

Overcoming Unbelief (Part 1)

by Bayless Conley

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Hello Friend, I'm so glad that you joined me today. I'm going to be talking about something that actually kept an entire nation from possessing what God had promised them. It kept Jesus from doing any mighty miracles in a particular region. And it can affect you, and it can affect me. You're not going to want to miss this. What can I say? Grab a Bible, sit down, let's spend the next few minutes together.

Friend, I'm going to read something to you from Mark's Gospel, chapter 6. And if it wasn't in the Scriptures, you almost just couldn't believe something like this was there, but it is there. Listen to this. Speaking about Jesus,

Then He went out from there and came to His own country, and His disciples followed Him.

Now, the other Gospel writers give a little more detail, "Came to His hometown, to Nazareth where He had been brought up." It says,

² And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing Him were astonished, saying, "Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands! ³ Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:2-3)

Yes, Jesus did have brothers and sisters.

After Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph began to have normal marital relations, and she had a whole bunch of kids. Jesus was their stepbrother. Same mother, different father. Jesus' Father was from heaven, but the people were saying, "Hey, look, His brothers, we know His brothers, we know His sisters." And says, So they were offended at Him.

⁴ But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." ⁵ Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And He marveled because of their unbelief. Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching. (Mark 6:4-6)

Now, it didn't say that He would not do any mighty works there. The Scripture says He could not do any mighty work there. Meaning He couldn't do a major miracle there. Not "He wouldn't" "He couldn't."

The Amplified Bible, Classic Edition from verse 5 says this,

⁵ And He was not able to do even one work of power there, except that He laid His hands on a few sickly people [and] cured them. (Mark 6:5)

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So in the Greek language, those that Jesus healed, they were just people that had minor ailments, that no ears were unstopped, no blind eyes were opened, no cripples were healed. There was no miraculous works of power like Jesus did everywhere else. And it didn't say He wouldn't; it said He couldn't.

Why? He marveled because of their unbelief. Their unbelief limited Jesus.

They were offended at Him. Said, "We know Him. We grew up with Him. We know His brothers and His sisters. We knew His dad. Who does He think He is?" They were offended, and they didn't believe.

Now, maybe they didn't bring the sick to Him like they did in so many other places because of their unbelief, or there was just this community atmosphere of unbelief about Jesus. But either way, He was limited. He could not do any mighty work there. And He marveled because of their unbelief.

Only two things in the Scripture ever caused Jesus to marvel. One is unbelief; the other is faith. If He's going to marvel at me, I want Him to be marveling at my faith, not at my unbelief.

Now, if their unbelief could limit Jesus as to the extent of what He could do, might our unbelief limit Jesus in our lives? The answer to that is absolutely yes, it can.

Let me just bring a contrast to you if I might. This is from Matthew chapter 9, just a few verses here. Matthew 9:27–30 says,

²⁷ When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!"

So get the picture. There are two blind men, and they're crying out, "Jesus, have mercy on us." It says,

²⁸ And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him.

(So they found their way to the house where Jesus was)

And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." ²⁹ Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you." ³⁰ And their eyes were opened.

You find as you read through the Gospels—we find as we read through the Gospels many, many times Jesus mentions people's faith, here, "According to your faith, let it be to you." The woman with the issue of blood, "Woman, your faith; daughter, your faith has made you well." With the ten lepers and the one that came back, Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." Many, many times, Jesus said, "Your faith . . ." The woman that was crying and washing His feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, He said, "Your faith has saved you."

What a contrast to His hometown and the people in the synagogue. The power of the Lord was there. Jesus was there. His method was He would preach the word of God, and then He would heal the sick. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, we have a sample of what Jesus taught, these quotes from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me. He's anointed Me to open blind eyes. He's anointed Me to preach the acceptable year of the Lord," and He closed the book and sat

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down. The eyes of everyone were on Him. He said, "Today, this is fulfilled in your ears," but they wouldn't believe it. And He was limited as to what He could do in their midst because of their unbelief.

There was a gentleman that I knew; he's been in heaven for many, many years now. He was an old guy when I knew him, and he pastored in several different churches throughout his life as a minister of the gospel. Someone called him to visit one of his parishioners who was sick. The guy that was sick didn't call, the guy's wife didn't call, but someone else calls him, "Pastor, so and so is sick, he's laid up, he's doing really bad. And I told them I was going to call you. And I'm just asking if you would go anoint him with oil. James chapter 5 says if you anoint the sick with oil, pray the prayer of faith that the Lord will heal the sick and raise them up, and if they committed sins, they'll be forgiven."

