

Trusting Jesus

Mental health and illness from God's point of view (pt 5)

Without a healthy mind, what are we? It's not surprising, then, that God sent Jesus to heal MINDS, as we see in the case of "a man with an evil spirit" in **Mark 5:2**, who "came from the tombs" to meet Jesus "and fell on his knees in front of him," shouting at the top of his voice.

Reading on as to what this man's state of mind was, he'd likely be labeled by mental health experts today with every mental disorder and mental illness known to man. Imagine this chap on a psychiatrist's couch pouring out his troubles - if, that is, you could get him on the couch in the first place and keep him there - because "he'd often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet," **verse 4**.

Think of the unfortunate mental health therapist today, filled to the brim with all his worldly counseling training, having this chap flailing away with his broken chains in the waiting room and destroying the furniture. And the walls would shake as bodies crashed against them, because "No one was strong enough to subdue him."

So what would be the therapist's diagnosis and suggested treatment in such a case? Would he offer some coping mechanisms to help with anger, or pills to calm the man's nerves, or lock him up in an institution? The only problem with all those suggestions, however, was that no one could hold the wretched man down long enough to administer any sort of help or treatment. There was nothing anyone could do, and so "Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones" (5).

I doubt any mental illness counselor today would have suggested **Jesus'** solution either, which was allowing the evil spirits torturing the man to transplant themselves into two thousand pigs and do a kamikaze dive over a steep cliff and drown (13). It caused a huge stir, but when a crowd of people came running to see what had happened, "they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and **IN HIS RIGHT MIND**" (15).

From a state of madness, the man's mind had been healed. And there he was for all to see, chatting away quite normally, maybe exchanging views on the weather while twiddling his broken chains into a nice neat pile. It must have seemed impossible, though, that this poor creature that everyone had steered well clear of in case they got hit by a flying ankle iron, had been totally restored to a state of mental health. The image of that man sitting there must have burnt itself into their brains, as well as the image of the one who'd healed him, because all of a sudden here was this **other** man, Jesus, who had the power to heal and restore even the most severely damaged mind.

But for some odd reason the people "were **afraid**" (Mark 5:15), and they "began to plead with Jesus to leave their region" (17).

Why? What was the problem? They'd tried their very best to help the crazy man by binding his arms so he couldn't cut himself, and they'd risked life and limb jumping on his wildly thrashing body to tie him up with chains, all to no avail however. But in minutes Jesus had restored the man to his right mind, the very thing they'd all wished for but could never do.

So why were the people "afraid"? Was it discovering the man had two thousand demons torturing his mind? But the Jews knew all about evil spirits, and it wasn't a taboo subject, either. Their Bible had lots of stories about evil spirits, like the time God sent an evil spirit to torture King Saul's mind in 1 Samuel 18. But they still couldn't wrap their minds round what **Jesus** had just done.

It was the same back in **Mark 1:23** when a man "possessed by an evil spirit" started yelling at Jesus in the synagogue, and Jesus yelled back, "Be quiet. Come out of him," and the "evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek" (25-26). But again, it wasn't the wonderful miracle of healing that caught people's attention; **it was Jesus**. "What is this?" people cried in **verse 27**, "He (Jesus) even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

And that's what people were afraid of, that **Jesus had such authority**. It was the same in **Mark 2:10** when Jesus healed a crippled man to prove he had "authority on earth to forgive sins." And that got the religious leaders turning purple, because they believed that only God had the authority to forgive sins, so who did Jesus think he was? And yet, here Jesus was, pulling off the most amazing miracles to prove he really did have that authority.

And then in **Mark 4:39**, Jesus calmed a furious squall, that threatened to swamp the boat that he and his disciples were in, by simply yelling, “Quiet. Be still.” Were the disciples relieved by this wonderful miracle? No, **verse 41**, “They were terrified.” Why? Because “Even the wind and the waves **obey him.**”

What shook people up was Jesus’ total authority over both the physical world and the spirit world. He could cast out two thousand evil spirits as easily as he could stop a raging storm. But he also had authority over people’s minds and bodies too. He could restore the tortured mind of a man with severe mental illness as easily as he could restore the pitifully crippled body of a paralytic. So here was a man who had the power and authority to do what **only God could do**. No wonder people were afraid, because, as one person said in **Mark 2:12**, “We have never seen anything like this.”

