

J.C. Ryle:

"He marvelled because of their unbelief."--Mark 6:6

The text which heads this page is a very remarkable one. Of all the expressions in the four Gospels which show that the Lord Jesus Christ was very Man, none perhaps is more startling than this. That He who was born of the Virgin Mary, and had a body like our own, should hunger and thirst, and weep and rejoice, and be weary and suffer pain,—all this we can, in some degree, understand. But that He who was very God as well as very Man, He "in whom dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily," He in whom were, "hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," He who "knew what was in man,"—that He should "marvel" at anything here below, may well fill us with astonishment. But what saith the Scripture? There it is written in plain words, which no critical ingenuity can explain away,— "He marvelled because of their unbelief."

In handling this subject, I do not propose for a moment to discuss those deep and mysterious articles of the faith which lie at the foundation of Christianity, I mean the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity, and the union of the Divine and human natures in the Person of Christ. If I attempted this, I could add nothing to what masters of theology have already said and should probably leave the subject where I found it, if I did not "darken counsel by words without knowledge."

What I wish to do is to say something practical about the general subject of unbelief. It must be a wonderful thing if even our Lord Jesus Christ marvelled at it. It must be an important thing, when we hear and read so much about it in the present day. And I shall try to make a few plain remarks upon it.

I. Let us consider the nature of unbelief. "What is it?"

II. Let us inquire why unbelief is so wonderful. "Why did the Lord Jesus marvel at it?"

I. What then is unbelief?

The word so translated will be found twelve times in the New Testament and always, so far as I can see, in one signification. In its fullest sense, of course, it only exists in lands where men enjoy the light of revelation. In heathen lands, where there is little known, there can be comparatively little unbelief. It consists in not believing something or other that God has said,—some warning that He gave,—some promise that He held out,—some advice that He offers,—some judgment that He threatens,—some message that He sends. In short, to refuse to admit the truth of God's revealed Word, and to live as if we did not think that Word was to be depended on, is the essence of unbelief.

Unbelief is the oldest of the many spiritual diseases by which fallen human nature is afflicted. It began in the day when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and brought sin into the world. They did not believe what God had told them would be the consequence of disobedience, and they did believe the Tempter, saying, "Ye shall not surely die."—It ruined millions in the day of Noah's flood: they would not listen to the great "preacher of righteousness," when he warned them for a hundred and twenty years to flee from the wrath to come.—It slew myriads in the day when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven. When righteous Lot called on his sons-in-law to escape for their lives, "he seemed as one that mocked." (Gen. xix. 14.) It kept Israel wandering forty years in the wilderness, till a whole generation was dead. We are expressly told, "They could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. iii. 19.) It brought, finally, destruction on the Church and State of the Jews some fifty years after Christ left the world. They would not believe nor receive Him as the Messiah, but crucified and killed Him. The primary cause why Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple burned, and God's ancient people cast off and scattered over the face of the world, was unbelief.

Unbelief, we are taught everywhere in the New Testament, is the grand reason why multitudes of professing Christian men and women in every age are not saved, and die unprepared to meet God. It bars the way to heaven, and makes God's glorious promises of mercy useless and unavailing. "He that believeth not is condemned already." "He that believeth not shall be damned." "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins." (John iii. 18, 36; Mark xvi. 16; John viii. 24.) Remember, every one into whose hands this paper may fall,—remember and never forget it,—it is not so much sin as unbelief that ruins souls.— "All manner of sins shall be forgiven to the sons of men:— "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin." "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow." (Matt. xii. 31; 1 John i. 7; Isa. i. 18.) But if a man will not put faith in Christ, he places himself out of the reach of mercy. I am bold to say that even Judas Iscariot might have found absolution,

if, after his denial, he had repented and believed. The true cause of eternal ruin is contained in those solemn words which our Master spoke before the Jewish "Sanhedrin," "Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life." (John v. 40.)

