The Seriousness of Unbelief

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Few devoted Christians would think of themselves as having unbelief. For years I’ve been baffled by something Jesus said: “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). The question implies a lack of faith not just on the earth but among God’s people.

Why would Jesus say this? Faith is one of the most talked-about subjects in the church. Godly preachers emphasize it, and there’s a flood of books on the topic. Great works are being done, huge projects undertaken, all in the name of faith. So, what is Jesus telling us by asking, “When the trumpet finally sounds, will I find any faith at all?”

We find a clue in the sober warning of Hebrews 3:12: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.” This verse says we should recognize unbelief in ourselves whenever we “depart from the living God.” Yet, what does it mean to depart from the Lord?

It happens through our doubts about God’s faithfulness. If we allow even small seeds of unbelief to grow in our hearts, we’ll end up in a sorry condition. This passage warns us, “Be on guard, and don’t allow any unbelief to take root. At times the Lord may seem distant to you. But don’t let your heart depart from the reality of his faithfulness.”

A pastor from another city approached me recently after one of our church services. As he spoke, his head was bowed in discouragement. He said he’d been meeting monthly with a group of pastors from various denominations in his town.

“But, Brother David,” he said, “our meetings have become depressing. Our numbers are dwindling because more and more are quitting the ministry. We never hear a word from God anymore. And many go about their ministry feeling hopeless. They’ve lost all joy. Now their wives are fed up and urging them to quit. It depresses me because I love these men. I’m hungry for us to hear from the Lord again.”

I see something similar happening in many Bible colleges and seminaries. Some of these institutions have actually become hotbeds of unbelief. Students enter convinced of the inerrancy of Scripture, of God’s ability to perform miracles, of a literal heaven and hell. But if they express their beliefs during class, a professor may ridicule them. He calls their beliefs “old school,” and mocks them as being uneducated and insecure. Many sincere young people graduate with no faith whatsoever, because they’ve been robbed of all confidence in God.

Yet the Bible tells us in no uncertain terms: “Without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Let me show you how seriously God takes our sin of unbelief.

1. Unbelief is the sin that exasperates God.
In Exodus 17, Israel arrived in the wilderness called Sin. There was no drinking water in sight, and the people angrily chided Moses: “Give us water that we may drink” (Exodus 17:2). They treated God’s anointed as if he were their personal miracle worker. Yet not one of them turned to the Lord in prayer. Nobody said, “Look, God has worked many water-miracles for us. He parted the Red Sea to deliver us from Pharaoh. And he sweetened the bitter waters at Marah. Surely he’ll provide drinking water for us here.”

You know the rest of the story. God instructed Moses to stand before a rock and strike it. When he did, rivers of water flowed out, more than enough to meet the people’s thirst. But the Lord put a name to this episode of unbelief. He called the place Massah, which means provocation, as well as exasperated, fed up, irritated. God was telling Israel, “You’ve totally exasperated me with your unbelief.”

Please understand, the Lord wasn’t just slightly grieved here; he was exasperated to the point of anger. Yet he wasn’t provoked merely by the people’s complaints. It was much worse than that: they had accused him of abandoning them in their trial. They had said to Moses, “Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?… Is the Lord among us, or not?” (17:3, 7).

Their inference was, “If God is with us, where is he now? We don’t see any sign of his presence or power. Is the Lord dead or alive? How can we believe in a God who allows so many awful things?”

You may think, “Poor Israel. All they wanted was water for their crying children. Anybody would be parched if they went without water. Who wouldn’t complain?” But the issue here wasn’t a lack of water. Nor was it that God was holding back blessings from his people. He’d just given Israel all the water they needed from the rock.

No, God was exasperated for a very good cause. We find the reason later in Scripture, as Moses recalled the episode at Massah. He said, “Ye rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God, and ye believed him not, nor hearkened to his voice. Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you” (Deuteronomy 9:23–24). Moses was telling Israel, “You’ve been rebellious ever since I’ve known you. You’ve never obeyed or believed God’s Word.”

So, what was the real issue? According to Moses, it was that Israel never truly had faith. They had never fully committed themselves to trusting the Lord. In fact, these Israelites had been harboring idols all along. They kept little gods hidden away in their tents, to fall back on in case God failed them. The Lord said, “Ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices…in the wilderness…(but) ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them” (Acts 7:42–43).

Can you imagine God’s exasperation with these people now? They were blaming him for their lack of water, demanding, “Why hasn’t the Lord answered our prayers?” Yet all along, they turned to foreign gods to deliver them. God’s anger here wasn’t some test of Israel’s faith; it was a thundering call to repentance. He hadn’t held back his favor from them at all.

A youth pastor wrote to me recently of an experience like Israel’s. He said, “When I came to the Lord, I didn’t give up my worldly music. I didn’t care how evil the musicians might be. It was my music, and no preacher could persuade me to forsake it.

“I even introduced it to the youth groups I led. I wanted to draw in crowds of kids by giving them the music they wanted. We used hard rock, punk, rap, mosh pits. But then the youth group began to die spiritually. They stopped listening to God’s Word and to my teaching, and all kinds of immorality broke out. It was absolute death.

