



The Curious Case of the Unbelieving Believer

Message by Pastor Andrew Kulasingham 24th May 2020

For these past few weeks, I've been looking at Hebrews chapter 6 and focusing on what I believe is a lost dimension of the Gospel of the Kingdom which was a real experience in the early church. We've been looking at this concept of experiencing "the taste of the age to come". Last week, I looked at various examples of real life experiences of believers in the New Testament – specifically the events that occurred in the life of Peter, Phillip and Paul. I challenged us all to press in to taste the powers of the age to come – not one day when Christ returns, but experiencing the Kingdom of God today.

Let's return to the passage in Hebrews.

Hebrews 6:12b (NKJV)

...but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Two words the apostle uses to describe what was present in those who "inherited the promises" of God. They inherited the promises through faith and patience. As I said last week, some people have all the faith but no patience and so give up before they obtain their promises. Others have so much patience and do nothing to step out in faith. They end up stuck in the practice of religion without any experience of the reality they believe in.

We need both – faith and patience – if we are to inherit the promises of God.

Today I want to look at Faith and then next week we will look at thoughts around patience and the time element in our faith journey.

So we are told to imitate those who through faith inherited the promises. We have heard so much about faith. I have preached about faith a lot too. In fact the first few sermons I preached at the start of the lockdown were about faith. If you look back at the first few podcasts, I talk about faith in opposition to fear, I then looked at Abraham and how faith is not passive but active. The following week we looked at Jesus and how he practiced faith in such a confident way. So we have looked at what faith looks like, and that when we talk about faith we are talking about active faith and confident faith.

So this week I won't be talking about what faith is. I actually want to approach this topic on faith from another angle. I want to take you to the story of Zachariah in the Gospel according to Luke and I want to show you what I personally believe is the biggest challenge facing modern day Christians around faith, prayer and inheriting the promises of God.

Luke chapter one – and we will begin our reading from verse 11. Before we do that I must give some background to this event.

Luke begins narrating this story by attaching these events to the days of Herod the King. This is the Herod that refurbished the second temple. The first temple was built by Solomon but

was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon around 586 BC. It was then rebuilt as a very moderate structure by Zerubbabel during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. But King Herod would undertake an extensive rebuild of the temple from 20BC that by the time of Jesus ministry, the temple was a magnificent structure that was the pride and joy of the whole of Israel. But Jesus wasn't impressed with it. He saw it as a mere facade. In fact Jesus prophesies that the temple will be destroyed and he will rebuild it in three days. He was speaking about Himself – implying that he was the person who was going to replace the temple.

The temple was totally destroyed in 70AD. It is my greatest fear that the 21st Century church is still attempting to rebuild a temple made by human hands – fixtures and structures, bells and whistles, lights and sounds, mere facades – but in reality a religion without relationship, preaching without power, and events without encounters.

Zachariah was a priest in this magnificent temple. This particular day, he was rostered to go into the temple and burn incense. We pick up this story from verse 11. Let's read Luke chapter 1:11.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

I have chosen to look at the story of Zachariah because I believe here lies the problem of the modern day Christian. I would like to call Zachariah the unbelieving believer.

He goes to the temple to pray – encounters an angel – his first response is fear. Who will blame him. Now listen to what the angel says -

Luke 1:13 (NLT)

Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John.

Now listen to Zachariah's response.

Luke 1:18 (NLT)

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

The angel, sounding a little annoyed, replies.

Luke 1:19-20 (NLT)

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! But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

Basically the angel is saying: you pray for something, God sends me, you know who I am. I'm the Messenger angel. You know if I appear this is a big deal. Instead of jumping up and down you doubt what I say? More than doubting my words – you doubt that God will fulfill it? You ask me how can you be sure? My answer is shut up and let God do his work in you."

I've got a theory about why the angel had to press "mute" on Zachariah's talk. Sometimes, friends, we can talk ourselves out of our miracle. But I leave that for another day. What I want to focus on is why the angel Gabriel saw Zachariah's response as unbelief – "You didn't believe what I said".

