

6 Obstacles to Faith

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[0 : 0 0] With me to 1 Timothy chapter 1, 1 Timothy chapter 1, and verse 15. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

When Paul says this saying is trustworthy, he's not implying that some sayings in the Bible are not trustworthy. He was simply aware, as we all should be, that not everything which is preached in the name of the gospel is accurate. In his day, wrong teaching was all the rage, and people were listening to all the wrong voices. There are always wrong voices in every age.

There always have been. And it's important today to stop and to discern and to ask questions whenever we hear a message that says this is the gospel, whenever we hear even a so-called Christian message in the name of the Bible, we have to stop and we have to use our brain and the reasoning and the teaching and the experience that God has given to us. And we don't just accept what we hear at face value. Don't just accept something just because a minister says it. Don't even accept something because I say it. Whatever I say and whatever you hear, check it out for yourself. Ask two basic questions about everything you hear. First of all, does it agree with the rest of the Bible? Anything that you hear that doesn't agree with the rest of the Bible, it should be looked at with great suspicion.

Don't believe it if it doesn't agree with the Bible. And the other acid test that we always need to use is this. Does what you hear, does the message that you hear focus on Jesus and his death on the cross and his resurrection? Is it all about the gospel? Is it about Jesus or is it about my brand or my form of belief? Sometimes we listen to people telling of their own experiences. Sometimes they are unusual experiences or so they say. And it appears that the whole content of their message is about miracles that they have either experienced or that they have performed, visions, prophecies, and all kinds of things that we would call unusual experiences. Sometimes people, they tend to drift off on a different message, a message that does not focus on Jesus. The problem is, of course, and I'm not denying that God works. Sometimes, occasionally, he works in ways that you don't expect. I'm not going to suggest for a moment that there are no unusual experiences and occurrence. God can do what he likes. It's his church. It's his people. He can do what he likes. And he sometimes does. But the problem is, if I spend all my time and all my life talking about my visions and my miracles and my prophecies, then I'm taking the attention away from Jesus and his death on the cross. And if I take my attention away from Jesus and his death on the cross, it means that people don't get to hear the gospel.

And if people don't get to hear the gospel, they don't get saved because salvation is found in none other than Jesus Christ and him crucified. That's the danger when we drift off onto our own thing and our own pet subject. And if I preach a gospel that says to you, as the gospel that some people preach is, God wants you to be rich. He wants you to be successful. He wants you to be on top of the world all the time. He wants you to overcome your difficulties and make them disappear. And he doesn't want you to be suffering. He doesn't want you to be in pain. He doesn't want you to be in difficulty.

[5 : 05] He wants you to be happy all the time. Some people preach that gospel. The problem is with that, not only is it a lie, because there are times when God does want you in pain. There are times when God does, by his own providence, allow you to go through suffering and all kinds of dark experiences that you cannot understand. He may even want you to be dead.

The death of the Lord's people is blessed in the eyes of God. And that, of course, is his purpose for all of us, sooner or later. And you can't say, oh, well, if I am sick, then I'm disobedient. It shows that I'm not victorious. That's not true. And it's a terrible shame on the poor person who falls ill through no fault of their own. And all of a sudden they're told, your illness is purely of the devil.

And if you had enough faith, you would overcome this illness by faith and that you would rise out of it. And then God would be glorified in your life. But what if God is glorified in your life through your illness, through the way in which you respond to your illness? That's the way in which the Christian life works, not in the happy gospel that many people, the gospel that if you're not happy and if you're not on top of the world, then something is wrong. But of course, the real problem with that kind of other gospel is that people don't get to hear the good, the real gospel.

And if they don't get to hear the real gospel, then they don't get saved. It's as simple as that. And it's as crucial as that. Paul says, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. But tonight, I want us to dwell just for a few moments on these plain and simple words in which the gospel is summed up in the most beautiful and simple way in verse 15. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That's it. One sentence. I'm not saying there are no questions. I'm not saying that there's no complication in the Bible. Of course, there are complications in the Bible.

[7 : 27] And you may have come here this evening with all your questions. And hopefully, as you continue to seek the Lord, then some of these questions will be answered. Remembering, of course, that we have questions sometimes that can't be answered. Because we're dealing with God who is more mysterious than we can fathom. So don't be surprised if sometimes your questions have no answer as far as we are concerned. And yet, despite all that, the gospel, you cannot get a simpler message than the gospel.