“I prayed and prayed that God would somehow awaken them, but nothing ever happened. One day, the Holy Spirit answered me very bluntly: ‘You brought your foreign idol into my house. It’s your ungodly music, which you know I detest. And now you’ve corrupted your whole flock with it. Remove that idol from your heart, and get it away from these young people. Then I’ll move in your midst.’

“I immediately got rid of the music. And I brought in worship music instead. I made my messages simple and direct, straight from the Scriptures. And soon the Holy Ghost was moving again. Now my young people are thriving spiritually.”

This is exactly what God wanted to do in Israel. He was telling the people, “I’m not holding any good thing back from you. When you asked me to meet your thirst, I moved instantly, bringing water from the rock. Now I’m only
trying to get your attention. I want to speak to you about the hidden things in your life.

**Do you believe God sees your hidden things?**

Do you believe the Lord blesses Christians who try to serve him while holding onto a bosom lust? That is the real crime of unbelief: to harbor something in secret and not bring it into God’s light for deliverance.

It is one thing to be bound to a habitual lust and hate it. Such a person despises his secret sin and struggles mightily against it. He cries out to God for deliverance and seeks the godly counsel of others. This servant can be sure the Lord will be patient with him through his struggle.

Think of it: the Israelites were still carrying their idols at Massah. That means they’d clung to them through the parted waves of the Red Sea. They’d held onto them even as Pharaoh’s army bore down on them. And they’d hidden them even after God sweetened the bitter waters at Marah. Now, at Massah, God delivered them without judgment again, filling their bellies with cool water. Indeed, all along God had blessed Israel in spite of their idolatry. Yet the people went on hiding their sin. They praised the Lord, enjoying his protection under the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Why did they go on this way? “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

Israel’s unbelief had nothing to do with God’s power to deliver them. They’d seen him work miracles for them time after time. No, these people simply didn’t take God’s commandments seriously. They’d become comfortable in their sin, because the Lord hadn’t speedily judged them for it. They had no fear of consequences; after all, none of their children had died, and they still had manna and meat from heaven.

In short, the Israelites had lost their fear of God. They secretly thought, “We should have been consumed by holy fire by now, for disbelieving God’s wrath. But he has never brought judgment on our sin. So, we might as well keep having devotions.” They took for granted Jeremiah’s statement: “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not” (Lamentations 3:22).

### 2. Unbelief hinders all deliverance from the power and dominion of Satan.

I’m convinced that every unsubdued sin is caused by unbelief. And right now, multitudes of Christians are fighting a losing battle with their sin. In fact, many have already given up the fight. They’re convinced some powerful demonic spirit has taken up a stronghold in them and can’t be expelled. So they live in wretchedness, bound by a besetting sin. Paul expresses the cry of their heart: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:24).

But Paul answers his own question in the next verse: “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (7:25). In other words, “Jesus Christ sets me free from the power and dominion of sin.” How is this so? Is this merely a theological truth we’re to accept? Or should it have a practical outworking in our life? How does Christ truly deliver us?

The answer is so simple, we often don’t get it. It’s too simple for Hindus, who reject it in favor of works. They’d rather crawl for miles to try to pacify God over their sins. Jews also reject this truth, preferring to keep over 630 rules and regulations, hoping to balance the books for their sins. Moslems would rather prostrate themselves and do good deeds, trying to appease Allah for their shortcomings. Even many Christians would rather add some rule of self-reliance to their deliverance. They make promises to God and try to beat down all the desires of their flesh in their own strength.

But here is the simple, uncomplicated gospel: whenever there is genuine repentance, there is instant forgiveness. And there is instant cleansing, as well as continual openness to the throne of God. If we believe these truths, we’re made free.

**Sin makes us want to hide from God’s presence.**

Here is the essence of unbelief among Christians: when we sin, failing God, we tend to run from his presence. We think he’s too angry to want to commune with us. How could he possibly share intimacy with us, when we’ve

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sinned so grievously?

So we stop praying. In our shame, we think, “I can’t go to God in this condition.” And we begin trying to work our way back into his good graces. We’re convinced we just need time to get ourselves clean. If we can stay pure for a few weeks, avoiding our sinful habit, we think we’ll prove ourselves worthy to approach his throne again.

This is evil unbelief, and it’s a crime in God’s eyes. When we confess our sin, including our besetting habits, God doesn’t interrogate us. He doesn’t demand proof of repentance, asking, “Are you truly sorry? I don’t see any tears. Do you promise never to commit this sin again? Go now, fast for two days a week, and pray for an hour every day. If you make it that long without falling, we’ll commune again.”

May it never be. When Jesus reconciled us to the Father at the Cross, it was for all time. That means if I sin, I don’t have to be reconciled to God all over again; I’m not cut off from the Lord, suddenly unreconciled. No, the veil of separation was rent permanently at the Cross, and I forever have access to God’s throne, through Christ’s blood. The door is never closed to me: “In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him” (Ephesians 3:12).