But the saddest fact remains behind. Unbelief is one of the commonest spiritual diseases in these latter days. It meets us at every turn, and in every company. Like the Egyptian plague of frogs, it makes its way into every family and home, and there seems no keeping it out. Among high and low, and rich and poor, in town and in country, in universities and manufacturing towns, in castles and in cottages, you will continually find some form of unbelief. It is no longer a pestilence that walketh in darkness, but a destruction that wasteth at noonday. It is even thought clever and intellectual, and a mark of a thoughtful mind. Society seems leavened with it. He that avows his belief of everything contained in the Bible must make up his mind in many companies to be smiled at contemptuously, and thought an ignorant and weak man.

(a) With some the seat of unbelief appears to be the head. They refuse to accept anything which they cannot understand. Inspiration, Miracles, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Holy Spirit, the Resurrection, the Future State, all these mighty verities are viewed with cold indifference as disputable points, if not absolutely rejected. Can we entirely explain them? Can we satisfy their reasoning faculties about them? If not, they must be excused if they stand in doubt. What they cannot fully understand, they tell us they cannot fully believe.

(b) With some the seat of unbelief is the heart. They love the sins and habits of life, which the Bible condemns, and are determined not to give them up. They take refuge from an uneasy conscience by trying to persuade themselves that the old Book is not true. The measure of their creed is their affection. Whatever condemns their natural inclinations they refuse to believe. The famous Lord Rochester, once a profligate and an infidel, but at last a true penitent is recorded to have said to Bishop Burnet, as he drew near his end, "It is not reason, but a bad life which is the great argument against the Bible." A true and weighty saying! Many, I am persuaded, profess that they do not believe, because they know, if they did believe, they must give up their favourite sins.

(c) With far the greater number of people the seat of unbelief is a lazy, indolent will. They dislike all kind of trouble. Why should they deny themselves and take pains about Bible-reading and praying, and Sabbath observance, and diligent watchfulness over thought and word and deed, when after all it is not quite certain that the Bible is true? This I have little doubt, is the form of unbelief which prevails most frequently among young people. They are not agitated by intellectual difficulties. They are often not the slaves of any special lusts or passions, and live tolerably decent lives. But deep down in their hearts there is a disinclination to make up their minds, and to be decided about anything in religion. And so they drift down the stream of life like dead fish, and float helplessly on, and are tossed to and fro, hardly knowing what they believe. And while they would shrink from telling you they are not Christians, they are without any backbone in their Christianity.

In days like these we must count it no strange thing if we meet with a vast amount of unbelief in the world. Rather let us make up our minds to expect it, and to see it under the most specious and plausible aspects. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. No doubt it is startling, when a young man leaves some quiet secluded country home, and launches on the waves of this troublesome world in some busy town, to hear doctrines and principles denied, or sneered at, which he never dreamed of anyone questioning when he lived at home. But surely this is no more than his old Bible might have taught him to expect. Is it not written there, "There shall come in the last days scoffers?" "When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" (2 Peter iii. 3; Luke xviii. 8;) Such a young man should say to himself calmly and quietly, "This unbelief is precisely what my father's Bible told me to expect. If I met with no unbelief, the old Book would not be true."

After all it is some comfort to remember that there is probably less of real, downright, reasoning unbelief than there appears to be, Thousands, we may be sure, do not in their heart of hearts believe all that they say with their lips. Many a sceptical saying is nothing more than a borrowed article, picked up and retailed by him who says it, because it sounds clever, while in reality it is not the language of his inner man. Sorrow, and sickness, and affliction, often bring out the strange fact that so-called sceptics are no sceptics at all, and that many talk scepticism merely from a desire to seem clever, and to win the temporary applause of clever men. That there is an immense amount of unbelief in the present day I make no question; but that much of it is mere show and pretence is to my mind as clear as noonday. No man, I think, can do pastoral work, and come to close quarters with souls, visit the sick, and attend the dying, without coming to that conclusion.

II. Let us now inquire why and wherefore unbelief is so wonderful. What is there in it that made even the Lord Jesus the Son of God marvel?

No doubt there was something peculiar and extraordinary in the unbelief of the Jews. That the children of Israel, brought up from their infancy in the knowledge of the law and the prophets, trained from their earliest years to look for the Messiah, and to expect a mighty "prophet like unto Moses," taught to believe in the possibility of miracles, and familiar with the story of miracle-working men,—that they should reject Jesus of Nazareth, and not be moved by the mighty works which He did among them, all this was truly wonderful and surprising. Wonderful that they should have such privileges, and yet make such a bad use of them! Wonderful that the door of life should be open, and heaven so near, and they should refuse to enter in!

