

Unbelief

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[0 : 00] Turn with me for a short while this morning to Mark chapter 9 and verse 24.

Mark chapter 9 and verse 24. I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief.

It seems to me that in this one short sentence in Mark chapter 9, this poor man whose name we shall never know teaches us so much about ourselves and our need of God's help.

This man teaches us that God shall help us. This man teaches us rather not that God shall help us if we will but only believe, but that God shall help us to believe.

That God does not so much reward our faith as he gives it in the first place. And that's a great comfort to us as Christians, that though we may struggle with unbelief, help is at hand from the very God in whom we are struggling to believe.

[1 : 18] One of the great advantages of being a minister is that over time you get to know the way people think and the issues they are facing in the faith.

And in this Glasgow city is no different from any other church. Many of us struggle with unbelief, with a lack of faith in Jesus. And such a struggle manifests itself in a thousand different ways.

From withdrawing from fellowship with other Christians, from stopping coming to church. To acting in a controlling manner toward other believers. From perhaps being shaken with fear.

To being filled with questions. And yes, perhaps even doubt. And maybe these questions or doubts are never shared with anyone else.

But you know you have them. And you kind of shake them. This poor man here in Mark 9 had a demented son. I'm sure many of us here have worries about our growing children.

[2 : 26] But this man was at his wit's end. He had taken his son to the disciples, but they could do nothing for him. So it's to Jesus he goes next.

The Jesus who challenges him saying in verse 23, Everything is possible for him who believes. It's to what Jesus says, this man replies, I do believe.

Help me overcome my unbelief. I want us this morning for a short while to dig deeper into what this man said to Jesus. And survey unbelief.

This huge topic of unbelief in six ways. Unbelief is serious. It's spiritually crippling. Unbelief coexists with belief.

Unbelief reveals itself in crisis. Unbelief is brought to a head by Jesus. And lastly, unbelief is chronic but curable. First of all then, unbelief is serious.

[3 : 31] It is serious. I guess it takes being a parent to fully enter into the frustration of this man. His son is going through a terrible time. In verse 17, 18, he describes the boy's situation.

He is possessed by a spirit who has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid.

The symptoms are very similar to those experienced perhaps by epileptics. But only the more severe because this boy, in addition, has been robbed of his speech.

You may have encountered someone who's having an epileptic fit. And it's a very scary thing to see. But what makes this situation even scarier is that the boy doesn't have epilepsy.

He is possessed by the darkness of a malevolent spirit from hell. So we feel great sympathy for this man. For though his son may be unaware of his condition, the man knows it only too well.

[4 : 40] And it's breaking him on the inside. So perhaps we can somewhat sympathize with his admission of unbelief. Because as we'll see in a while, unbelief often reveals itself in crisis.

We're sympathetic. And it strikes me that Jesus was more sympathetic toward this man than we give him credit for. Or that any of us could ever be.

Yet we must not forget that unbelief is a serious matter. Consider the nature of this man's unbelief as revealed by Jesus.

This man comes to Jesus and pleads with him in verse 22. If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. And to this man's request, Jesus says, if you can.

This poor boy, under the influence of that malevolent evil spirit, is convulsing on the ground. To all the world, it looks like he's beyond the help of anyone.

[5 : 41] The darkness is too great even for the disciples to deal with. But such is the nature of unbelief that it strikes into the heart of the dignity of Christ.

If you can, of course Jesus can. Of course Jesus will have pity and help this boy.

You see, that's why unbelief is so serious. It strikes into the very heart of God himself. It questions God's attitudes and his abilities. It calls God's character into question.

That character filled with so much love and righteousness, compassion and justice. It calls God's power into question. That power so filled with overwhelming grace and the infinite energy of the Holy Spirit.

That's why unbelief is so serious. It strikes at the heart of God questioning everything about him. I don't like my motives and reputation being impugned.

[6 : 47] For people to say of Colin Dow, see that fella? Can't trust a word he says. How much less the God who was jealous for the glory of his own name and for the honour of his own majesty.

Now I'm speaking as much to myself today as to anyone else because before I see unbelief in any of you, I see it far more in myself.