So being a good pastor, he said, "Sure." The people know he is coming. He gets to the door and knocks, no answer. He knocks louder, no answer. He starts banging on the door. Finally, the wife comes to the door, says, "Oh, it's you. He's in the back," and she goes off into the kitchen, doesn't even show him to the back of the house, to the bedroom where the sick husband is in the bed.

He goes back there, and the husband was just kind of half interested. He didn't call himself. The wife didn't call. And the pastor said, "I dutifully, and trying to be a good pastor, I anointed him with oil and prayed with him, but there was nothing. The atmosphere was dead, and he didn't get well. There was nothing that happened."

Now, by contrast, I heard that same pastor share. He said, "One day, I'm in the church office, and I get a phone call from a woman. She said, 'Are you the pastor of such and such church?'" He says, "Yes, ma'am, I am." She said, "Well, I don't go to your church, and I've got two boys, and they're both terribly sick, and I was reading in the Bible, in the book of James, and it says to call for the elders of the church." Says, "Now you're an elder, right? You're the pastor." He says, "Yes, ma'am, I'm the pastor. I'm considered an elder."

Says, "Well, call for the elders of the church and let them come and pray over the sick person, anointing with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will heal the sick and raise them up. And I want you to come and anoint my boys with oil. And I know God's going to heal them. Here's my address. Can you come now?" He says, "Well, yes, actually, I can."

So he finds the street and parks his car. She's waiting out on the curb for him. She walks up and says, "My boys are inside. My name's such and such. I told you I don't come to your church." She said, "The truth is I'm not even a Christian, but I was reading in the Bible," and she quoted James 5 again about anointing the sick with oil.

She says, "I know God's got no reason to not heal my boys. I believe He's going to heal them if you just do . . . You brought your oil with you, didn't you? Make sure to check." He says, "Yes, I've got my oil." She said, "Come on, they're in here." She takes him in the back. He anoints those two boys with oil. Both of them got instantly healed, jumped out of their beds, fevers broken, and she did get saved and became a member of the church.

But the two stories, what a contrast. One, there's just like, "don't really care," and the other one is latched on to the promise of God. Faith and unbelief.

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I've been pastoring a lot of years, well over four decades, and could say I've been around the block a few times, and I've seen a few things. Once I got a call from a woman whose husband was in the hospital; very serious. The doctor said that he probably wasn't going to live. The sickness he had was going to be the end of him after a period of time—six months, or whatever it was.

He's a Christian. She's a Christian. He didn't call. He knew me. They both had access to my number. This is many years ago. The Bible says in James, "Is any sick among you? Let him call. Let the sick person call for the elders." It didn't say let someone else call on their behalf. It said, "Let them call." That is important.

I'm thinking of a particular Christian drug rehabilitation ministry. Their policy is if the person that's struggling with drugs, if they won't come themselves, says they won't take them in. If somebody else calls on their behalf, they won't follow up on it. The person needing deliverance has to come themselves. In fact, one of the guys told me. He says, "If somebody comes to our place and they are strung out on drugs, and they kind of collapse on the bottom step, we make him crawl up the steps to come inside."

His point: says, "We found that unless there's that desire, unless a person acts upon things themselves, the results are never forthcoming." Well, the book of James says, "Is there any sick among you? Let the sick person call for the elders."

So the guy didn't call. His wife calls. I've got a little bottle of oil with me. And I brought a little booklet on healing that was just filled with healing verses from the Bible, Old Testament, and New Testament.

I come into the hospital room, the guy knows me, and he is watching TV. He's in the bed, he's got the bed propped up there, and he is just watching TV. I said, "Hi." He didn't even look at me. "Hi, pastor," glued to the TV. He's watching. [chuckles] He's watching something on TV. And so I said, "Your wife called, asked me to come and pray for you." "Yes, okay, pastor." [chuckles] He never even looked at me, just glued to the television set.

So I spent about 15 minutes there at his bedside talking to him. He never looked at me once, sort of, kind of glanced at the side of his eye for a moment, but really no initiative, nothing on his own. Just "Ha, ha, ha," just watching the TV, glued to his TV show. I didn't even pull out the bottle of oil. There would've been no point. My heart was broken. So I said, "Listen, I brought a book for you." I said, "It won't take you long. You could probably read it in 25 minutes. It's got healing verses. I'm going to be back in three or four days. I want you to read the book. I want you to reflect on it. And when I come back, I'm going to pray for you." "Okay, pastor." He grabs the book. "Ha, ha, ha," he's still watching his TV show.

