

I Believe in God, but I Have Doubts

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This morning we're going to be looking at Mark, the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, and we're going to start in verse 17. And we've been working through a series: "I Believe in God, but..." We started with "I believe in God, but I don't believe in the Bible." And then last week we looked at "I believe in God, but what about evolution?" And this morning we're going to look at "I believe in God, but I have doubts." Are you ready? All right, if you would stand with me as we read from God's Word, the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, starting in verse 17.

And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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."

And He answered them, "Oh faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."

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.

And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?"

And he said, "From childhood. 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."

And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for the one who believes."

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

I believe; help my unbelief. I believe; help my own belief.

It was a cold winter day, and I was on the day shift. And as shifts go, the day shift is often the most boring of shifts. Usually the crazy people who are up all night are now sleeping, and those on the day shift are left dealing with the complaints of the property owners who are usually the victims of the crazy people who are up all night. But this call, this call had potential. The lady was telling the dispatcher that she woke up this morning, poured herself a cup of coffee, and stepped out onto her back patio, where she ran directly into Satan himself. Literally Satan, not just an angry guy, not just a bad guy, but Satan himself. Potential, right? This can be a good one. What's more is she had informed the dispatch that she may have even killed Satan with her sword. "Cut him almost in two," she said. You can't make this stuff up! But this wasn't the first time that we had dealt with this lady. She suffered from both a significant substance abuse problem and significant mental health issues. It was difficult to determine which came first. We were often at her house dealing with visions of demons and manifestations of Jesus. Her refrigerator talked to her, and often the CIA and the FBI were monitoring her from her neighbor's driveway. It wasn't and they weren't, but she was convinced. When she was lucid, the conversations were amazing. She was a believer in the unseen, dark realm and had experiences to share. Needless to say, it also had the potential of being a dangerous situation. Anytime someone is disassociated with reality, you cannot assume your own safety. So, while my backup was on the way, I knocked on the door and carefully let myself in. She was there. She was unarmed. I introduced myself and she seemed lucid. As I took my notebook out to take the call, my backup announced

that he had arrived at the property. I radioed that I was safe and asked him to stay outside, because if we're balanced right now, let's not introduce another element. He's close; that's good enough for me. And he agreed. And I went back to getting information from the lady. Her description of Satan was pretty typical. He was red, horned, and armed with a pitchfork. Her description of her morning was also typical, with the exception of the presence of Satan, of course. She told me: After she made her coffee she went out on the porch, and there he was. In an instant of instinct, she grabbed her son's sword and she attacked. She got one good swing in, but when the sword stuck, she let go and ran back into the house. "Your son's sword?" I let the question hang. "It's a real sword, Officer Johnson, not a toy. I wouldn't attack Satan with a toy." "Of course not," I replied. Just then my backup radioed frantically. He had gone around to the backyard. "Officer Johnson, you need to get back here right away. You need to see this." You know, up until that moment I hadn't even considered the possibility that her story might be true. It hadn't even occurred to me to look in the backyard.

You see, belief is a strange thing. I am, by far, more acquainted with unbelief than belief. I'm skeptical by nature. Unbelief, for me, is the default position. That's not to say that I don't believe; only that there is a mixture of belief and unbelief; and that generally the mixture leans lean on belief and rich on unbelief. (Right now you're thinking, "Okay, who is this pastor that we've hired?") Because the problem is there, and the problem is real. Belief is central to salvation. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." He also said, "This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Belief is central. Over and over again, Jesus brings faith and belief to the center. A centurion is commended for his faith. In fact, no one in Israel was as faithful as the centurion. In response to the faith of his friends, Jesus tells a paralytic, "Take heart, my son. Your sins are forgiven." One woman thought that just touching the hem of Jesus' garment was enough. And Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." Then there are the blind man, the Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter, multiple paralytics, Bartimaeus, and the woman with alabaster, just to name a few. Many are commended for their faith, and some are even condemned for their lack. The disciples, afraid of a storm, woke Jesus, crying, "Save us, Lord! We are perishing!" only to be scolded by the Son of God. "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Peter's faith falters on the water. And even after two miraculous feedings, the disciples find themselves wondering where they're going to get food.

