

# unbelief

## Introduction

Unbelief is prevalent in the world today, and perhaps just as (if not more) prevalent in many churches and in individual Christian's lives.

[Loud silence]

This paper is the accumulation of thoughts pertaining to the subject at hand, and the result of a thorough searching of God's word and my heart.

Why have I pursued this process? Because I desperately desire to live the supernatural Christian life that the early Christians lived. They didn't just speak about Jesus' love... they also demonstrated Jesus' love by praying for the sick and seeing them healed and delivered in His name. How many of us actually do the same?

I confess that I have nurtured pockets of unbelief in my life for many years, all the while being involved in ministry. I have seen 'a few' miracles but nowhere near the extent of the everyday occurrences recorded in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. I know God is the same yesterday, today and forever and I also know that the Bible does not lie, so, something needs adjusting... and that something is me.

## What unbelief is

Biblically speaking, belief and faith go hand-in-hand. The Greek words only slightly differ and are frequently used interchangeably. Similarly, doubt and unbelief are also very closely related.

Below are two Biblical definitions of the word unbelief.

### 1. Pushing the truth away

*<sup>18</sup>But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves. <sup>19</sup>For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts. <sup>20</sup>From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God.*

**Romans 1:18-20 (NLT)**

When confronted by the truth, we have only two responses. We can embrace truth, which demands a change of heart, attitude and lifestyle, or we can push it away, because we don't want to humble ourselves and change. Sadly most people choose the latter.

### 2. Stubborn refusal to believe

The dictionary defines an unbeliever (or disbeliever) as someone who refuses to believe. Most people do not realise that believing and not believing are primarily an act of the will.

Something else most people don't realise is that Christians can have unbelief in their hearts, essentially being 'unbelieving-believers'.

*<sup>9</sup>It was early on Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead, and the first person who saw him was Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom he had cast out seven demons. <sup>10</sup>She went and found the disciples, who were grieving and weeping. <sup>11</sup>But when she told them that Jesus was alive and she had seen him, they didn't believe her. <sup>12</sup>Afterward he appeared to two who were walking from Jerusalem into the country, but they didn't recognize him at first because he had changed his appearance. <sup>13</sup>When they realized who he was, they rushed back to tell the others, but no one believed them. <sup>14</sup>Still later he appeared to the eleven disciples as they were*

*eating together. He rebuked them for their unbelief—their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. Mark 16:9-14 (NLT)*

Even those closest to Jesus (His disciples) were guilty of unbelief – which shows that Believers can be guilty of unbelieving.

## What unbelief does

### 1. God's power is greatly hindered

<sup>1</sup>Jesus left that part of the country and returned with his disciples to Nazareth, his hometown. <sup>2</sup>The next Sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They asked, "Where did he get all his wisdom and the power to perform such miracles? <sup>3</sup>He's just the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us." They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus told them, "**A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.**" <sup>5</sup>And because of their unbelief, he couldn't do any mighty miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief. **Mark 6:1-5 (NLT)**

I find the above verses staggering, for a number of reasons.

- **The synagogue should have been one of the most faith-filled places... instead it was the opposite.**

The synagogue (the place where followers of God met regularly to learn from the Scriptures and seek God's face), should have been thick with an atmosphere of faith and expectancy, instead it reeked with the incense of unbelief.

Fast forward a couple thousand years to our 'synagogues', our places of worship. Do we come faith-filled and expectant, or do we come cynical and critical? The hard truth is that we may be the very thing responsible for hindering God's work in our church meetings.

- **The people's entire worldview was drenched in unbelief, and they didn't realise it.**

The people saw God's love demonstrated by Jesus, but their default setting was one of offense, fault-finding, criticising, refusing to believe (act of the will again), unbelief. Are we any different?

- **Because of their unbelief, God couldn't do any mighty miracles among them.**

Possibly a tad controversial, but based on the account given to us above, I can conclude that most of our western churches (not a judgement, just an observation) are filled with unbelieving-believers. If it were not so, then we would see the miraculous taking place on a much greater level and quantity. Instead, at best we see 'a few sick people' healed. This gives us the same characteristics as the synagogue in Nazareth... Unbelief.

### 2. A blinded mind

<sup>3</sup>If the Good News we preach is veiled from anyone, it is a sign that they are perishing. <sup>4</sup>Satan, the god of this evil world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe, so they are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News that is shining upon them. They don't understand the message we preach about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.  
**2 Corinthians 4:3-4 (NLT)**

If any verse should strike fear into our hearts, it is this one... that our refusing to believe opens the door for Satan to blind our minds, bringing deception. What could be worse than being blind to the only thing that can save us?

### 3. Deception and hard-heartedness

<sup>12</sup>Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. <sup>13</sup>You must warn each other every day, as long as it is called “today,” so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. <sup>14</sup>For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ. <sup>15</sup>But never forget the warning: “Today you must listen to his voice. Don’t harden your hearts against him as Israel did when they rebelled.”