And that’s what scared them, that something was happening outside the realm of normal human experience. Never had anyone experienced the instant and total healing of an impossibly crippled man, or the total restoration of a madman’s mind. And never had they seen a man like Jesus with such power before either. But if such power could only come from God, then the Jews were being faced with the clear fact that God himself was right there with them - and that he was fully involved and thoroughly interested in their practical troubles, both physical and mental. But maybe that was scary too, that Jesus was bringing God that close up and personal.

But how would people react today if a man with an impossibly damaged mind suddenly turned up in his therapist’s waiting room “in his right mind” and there he was chatting away quite normally like he’d never done before?

The medical profession would naturally try to offer a reasonable explanation within the realm of human experience. Some people, they might say, experience ‘spontaneous remission’, and maybe that’s what happened. Or maybe the mentally ill chap tripped over a curb on the way to his therapist and banged his head on a fire hydrant and jiggled the wires in his brain a bit. But please, don’t say it was a miracle, because that’s introducing the possibility of a spirit world being involved in people’s lives, and that can really spook people out, especially if they hear that evil spirits may be involved as well.

On the other hand, why be squeamish about evil spirits when their influence could explain all sorts of incurable mental problems?

Jesus' own family, for instance, thought he was "out of his mind" **due to "an evil spirit"** (Mark 3:21, 30). The Jews had no problem accepting that evil spirits could mess people's minds up. To the Jews it **wasn't** outside the bounds of normal human experience at all. What spooked **them** out, therefore, wasn't the existence of a spirit world; **it was Jesus himself**. It wasn't the possibility of evil spirits that bothered them, it was the big question in **Mark 6:2**, "Where did this man (Jesus) get these things? What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles?"

It was Jesus' miracles that did it, because there was nothing the Jews could turn to in their experience or their religious upbringing that could explain how an ordinary man like Jesus could raise a twelve year-old girl back to life again (5:42), and completely cure a woman with a hemorrhage that had stumped every doctor she'd been to so far (5:26). Jesus was able to do what the medical profession could neither do, nor explain. And it really bothered people that Jesus, a mere carpenter (6:3) with no medical qualifications or years of training, had power over terminal and incurable illness, power to heal the deaf, dumb and blind (7:35 and 8:25), and power over evil spirits and death. And all Jesus asked of people in return was: "**Don't be afraid; just believe**" (5:36).

But they **were** afraid and they **didn't** believe, as we see in the tragic case of a young boy in **Mark 9:17-18**, who was "possessed by a spirit that robbed him of speech." According to the boy's father, "Whenever the spirit seizes my son, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid." And there was nothing anybody could do for the poor boy, including Jesus' disciples, who up to this point had driven evil spirits out of people without fail, but on this occasion they couldn't (18).

And why couldn't they? Well, that was the question the disciples themselves asked Jesus later, and his answer in **verse 29** was: "This kind can come out only by prayer." Well, he'd never said that before. Up to this point he'd given his disciples total "authority over evil spirits" (Mark 6:7), so all they'd ever needed to do when faced with a person with an evil spirit was simply command the evil spirit, or spirits, to leave the person, and the evil spirits left, with **no prayer by the disciples needed**. And the disciples "drove out many demons" by that method (6:13).

But suddenly they couldn't, and Jesus' reply was, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (19).

Strong words indeed, but not surprising when here was an entire crowd of Jews, including the most scholarly "teachers of the law" - **and** nine of Jesus' very own disciples too - all of whom were arguing over the tragic state of this poor boy, and **no one had a solution** (Mark 9:14). Really? But only four chapters earlier Jesus had just healed an uncontrollable madman with **two thousand** demons - not just **one** demon like this boy had - so **where was the faith of these people?**

The boy's father was no help either, because his only response to the man who had the power to cast out two thousand demons was, "**IF** you can do anything for my son" in **Mark 9:22**.

"IF?" Jesus cries in **verse 23**. "There are no 'ifs' among believers. Everything is possible for him who believes." Well, they'd never heard Jesus say something as blunt and staggering as that before either, that if they believed in him and the **obvious** power and authority he'd been given, then nothing would be impossible for them. But, hang on, the disciples **already** knew that to be true, because it had never been impossible for them to cast out demons so far, had it? So why didn't the disciples simply calm the crowd down and cry out, "Don't be afraid everyone; just believe" - just like Jesus said back in Mark 5:36? But they didn't, so where was their faith too?

