

<b>Series:</b> Help My Unbelief	<b>Reference:</b> Mark 9:20-26	<b>Title:</b> Coincidences	<b>Date:</b> 02.20.2022
<b>Website Writeup:</b>			
We can believe God & struggle to believe at the same time. And Jesus will accept us, even in our struggle. It's wise not to hide doubt, but bring our unbelief before a loving God even if in guarded hope & expectation. Because when disappointment becomes the norm, doubt may be our natural reaction.			

## COLOR CHANGES IN TEXT INDICATE SLIDE CHANGES

Have you ever been desperate for something - like, when you're thirsty or hungry & are desperate for anything that'll fill you? Or if you're in a lot of pain & will take anything to take the pain away? I felt that when I had Covid, my throat hurt so bad I was willing to do anything to have it stop.

Kim & I hiked the John Muir Trail, about 240 miles a few years back. We started from the north & went south to the highest point in the contiguous United States, Mt. Whitney, 14,494 feet above sea level.

Imagine hiking for 18 days then camping at the bottom of that mountain, one more day ahead of you, looking up you knew you'd have to climb it that next day. We did, only after waking up to ice on our tent before dawn. We packed up in the dark, donned our headlamps & began the ascent. It was long & arduous.

At one point the trail goes to the right, over & down to the end. But the trail to the left was to the highest point which anyone doing this hike had to do before going over & down. We went left. By the time we got to the top, we were exhausted. For more than 2 weeks we'd been in the wilderness with no cellphone access, we didn't know how our kids were. I fished around & found a weak cell signal, called, and my father answered. Everything was okay at home - Kim cried. I gave her whiskey someone had left at the top with which hikers could celebrate their great accomplishment.

But the journey was long but over. We still had to go back to the other trail, over & down. We thought, "Down's good, this'll be easy!" We knew it was 99 switchbacks down, and we figured from the wording in the guidebook that would be it. We also knew, after eating dried food for more than 2 weeks, there was a restaurant at the bottom where we could get a hamburger!

But what the guidebook didn't tell you was that from the end of the 99 switch backs it was still miles of hard hiking to the restaurant! And looking down the mountain was deceptive, it would seem that after the switchbacks we were done. But when we got to that point we realized in talking to people hiking up, we had a long way to go, expectations were shattered. We got to the bottom at dusk, exhausted & emotional. In all my days a hamburger never tasted better!

Maybe you've felt that desperation other ways? In no other way do we feel it than with our children. When we see our kids suffering, there's nothing which can placate. I've experienced that. My own daughter was tormented by an egotistical professor at college who seemed to just want to make her life difficult. They kept him away from me on graduation day & for good reason, I may've taken a poke at him if given the chance. He's since been fired for his antics, and I feel vindicated! I have friends who've been through worse as their kids have been taken advantage of by evil people, drug use & sexual deviancy - they've felt powerless to defend & guide in those times.

This series addresses doubt in the Christian life. Our doubt can come from disappointment, but it can also desperately drive us to search for answers & help.

In Mark 9 on p689 of your pew Bibles, there's a story where Jesus meets a father who was in desperate need of Jesus to heal his son. The man's son was possessed by an unclean spirit & would go into convulsions. His desperation is palpable in the story.

Mark 9:20-26 says...*they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground & rolled around, foaming at the mouth.*<sup>21</sup>*Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered.*<sup>22</sup>*"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us & help us."*

Imagine being this father, powerless to help his own son. Years of care, tears & frustration! He's probably gone to every charlatan & shaman hoping they could do something. Nothing's worked. He's exhausted all resources, still nothing. You can't blame the guy for saying, "IF you can do anything..." But, he'd never met Jesus until now. He'd probably heard all the stories of healing & miracles He'd done in others, but even in hearing them, this father doesn't really believe something can be done since experience has taught him to doubt.

I love Jesus' response...<sup>23</sup>*"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."*

If I was this father I may've gotten testy at that! I may've launched into a lengthy description of all the different ways of how I've tried to elicit help to no avail! But, this man is more mature & insightful than me, listen to his response...<sup>24</sup>*Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

That's probably the most honest answer I've ever heard! Is it not what we all think & feel? I think so. We want to believe, we do at some level, but experience just hasn't afforded that belief to solidify in our hearts - after all, this is his first encounter with Jesus. What can Jesus do beyond doctors & snake oil salesmen!?

It continues...<sup>25</sup>*When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf & mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him &*

*never enter him again.”<sup>26</sup>The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently & came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.”*

We can believe God & struggle to believe at the same time. And Jesus will accept us, even in our struggle. It’s wise not to hide doubt, but bring our unbelief before a loving God even if in guarded hope & expectation. Because when disappointment becomes the norm, doubt may be our natural reaction.