Once again a stern warning to us... unbelief is intrinsically linked to backsliding, deception and hard-heartedness.

#### 4. Unable to live in the land of God’s promises and blessing

<sup>16</sup>And who were those people who rebelled against God, even though they heard his voice? Weren’t they the ones Moses led out of Egypt? <sup>17</sup>And who made God angry for forty years? Wasn’t it the people who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup>And to whom was God speaking when he vowed that they would never enter his place of rest? He was speaking to those who disobeyed him. <sup>19</sup>So we see that they were not allowed to enter his rest because of their unbelief. **Hebrews 3:16-19 (NLT)**

These verses reveal the real reason why the Israelites were unable to enter the Promised Land... unbelief. The Promised Land was the land of fulfilled promises and blessing God had prepared for His people the Jews.

We can relate this tragic scenario to our life. God has prepared an abundant life full of fulfilled promises and blessing for us as His children, but we can disqualify ourselves from entering this ‘Promised Land’ by refusing to believe His word and His promises. I can’t imagine any life more frustrating than wandering aimlessly in a proverbial wilderness. Out of ‘Egypt’, our old sinful, enslaving lifestyle, but perpetually barred from entering our ‘Promised Land’ because of our stubborn, habitual embrace of doubt instead of faith.

- Ten spies saw the fortresses, giants and challenges and chose to believe the circumstances over God’s word, thereby pushing truth away and embracing unbelief. They were put to death and caused an entire generation to perish in the wilderness.
- Two spies, Caleb and Joshua, saw the fortresses, giants and challenges and chose to believe God’s word over the circumstances, thereby embracing belief. They, and only they, out of an entire generation, entered that Promised Land.

#### 5. Paradise lost

<sup>7</sup>All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. <sup>8</sup>But cowards who turn away from me, and unbelievers, and the corrupt, and murderers, and the immoral, and those who practice witchcraft, and idol worshipers, and all liars—their doom is in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. This is the second death.” **Revelation 21:7-8 (NLT)**

This is the ultimate outcome and consequence of embracing unbelief... eternal damnation.

Are we starting to realise the severity of unbelief yet?

## FAQs

### 1. I’m uncertain and questioning... is this unbelief?

Let’s look at Zechariah and Mary’s response to God’s promise.

Zechariah was a righteous man, who carefully followed God’s ways (Luke 1:6). He was visited by the angel Gabriel who informed him that his wife would become pregnant, and his son would be John the Baptist. Zechariah’s response was one of unbelief – choosing to push the truth away, and he was judged for it.

<sup>19</sup>Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news!" <sup>20</sup>And now, since you didn't believe what I said, you won't be able to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly come true at the proper time."

**Luke 1:19-20 (NLT)**

Mary was also visited by Gabriel who told her that she would give birth to the promised Messiah... her response, while cautious and questioning, was believing. She reached out to truth instead of wilfully pushing it away.

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. <sup>28</sup>Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

<sup>29</sup>Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. <sup>30</sup>"Don't be frightened, Mary," the angel told her, "for God has decided to bless you!" <sup>31</sup>You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

<sup>34</sup>Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin."

<sup>35</sup>The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

<sup>36</sup>What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For nothing is impossible with God."

<sup>38</sup>Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." And then the angel left. **Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)**

I love Mary's response in verse 38:

*"I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true."*

Whose attitude and response is ours most similar to? Zechariah or Mary?

I am analytic (borderline cynic) by nature. My natural response would be totally like Zechariah's - But I cannot (and must not) let my natural inclination be an excuse for unbelief and a stumbling block to my belief. Anselm of Canterbury (eleventh century Christian philosopher/theologian) had a wonderful saying:

**"Faith seeking understanding."**

We live with an attitude of belief (or faith) while seeking the understanding at the same time. It's not either/or. We don't push truth away while we seek the understanding... we have faith while seeking understanding.

There is a huge difference between someone who is questioning and someone who is hindering.

## 2. Should I believe everything I see and hear then?

In our desire to flee unbelief we can go to the opposite extreme and fall into the ditch of gullibility. I love the people of Berea... and we can't go wrong if we follow their example.

<sup>11</sup>And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth. **Acts 17:11 (NLT)**

Note that they searched the Scriptures daily, not Google. Many of us search for and research the truth everywhere else except the very place we will find it.

## 3. Does unbelief hinder evangelism?

<sup>14</sup>Still later he appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their unbelief—their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

<sup>15</sup>And then he told them, *“Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere.”* <sup>16</sup>*Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.* <sup>17</sup>*These signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak new languages.* <sup>18</sup>*They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won’t hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick and heal them.”* **Mark 16:14-16 (NLT)**

A little known fact is that immediately preceding the Great Commission, Jesus gave His disciples firm teaching on belief and unbelief. Another little known fact is that the key to effective evangelism is belief! That signs and wonders will follow those who believe!