The key to all this lies in verse 11.

Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son,

For God to hear Zechariah's prayer it would mean that Zechariah was praying. Zechariah is an old man and according to his own account of his wife, she was "well advanced in years". In other words, far too old to bear a child. So here is Zachariah, praying for something he didn't believe was going to ever happen. Going through the motion of praying for something he didn't believe was ever going to happen. Like the grand, magnificent temple he dutifully served in, he prayed prayers that were merely a facade, a mere practice of an outdated belief. The prayer was past its expiry date – but he used it anyway.

"What's the harm? I'll go through the motion of praying this prayer. But I know very well – everything around me speaks to the reality, it is impossible for us to have a child."

Why would he keep praying? I can only speculate. Maybe he had no choice. Here he was, a priest in the temple. His very profession required him to stand before God daily and pray for God's people. If he didn't believe in prayer, what would happen to the institution of prayer. His very practice of burning incense daily before God was crucial to keeping people believing in prayer. So he maintains the facade of prayer, in spite of the jarring reality – which Luke highlights in verses 6 and 7.

Luke 1:6-7 (NKJV)

And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

Maybe he kept up the facade of praying for a child because it was expected of him to believe that God answers prayers.

If it was not because of him being a priest, maybe he kept up the facade because Elizabeth kept praying the prayer. After all, she was the one said to be barren. It was always the fault of the woman when a couple couldn't have children. The woman would bear the brunt of it all. She was the one who had to bear the shame. Must be something you have done for God to close your womb. It is the shame one bears in silence. Those younger days when there was still hope, when the cycle was delayed. Maybe this time. Maybe I am pregnant.

But it wasn't so. One can only imagine the unbearable pain she would have gone through each time like clockwork, the menstrual cycle will come and go – until it stopped altogether. And along with it, all hope to have a child. Maybe Elizabeth continued to pray and so to appease her, Zachariah would pray along.

We do not know why he kept praying; we are not told. All we are told is that the angel came to deliver a message in response to Zachariah's prayer. "Your prayer has been answered."

What? A real shock to the system. A jolt to the daily ritual of years of praying unbelieving prayers. "No way. This cannot be true. It's impossible and I have made my peace with praying only possible prayers."

The apostle James has something to say about this type of prayer. Speaking about praying for wisdom, he strongly reprimands unbelieving prayer.

James 1:6-7 (NKJV)

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;

Such a strong warning. When you pray, ask in faith. Don't doubt. Don't go to and fro, one day believing, one day unbelieving. When things seem like it's going your way – believe, but when everything is turning to custard, undo your belief. The consequence of unbelief is severe according to the apostle:

... let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

Strong words to mute unbelieving prayers. Like the angel, James too seeks to silence unbelieving prayer. James goes on in chapter two to instruct us on what faith looks like. He brings out a subtle but important difference between having faith that God can do it and Faith in God to do it.

Let me repeat this – please don't miss this. There's a difference between “Faith that God can do it” and “Faith in God to do it”. “Faith **that**” and “Faith **in**”.

James 2:19-22 (NKJV)

You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?

James is making a subtle but significant distinction between “Faith that” and “Faith in”.

You believe that God exists – that's a “faith that” belief system. That's the type of faith that believes God can do it. Faith that God can do it. James is saying even demons have a “faith that” belief system. Demons believe that God can do it. In fact they believe that God can do anything so much so they tremble at the thought of God doing something. Because when God intervenes and does something – He reverses everything the devil and his minions have done. It is a frightening thought that torments demons – “faith that” – faith that God can do all things. Faith that God can heal the sick. “Faith that” God can and has the power to fulfill all his promises.

James is saying you have “faith that” belief. That's good but not good enough. Even demons who stand opposed to God have “faith that” belief. They believe that God can.

The type of faith we need to have is a “faith **in**” belief system. Not just “faith that” God can do it, but “faith in” God to do it. Not just “believe that” God can do it. But “believe in” God to do it.