But what the presence of unbelief within us shouts to us is our need not just of forgiveness but of help. Because surely it's not right to say of God who sent his son to die for us on the cross.

You don't love me. You don't have my good in mind with all these things that are happening to me. And then we withdraw from other Christians.

Sure it's a sign that we need help when we say to the God who created the heavens and the earth, Jupiter and all the planets, you can't do anything with the chaos of the world in which we're living.

[7 : 54] Unbelief is so serious. But we, just like this man, are invited to return to Christ and tell him everything about our unbelief and keep nothing away from him.

And then to plead with him for his grace and his help to overcome our unbelief. So if you struggle today with unbelief, and I don't think there's one person here who doesn't, let me give you a word of advice.

Take it all to the Jesus in whom you are struggling to believe and ask him for his help. Unbelief is serious.

Unbelief, secondly, is spiritually crippling. It is spiritually crippling. You know, when we're reading this passage, our temptation is to fixate on the unbelief of this poor man.

But he's not the only one who struggles with unbelief. Consider with me the words of Jesus in verse 19. Oh, unbelieving generation.

[9 : 07] In other words, this man was no more, no less unbelieving than anyone else there that day. But more than that, he was no more or no less unbelieving than the very disciples of Jesus, who had tried so hard but had failed to cast the evil spirit from that boy.

They, more than anyone else present there that day, were guilty of unbelief. Because after all, if what Jesus had said in verse 25 was right, that everything is possible, verse 23 rather, everything is possible for him who believes, they obviously had not believed like they should have done.

Or else they'd have been able to help the boy. And the lesson for us is that unbelief is spiritually crippling. When our views of God are wrong, when we're questioning him and doubting both his attitude toward us or his actions for us, our spiritual lives become very messy and not so healthy. Our prayer lives dwindle and our reading of the Bible becomes dull. We lose the motivation to pursue Christ-likeness. We lose our grip on the grace of Christ.

We begin to listen more to the world around us, especially its social media and less to the Word of God.

[10 : 34] The preaching of the Word of God washes over us like water from a duck's back. We don't feel accountable to God for our sin anymore and our sense of intimacy with Christ is destroyed.

If we're struggling with unbelief, it is most certainly going to be more difficult to help others grow in their faith or to serve them because we ourselves will be running on empty.

Tyson Fury can only box with power because his stance is firm and our unbelief makes our stance unstable.

We become susceptible to temptation and our attitude to one another becomes apathetic or over-dependent. We become cynical toward the church, hyper-critical of everyone else and our evangelism is powerless does any of this sound familiar to you?

Perhaps you've been struggling with unbelief for some time now, in fact, for so long that you can't remember what it felt like to be assured. You've been questioning, is God real?

[11 : 54] And if God is real, does he love me at all? Perhaps you wish it was different. But it's not different.

And that's all the more reason to go back to Jesus with the words of this man in your lips. I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. Third, unbelief coexists with belief.

Unbelief coexists with belief. There's something in what this man says which is deeply comforting and yet strangely unnerving. He cries out to Jesus, I do believe.

Help me overcome my unbelief. And we focus, of course, do we not, on this man's unbelief. But we must also listen to what he says in the first part of his prayer.

I do believe. In other words, belief and unbelief coexist in this man. He believes, but he also struggles to believe. He's continually at war with himself.

[13 : 02] Part of him believes, part of him does not. Or could it be that all of him partly believes, but does not believe at the same time? From my experience of people who struggle with unbelief, you know they can tie themselves in knots and questions whether they are Christians at all simply because there are certain aspects of the faith they are struggling to believe.

Their lives become confusing kaleidoscopes of doubt, uncertainty, faith, and unbelief. They lose courage because they think their unbelief should not belong in the heart of the genuine believer.

But if they really were Christians, they wouldn't struggle with unbelief at all. Listen to me carefully.

There is no Christian here on planet Earth who does not struggle with some form of unbelief.

Only the glorified, purified saints in heaven are unaffected by unbelief. As for the rest of us, faith coexists with non-faith, belief coexists with unbelief.