In our passage today, an entire generation is dubbed as faithless. You know, I can relate easier to the disciples when they pled, "Save me, Lord! I am perishing!" And is it any wonder? We all know where our familiarity with unbelief comes from. It's a consequence of the naturalistic and humanistic culture and worldview in which we are born, and now live and breathe. Whether you graduated high school in the 40s, the 50s, the 90s, the 2000s, or later, by the time you graduate high school, there are some things that you are encouraged to know and to believe. They include:

- the idea that everyone must develop his own set of principles to govern his own behavior;
- the idea that your decisions about your behaviors are important only to you, and that you should be the one to make those decisions;

- the idea that if a situation pressures a person to act in a certain way, that person is not likely to be judged as the cause of the act;
- the idea that there are no right and wrong answers, that morality is governed by each individual;
- the idea that the Christian moralistic value system, while still present, represents old values, old standards, old-time religion, and as such, they represent a waning culture that will fade into obscurity;
- the idea that a religion was created by men to answer or deal with their own specific needs of their own time, whether that was control, or power, or just trying to understand nature. Religion is to serve man, rather than man serving religion.

Every idea is built on our modern assumption that this material existence is all that there is, and there is nothing beyond. Is it any wonder that we are more familiar with unbelief than belief?

In our passage this morning, Jesus, Peter, James, and John have just returned from the Mount of Transfiguration. They have gone away, and they're coming back. They returned to find a crowd surrounding the other nine disciples who are arguing with a group of scribes. When the crowd saw Jesus, they ran to him, and he asked them, "What are you arguing about?" Someone from the crowd steps forward. He doesn't have a name. He doesn't have an argument. What he has is a need. The need has driven him to this moment. His son, his only son, is tormented by a demon. And it's clear that he loves his son, so much so, that I am left pondering: has he tried other things? Did he go to a doctor or a surgeon already? Did he seek the help of the ritualistic religious system of his day? Had he taken his son to the waters of Bethesda? Perhaps even driven by the love of his son, he considered pagan options: sorcerers and necromancers. The text is silent; but what I do know is that nothing to this point had worked. Now, one who claims to be the Messiah, one who it was rumored had already healed and had already been victorious over demons and evil spirits, was coming into his backyard. Would you go? Would you consider going? This man went, and what did he find? This man had come on the chance of a miracle, and he found disappointment. In Jesus' absence, the disciples could not cast out this demon. And when the disciples failed, an argument ensued, an argument between the disciples and the scribes. And I don't know that this man even cared about that argument, but he didn't go home. Did he stay because he knew Jesus was coming, or did he just not want to go home again in disappointment? Again, the text doesn't say.

But then Jesus appears and asks the question: "What is going on here?" The man steps forward and brings his need to Jesus himself. He brings his son to Jesus. "If you can, have compassion on us and help us." There are only two reasons not to expect a miracle: you believe Jesus isn't willing, or you believe that he isn't capable. And in this case, we're dealing with the latter. "Are you capable? If you can..." The doubt is about the power of Jesus. And Jesus responds, "If I can?" And two of the five translations that I checked put an exclamation mark at the end of that: "If I can! If I can!" And two of the translations put a question mark: "If I can? Really? You think this is too big? Really?" And one of them puts a question and an exclamation mark: I'm not even going to try to explain that. Either way, the phrase is a rhetorical device used to illuminate the absurdity of the challenge. Of course, God can. Of course, He can. Nothing is impossible for God, not even this. And Jesus says it plainly: "All things are possible for the one who believes." Immediately the man responds, "I believe; help my unbelief." Did you miss it? Something changed there. The man from the crowd introduces another

need. Two needs are now on the table. He is convinced that all things are not possible, and he asked for help with that conviction.