Faced with what looked like a failed healing, no one, including Jesus' disciples, cried out, "Remember the madman in the tombs?" Only four chapters had passed and they'd all forgotten that incident already, staggering though the miracle had been. So there they all stood, faced with their pathetic lack of faith. And that's exactly what Jesus faced his disciples with later on too, when he said, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

Did Jesus mean that this was some sort of super demon that only prayer could cast out? But Jesus didn't pray when **he** cast the demon out, did he? In context, therefore, Jesus wasn't talking about prayer being the magic bullet to cast out certain types of demons; it was prayer being **the source of faith** to cast out **any** sort of demon. Prayer is what gives us the belief and confidence that with Jesus all things are possible. That's why prayer was the answer to the boy's father's plea, "help me overcome my unbelief," because with prayer he wouldn't have said, "IF you can" to Jesus; he would've said, "I know you can."

And that's the kind of confidence Jesus came to instill in his disciples; and if their faith in him wasn't that strong yet, all they had to do was pray.

What we see in the book of Mark, then, is a clear theme about belief and how we get it. It continues in **Mark 10** as well, when “a blind man, Bartimaeus, was sitting by the roadside begging,” and when he heard Jesus was nearby he yelled again and again, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (47-48). When Jesus eventually called for him, Bartimaeus jumped up to meet him, and when Jesus asked him what he wanted, Bartimaeus replied, “Rabbi, I want to see” (51). **Not**, take note, “**IF** you can help me,” like the boy’s father in Mark 9. It was more like, “Jesus, I know you can help me. I want to see, and you’re the one who can do it.”

Jesus reaction was immediate: “Go,” he said to Bartimaeus in **verse 52**, “your faith has healed you,” and immediately Bartimaeus’ sight was restored. What a contrast **that** was to the unbelieving religious leaders and disciples just one chapter earlier. And what was it that enabled this man to be healed of an impossible to heal disease? It was his faith in the power and authority of Jesus over anything and everything in his life, no matter how impossible it was.

And then there was the strange case of the withered fig tree in **Mark 11:20**, that Jesus had cursed for having no figs on it back in verse 14. In **verse 21**, “Peter remembered and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, look. The fig tree you cursed has withered.’”

And what was Jesus’ response? “Have faith in God” (22). He could have added, “Don’t be scared” too, because the disciples were clearly shocked by the sight of the shriveled fig tree. Theirs was the typical, default human response when hit by something outside the range of normal human experience, like, in this case, a fig tree withering in a single day.

As they stared at the fig tree in disbelief, Jesus, like a narrator speaking behind the scenes, explains in **verses 23-24** why the fig tree withered: “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, **whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.**”

Whether the disciples actually heard what Jesus said is debatable, because they’re probably still staring in disbelief at the fig tree, their brains still blowing bubbles. But the message is clear, and it follows the same pattern in all Jesus’ miracles, that a new era had opened up ever since his arrival, where the impossible had suddenly become possible.

Prayers for impossible needs to be fulfilled would be answered as easily as telling mountains to go jump in the lake. And all it takes is belief, or as Jesus said to the synagogue ruler whose daughter he'd just raised from the dead: "Don't be afraid; just believe." Yes, it was scary stuff that Jesus had the power to bring a dead child back to life again, but please, just **believe** he had that kind of authority and power, that's all.

The disciples, meanwhile, were still probably thinking, "I don't believe it," as they stared at the fig tree, which was typical of that entire generation of Jews. The withered fig tree, in other words, pictured Israel and its inability to believe in Jesus. It was their brains that were withered, because instead of delighting in Jesus' power and authority they were flummoxed and scared by it. And that frustrated Jesus. Why couldn't they just accept the clear fact that he had the power to move mountains - mountains that humanity should be **delighted** in having moved too - like the terrible mountain of evil spirits meddling in human affairs and messing people's minds up? And all people had to do was believe in him, seek his help personally, and it would be given. And if they lacked belief, ask and belief would be given too.

And what more proof did they need than the crazy man in the tombs being restored to his right mind? No wonder Jesus cried out in Mark 9:19, "What a generation! No sense of God! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this?" (The Message).

But the Jewish nation was only typical of the general human response to Jesus all through the ages, because the response is no different today either, is it? Introduce the idea that Jesus is the only and ultimate solution to all our ills, including mental illness, and the establishment will dismiss you as a scary crank.

