

“A Skeptic’s Faith”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

April 13, 2008

Text: “Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief’ (Mark 9:24).

One of the great struggles that many Christians face is the struggle with faith and unbelief. I was reminded of that recently while reading a book by a university professor, Bart Ehrman, entitled *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. In the introduction to the book, Ehrman shares some of his own religious experience with his readers.

As a boy, he was raised in the church. As a teenager, he underwent an intense “born again” experience and became a part of several very conservative groups. He decided to become a minister and ended up earning a doctorate in New Testament study. As he studied the texts of the New Testament, he realized that many of our manuscripts of the New Testament often are in conflict with each other. Having been raised in a tradition that held to the inerrancy of Scripture, he became disillusioned about the faith and recently has abandoned the faith altogether.

I.

The struggle between faith and doubt is not new. It is present throughout the Scripture. The passage we just read is a case in point. Mark’s gospel tells us that immediately after Jesus had descended from the Mount of Transfiguration, he came upon a difficult scene involving his disciples and an epileptic boy.

This narrative is technically an exorcism. It has to do with the ability of Jesus to cast out unclean spirits or demons. This boy was subject to great seizures that would throw him to the ground. When the disciples of Jesus were asked to heal this boy they were not able.

When Jesus approached this boy, the boy immediately went into a seizure. The distraught father of the boy said to Jesus, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus said, “If you are able ... All things are possible for those who believe.” Then we read, “Immediately, the father of the boy cried out, ‘I believe, help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:24). In this

verse we confront the struggle between faith and doubt. So, there are several things that need to be said today.

II.

The first concerns the role of doubt. Often in the vocabulary of religion, the word “doubt” has received bad press. Most of us who are preachers don’t spend a lot of time talking about doubt. We talk about faith. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world. Doubt is not something to be feared. It is essential to the growth of our minds and our faith. Oftentimes the church has been guilty of stifling intellectual growth. Oftentimes the church has sided with superstition, repression, and persecution.

One of God’s gifts to us is the capacity of critical thinking. John Calvin, the great Reformer, believed that God calls us to love God with our hearts and our minds. That ability to think, to question, and to doubt is one of God’s great gifts to us.

Take, for example, Martin Luther, one of the great Reformers of the church. Luther was able to question the abuses of the medieval church with its indulgences, corruption, and the loss of its Scriptural basis. But Martin Luther was not always right. One of Luther’s contemporaries was a scientist by the name of Copernicus, who advanced the “heliocentric” view of the universe, the notion that the earth revolves around the sun, and not the sun around the earth. Listen to what Luther had to say about Copernicus. He called him “an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy.”

Luther was a great reformer but he was wrong about Copernicus. Luther was deceived by surface views. The universe was much more vast, mysterious, and wonderful than even Martin Luther dared to think.

Jesus also had the capacity for doubt. He knew how to question the conventional wisdom of his time. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”—that was the law in Jesus’ time. But Jesus doubted that. He saw men trusting in long prayers, broad phylacteries, rigid Sabbath rules, dietary laws, and he doubted that.

Much of Jesus’ ministry was to call into question the conventional wisdom of his time. The Jews of Jesus’ day hated the Samaritans. Jesus said that a “good Samaritan” was better than a bad priest.

To be sure, we revere people of great faith. But let us not forget the important role that doubt has in the growth of faith.

III.

There is something else that needs to be said. There is a place in the church for skepticism, but skepticism alone is not the answer. Sometimes the skeptics are wrong. Over the last several years there have emerged a group of writers that some have called the “new atheists.” I have mentioned Bart Ehrman. Recently Richard Dawkins, a British scientist, has written a book

entitled *The God Delusion*, in which he says that to be an atheist is a “brave and splendid” aspiration. For him, belief in God is not only a delusion, it is a pernicious one.

There are other atheists on the best seller list today, including Samuel Harris and Christopher Hitchens. It is very fashionable on many high school and university campuses to profess one’s doubt about the Christian faith.

But doubters can be just as wrong as believers. I thought of that this past year when I visited my daughter in Washington, D.C. One afternoon we walked down to the Mall and looked at the Viet Nam Memorial and then walked to the Lincoln Memorial. On one wall of that memorial are carved the words of the Gettysburg Address.

On the day that Lincoln delivered “The Gettysburg Address,” there was a newspaper editor present, who lived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, just thirty five miles away. This is what he wrote in his newspaper. “We pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation, we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.”

Here was a man who stood in the presence of greatness and did not believe. If only he had doubted his doubts.

The older I grow, the more I ponder Judas Iscariot. He came so near to not betraying Jesus. He was a loyal disciple. It took courage to join that little band of disciples and Judas had it. Jesus trusted Judas so much that he made Judas the treasurer of his group. But then the doubts set in. What kind of Messiah was this who refused a violent revolution against the Romans and talked about loving one’s enemies? So the doubts begin to grow until finally, in an explosive hour, Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

He came so near not to doing it. And when he saw what he had done, he hanged himself. If only he had waited until Easter. He stood in the presence of greatness and disbelieved.

Do you see what I am trying to say? Believers can be credulous. But disbelievers can be fools as well. Take a long look at Christ. The world desperately needs him. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

IV.

The third thing that needs to be said is this. Oftentimes the strongest faith comes out of a great struggle with doubt. In the final analysis there are only two ways that a person can get faith. We can inherit it. We can take it from others, accept it and treat it as if it were an inheritance.

There is another way that faith comes. It comes through great struggle. It comes through a great fight, and often a “dark night of the soul.”

The person who does not understand this does not understand the Bible. To be sure, it is a book of faith. But it is also a book filled with the struggles of individuals wrestling with their doubts and unbelief. One thinks of Gideon, one of Israel’s judges, crying out, “If the Lord is

with us, why then is all this befallen us?" Or the Psalmist, "My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, 'Where is your God?'"

One of the most powerful aspects of the Old Testament is the laments of the prophets and of the great figures of the Wisdom Literature ... Jeremiah, the great prophet of Israel, calls out to God, saying, "Will you be to be a deceitful brook, waters that fail?"

Is the Bible only a book of faith? But listen to Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:1). Or again, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

But the same is true in the New Testament. In Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup [crucifixion] pass from me." And on the cross he prayed, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"

For all those who today find themselves in the midst of great doubt, the Bible is a book of great assistance. All its faith was hammered out on the hard anvil of doubt.

This has been true throughout the history of the church. John Knox of Edinburgh was a man of great faith. But Knox also wrote of "anger, wrath, and indignation, which called all of God's promises into doubt." We sing Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," and we know that Luther had the courage to stand not only against the medieval church, but against the emperor as well. But listen to Luther's words: "For more than a week," he wrote, "Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by depression and blasphemy against God."

But, let us end with the father of this epileptic boy, for this is where we began. "Help my unbelief," he cried. But that was not his finest hour. His finest hour was when he proclaimed, "I believe."

Today, we are in desperate need of people who believe—people who believe in God, in Christ, in the importance of the church.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was once arrested for preaching his faith and was placed in the Bedford, England jail. He was told to renounce his faith or face death. Bunyan spent the night in a great struggle. He was greatly frightened. He admitted his own uncertainty about his salvation.

Finally, he concluded that he must venture forth. Listen to his words, "I am for going on, and venturing for my eternal state with Christ, whether I have comfort here or no. If God doth not come in, I will leap off the Ladder even blindfolded into Eternity, sink or swim, come Heaven, come Hell. Lord Jesus, if you will, catch me. If not, I will venture for thy Name."

That is faith! May we struggle with all our doubts until we get it.

Amen!