

I Believe, Help My Unbelief!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series

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Mark 9:14–29 (NRSV)

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him.

¹⁶ He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?”

¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.”

¹⁹ He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.”

²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

²¹ Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

²³ Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.”

²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!”

²⁶ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”

²⁹ He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

John 20:19–31 (NIV)

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

“If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.” – St. Augustine of Hippo

You’d think that the Christian journey would get easier as we go along. We’d be growing in our faith and understanding as we come to an ever-deeper appreciation of God and his grace. But that’s really not how it is for many of us. With great enthusiasm we give ourselves to Jesus and are carried along by the joy and newness of it all. But then, as we start to take the Bible seriously and really listen to the preachers, we find that questions start to sprout up, good questions, important questions that challenge our still newly born faith. We don’t know whether to keep going or to turn around and go back, thinking we’d be happier staying as infants in the faith. After all, didn’t Jesus say that we are to come to him as little children?

I imagine that the disciples felt a bit like that in the days after the transfiguration when Peter, James, and John had been to the top of the “spiritual mountain” (Mark 9:2-13, the story immediately preceding today’s passage from Mark). They hadn’t comprehended the events on that hillside, but they knew it was big. So, imagine their surprise when they

couldn't drive out a demon out of a possessed boy. Perhaps they thought they had come far enough with Jesus that they could overwhelm the spiritual forces of wickedness with the snap of a finger or the utterance of a few "magic" words. But, instead, things were getting harder and they had failed the boy and his father utterly.

So the father had turned to Jesus himself, pleading, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." I try to imagine the look Jesus gave the father as he said, "IF?" It is the father's immediate reply that is the most important part of this story:

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

This simple plea, so heartfelt and honest, has drawn Christians to this man for two millennia. In those few words, he speaks for us all. Who amongst us has not struggled with doubts, with unbelief? Is it not ironic that this famous phrase is uttered in the midst of a story about demon-possession, to which we are inclined to say:

A demon, really!? Sure sounds like an epileptic seizure. But the Bible says it is a demon. Jesus speaks as if it is a demon. Do I have to believe it was an actual demon to believe the Bible, to be a good Christian? Do I have to believe in demons? But, then again, what about angels? . . . *and so on it goes.*

Sometimes I think that those who don't struggle with doubts and belief don't really understand the radically extraordinary nature of the claims we make. We domesticate Easter and lose our wonder at the claim of bodily resurrection. Even the disciples struggled to believe such a thing. Take Thomas for example – the most famous doubter of all.

The truth of doubt

So Thomas had doubts. Poor guy got the label "Doubting Thomas." Big deal. We all have doubts. We are doubt-producing machines. And like Thomas, our doubts are reasonable. Think about it. We claim that 2,000 years ago a Galilean Jew died and was then resurrected to a newly embodied life. Not a ghost. Not resuscitated. But living anew, bodily, on the other side of death, never to look back. And we even claim that the same will be true for us all one day!

As hard as it might seem to believe such claims, when it comes to spiritual and religious matters, it is really not so much that America is a nation of unbelievers; rather, we are a nation of *half-believers*, carrying around vague notions of our deeply felt spiritual hunger. Sometimes we believe more than we would like to admit. At other times, we prefer to deny any beliefs at all. One need only turn on the television or pick up the daily newspaper to find Americans awash in attempts to make sense of their spiritual desires. We are a nation in which most still self-identify as Christian, though many are really more "Christian-ish" than anything else, as shown in rigorous studies of Christianity in America.

In part, I think this is because we live in a world that values scientific knowledge as the only "real" knowledge, rather than embracing science as a way of knowing, but not the only way. Too many people expect "proof" if they are to overcome their doubts.

But the notion that we make decisions based on what we can *prove* is naïve. We "know/can prove" very little. Outside of mathematics, I can't really think of much that we can actually prove beyond all doubt. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything. One of the things drummed into me in my Ph.D. work was the notion that a scientific hypothesis is never proven, only that many hypotheses have yet to be disproved, or as one of the principal scientific texts puts it, ". . . hypotheses can be tested and be shown to be probably true or probably false."¹ Scientific hypotheses are always predictions, never proofs. Modern science works because the visible universe is orderly and predictable, not because science proves things.