You cannot get a more marvelous message than the gospel. Everyone here, sometimes we feel that our young people, our children, can't understand the gospel. We try and shelter them. But they can. It's amazing, really, tonight. I see so many young people, so many children, and they are taking this in. They are taking in the little pieces that God is giving to them, the crumbs that drop off the table. Don't ever lose sight of the importance of taking our children to church. And of course, that's been said so many times. When it comes down to this, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. To save you and to save me from our sin, from our guilt, from our condemnation before God. That's what he came to save us from. And he did so by giving his life on the cross as a sacrifice for sin in which he took our sin upon himself and became sin for us. There's a question. How can the son of God become sin? That's the greatest paradox of all, isn't it? How can God become guilty? And yet, never having done anything that deserved that guilt? There's a great paradox, isn't it? There's a question.

And yet, it lies at the heart of the Christian faith. And as we come to discover that great truth, we come to discover the greatest truth in all the world. And as we trust, as you and I trust in that great message and in that great Savior, we discover the new life that Jesus Christ can give us. And we rise to newness of life as God performs that miracle, that resurrection in us. And as we're born again, have you been born again? Have you come to trust in Jesus to save you from your sin? Have you asked for his forgiveness that only he can bring through this great truth that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners? Of whom, says Paul, I am the foremost? And yet, what is truly astonishing tonight is that this, the greatest message, the simplest message in the world, is almost impossible to communicate. You would think that this message, this message that even the youngest person here tonight can understand, can understand, can understand the basics of, you would think that it would be easy to communicate. But it's not, because there are obstacles, there are several obstacles that we place in front of our ears and our hearts in order for this message. And I want us to look tonight at this verse in terms of the obstacles that there are between us believing and Jesus bringing this message to each one of us. I want us to look very briefly at six of these. Maybe we won't have time for the six. It doesn't matter if we don't have time for them. Then we'll maybe pick them up some other time. I want us to, first of all, look at the first obstacle, which is this. I've heard this before.

Perhaps you said that. As soon as I came to this chapter, perhaps you did what I used to do when I was a teenager. When I was in Bible class, there was a few of us went to Bible class. And our Bible class was you went out after the text was given. And we used to sit there and we used to read the chapter. We used to guess between each other what text the minister was going to choose. And we used to kind of have a competition between three or four of us as to what text the minister was going to, who was the one who guessed right. And you probably did this this evening. You probably read what I read in 1 Timothy. And you said, I wonder what text he's going to speak on tonight. I bet you it's verse 15. Christ Jesus came into the world. It's the obvious one, isn't it? It's the one in which there is the gospel. It's summarized and it's put in such a wonderful, beautiful form. You can't get simpler than that. And yet you possibly said to yourself, heard that before. I've heard it millions of times before. I've been coming to this church my whole life. If I haven't, I've been coming to another church where the minister always talks about this same theme. Why is it that you always talk about this same theme? Why is it that you ministers, why are you preachers, you're always going on about our need to be saved and that Christ is the only way to be saved. It's like Spurgeon, the great preacher, over a hundred years ago, somebody came to him once and he said, you're always talking about the same thing. You must be born again. You must be born again. When are we going to get something different? Why are you always talking about you must be born again? You know what Spurgeon's reply was? Because you must be born again. And that's the heart of the matter.

So if you're one of these people tonight that says, I've heard this before, can I tell you what the fly bee stewardess says? You've flown fly bee, haven't you? Storn away to Glasgow, Glasgow or whatever. You know what they say at the beginning of the flight? They say, I appreciate that you have heard this message before, but it is important. So I would ask for your full attention. And if that message is important, how much more is this one? Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And then secondly, the second obstacle is that for some people, God is simply not on your list. Doesn't figure in your routine or your priorities or your thoughts or your intentions or your goals and objectives of the week. Doesn't figure in your ambitions for life. When you come to think about what makes up your life, God is simply not on the radar. I really hope that that changes even a little glimpse. Even to the point where tonight you've just, that interest has been there's been a spark. And I hope tonight that if nothing else, that you become concerned about this issue just for the sake of one thing, that this is about God. Surely, logic alone tells you that God has to be your first priority. God gives you the breath that you breathe every moment. He could take it away.

[15 : 12] God gives you the breath every day. He gives you the breath that you eat every day. Everything that you take for granted is given to you by God. He could take it away in a moment. He could change your life in one single second. And he's not on your radar. I don't get that one. And tonight, all I'm saying is this.

Just because he's God, will you just focus your attention on him? I'll give you a wee example of that.

My wife and I went to Uig yesterday. We did some hill walking. Not very strenuous. Not very far. But enough just to get out into the open. It was an absolutely gorgeous afternoon. Went to Uig.