But, I suspect, the Holy Ghost would have us look deeper than this. He would have us know that if we sit down and calmly consider unbelief, we cannot avoid the conclusion that there is something singularly marvellous about it and never so much so as in these latter days of the world. Let me try to show what I mean.

(1) For one thing, unbelief is a spiritual disease peculiar to Adam's children. It is a habit of soul entirely confined to man. Angels in heaven above and fallen spirits in hell beneath, saints waiting for the resurrection in paradise, lost sinners waiting for the last judgment in that awful place where the worm never dies, and the fire is not quenched,—all these have one point in common, they all believe. The rich man in the parable, when he lifted up his eyes in torment, and asked for a drop of water to cool his tongue, and pleaded hard for his five brethren, had bid an eternal farewell to unbelief. "The very devils," says St. James, "believe and tremble." (James ii. 19.) Hateful, and hating, and malicious, and murderous, and lying as Satan is called in Scripture, we read that his agents cried, "We know Thee who Thou art the Holy One of God." "Art Thou come to torment us before the time" (Matthew viii. 29.) But man, living man, is the only intelligent creature who is unbelieving! I say "living man" advisedly. Alas! What a waking up remains for many the moment the last breath is drawn. There is no unbelief in the grave. Voltaire now knows whether there is a sin-hating God; and David Hume now knows whether there is an endless hell. The infant of days, by merely dying, acquires a knowledge which the subtlest philosophers, while on earth, profess their inability to attain. The dead Hottentot knows more than the living Socrates. Surely a habit of soul so absolutely and entirely confined to "living man," may well be called marvellous.

(2) For another thing, unbelief is marvellous when you consider its arrogance and presumption. For, after all how little the wisest of men know; and none are more ready to confess it than themselves. How enormously ignorant the greater part of mankind are, if you come to examine the measure of their knowledge. The education of the vast majority of people is wretchedly meagre and superficial. Most of us cease learning at twenty-one, and then plunge into some profession in which we have little time for thought and reading, and are annually more absorbed in family cares and troubles, and add little to our stock of knowledge. Fifty or sixty years after this our part is played out, and we retire from the stage, rarely leaving the world a wiser world than it was when we were born! And does unbelief become a creature like this? Is it seemly for him to talk in a sceptical and sneering tone about the revelation which the Eternal God has been pleased to make of Himself, and the unseen future, in that marvellous Book the Bible? I appeal to common sense for a reply. "Honest doubt" is a fine thing to talk about, and men are fond of saying it is "better than half the creeds." But when a man tells you he is troubled with sceptical and unbelieving feeling about Christianity, while he has probably never studied a dozen pages of Butler, or Paley, or Chalmers, or McIlvaine, or Bishop Daniel Wilson, and never thought deeply about religion at all, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that one of the most curious things in much unbelief is its wonderful self-conceit.

(3) For another thing, unbelief is marvellous when you consider its unfairness and one-sidedness. Who has not known that some of the minor facts and miracles of the Bible are the ostensible reasons which many assign why they cannot receive the Book as true, and make it their rule of faith and practice. They point to the ark, and the passage of the Red Sea, and Balaam's ass, and Jonah in the whale's belly, and ask you sarcastically if you really believe such things to be credible and historically true. And all this time they refuse to look at three great facts which never can be denied, and which no higher criticism can possibly explain away.

(a) One of those facts is the historical Person Jesus Christ Himself. How He can have been what He was on earth, lived as He lived, taught as He taught, and made the mark He has certainly made on the world, if He was not very God, and One miraculously sent down from heaven, is a question which those who sneer at Balaam's ass find it convenient to evade.

(b) Another fact is the Bible itself. How this Book, with all its alleged difficulties, written by a few Jews in a corner of the earth, who wrote nothing else worth reading, can be the Book that it is, so immeasurably and incomparably superior to anything else penned by man, and hold the position it holds after 1900 years' use,—how all this can be, if the Book was not miraculously given by inspiration of God, is a knot which cannot be untied.