So, tragically, mental illness continues, devastating the lives of millions of young people, and in the meanwhile the mental health establishment, just like the religious leaders in Jesus' day, will not admit its helplessness. It continues to portray itself as the saviour of mankind, dribbling out a constant flow of expert sounding advice and new discoveries to mesmerize people with its brilliance, giving it an air of authority and superiority that can even get Christians thinking it has all the answers.

But that's the culture we live in, where the establishment accepts nothing outside the bounds of its **own** authority and learning.

And what a pity that is, when Jesus could actually help **them** too. He could let the medical establishment in on all sorts of discoveries that would enable them to move unmovable mountains and help millions of people, and all they need do is believe and ask, and he will answer. Imagine what that opens up to Christians contemplating a career in medicine or mental health, because, like so many Christians in the past, they too could become pioneers as Jesus opens up the lid on the knowledge that only HE has to those who believe in him.

Jesus is not against the medical establishment. Luke was a physician, and Jesus didn't tell him to dump his medical bag in the garbage. Jesus also gave analogies using medical terms. The problem, therefore, isn't medicine competing with Jesus, it's medicine not accepting Jesus as the ultimate authority and power in moving mountains, which has denied humans the help that he can give.

What if evil spirits do exist, for instance, and they really do cause all sorts of mental illness? Wouldn't it be great if the medical establishment believed that, giving them another weapon in their fight against the diseases that ravage humanity - and a weapon that Jesus is more than willing to give them too? But they're stuck with the mountain of their own disbelief, and while that remains so will a huge amount of unnecessary suffering and mental illness.

What we're saying, then, is that mental illness exists because of lack of belief in the power and authority Jesus now has to cure it. Or put in a positive way, that mental health is directly connected to believing Jesus has the authority right now to heal people's minds. But who on this earth believes that? Who believes that Jesus has authority over everything in our lives, including the massive mountain of troubles going on in our own heads? And who accepts that our minds are impossibly muddled and only Jesus can sort them out?

But that's why Jesus withered the fig tree, not only to picture the Jews' pathetic inability to believe in him, but also to point out "the spirit of timidity" and fear and unbelief in his very own disciples too. For three years they'd seen hundreds of evil spirits do what Jesus commanded them, but when Jesus told a fig tree it wouldn't produce fruit again, their minds blew fuses when it happened.

So here was a second occasion when the disciples got all muddled up in their heads and didn't know what to think. Which made me think, "What's my fig tree?" What brings me up short in my life to help me realize I don't actually believe in Jesus' authority over everything yet either?

Jesus has his ways of bringing unbelief to the surface too, like he did when the disciples couldn't heal the boy with the evil spirit. "When are you lot going to believe in me?" he cries. And to his disciples at the fig tree he says, "Haven't you got the point yet that no mountain now is too big for you? Don't you have the confidence yet to tell the mountains bothering you to take a hike, and because you believe in me, that's exactly what they'll do?"

But maybe we've got demons messing our minds up too, making us shaky and fearful when we're hit with things we've never experienced before, or when issues we can't handle never ease up. And we sense we're careening out of control, our emotions are taking over, and we're heading for trouble.

So where do we turn? Well, Jesus said, this kind can only come out by prayer. But what are we asking for, exactly? Well, in the context of Mark 9 we're asking for what the boy's father asked for when he wasn't quite sure IF Jesus would heal his son. The father pleaded, "I believe, but help my unbelief." Oh, he believed in Jesus' power all right, but suddenly, when it came to his OWN situation and Jesus actually pulling off the impossible in his own family, he got a case of the jitters. Jesus did great things for other people but would he do it for him?

Well, why wouldn't Jesus do it for him? When had Jesus ever refused anyone asking for help? And Jesus understands us better than anybody, so not only does he know exactly what's messing up our minds, he knows exactly how to restore us to our right minds too.

So, does a strong belief have anything to do with mental health? A believer in Jesus should know the answer to that from tons of personal experience, having had many a mountain of mental and emotional troubles cast like mountains into the ocean. We are living proof, therefore, that mental illness can be cured. And all it takes is: "Don't be afraid, just believe," and if we *are* afraid and we *don't* believe we can ask Jesus to help our unbelief, because fear and unbelief only come out by prayer.

The question we're left with, then, is: "Do I believe Jesus has the authority and power in my life to heal anything and everything that needs healing? Do I believe he wants to heal me?"

Or put another way: "Do I believe that what Jesus did for the madman in Mark Chapter 5 he can and wants to do for me?"