I have never explored Uig. I say that to my shame. It's an absolutely fabulous place. We just discovered it's a little bit of just walking in the Uig moor and mountains. We were walking there and all of a sudden we saw something in the sky. Just a little dot. But there was something about the movement of that little black dot in which you could tell what it was. It was an eagle.

My wife had her binoculars, came prepared. We sat there, I don't know for how long, with the binoculars and just looked at that eagle. But even with the binoculars, you couldn't really see much of it. It was still just slightly bigger dot than you could see with the naked eye. And still, you were filled with this sense that you were looking at something truly glorious. If it had been a pigeon, then we wouldn't have given it the time of day. Or a crow, or a seagull, you wouldn't have given it. But just because it was an eagle, even although you couldn't see its head, you could only see just a tiny outline of its glorious figure with its wingspan soaring up. It appeared to be miles in the air, soaring, circling round. I could have watched it for ages until it disappeared. It was only a dot.

[17 : 37] Tonight, maybe God is only a dot. But will you focus on him just because he is God?

That's what he asks you to do. Surely just because he's God, then you'll cast your eyes upon him and come to him. For some people, thirdly, the problem is a language problem. Language is always a problem when it comes to communication, isn't it? And none more so than the Bible. Because some people do find a language problem. There's a natural language problem. Every generation has its own words and its own definitions and its own idiom. We've always had so much discussion about how to translate the Bible into various languages and how to get one Greek or Hebrew phrase into the best possible translation. Like Luther once said when he translated the German Bible, he said, how would a German say what the Apostle Paul is saying? And we have to say the same thing. That's why we've had to give our attention to providing the Word of God to the congregation, hopefully to people who need to read the Word of God in the modern idiom of today without losing its respect and without losing reverence for the grandeur of the Word of God. That's why we have. We've addressed the language problem. But there's still a language problem, isn't it? You can have the most accurate translation in the world, and yet when you try and come to terms with the gospel, there's still these terms that you simply, that you have to grapple with. It's the same with anything. I came across a headline the other day that seemed to illustrate to me the huge problem that there always is with language and the need that there always is to find out what is being said. And the headline was this, Hathaway woos in McQueen at one day premiere. That's what the headline said. And I read it again, Hathaway woos in McQueen at one day premiere. I had absolutely no clue what that headline meant.

And it was only when you read the actual newspaper article itself, when I went on to start reading, I was quite intrigued by it. Why do I not understand this headline? You understand most headlines. Why am I having difficulty understanding this headline? So I read it, and I discovered that Hathaway is Anne Hathaway, the actress. And she was at the premiere of a movie called One Day, and she was dressed in an Alexander McQueen dress. And of course, by that stage, I had completely lost interest and read on to something else. But you have to read on, don't you? And that's what people do when they come to the gospel. They get put off by the first obstacle that they find, because it's an excuse, isn't it? It's a nice excuse. Because if you're interested in something, then language should not be a problem. If you knew anything about what it was to stand before God on the day of judgment, and know that there was an escape, that God had sent his son into the world to deliver you and to save you from your sin, then surely you'll want to pull out all the stops in order to get this right. Language should not be a problem. So read on.

Don't stop whenever you've read the first sentence of the Bible. Continue. And if you don't understand something, then make sure, ask. And come to someone who has perhaps studied the Bible for themselves, ask more and more and more. And it's only by grappling with a language problem that we realize that we just grow in our discovery of this great gospel and realize that it's the only message in all the world. And to know Christ is to have everything that we could possibly have in this world.

Here's another obstacle. Some people just don't get it. They just don't get the gospel. Language is not the problem with them. God on the radar is not the problem with them. They're interested in God. They figure that he's there. And they're quite happy to say to you, well, I believe in a God of some description. Not quite sure who he is or where he is, but that's okay because I'd rather not know. Because it's better to have questions than answers. Sometimes more convenient to have questions than answers, isn't it? To be left in some kind of fog. Because if you're left in the fog, then you can't be held accountable for anything. Then you can live as your light. And you can say, I didn't know because I'm confused. God has not left us confused. He's given us a clear answer.

[23 : 04] And that means that we absolutely have to come to terms with it. But some people just don't get it, do they? It amazes me how many times in my whole ministry, going back years and years, that you preach the most horrendous sermon on the most horrendous passage, on the most threatening passage that talks about awful things in the Bible. And somebody comes up to you and says, that was nice. And I feel like saying to them, what was nice?

It just seems to be the right thing to say, isn't it? That was nice. You could be saying, you could be talking about Ephesians chapter 2, you were dead in trespasses and sins. And they come out and they say, that was nice.

Or you can be talking about the closing verses of John chapter 3 that say some of the most horrendous words in Scripture, whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. You preach a sermon on that verse and people come out to you and they say, that was nice. And you think, you haven't got this, have you?