(c) The third and last fact is the effect which Christianity has had on mankind, —the amazing change which has taken place in the state of the world before Christianity, and since Christianity, —and the difference at this day between those parts of the globe where the Bible is read, and those where it is not known. Nothing can account for this but the Divine origin of Scriptural religion. No other explanation will stand.

Now these three great facts are coolly ignored by many professing unbelievers! They will talk by the hour about minor difficulties in the way of faith, while they refuse to touch the weighty, patent facts which I have just been naming. The difficulties of infidelity are a wide and interesting subject, which deserves more attention from the defenders of Revelation than it receives. But the unfair and unreasonable extent to which many nowadays concentrate their minds on small disputable points of revealed religion, while they refuse to look at the great standing evidences of God's truth, is to my mind one of the most marvellous features of modern unbelief

(4) Fourthly, and lastly, unbelief is marvellous when you consider how the vast majority of those who Profess it drop it, and give it up at last. Few of us perhaps have the least idea how seldom any man leaves the world an unbeliever. The near approach of death has a mighty effect on consciences, and brings into fearful relief the utter superficiality of much that is called scepticism. The very people who go through life sneering and scoffing at Christianity, and those who support it, continually break down in their own last hours, and are glad enough to send for the ministers of religion, and seek comfort in the old doctrine of the despised creeds. Some, with a mighty swing of the pendulum, go from one extreme to another, and, after living sceptics for years, go out of the world in grovelling credulity, on humblest submission to the worst superstitions of the Church of Rome. Others who do not go so far, are willing to be read to, and prayed with, and receive the Lord's Supper, after neglecting every Christian ordinance and despising God's house for scores of years. Wretched indeed must systems be which prove so useless and comfortless in the hour when comfort is most wanted!

But the wonder of all wonders is, that these failures of unbelief are so notoriously and constantly occurring, and yet men will not see them, and the ranks of scepticism are perpetually filled by fresh recruits. If those who profess to deny Revelation generally died happy deaths, and left the world in great peace and joy, holding their opinions to the last, we might well expect them to have followers. But when, on the contrary, it is the rarest thing to see an unbeliever dying calmly in unbelief and giving no sign of discomfort, while the vast majority of unbelievers throw down their arms at last, and seek for the very religious consolation which they once affected to despise, it is impossible to avoid one broad conclusion. That conclusion is, that of all spiritual diseases by which fallen man is afflicted, there is none so truly marvellous and unreasonable as unbelief.

And now let me wind up this subject, with a few words of kindly advice to all my readers, and especially to the young. I am no longer young myself. It is thirty-five years since I first began to write on religious subjects. But even now I think I know the heart of a young man. I can remember the days when I tried hard to be an unbeliever, because religion crossed my path, and I did not like its holy requirement. I was delivered from that pit, I believe, by the grace of God leading me to a book which, of late years, has undeservedly fallen out of sight, I mean "Faber's Difficulties of Infidelity." I read that book, and felt it could not be answered. But the remembrance of the struggle I went through in those days is still fresh in my mind, and I always have a deep feeling of sympathy, when I hear of the mental conflicts of young men.

Some of my readers, I dare say, are often troubled with sceptical doubts about the truth of Christianity. You are not professed unbelievers; God forbid that I should say this. But you see many things in the Bible which you cannot quite understand. You see not a few men of powerful and commanding intellect rejecting Christianity almost entirely. You hear many, slighting things said, and depreciatory remarks made cleverly and smartly about the facts and doctrines of the Bible, which you are unable to answer. All this puzzles you. You stand in doubt. Is it really worth while to pray in private, and read the Bible, and keep the Sunday holy, and attend the Lord's Table? Is it necessary? Questions such as these are the first steps in the downward road. Unless you take heed, they may land you in infidelity. Listen to me while I offer a few friendly counsels.

(a) For one thing, let me, entreat you to deal honestly with your soul about secret sins. Are you quite sure there is not some bad habit, or lust, or passion, which, almost insensibly to yourself, you would like to indulge, if it were not for some remaining religious scruples? Are you quite sure that your doubts do not arise from a desire to get rid of restraint? You would like, if you could, to do something the Bible forbids, and you are looking about for reasons for disregarding the Bible. Oh! if this is the case with any of you, awake to a sense of your danger! Break the chains which are gradually closing round you. Pluck out the right eye, if need be; but never be the servant of sin. I repeat that the secret love of some vicious indulgence is the real beginning of a vast amount of infidelity.