Which is more exciting and life-changing evangelism? Spending hours debating whether Jesus is alive, or demonstrating (in minutes) that Jesus is alive by seeing healings and miracles in His Name?

## Overcoming unbelief

For us to rise up and become the people of power that God has purposed us to be, we must be ruthless in our efforts to rid unbelief from our lives and thinking. Here are some pointers on how to do just that.

### 1. Repent

Unbelief is an act of the will and simply put, when we choose not to believe, we choose to sin. We need to repent of the sin of unbelief, understanding that repentance is not just a decision, but is a lifestyle.

The danger with practising sins is that we open the door to demonic influence and habitation. If we continually build walls of unbelief in our thinking, we will eventually have built a stronghold where a spirit of unbelief will find very attractive can possibly take up residence in.

Practising sins gives demonic forces legal access to our lives. The good news is that genuine repentance coupled with prayer in the Name of Jesus closes that door, brings freedom and change.

### 2. Pray the prayer of the desperate father

<sup>19</sup> Jesus said to them, \* *“You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”*

<sup>20</sup> *So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.*

<sup>21</sup> *“How long has this been happening?” Jesus asked the boy’s father.*

*He replied, “Since he was a little boy.”* <sup>22</sup> *The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can.”*

<sup>23</sup> *“What do you mean, ‘If I can’?” Jesus asked. “Anything is possible if a person believes.”*

<sup>24</sup> *The father instantly cried out, “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!”* **Mark 9:19-24**

The father did believe to an extent, but struggled with areas of doubt in his life. He cried out to the only One who could really help Him overcome his unbelief.

### 3. Focus on what God is doing, not what He isn’t doing

<sup>2</sup> *John the Baptist, who was now in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus,* <sup>3</sup>*“Are you really the Messiah we’ve been waiting for, or should we keep looking for someone else?”*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus told them, “Go back to John and tell him about what you have heard and seen—<sup>5</sup>the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.* <sup>6</sup>*And tell him: ‘God blesses those who are not offended by me.’”* **Matthew 11:2-6 (NLT)**

John’s reality was that he was in prison, but the truth was that Jesus came to set the captives free. He had recognised (and prophesied) that Jesus was the Messiah, but because his immediate situation was one of disappointment and disillusionment, he fell into unbelief.

Jesus instructed Him to look at the big picture... that “the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.” Jesus told John to focus on what He was doing, not what He wasn’t doing.

Here is where many Christians stumble. When our experience does not match up with what the Bible teaches (healing for example) we often change our theology to fit our reality, rather than choose to stand on the promises of God despite our reality.

#### 4. Expose yourself to things that will strengthen your faith, not hinder it

There are a multitude of biographies, DVDs, books, and podcasts filled with the miracles that are happening today in Jesus name. They aren’t hard to find and they are abundant.

*<sup>17</sup>Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. **Romans 10:17 (NIV)***

#### 5. Don’t feed on a diet of faith-eroding media or ministry-slander

Unfortunately, the internet has made it very easy for unbelieving-believers to spread slander on almost every ministry that is doing any good in the world. My response is this...

- They have far too much time on their hands.
- I would wager that they aren’t living a supernatural overcoming Christian life
- They are ignorant of its teaching concerning ministry slander...

*<sup>4</sup>Who are you to condemn God’s servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord’s power will help them do as they should. **Romans 14:4 (NLT)***

#### 6. Surround yourself with like-minded people and ministries

Who we spend most of our time with has the greatest influence on our world-view. In other words, we take on the characteristics of those we spend the most time with.

Imagine two people, one on the ground and one on a table, both trying to pull the other to where they are positioned. Everybody would admit that the person on the ground would have a far easier job. The moral is that it is far easier to pull people down and to pull people up. For this reason I don’t spend much time around negative people... I can’t, because I know that sooner or later their attitude will rub off on me.

#### 7. Be on your guard

Lastly, it is a sad truth that many good churches have been severely crippled because of unbelief. It takes root in the life or lives of certain people and its system grows deep and strong. Beware of its corruptive poison!

*<sup>14</sup>Try to live in peace with everyone, and seek to live a clean and holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. <sup>15</sup>Look after each other so that none of you will miss out on the special favor of God. Watch out that no bitter root of unbelief rises up among you, for whenever it springs up, many are corrupted by its poison. **Hebrews 12:14-15 (NLT)***

Unbelief never just affects one person. Its poison will always spread and always corrupt, as that is the very nature of unbelief. This is why the Bible teaches so strongly against it, and this is the reason we must be constantly on guard and militant in our actions to rid unbelief from our lives.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, as I stated at the beginning of this paper, my ardent desire is to live this Christian life, Spirit-filled, and adventure filled, and to do that I must nurture an attitude of belief in my life – because nothing is impossible if we believe!

<sup>12</sup>*"The truth is, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father.* <sup>13</sup>*You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, because the work of the Son brings glory to the Father.* <sup>14</sup>*Yes, ask anything in my name, and I will do it!* **John 14:12-14 (NLT)**

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