And it's no sign we're not Christians. Sometimes the presence of unbelief within us is a sign of the presence of a living faith, especially if we are struggling against our unbelief and praying for Christ's overcoming grace.

[14 : 31] If we are contented with unbelief, then perhaps we are not Christians. But if we're struggling against it, then all the signs are that true faith in Christ lives in us.

So I find what this man says in this verse deeply comforting because it reminds me that faith and unbelief can coexist in the same heart. It's entirely normal.

If you're someone who frets because of your unbelief, do not despair. In fact, rejoice in your fretting because it shows you're struggling against it and that you need the grace of Christ to overcome it. Fourth, unbelief reveals itself in crisis, in crisis. You know, I often hear the complaint, it's really hard to be a Christian today.

And I normally nod my head in agreement because, yeah, it is hard to be a Christian today. I don't really think it's any harder to be a Christian today than it was 200 years ago or 2,000 years ago.

[15 : 43] Christian life was never meant to be easy. Let's face it, perhaps here I'm speaking only for myself, but do you think it's harder to be a Christian in today's Scotland than it is in today's Saudi Arabia?

or is it any harder to be a Christian in a church like Glasgow City where there are many of us than it is to be a Christian in a tiny church on one of the small islands in Shetland where there are only one or two Christians?

Unbelief reveals itself in crisis, it always has, when times are genuinely hard. And when I say hard, I'm not talking about the lack of a good flat white or that we can't find a half-decent hairdresser or that our fridge has stopped working or that our kids can't get into the best school.

I'm talking about genuine crisis in life. Family illness and bereavement. unemployment, the crisis of state-sponsored persecution.

I'm not talking about first world problems, but problems we are to expect as Christians if we are faithfully living for Christ in an anti-Christian society.

[17 : 08] It's here in crisis our unbelief reveals itself. I wrote this sermon six weeks ago and I wrote this next paragraph because I thought to myself this will never happen in the last six weeks.

Can you believe how far forward we've come? Wouldn't it be interesting if the Scottish government were to legislate it was illegal for Christians to meet together in public on Sunday to worship God

and to listen to the preaching of the whole council of the Bible?

I wrote that six weeks ago. Okay? I wonder how many of us would continue to come to worship God on a Sunday in Glasgow City Free Church if our fathers said it is now illegal for you to come and hear the whole Bible being preached.

That is not an inconceivable scenario. Perhaps I perhaps I was being a bit fanciful six weeks ago but today it is not an inconceivable scenario.

That is what the Scottish government did in the mid to late 17th century to believers just like us. And over 16,000 of them died for their faith in Jesus.

[18 : 26] You can no longer come and hear God's word being preached in all its fullness. And over 16,000 of them died for their faith in Jesus.

When things are smooth and it is really easy to be a Christian we are never really bothered with questions of unbelief. But when the rubber hits the road and we are challenged as to whether we really do believe enough in Jesus to suffer for him and stake our lives upon him that's when we meet unbelief face to face.

You know I would love to say that every Christian with terminal illness and near death that I've visited has said to me you know I'm just longing to go home to be with Jesus.

I'd love to say that but the truth is that many of them have said to me I'm so afraid please tell me that all I believed about Jesus is true.

So perhaps we need to cut ourselves and others some slack especially during crisis points in life because it's then just like this demented father with this father with this demented child discovered it's then unbelief rears its ugly head.

[19 : 52] The last thing we need at times of crisis is more criticism and more self flagellation rather we need to pray for ourselves and for others.

Lord I believe help me overcome my belief Lord that person going through that crisis believes I know she does help her overcome her unbelief.

Fifthly unbelief is brought to a head by Jesus. Isn't it curious that whereas this man in Mark 9 had spent time with the disciples of Jesus it wasn't until he met Jesus face to face he confessed his unbelief.

Something about the direct presence of Jesus which brings unbelief to its head. It was when he met Jesus face to face he realised how little he really believed.

It's only when the sun shines directly through our windscreens that we realise how dirty our windscreens really are. It's only when the doctor shines a bright light into our ear she realises how mucky that ear is.

[21 : 11] There are times in our Christian lives where we're going along really quite nicely. But if we're being honest with ourselves we're holding Jesus a wee bit at arm's length.

