scene. In the midst of much commotion, Jesus inquires about what's going on here. The explanation our Lord hears apparently does not please Him, because He responds, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” The possessed boy is brought to Jesus and the spirit, upon recognizing Jesus, convulsed the boy. The picture we now have is the boy's father standing before Jesus, the boy twisting and turning around on the ground, and Jesus watching the events.

We've heard the story about the Gerasene demoniac, who broke chains when men attempted to bind him (Mark 5:3). Possessed people apparently had superhuman strength at times. It could be that because of this knowledge that folks didn't move quickly to attempt to subdue a possessed person. Rather, they just stood by and tried to stay out of his way. We can understand why people just watched the convulsing boy on the ground. No one wanted—or dared—to go near him. The frantic father, who had tried and tried and tried to get help for his son, cries out in desperation, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (verse 22). The father sounds like he has run out of viable Possibilities as to what can be attempted with his son's condition. “If you can” doesn't appear to convey much conviction or faith in what Jesus can do. Our Lord emphatically responds, “All things are possible for one who believes” (verse 24).

The father is now faced with a personal dilemma. Everything he has tried up to this point to have his son delivered from demon possession has failed. It's difficult to continue to exhibit hope when so many failures have been painfully endured. The father wants to be the kind of believer that can expect all things to be possible; however, he recognizes his own limitations and voices that stirring statement of faith, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (verse 24). Apparently, that's exactly what happens here. The father is given the faith to believe—and the demon is cast out of the boy. We're pleased to see a pleasant ending to a very nasty situation.

The disciples had exhausted the possibilities of which they were aware as they tried unsuccessfully to cast out the demon. They didn't know—or remember—that there was still another possibility that could be used: prayer. Personally, I can relate very well with that obvious omission. Too many times, I exhaust all the possibilities I can think of trying to resolve something and forget about prayer. More times than I care to admit has my wife found me muttering to myself about

my inability to fix or find something and then saying to me, “Have you prayed about it?” Without realizing it, I had closed my mind to other Possibilities.

Far too often we tend to limit the possibilities before us to whatever we can easily come up with. The truth is that there are solutions to the problems and difficulties we face that we might never think of—unless we pray and seek the Lord’s help. There is absolutely no problem we can ever come across to which the Lord doesn’t have a solution—a remedy—a way to resolve. Now it’s also true that we might not especially like the answer the Lord provides, because we tend always to want the easy way out of whatever difficulty we find ourselves in. But the Lord’s way is always the best way—even if we don’t much care for it. Faith prompts us to accept that His answer is best for us in the long run.

The Disciples of Jesus thought they had the best possibilities in mind when they considered what He should do to be the Savior that the Jews needed: become the political leader of the people, drive the Romans out of the land, and make Israel a mighty world power. With all the divine power Jesus had at His disposal, why not use it to better the earthly living conditions of God’s people? The Disciples were aware of a limited number of Possibilities regarding Jesus being the Messiah who was promised by God. Instead of coming among the people in all the power of Almighty God, Jesus came in the role of a servant. This servant role effectively negated all the salvation possibilities the Disciples and other first century Jews were considering. The Savior of the world coming to be a servant and permitting Himself to be crucified and killed on a cross is not a possibility that occurred to anyone.

And we can certainly see why! It’s not reasonable to expect that God Himself would take on all the punishment sinful man had rightly earned. Why would God make Himself our stand-in? It’s such an unjust way for humankind to be saved that no rational human would ever think of it. Yet, this was exactly the plan of Almighty God from the time of the first sin back in the Garden. The Lord clearly understood that once sin entered the world through the rebellion of our ancestors, there would never be any way that we could save ourselves from damnation. Either the Lord Himself would provide a Savior—or everyone would end up in the same hell that had been prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

Having Jesus as one’s personal Savior is not a possibility that naturally occurs to sinful man. Sinful man either denies the existence of hell or attempts to save himself through good works. Only through the power and grace of the Holy Spirit does anyone receive the confidence that Jesus can and will save him or her from that person’s natural eternal destination. Through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit reveals a new possibility to us: salvation—a forever place in heaven—through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.