The Bible states clearly that if any of us sins, we have an advocate with the Father in Jesus Christ. We may stand outside the door of his throne room, feeling rotten and unclean. But if we stay there, refusing to go in, we’re not being humble; we’re acting in unbelief. “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

What is our “time of need”? It’s whenever we’ve failed our blessed Lord. The moment we sin, we’re in need of grace and mercy. And God invites us to come boldly to his throne then, with confidence, to receive everything we need. We’re not to come to him only when we feel upright or holy; we’re to come every time we’re in need.

Moreover, we don’t have to wait to get our souls cleansed. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). John says we’re not to try to work at being cleansed, over hours, days or weeks. It happens instantaneously, as soon as we come to the Lord.

So, do you have the faith to believe in God’s instantaneous forgiveness? Can you accept instant, uninterrupted communion with the Father? That’s exactly what Scripture urges us to do. You see, the same faith that saves us and forgives us is also the faith that keeps us. Peter says we “are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). What an incredible truth.

Yet, our unbelief prevents us from accessing God’s keeping power. And over time, as we face sin’s continual onslaught, we may start to despair. Beloved, this simply shouldn’t be. God has given us wonderful New Covenant promises. But they’re of no use unless we believe and appropriate them. Our Lord has pledged to put his law in our hearts, be God to us, keep us from falling, implant his fear in us, give us power to obey, cause us to walk in his ways. But we have to fully believe this.

3. Luke 1 includes one of the most revealing cases of the seriousness of unbelief.

You remember the story of godly Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. Zacharias was a devoted priest who suffered because of a single episode of unbelief. His story illustrates just how seriously God takes this sin.

Scripture says Zacharias was “righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:6). Here was a pious man who wore the robes of his respected position. He ministered before the altar of incense, which represented prayer and supplication, acts of pure worship. In short, Zacharias was faithful and obedient, a servant who longed for the Messiah’s coming.

One day, as Zacharias was ministering, God sent the angel Gabriel to tell him his wife would have a son. Gabriel said the son’s birth would be a cause for rejoicing for many in Israel, and he gave Zacharias detailed instructions on how to raise the boy. Yet, as the angel spoke, Zacharias trembled in fear. Suddenly, this devout man’s mind was filled with doubt, and he gave in to terrible unbelief. He asked the angel, “How do I know you’re telling me the truth? After all, my wife and I are old” (see 1:18).

God didn’t take kindly to Zacharias’ doubt, and he passed this sentence on the priest: “Behold, thou shalt be
dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words” (1:20, my italics).

What does this episode tell us? It says unbelief shuts our ears to God, even when he's speaking clearly to us. It shuts us off from fresh revelation. And it keeps us from intimate communion with the Lord. Suddenly, because we no longer hear from God, we have nothing to preach or testify. It doesn’t matter how faithful or diligent we may be. Like Zacharias, we bring on ourselves a paralysis of both our ears and tongue.

Finally, we’re confronted by this verse in Hebrews: “We see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (Hebrews 3:19). Only one sin kept Israel out of the promised land: unbelief.

Canaan represents a place of rest, peace, fruitfulness, assurance, fullness, satisfaction, everything a true believer longs for. It’s also a place where the Lord speaks clearly to his people, directing them, “This is the way, walk in it.” But Israel couldn’t enter the Promised Land because of one sin.

That sin wasn’t adultery (and Scripture calls these Israelites an adulterous generation). It wasn’t their rampant divorcing. (Jesus said Moses granted divorces to that generation because they were so hardhearted.) It wasn’t rage, jealousy, sloth or backbiting. It wasn’t even their secret idolatry. Those sins were all the result of unbelief.

No, it was this sin, unbelief, that prevented God’s people from entering Canaan. Therefore, Hebrews urges us today, “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief” (Hebrews 4:11).

I have known many Christians who decided to get serious about their walk with the Lord. They determined to become more studious in his Word, and they fasted and prayed with renewed conviction. They set their hearts to cling to God through every situation in life. As I observed their lives, I thought, “Surely all their devotion will bring a glow of joy. They can’t help but reflect God’s peace and rest.”

But all too often, the opposite was true. Many never did enter into God’s promised rest. They were still unsure, restless, questioning God’s leading, worried about their future. Why? They had a habitual leaven of unbelief. All their devotion and activity had been rendered ineffective because of it.

The believing servant clings to God’s New Covenant promise: “I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezekiel 36:27). He also clings to this Word: “I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach unto me…I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble” (Jeremiah 30:21, 31:9).

Finally, Hebrews declares, “Some must enter therein” (Hebrews 4:6). The writer is saying, in essence, “Somebody has to enter into this incredible promise.” I ask you: why not you, believer? Why not me? If our unbelief is keeping us out, we should pray, “Lord, help my unbelief. Heal my unbelief. Give me an abundance of faith.”

Our God has made incredible promises to us. And he desires that we hold him to these promises. So, let us lay hold of his wonderful Word. May each of us enter into his promised rest. Then our lives will be a glowing testimony to this generation.

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