The word translated “unbelief” in Greek is “apistia.” It comes from “apistos,” which is the act of unbelieving. And “apistos” comes from “pistos,” which is the act of believing. They’re verbs. They’re things we do. Additionally, “pistos” comes from “pistis,” which is the Greek word often translated into English for “faith.” So, faith and belief are almost synonymous. The difference is faith is a noun and belief is an action. In the Greek, your faith is a conviction you hold, and your belief is the action you take in regard to that conviction. But pistis or faith isn’t blind, and neither is pistos or belief. Pistis is a moral conviction that comes from “patheo,” which is the Greek for (ready for this?) a convincing argument. Biblical faith and biblical belief are not blind. They are based on a convincing argument. They are a conviction that you hold based on a convincing argument, and an action that you take based on a convincing argument. Faithlessness and unbelief are the opposite. Unbelief is a conviction and faithlessness is an action. All of this put together means that this man’s statement could be restated: “I am acting on my belief; help me with my convictions of unbelief.” This man, who is convinced that Jesus can’t deliver his son from a demon, had just enough faith to go.

In the next few verses, following our passage this morning, Jesus casts out the demon of this man’s son. Of the two needs, the demon-possessed son, or the father’s convictions of unbelief, which need is being met in this miracle? Often I think we look at this passage and we go, “Lord, help me with my unbelief,” and we just leave it hanging, and we pray that, and we forget that the miracle has just given this father a very significant reason to believe that all things are possible. Is that the miracle? This man’s son went home with a world of opportunity before him, opportunity that he didn’t have that morning, while his father went home with the possibility of eternity before him. Believe on Jesus and you will live forever. And Jesus just delivered on this man’s need.

Our greatest need is to be rescued from this mortal life. Our greatest need is to be redeemed from the judgment we deserve. This need was met in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and all that you need to do is seize it by believing. Seizing it rests in understanding that this man’s faith, while smaller than his convictions of unbelief, was big enough to cause him to act. Seizing it rests on our ability to not let our worldly convictions distract us from that one moment in which the smallest of hope might be calling us to act. Because when we act, and God comes through, our prior convictions melt before the power of God, as we witness Him do something that is impossible apart from Him, something we could have never done. Every small act of faith chips away at our old convictions until all that remains is a salty and seasoned Christian, firmly rooted on a new conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Do you want more faith and less doubt? Then act on the faith you have and let the power of God replace those doubts with reasons to believe.

Right about now, you’re probably wondering if Satan was in that backyard. And I’m notorious for leaving stories hanging. And I love it because y’all come to the Welcome Center and you say, “Hey, Pastor Aaron, what happened?” As I said earlier, up until that radio call, I hadn’t even considered the possibility that her story might be true, and it hadn’t even occurred to me to look in the backyard. My conviction that Satan was not there was great. In fact, if I left this story unfinished, I think you know the answer. My faith, though it was small, that Satan might be in this backyard, that’s the thing that caused me to go look. And what I found was a snowman, painted red, with horns and a

pitchfork and a sword stuck halfway through him. My backup was laughing, and I just turned around and walked back into the house.

But I leave you with this. Have you considered the possibility that the story of Jesus might be true? Have you considered the possibility that there might be more to the story than you know? Have you considered the possibility that He might be calling you into the story, that He might be calling you to do something for Him? There are usually a pile of reasons to doubt, but it only takes one small reason to act. And if what we believe is true is in fact true, that Jesus is the Son of God, then there is no one more powerful. If He is calling you to act, I don't care what your doubts are. Don't get distracted. Act on the faith you have and let the power of God replace those doubts with reasons to believe. Oh, I can't wait! I'm getting goose bumps, you guys! Let's pray.

Lord, our greatest need is to know You. Our greatest need is to believe that You are true. Our greatest need is to know that You are who You say you are, and that You have done what You said You have done, and that You are capable of doing it. That it is, in fact, finished. And yet, Lord, this world would tell us that it cannot be believed. Lord, I lift up everybody that hears my voice, and I pray that they would hear Your call to act, that they would hold on to the one reason to believe that call is real, and that they would act on that call. And Lord, in that action, I pray that You show up in power and melt away every doubt until all that remains is a conviction that, in the moment we die, we pass into eternity. All of this I pray in Your precious name. Amen.