I went back four days later. And his wife was there, a couple of other people were there, the TV happens to be off. I said, "Hey." "Hi, pastor. How are you doing?" I said, "Hey, did you read that little book that I gave you?" "Oh, it's around here somewhere. No, I didn't have time to get to it. I'm not sure where it is."

I did my best to minister to him. But there was no reaching out from his heart to the promises. There was no real desire expressed to touch God. And the doctors were right. Eventually, that sickness did take him. And thank God he went to heaven, and very, very thankful for that.

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But again, just by way of contrast. During that same time, and it was back in the early days when we just started our church, I got a call from a woman. She said, “Pastor,” said, “I have got the flu so bad.” I feel like my head is going to break off. Said, “I’ve got this pounding in my head right now. I’ve got this high fever. And I was just reading in the book of James, it said to call for the elders, and I know you’re an elder, and I want you to come over and anoint me with oil.” And so she quotes the verse from James. Says, “Come over, pastor. Come over.”

I said, “Okay. I’m on my way.” I get to her apartment. She greets me at the door. I said, “You’re ready?” We never sat down. We never talked. She said, “Yes.” She quoted the verse from James chapter 5 again. I put some oil on my fingers, touched her head, began to pray. And listen, I’m telling you, the atmosphere in that apartment changed. Suddenly, it was like it was electrified. You could sense the presence of God. There was a weightiness there. The Bible talks about God’s glory, and that literally means the weightiness of God. When His glory comes, there’s a weightiness that can be sensed about His presence. And suddenly, in that apartment, there was this just weightiness of the presence of God. And she lifted her hands, and she began to cry. And she began to worship God, and she began to thank God.

She said, “Pastor, it’s gone. The moment the oil touched my head, the fever broke, and my headache left. I’m healed, I’m healed.” And she cried, and she cried, and she thanked God. I lifted my hands, and I thanked God as well.

Now, we go back to our story from Mark chapter 6. Jesus is in His hometown. He knows these people. He grew up among them. He knows their stories. He knows the sick that are among them. He knows the cripple that are among them. There’s no doubt that His heart went out to these people that He knew personally to make them well, but it said He could do no mighty work there because of their unbelief.

Listen to these verses from Hebrews chapter 3. It’s speaking about the Israelites, the generation that came out of Egypt, that God had promised that they would enter into Canaan’s land; the land promised to their ancestor Abraham. Hebrews 3:16–19, it says,

¹⁶ For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? ¹⁷ Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? ¹⁹ So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

The Scripture says they didn’t enter into Canaan’s land, enter into what God had promised from them, that they never accessed it even though it was promised to them by God because of unbelief. They had an unpersuadable attitude towards the word of God. They would not act upon what God said. Hebrews 4:6 says this,

⁶ and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief:

It was preached to them. Literally, it was promised to them by God, but they never seized it. They never enjoyed it because of unbelief. Hebrews 4:11, listen to this.

¹¹ Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.

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Now, this is written to New Testament believers. This is written to you. This is written to me. Here, the writer of Hebrews cites the Israelites, an entire generation that comes out of Egypt. They're actually the ones that God had told Abraham 400 years before that that particular generation was going to come out of Egypt and that they would inherit the promised land. God told Abraham. He said, "Your descendants, they're going to be ruled over by another people. They're going to be enslaved for 400 years, and then they're going to come out with great wealth," which they did.

And they were the ones that the promise was made to them to come into the land flowing with milk and honey. But they never inherited what God had promised to them. Why? The Scripture says because of unbelief. And then we are admonished not to fall after the same example of unbelief.

Now, unbelief does not mean non-belief. Unbelief is choosing to believe something or someone other than what God's Word says about us or about our situation. Listen. That is so important. I'm going to say that to you again. Unbelief is not non-belief. Unbelief is choosing to believe something or someone other than what God says about you and your situation. It's me choosing to believe something other than what God says about me or my situation. It's choosing to believe the voice and the opinion of the majority over what God says.

Listen, friend; the majority is not always right. And when the majority disagrees with God, guess who's wrong? The majority. But the tendency of many people, if this is what the majority says, "Well, I'm going to vote with them. It doesn't matter what God says." That's unbelief. Unbelief is siding in with "the experts," the human experts, when they contradict what God has said. No, my friend, let God be true. Let every man be a liar.

It's choosing to believe the testimony of our own five physical senses that may oppose what God has said in His Word. It's choosing to believe the lies of the devil over what God has said about us and our situation. It's choosing to believe tradition or whatever it might be in place of God and His Word.