Here's one concrete example of what I mean. We imprison and even execute on the basis of DNA evidence. It is the gold standard in the courtroom. But we've all seen that it is presented in the form of probabilities not absolute proof. It is utterly reasonable to accept

1. This is from a classic textbook on scientific research, Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1986), 20.

DNA evidence as being as close to a proven fact as we can get, but it is still not 100% certain. The probabilities still operate.

So, let's consider our beliefs and what we can actually prove. My hope is that this will help you get past feeling like you have to "prove" the existence of God or "prove" that the resurrection of Jesus really happened.

First, our lives are built on what we believe to be true, not what we know to be true.

This business about truth and proof can be tricky, but just stop to think about all the things you "know." I think you'll soon come to realize that nearly everything in your "knowledge" category is really in a "belief" category. It is just that there are many beliefs for which the evidence is so strong that we take the beliefs to be proven -- and we use the word "knowledge" when speaking of such beliefs. We then go on to organize our world-view around those beliefs until such time that we learn something that causes us to modify our beliefs and, subsequently, our world-view.

To illustrate, perhaps you've seen the movie, *The Truman Show*. In this movie, the hero, Truman, was born and raised in a completely controlled "artificial" world that was really nothing more than a large movie set. Truman had no reason to believe that there was anything artificial or contrived about his world, even though his wife and all his friends were actors hired to play the roles. Truman was the only person not in on the secret. Truman's belief in his lived reality was utterly reasonable -- though wrong.

In *The Matrix*, the world is an artificial mental "reality" induced in the minds of humans so that they can be kept alive in large farms and used as batteries (yes, really). The hero was one of a small group of rebels who discovered the secret, even though they could never be sure what was truly real and what was the computer-created artificial reality.

There are substantial theological issues embedded in both of these films because we cannot transcend our senses, thereby throwing into doubt all that we hold to be true. To put it simply, we are stuck with our five senses and we can't get around them! Now, I don't think I'm living in an elaborate movie set or in a Matrix, I just don't think I can prove it beyond any doubt. Because everything we know must be mediated by our senses and our senses can be deceived, we have to admit the possibility of being wrong about everything.

Of course . . . no one lives that way. I "know" that I married Patti fourteen years ago and that Chris, Matt, and Robby are my sons. For me to hold otherwise would get me committed - and rightly so! We just need to lose the notion that life can be reduced to Euclidean proofs such as we learned in tenth-grade geometry.

Second, something can be true whether we can prove it or not. For example, a couple of hundred years ago, a mathematician named Cronbach conjectured that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers. This conjecture has never been proved or disproved; perhaps it never will be. But it still could be true and it might be very reasonable to believe it is true until you can find an even number that is not the sum of two primes. *Truth is independent of the evidence for the truth.* Truth is that which corresponds to reality, to what is actually so -- if we will never fully understand reality.

Third, it may be reasonable to believe something that is not true or to disbelieve something that is true. When you were five, it was reasonable to believe in the material existence of Santa Claus. Your parents told you it was so and you had no reason to doubt your parents. Santa Claus was a reasonably held belief. By the time you were eight and had gathered some contradictory evidence, belief in Santa was no longer so reasonable. Indeed, had you held on to your childhood beliefs in the material existence of Santa, the Easter bunny, and the tooth fairy, your beliefs would have been most unreasonable and, indeed, foolish. At the same time, if you call to check on the arrival of a flight from New York and the airline tells you that the flight will arrive on time, it may be reasonable to disbelieve them based on your experience with the airline, even though it is true that the flight will arrive on time.

In sum, our lives are built on a foundation of countless beliefs about ourselves, others, the world, even the very nature of reality. Most of our beliefs do correspond to reality - to what is true - which is a good thing, because we have to make decisions every day on the

basis of our beliefs. I did marry Patti in 1998; I was present at my marriage. (Of course, I have to believe that the Justice of the Peace was legit.) Barack Obama was elected President in 2008. (At least the media has told me so.) The American colonies won their independence in 1781. (Or so my books have told me.) My point is that our beliefs are like a pyramid. When we are children, we begin building our pyramid of beliefs, adding blocks to it, taking blocks away. This pyramid constitutes our world-view. If we are fortunate, our pyramid is built on a wide foundation of many reasonably held beliefs that enable us to build an ever-higher pyramid of understanding. Sometimes our most fundamental beliefs are challenged and replaced with beliefs that we believe are closer to the truth - or, to put it another way, our world-view is modified. This is an unending, life-long process - and an inescapable one.