We're going through the motions but we're not really that close in our relationship with Jesus and we know it. I'm not passing any judgement I'm just saying that's the way it is.

But then something happens. Perhaps we meet with an inspiring Christian who challenges us as to where we are with Jesus or perhaps it's through the preaching of the word Jesus meets us face to face or perhaps it's when we hear a genuinely godly Christian pray.

Whatever the scenario whatever the situation for the first time in ages we feel like this man here in Mark 9 confronted with the direct presence of Jesus Christ the Lord of glory the savior of our souls and we realize that we do not believe in him nearly as strongly as we thought we did.

It was when the prophet Isaiah was confronted by the vision of the glory of God he confessed saying woe is me for I am undone I'm a man of unclean lips I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the king it was when Peter was confronted with the miraculous power of Jesus he said away from me Lord I'm a sinful man and it's when we're brought face to face with Jesus that we realize not how strong our faith is but how weak it is it's then we come to realize how much we need him it's then we cry out I do believe help me overcome my unbelief I'm actually really glad when someone confesses to me their unbelief because it means their living in reality and they're seeing Jesus face to face they're not living in a fantasy world of make believe and apathy then lastly unbelief is chronic but curable chronic but curable

[23 : 32] I make no bones about it Mary and I are the same in this we like words especially the words of the bible in this word in this verse the words are very interesting indeed the man says I do believe help me overcome my unbelief the tenses of the verbs are very interesting they are both in the present tense meaning that they are continuous actions this man really believes and for as long

as he lives he's going to keep having faith in Jesus that's the reality of the situation he's always going to believe but the request to help is also in its present tense meaning it is also a continuous request in other words this man is going to struggle with unbelief for as long as he lives belief and unbelief trust and distrust faith and unfaith will continue to exist within him for as long as the course of his natural life he is always going to need help to overcome his unbelief and there's a sense in which

I'm going back to an earlier point in our study here take it as read there is no such thing as a Christian who does not struggle with unbelief the oldest and most matured among us struggle with it perhaps even more than the youngest and most immature let me tell you that after 30 years of being a Christian I haven't got any less questions now than I did 30 years ago that I still struggle with unbelief with not understanding the love and power of God in the way I should unbelief unbelief is a chronic condition which infects every Christian from the moment of their birth to the moment of their death that's the way it is and that's why we're always going to need help to overcome our unbelief the prayer of this man help me overcome my unbelief is a prayer entirely as appropriate for someone who's been a believer for 60 years as it is for someone who's been a Christian for 60 seconds and the cry is help and again that's an interesting word in and of itself perhaps it might better be translated as come to my rescue run to my aid yes unbelief may be a chronic condition but it's curable and the cure consists in crying out to Jesus to come to our rescue and to run to our aid to help us overcome our unbelief the very Jesus whom we struggle to believe in is the very Jesus to whom we cry come to our rescue I like the way in which the NIV translates this help me overcome my unbelief because the help Jesus brings is designed to help us in our struggle against unbelief Jesus does not take away our unbelief but he does give us the help we need to overcome our unbelief he'll help us through his spirit as we apply to ourselves the reading and the study of the word of God he'll help us by his spirit as we confess to him our unbelief in prayer and plead with him for a refreshed faith he'll strengthen us in the faith as we invest in our fellowship with other

Christians and get more involved in the life of the church he'll build us up in belief as we renew our commitment to the cross to his gospel and to his grace here's a question for you all a question for myself to take away and ponder how does your unbelief manifest itself is your unbelief helping you or hindering you in life are you ready yet to pray the prayer of this man I do believe help me overcome my unbelief you know it's time folks for us to take unbelief very seriously and to pray earnestly that God would help us overcome our unbelief let us pray Lord it's such a comfort to know that unbelief and belief coexist within the same heart we struggle with it all the time help us oh Lord we do believe in the heart of even the hardest of us today here we do believe help us overcome our unbelief

Lord we pray that if there's any here today who are not yet Christians those who have not taken the first step we ask that today would be the day they say Lord I want to believe will you give me the faith I need in order that I can believe in you in Jesus name Amen