He brings up Abraham as the example.

James 2:22 (NLT)

You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete.

The apostle James makes it very clear that faith must have action in it for it be called faith. Faith without action is dead. Faith without action is not faith. It's some practice that will produce death and decay. On the other hand, faith with action is complete faith. It's faith in its entirety.

The act of Abraham offering his son at the altar was not just faith that God can do it. He believed God was going to raise Isaac from the dead. He didn't just have faith that God can do it. He had faith in God to do it. So he was ready to sacrifice his son, in order to see the fulfilment of his faith in God to do it.

James is saying: You can't see God do anything if you only have faith that God can do it. If you want to see God do something – your faith must be accompanied by the act of believing.

Faith accompanied by the act of believing produces the miracle. Faith that God can do it, accompanied by the action consistent to faith in God to do it, will produce the miracle.

FAITH THAT GOD CAN DO IT, ACCOMPANIED BY THE ACTION
CONSISTENT TO FAITH IN GOD TO DO IT, WILL PRODUCE THE MIRACLE.

Jesus' entire life and ministry displayed this combination. He had "faith that" nothing is impossible with God. And he lived his life by actions consistent to "faith in" God to do it.

Jesus had "faith that" God was going to raise him up from the dead. He believed that he was going to be crucified and he believed that God was going to raise him from the dead on the third day. So he had "faith that" God can raise the dead. He believed that God had the ability to raise the dead and in the near future he had "faith that" God will raise him from the dead.

But he didn't just have "faith that" God can raise the dead. He went ahead, even before he was raised from the dead, to put his faith into action by raising the dead.

Moved with compassion for the widow of Nain, he accompanies his faith with the act of believing and raises her only son from the dead.

Moved by the plea of Jairus, he goes into the home having "faith that" God can raise the dead. He accompanies his faith with the command "*talitha koumi*" "little girl, wake up"; and raises her from the dead.

Hearing his dear friend was dying, but having to wait till the right time. He goes to Bethany, with his cheeks still wet from weeping, he shouts with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

And after four days, the crowd expected a stench of decay when the stone was rolled away; instead, a man walks out, raised from the dead.

"His faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete." The way to make that move from merely having "faith that" into a "faith in" is to apply action to what you believe.

If you do not put some action into your faith, your faith is dead. Peter would have never experienced walking on water. "Jesus," he said. "if it is really you, bid me come to you". Jesus said, "Come." Now Peter had to do something. If he ever wanted to walk on water, he had to step out of the boat and put his feet on water. Faith requires action in order to complete it. The evidence is in the experience. "O taste and see that the Lord is good". You have to act on what you believe if you want to experience your miracle. The evidence is in the experience.

Today I challenge the mere "faith that" God can do it system of belief. It's a dangerous place to be. It's faith without action. It's prayer without expecting answers. It's a believer living in unbelief. It's the facade of a saviour without salvation, faith in a healer without the experience of healing, the faith of a God of the impossible without walking in the realm of Divine possibilities.

Today we change. Today we make that subtle shift – from Faith **that** to faith **in**. Today we decide we won't just stop at faith that God can do it. Today we move into faith in God to do it. Today we take steps – we accompany our faith with acts of believing.

What would that look like for you? For Abraham, he obeyed and took his son up the mountain and met Jehovah Jireh. For Peter, he stepped out of the boat and walked on water. What would it look like for you to accompany your faith with acts of believing?

Take time this week to go into that quiet place with God. If need be, ask him to forgive you for praying unbelieving prayers. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you from “faith that” God can do it, into “faith in” God to do it. Ask him to teach you what that looks like in your daily life – what actions need to change to reflect the “faith in” God to do it.

Press the mute button to your unbelieving prayers. Turn up the volume of faith accompanied by acts of believing. And let’s begin to see God bring us to the place where we inherit all the promises of God he has for us.

Have a miracle filled week ahead of you.

I bless you in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