If you had, then you would have come up to me after the service and punched me in the face. And you would have said, don't you ever, ever accuse me of being a sinner again. I am so offended that you just called me a sinner.

I regard myself as a decent, upright individual. And you have told me from the Bible that I am condemned before God. Don't you dare say that to me again. Now, if somebody said that to me, I would say, you've got it.

[24 : 42] At last, you've got it. You can say that. Please don't do the other thing. The person who understands the gospel is the person who is very often offended by it at the start.

The gospel is an offense. There is nothing nice about discovering that my life is full of shame and sin and that I need to be saved from that sin.

There's nothing more humiliating, isn't it? There's nothing that will destroy my pride as a human being and particularly as a man. We like to think we're self-sufficient as men, don't we?

Perhaps that's the reason why in this congregation, do you know how many men there are in comparison with women members in the congregation? Do you know that there is one in four? One in four.

There's not much equality there, is there? Why is that? Is it because somehow or other that women are easier to save? No, it's not. It's because men are full of pride, full of self-sufficiency.

[25 : 56] They're full of this thought that goes, that says, I'm not going to allow anyone to humiliate me to the extent that I have to be saved because I want to live my life the way I want to live it.

There's something in us men that says that. But I believe tonight that the power of God can overcome all of that. It doesn't matter how much pride that we carry in our hearts, God is able to overcome that pride.

And then some people say that for some people, they don't see the problem as relating to them.

You might be here tonight and you say, well, I can think of plenty of people who should hear this message tonight and how it would do them a lot of good.

You're possibly looking down on someone tonight and saying, well, I hope that person is listening because he needs to hear that message. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I can't think of a bigger sinner in Stornoway than that person who's, I mean, in fact, I'm glad he's here.

[27 : 06] I'm glad he's here listening to the message. I hope there's a turnaround in that person's life. I can think of no better person to be saved. And I'm glad because he needs to be saved. Well, do you need to be saved? The fact is we all need to be saved.

The easiest thing in the world tonight is to try and point the finger at someone else. And as soon as you're confronted with the gospel, you think of someone else. You think you can deflect the problem onto someone else.

Well, you can't. There's various forms of sin. There are outward forms of sin. There are the most obvious forms of sin. You might even call them the worst forms of sin.

That's okay. But there, and it doesn't really matter, isn't it? Because the wages of all sin is death. And that means that if your sin is pride, that you've been able to hide from everybody else all your life, under the cloak of decency and respectability, you're still condemned.

You haven't put a foot wrong. That's what Dr. Campbell said to the older people when he was giving his testimony. He said, I was amongst what you might call the best of sinners. Never put a foot wrong in my childhood.

[28 : 07] Well, I'm not sure about that, but I'm sure in his estimation that was what was true, as far as everybody else could see. And yet he says, I needed to be saved.

Paul was the same. Saul of Tarsus. He was the model student, the model child. Grew up. Everything was right. Everything his parents told him because it made it his ambition to please God by his own works.

There was no person more eager to please God by his lifestyle than Saul of Tarsus. Look at what he says here. He says, I am the foremost sinner in the world.

That's how he came to regard himself after he came to know Jesus Christ as a Savior. I am the foremost. And that's what happens to us. It's when Christ comes to us and opens up our hearts and shines his spotlight into our lives and into our deepest recesses.

The darkness and the shame that is here. Me too, by the way. I'm speaking to myself that we suddenly realize what we are. And there's no hiding from God. Oh, Lord, you have searched me and known me.

[29 : 17] You know my sitting down and my rising up. My, even my thoughts are known to you. And some people say today that all of these things, it's a waste of time to talk, talking to the modern Western man or woman about these concepts of sin and guilt because they just don't understand.

I read a book recently. It was a very good book, but one thing I disagreed with was the statement made in the book that modern man, modern human being, they don't understand the concept of guilt.

I don't believe that. I just don't believe it. A couple of months ago, two or three months ago, I am a great watcher of BBC News Channel.

I watch it regularly. And three or four months ago, they were doing this piece on something that the Catholic Church had taken out. And they invented an app for your iPhone in which you could confess your sins by way of this app.

Okay, I'm not sure how it works. I've never investigated it. But apparently, Catholic Church, I've got this thing in which you can put onto your iPhone and you can confess your sins. There you go.

[30 : 38] Simple as that. It would be marvelous if forgiveness came through an iPhone. Dead easy, wouldn't it? It doesn't.

There's no one who can forgive your sin except Jesus. Anyway, the newsreader, Simon McCoy, do you know what he said?