In fact, speaking of tradition, just a little side journey here, but I felt like I should mention it. This is from Matthew 15:1–6. Listen to it. It says,

¹ Some Pharisees and teachers of religious law now arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They asked him, ² "Why do your disciples disobey our age-old tradition? For they ignore our tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat."

³ Jesus replied, "And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God? ⁴ For instance, God says, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.' ⁵ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.' ⁶ In this way, you say they don't need to honor their parents. And so you cancel the word of God for the sake of your own tradition.

"You cancel the Word of God for the sake of your own tradition."

I remember many years ago; I was teaching a Bible study in a town called Hemet here in California. And I was teaching about something specifically that the Word of God said that we

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need to do as believers. And there were specific promises attached to that command. That when we obey that command of God, certain promises become ours.

And there was a woman in the Bible study who vociferously opposed what I was teaching. She just began to argue with me. I said, "Okay, wait a minute." I sort of just stopped what I was doing. I said, "Look, you've got your Bible there?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Read along." I said, "Does your Bible say the same thing that mine says?" She says, "Well, yes, it does say that."

I said, "This is a clear command from Jesus. Correct?" She says, "Yes." But then she said, "But church tradition says . . ." And then she quoted the tradition out of the particular Christian background from which she had come, and they held certain traditions. And the church tradition that she referred to, and I was familiar with it, directly contradicted God's command.

And she said, "No, no, church tradition is right. The church has been doing this for hundreds of years." And she refused to accept what Jesus plainly taught and thereby canceled all of the promises that were attached to obedience to that command.

All right. Again, unbelief is having a disobedient or unpersuadable attitude toward the clearly revealed Word of God. In Exodus chapter 23, God made very, very detailed promises to Israel regarding their possessing the promised land. God said to them, "I will drive out the inhabitants from before you, and I will put your fear in them. When they see you, they will fear you. They will not be able to stand against you."

And then in Deuteronomy—Deuteronomy literally means it's the second giving of the law. It's a reiteration of the law. So in Deuteronomy, God's saying it again. Deuteronomy 11:22–25, it says,

²² "For if you carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do—to love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him—

(Listen to this),

²³ then the Lord will drive out all these nations from before you, and you will dispossess greater and mightier nations than yourselves. ²⁴ Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the River Euphrates, even to the Western Sea, shall be your territory. ²⁵ No man shall be able to stand against you; the Lord your God will put the dread of you and the fear of you upon all the land where you tread, just as He has said to you."

In other words, He's told you before. It's clear.

And then you read the story. Moses sends 12 spies in, one from each tribe. And they come back, and they're carrying bunches of grapes, and the fruit of the land, and said, "Man, this is everything God said. It's a land that flows with milk and honey. It's rich." They said, "Nevertheless, nevertheless, we saw giants. We saw walled cities. The people are armed. We can't do it." It doesn't matter what God has promised. It doesn't matter what God has said. We know better.

You read about that in Numbers 13. And the entire nation cited, that was 10 of the spies. Ten of the spies brought back a bad report. The Old King James version says, "They brought back an evil report of the land which they had searched, saying it's the land that eats up the inhabitants

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thereof, and they saw us, and we look like grasshoppers, and we just can't do it. There's no way." When God had directly already told them, "Every place the sole of your feet treads, I have given it to you."

But they had an unpersuadable attitude toward God's word. They chose to believe something instead of what God said. The nation agreed with the evil report of the ten spies, they agreed with what the five physical senses were telling them above what God had said. And the New Testament says, "That was unbelief." And they never received what God had promised for them because of that unbelief.

My friend, God has promised us so many things. We have a better covenant established upon better promises. We have everything they had and more. We have all of the blessings they had and more. Yet, we're admonished not to fall after the same example of unbelief.

My dear friend, I just want to encourage you. Make God's Word the final authority in your life. Above the voice of the experts, above the voice in the majority, above the voice of your five physical senses, above every other voice, choose to believe God's Word and act upon what He says. It will bring His power on the scene.

Faith invites God's power to come. Unbelief can limit God. And we're going to be talking about that more next time.

And I just want to encourage you right now. If you're watching me, if you've stayed with me this long, there's a reason for it. You must have a heart that's hungry for God. Listen, He loves you, and He wants to help you. Start having a love affair with God's Book. He'll speak to you from it. And if you've never made Jesus the Lord of your life, why not open your heart to Him and say yes to Him today? You'll never regret it. God bless you.

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