This story is one of desperation, hope & healing. The statement of the child’s father is complex, yet also comforting for anyone who struggled with doubt: *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* In that moment he believed Jesus could perform this miracle, yet still struggled with doubt - we can all relate. He had seen others try & fail. Maybe he sought different healers & doctors to help his son, only to be let down every time. And we see in vv17-18 even Jesus’s disciples couldn’t help the boy, which may just remind us we’re not Jesus!

Can God handle our questions & struggles? This guy’s like, IF YOU CAN? And Jesus is like, IF I CAN? And heals his son. And I tend to interpret Jesus’ words to the demonic force as strong & authoritative, not wimpy. He didn’t ask, He commanded, because He has authority over all things!

Furthermore...He didn’t need that guy to be 100% confident of His ability! He’s Jesus, God Incarnate! The Creator of all reality who put the stars in the sky which number a million for every grain of sand on this earth.

I’ve studied the Scriptures, in no way does it indicate that Christ’s ability to move in our lives is limited by our level of belief. Health & Wealth preachers may claim someone doesn’t have enough faith when something doesn’t happen - but they’re dead wrong! That’s just a mask for failure of their own faulty theology. Some people had faith, others didn’t, and He moved in all of them! There are so many accounts of Jesus healing the masses of people we can’t expect all those people had rock solid faith - they were just people on the side of the road hoping for something in a world where modern medicine did not exist.

But maybe what He is limited by is our indifference...by our not even trying to ask! Giving lip-service on Sunday, but never going to Him with any request. We trust in our abilities, money, wit & intellect which all fall short. Even trust in modern science runs out & we end up on our knees. We trusted in the science & all got COVID anyway for goodness sakes! Would it not be better to give Him the chance in every situation & at all times?

In reference to money, in Malachi 3:10 God says, *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,*” says the Lord Almighty, *“and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven & pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”*

Can that principle not be applied in other areas of emotional & physical healing? I don't think that's a stretch by any means. Maybe we can build our faith by giving Jesus the chance to work! By asking in faith even when our hearts don't fully believe He can!

Nicky Gumbel, the pastor from England who developed the Alpha course, when he was still an atheist was traveling America in his twenties. His bag with all his money & clothing got stolen, leaving him only his passport & a prepaid bus ticket. And...he was totally alone. He walked city streets not knowing what to do for a few days. Then in desperation he cried out to a God he didn't even believe in, saying, "IF you're real, which I'm not sure I even believe, let me see someone I know."

Low & behold, the next time he stepped onto a bus there was an old friend sitting there who encouraged him & gave him money to get by! Nicky said, "I don't believe it!" Coincidence? Or God? Funny thing was, he even considered that a coincidence at the time & it would be years until he finally became a Christian. Even after that experience belief didn't materialize! Since then He states, "I've found that when I pray coincidences happen, when I don't, they don't." Is it a coincidence that coincidence happen, or is it Jesus!? As a Christian preacher, you know my answer.

Life has a way of pounding your shores making sand of all you thought was solid rock. And God will allow this in order to reveal Himself to you. But it does no good to give lip-service to God on a Sunday while walking around in desperation not crying out to Him, convinced He doesn't care & won't move anyway - why bother, right?

Or to put on the smiley face acting as if nothings wrong all the while your life's like a house fire burning down, when you could just ask & say, "Jesus, I need your intervention. All that I am isn't enough, nothing I've done works! I do believe, *help me overcome my unbelief!*" And see what coincidences happen.

Jesus didn't reject this father when he spoke of his struggle with belief. The man believed, but his faith was weak. The Greek word *apistia*, translated "unbelief" in Mark, means "weak in faith".<sup>1</sup> The man is holding this tension between believing & yet still having questions. A beautiful display of honesty to say the least.

Christians can be harsh toward other believers who struggle with doubt. We sometimes have a theology which leaves no room for questioning or struggling with our walk in Christ. We see faith as unwavering loyalty - *no questions asked*. But the Christian community is important for those dealing with doubts. How we treat others within the family of God affects their connection to God.

Church is a unique & difficult place. Some claim it's a business. I disagree, it has business aspects to it like any family does, but it is much more family than business. A family where we bear with one another in love. The problem is that some in the family

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 9th ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009], 57

want to question as Skeptic & not Believer - without desire to be led. To question to the point of disbelief, instead of to the goal of growing towards it.

This man, in his desperation, questioned towards faith. His was an honest answer revealing he wanted to see Jesus work. Those who want the church to give up on orthodoxy & simply acknowledge & agree with their hopeless nihilism can't be afforded that luxury, because Jesus is real, and He does work - and we know it, and proclaim it to their benefit.