He said, I wouldn't be able to have one of these. It wouldn't have enough memory. That's what he said. You tell me there's no guilt in today's world?

Oh, there is. We all know what it's like to be caught out. The fact is that we become so sophisticated at arguing away our behavior.

We've built walls around us. We've got syndromes for everything. All kinds of behavior. I'm not denigrating psychiatry or psychology.

[31 : 41] There's a place for it. It seems to me we've built syndromes for every sort of human behavior. And we've worked out whereabouts in our genes or in our brain cells our bad behavior comes from so that, well, there's no such thing as human choice anymore.

But there is. And you and I both know that. You and I, but we've kept it inside. And we're keeping it quiet. And we're keeping it from other people. And we're afraid to face up to ourselves for what we are.

There's nothing new, by the way, about that. That's exactly, somebody was asking me the other day when we were in a discussion group the other way, somebody said, what was John the Baptist all about? Why was John the Baptist there?

What was his ministry all about? It was precisely this. Do you know what? He prepared for the coming of Jesus by getting the people to look into themselves. By forcing them for the first time in their lives to confront their own badness.

Because there's no point in looking at Jesus. Jesus is meaningless if we're not prepared to look at our own badness.

[32 : 50] That's what the verse says. It says, Christ came into the world to save sinners. You say, I'm not a sinner. And the reason you're saying that is not because you're not.

It's because you refuse to believe it. Because you've persuaded yourself that everything is okay. That you're better than the other guy. And that you've gathered together a whole bunch of terminology which explains your behavior.

Well, maybe we need another John the Baptist today. To come and to force us to see ourselves as we really are. We are sinners. I am a sinner.

You are a sinner. And if you would do very wisely tonight. If we would just listen to what God says about us. Because when we listen to what God says about us as we really are.

Then we come to terms with our lostness and our condemnation before a just and a holy God. And it doesn't matter how many objections you put up.

[33 : 50] It doesn't matter what your arguments are. You're arguing against God. Don't even think about it. Because he's always right. And you're always wrong. He has to be right.

Otherwise he's not God. And if he says you need to be saved. If he says I need to be saved. That's what he said to me. I've gone through this. Believe me. I've gone through the humiliation of recognizing myself.

And I do it all the time. Recognizing who I really am. But it's as we recognize ourselves. That we recognize the wonder of Calvary.

And what Jesus did when he gave himself on the cross. And it's the only place I can come to. Nobody else can forgive my sin. I can persuade myself. I can say time is the great healer.

I can say well get over it. I can go all these catchphrases. And it doesn't work. Only the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

[34 : 49] So come to him. Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from our sins. To save sinners of whom I am the foremost. Now let me just spend two or three more minutes.

There is another obstacle. And the obstacle is this. That perhaps tonight you may believe everything I've said.

That Christ came into the world. You believe that he's the son of God. You believe that he is. That his death on the cross is the payment for our sin. You believe that he's the only way to God.

You believe. And you know what you must do to trust in him. And to give your life to him. To surrender your life to him. And yet you say. Not me. Because.

You've written yourself off. As unsavable. As unsavable. I don't know why. You know why.

[35 : 50] One episode in your life. In which you feel that you made a choice that was catastrophic. Could be. Perhaps a power in your life.

An influence. That you feel that you can't break free from. Drink. Sexual temptation.

Perhaps tonight. You were. A professing Christian at one time. You were where you ought to have been. You were under the power of the gospel.

You were a witnessing Christian. And now something has happened. And you've drifted away. God has dropped off the radar. God. And you say. Well. When I read Hebrews chapter 6.

For it is impossible. In the case of those who have once been enlightened. Who have tasted the heavenly gift. And have shared the Holy Spirit. Have tasted the goodness of the word of God. And the powers of the age to come. And then have fallen away.

[36 : 55] To restore them again to repentance. Since they are crucifying once again. The son of God to their own harm. And holding him up to contempt. Have you written yourself off tonight.

For whatever reason. I want you to look at verse 14. The grace of our Lord.

Overflowed. For me. And I want you to go away tonight. Thinking of God's grace. Without measure.

Unrestricted. There's no austerity measures. With God. If you went to someone's house. And they poured you a cup of tea. And they kept on pouring.

So that the. Tea overflowed the cup. You would think that that person. Lost the place. Wouldn't you? Something wrong. Something's happened to that person. Needs help. Just don't do that.

[38 : 01] But that's. What God does. His grace. Overflows. So I would like to think tonight.

That you will come to that God. In all your need. And your emptiness. And your guilt. And ask him. As never before.

To have. Mercy. On. You. And change. Your. Life. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.