(b) In the next place, let me ask you to deal honestly with your soul about the use of means for acquiring religious knowledge. Can you lay your hand on your heart and say that you really take pains to find out what is truth? Do not be ashamed to pray for light. Do not be ashamed of reading some leading book about the Creeds and Confession of your own Church, and, above all, do not be ashamed of regularly studying the text of your Bible. Thousands, I am persuaded, in this day, know nothing of the Holy Book which they affect to despise, and are utterly ignorant of the real nature of that Christianity which they pretend they cannot believe. Let not that be the case with you. That famous "honest doubt" which many say is better than half the creeds, is a pretty thing to talk about. But I venture a strong suspicion that much of the scepticism of the present day, if sifted and analysed, would be found to spring from utter ignorance of the primary evidences of Christianity. For my part, I take my stand on these words of Solomon, "My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God." I fear many professed unbelievers never took the course Solomon here recommends.—Proverbs ii. 1-5.

(c) Last, but not least, let me entreat you to deal honestly with the religion of faith, and those who profess it. That there is such a religion in the midst of us, and that there are thousands who profess it are simple facts which nobody can deny. These thousands believe without doubting certain great truths of Christianity, and live and die in their belief. Let it be admitted that, in some points, these men of faith do not agree,—such as the Church, the ministry, and the sacraments. But after every deduction, there remains an immense amount of common theology, about which their faith is one. On such points as sin, and God, and Christ, and the atonement, and the authority of the Bible, and the importance of holiness, and the necessity of prayer, and self-denial, and the value of the soul, and the reality of heaven and hell, and judgment, and eternity,—on such points as these, I say, these men of faith are very much of one mind. Now, I ask is it honest to turn away from these men and their religion with contempt, because they have many weaknesses and infirmities? Is it fair to despise their religion, and wrap yourself up in unbelief, because of their controversies and strifes, their feeble literature and their party spirit? Mark the fruits of peace, and hope, and comfort, which they enjoy. Mark the solid work which, with all their faults, they do in the world, in lessening sorrow and sin, and increasing happiness, and improving their fellow-men. What fruits and work can unbelief show which will bear comparison with the fruits of faith? Look these facts in the face and deal honestly with them. Systems ought to be judged by their fruits and results. When the so-called systems of modern unbelief, and scepticism, and free thought, can point to as much good done in the world by their adherents as simple faith has done by the hand of its friends, we may give them some attention. But till they do that, I boldly say, that the simple, old-fashioned religion of faith has just claim on our respect, esteem, and obedience, and ought not to be despised.

After all, I must conclude with the humbling and sorrowful remark, that we who profess faith, and are never troubled with unbelief, are not altogether free from blame. Too often our faith is little better than a mere "otiose assent" to certain theological propositions, but not a living, burning, active principle which works by love, purifies the heart, and overcomes the world. It is not the faith which made primitive Christians rejoice under Roman persecution, and made Luther stand up boldly before the Diet of Worms, and made Ridley and Latimer "love not their lives to the death," and made Wesley give up his position at Oxford to become the Evangelist of England. We are verily guilty in this matter. If there was more real faith on earth, I suspect there would be less unbelief. Scepticism, in many a case, would shrink, and dwindle, and melt away, if it saw faith more awake and alive, and active, and stirring. Let us, for Christ's sake, and the sake of souls, amend our ways in this matter. Let us pray daily, "Lord, increase our faith." Let us live, and move, and have our being, and deal with men, as if we really believed every jot and tittle of our creeds, and as if a dying, risen, interceding, and coming Christ were continually before our eyes.

This, I am firmly convinced, is the surest way to oppose and diminish unbelief. Let the time past suffice us to have lived content with a cold tame assent to creeds. Let the time to come find us living, active believers. It was a solemn saying, which fell from the lips of an eminent minister of Christ on his death-bed,—"We are none of us more than half awake!" If believers were more thorough, and real, and whole-hearted in their belief, there would be far less unbelief in the world.