Now we come to the really hard part -- living with our belief pyramid. First, we are stuck with it, and each belief in the pyramid is only more or less likely to be true. Second, we have to use these beliefs to make decisions every day. If I work hard will I get the promotion? Is there a God? It is pretty easy to see how deciding on your level of work effort will influence your life. It is perhaps not so easy to see how your decision about God will affect your life, especially for pragmatic Americans. It is not even obvious why a decision has to be made. But decisions are inescapable. It is true in life, just as it is true in business: a decision delayed is a decision made.

Christians hold that you will make no more important decision than your decision about God. Further, we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was born 2000 years ago, that we know little of his life until his public ministry in the last three or so years of his life, that he proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom, that he was crucified by the Romans, died, and was buried, and that three days later he was bodily resurrected, subsequently appearing to hundreds of people. We believe, with Paul, that Jesus' resurrection validates his claims that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, and indeed, God himself. Perhaps most importantly, Christians hold that God challenges us to make a decision - do we wish to be part of his kingdom or not? Further, we hold that this decision is bound up with our eternal destiny.

Even in the face of inevitable uncertainty and doubts, we must make a decision. Do we believe that the Christian story is essentially true or do we believe that the Christians have got things wrong, despite their sincerely held beliefs? We may not want to confront this decision but it cannot be avoided -- a decision delayed is a decision made.

Back to Doubting Thomas

And so, with the boy's father and with Thomas, we stand there before Jesus. Like they did, we have a decision to make. Believe or not? We cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief."

A week before Thomas had scoffed at the idea of a resurrected Jesus, saying he'd have to touch the wounds for himself in order to believe (John 20:25). Now, he can touch the wounds for himself. Now he *knows* as well as he can ever know. And his response is all it could ever be: "My Lord and my God!" And so doubting Thomas places a brick titled "resurrected Jesus" as the cornerstone in his pyramid of beliefs.

Twenty or so years later, Paul is writing to a Christian fellowship that he started in Corinth, Greece. They have given up their belief in Jesus' resurrection and, hence, their own. Paul can't bring them before the risen Christ to touch his wounds, but he can offer his own testimony and that of others. Paul tells them that he, the other apostles, and more than five hundred men and women can personally attest to the resurrection of Jesus, for they saw Jesus with their own eyes. Indeed, many are still alive, he says. and could still testify to the truth of the resurrection claim.

So it was then; so it is now. We want to believe. We confront our doubts. As part of a believing community, we strive to understand the Bible and the essential Christian beliefs. We want to make some sense of it all. We put the work in. We discuss. And, all the while, we pray,

"I believe; help my unbelief."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Take a few minutes and discuss your own doubts. What things trouble you the most about the Christian faith or about the Bible? If someone asked you why you believe what would you tell them?
2. Thomas, one of the twelve, has missed Jesus' visit and directly expresses his doubts about the claim of resurrection. When he meets the risen Christ, Thomas makes the first direct declaration of Jesus' divinity in John's gospel by anyone other than Jesus.

This story is a great occasion to talk about our own doubts. We all have them – sometimes more and sometimes less. Talk about the doubts that most often trouble you.

3. Discuss how you deal with doubt in matters of faith. How do you differentiate between day-to-day doubts and those that could threaten the foundations of your faith?
4. Most of us work in places that have mission statements. John had a mission when he set out to write his story of Jesus. He wrote so that we would believe in Jesus and have "life in his name."

What do you think John means by "life"? What might it have to do with our lives today. Too often, people conclude that faith in Jesus is only about getting our ticket-to-eternity punched. What do you think we gain today, in the now, by believing that "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God."

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Mark 9:2-13 The story of the transfiguration. This immediately precedes the story of the demon-possessed boy and his father.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 4:39-54 The Samaritans believe and Jesus meets another father. This dad doesn't seem to question at all Jesus' ability to heal his son – long distance!</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 "The message of the cross is . . . foolishness to the Gentiles."</p>	<p>Thursday, Hebrew 4:1-13 The Sabbath rest that awaits those who believe.</p>
<p>Friday, Hebrews 11:1-12:3 Faith in the unseen; faith in action</p>	<p>Prayer List</p>