Community is important, but community for communities sake isn't what the Bible teaches. Ours is community to glorify Christ. Community, and unity within it, come from shared belief under Jesus - this doesn't mean we don't openly share doubts, but we do so in a way this man did, 'I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.' Which is different than what many are saying these days. Instead they're saying, 'I don't & won't believe, and you must agree with me...' giving very elaborate, complex & confusing reasons which have much more to do with internal felt need than truth revealed to them. They want to be allowed to poison the sincere efforts of others, since they've long given up on Jesus. But faith, although not easy, is simply choosing to believe Jesus even when you feel otherwise. It's giving Him the chance, pursuing Him still to move & work.

James Catford in an interview with Dallas Willard said, "Doubt comes to us in many forms. We may be fools to say it, but we might wake up one day & find, at a profound level, that we doubt the very existence of God. Or perhaps we wrestle with the existential twins of unbelief; either we doubt if God is really powerful enough to act in our world or, if He is, whether He cares enough about us to do so. Whatever form our doubt may take, it's important to acknowledge it as an elephant in the room of our follower-ship of Christ."

The truth is everyone operates under the assumptions of what we believe to be real. Which is why I often ask in sermons, "Do we really believe this?" Do we believe Jesus to be real or not, is the question. Not that we're certain in every detail & situation, but do we trust even when doubt's evident? No one escapes belief, from atheist to Christian. We can believe that God isn't real, and that right & wrong are simply determined by what we want as long as it doesn't step on someone else's toes (which is impossible by the way). We all have belief, Christian or otherwise. What you have to understand is, you can't be non-committal. You believe something, whether you believe in Jesus or otherwise. But you don't have to be absolutely certain in all details to have belief.

For instance, you may choose a political party & believe that to be right, but do you actually believe that your party is absolutely right in all issues? I doubt it. You believe your spouse loves you, good, but you can't say you believe everything they do communicates love to you. That would be naive. You believe getting vaccinated will protect you due to the science, but you can't believe 100% that you won't get Covid, since experience tells us otherwise!

Dallas Willard said in that interview, “It’s possible to go to heaven with a lot of doubts, and it’s possible to go to hell with a lot of certainty - people do it every day. But you can’t stay at...an abstract level for very long. You’re going to have to bring it down to a practical level with questions like: what do you believe about Jesus?...you don’t have to be certain about anything you’re not certain about. In fact, certainty isn’t something you can choose anyway. Certainty & uncertainty aren’t things that are under the will...We have to help people understand, belief’s something which comes along as you experience. You don’t have to fake anything. The way faith works is this: *you put into practice what you believe*. If you’re attracted to Jesus, what do you believe about Him which you can act on? Experience shows again & again that when you allow people to act on the little they do believe, the rest will follow.”<sup>2</sup>

**So, express your doubt as Believer, not Skeptic. Choose to acknowledge doubt, and ask Jesus to help you overcome your unbelief like this man. That He act in your life, and we’ll see what ‘coincidences’ come about - experience builds upon itself, faith will grow, and you will find yourself saying, “You know what...I do believe!”**

A friend of mine, Stephen Smallman, once wrote a book called *Spiritual Birthline*. It talks about the arch of faith. That we usually see people as having a linear Pauline about face when it comes to belief. But in reality, many people have an arch of faith in life. They start out not as a Christian, not believing in Jesus, but over time they see God do little things in life & little by little they come about to face the other way. There’s no Pauline knocking of the horse moment, just a gentle baking into faith. And they say, “When I was younger, I didn’t believe, but now after seeing Jesus work throughout the years, I do!” I shared that with my father years ago, he said, “That’s me!”

This man probably walked away from this interaction saying, “I wanted to believe, but didn’t really! But look what He did! My son’s safe!” Maybe it was the final nail in the coffin of his atheistic tendencies. The question is, do we give Jesus the chance to act, or do we just explain things away which aren’t that easily explainable? Do we give Him the chance to act building belief & faith?

**God shows compassion to those with struggles & doubts, and we as a church have an opportunity to show that same compassion. But we will proclaim loudly that Jesus is the answer no matter what the struggle, because we have seen it & testify to it! We may have doubt, but we say along with this man, I believe, help me with my unbelief. Approaching faith & life as Believer with more to learn, than Skeptic just wanting to embrace nihilism!**

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<sup>2</sup> interview with Dallas Willard, “Doubt: The Elephant in the Room,” *Renovaré*, [https://renovare.org/articles/the-  
elephant-in-the-room](https://renovare.org/articles/the-<br/>elephant-in-the-room)