

Why is it sometimes hard to believe in God without hard evidence?

(LISTEN) As long as you have faith... you will have doubts.

Let me demonstrate what I mean... by borrowing an illustration from John Ortberg. ... In my hand... here... I am holding a \$20.00 bill. ... Who believes me... Is there anyone who believes my claim that I have inside of this fist a \$20.00 bill? You do...? Good. ... Now I hope you don't mind... but I am now going to destroy your faith. In fact... I am going to obliterate it. It's OK... isn't it...? You'll allow me to shatter your faith...?

(Open hand and expose the \$20.00 bill)

Your faith has been destroyed... because now you have full **knowledge** that I am holding a \$20.00 bill. You don't need faith any more.

Faith is required... only when we have doubts... when we do not know for sure. ... But when knowledge comes... faith is no more.

Sometimes a person is tempted to think... *"I can't become a Christian because I still have doubts. ... I'm still not sure..."* ... But as long as doubts exist... as long as the person is still uncertain... that is the only time faith is needed.

Now a person can have doubts... can't they... and chose to turn **away** from faith/belief...? Many people make a conscious choice... out of doubt - not to believe the claims of Christ. There may be an enormous amount of evidence... but doubt propels them in a different direction. ... On the other hand... people can also make a conscious choice... out of doubt... to believe.

Unbelievers consider themselves to be better-off with the choice they make... and we... as believers... consider ourselves to be better-off by the choice that we make. ...As believers... we make the conscious choice... from doubt... toward faith.

This morning... we are going to pick back up... with our study through the Gospel of Matthew. And we left off... before my vacation time away... at a very pivotal point in Matthew's Gospel. (You see) Israel's leaders made an obvious decision to lead their nation into unbelief... in spite of the overwhelming evidence. We will see Jesus... because of their conscious choice... take His offer away... to establish His Kingdom right then and there among them... that has been promised for Centuries through the Jewish prophets. ... Instead the Kingdom that was offered is temporarily denied. It is denied to Christ's first-century generation... and so it is delayed until Jesus' second-coming ... when He will establish – what we call - the Millennium.

We are at a very important and dramatic turning point... in God's dealing with mankind... But as we get into today's study... and see why Christ moves to a different plan... we should all be deeply impressed by Christ's faithful pursuit of His sinful people... who obstinately reject Him. He remains so faithful... in light of our faith-less-ness.

So... before we get to today's passage... let's do a little review. Our passage today begins with verse 32 of Matthew Chapter 12... but it has been a little while... and some review would be helpful.

The layout of Matthew's gospel is that Jesus does not begin His ministry until Matthew Chapter Four. From chapter four through our present chapter... Jesus went around Israel... city to city... synagogue to synagogue... proclaiming Himself to be the Messiah and announcing that the Kingdom is ready. He was offering to the Jewish people the kingdom that Israel's prophets had often written about. But Israel... and its leaders needed to recognize the time of the Messiah's coming... and accept Him as the Messianic King.

In order for them to recognize Him as the prophesied King... Jesus performed many miracles. The purpose of all His miracles between chapter four and chapter twelve... was to authenticate Who He is... and that the Kingdom was ready and waiting for them to respond (or... in other words... the Kingdom was literally at hand.) These miracles were to serve as signs... to force them to make a decision... out of their doubt... about Who He is.

Going forward from our passage this morning in chapter twelve... Jesus will still perform miracles. But He does them for a different reason. Once the Jewish leaders made their decision... (and it was the decision to reject Him)... the purpose of Jesus' miracles underwent radical change.

Let's go back to the passage we studied... the last time I was with you. It will show us the rejection of the Jewish National Leaders...

Matthew 12:22-37

Jesus had cast out many demons before this one... and so had some of the Jewish religious leaders. The Jewish exorcists first had to establish

communication with the demons to find out their name... in order to take control over them. Using the demon's name... the exorcist would cast them out. We see that Jesus did this also in one incident recorded in Luke 8:30.

In order for the demons to speak... they had to use the vocal chords of the body they occupied. ... But what if the person was mute and their vocal chords could not work...? ... Well... Jewish exorcism could not be of any help. They needed to establish communication with them.

Now... here is where it gets very interesting. Jewish theology taught that the Messiah... when He would come... would even cast out demons from people who could not speak. Messiah would be able to cast out THAT kind of a demon. In the Gospel of Mark... this distinction of a mute demon... and the difficulty in casting this kind out... is seen.

Mark 9:17-29 (ESV)

And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "'If you can!' All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and

never enter him again.” And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

Now... in Matthew chapter twelve... Jesus cast out a demon from a man who was mute. He offered a sign that Jewish theology taught would be a distinctive sign of the Messiah. He had cast out several demons before this one... but now... suddenly ... the people began asking the question “*Can this really be the Messiah?*” (They saw the significance of the miracle... that Jesus performed... to authenticate Who He is.)

However... the people were not willing to come to this important decision... without the help of their nation’s leaders. They wanted the Pharisees to reach a verdict for them. They wanted the Pharisees to conclude either that He was the Messiah... or that He wasn’t. ... And if... (for some reason)... they came down on the side that He is not the Messiah... the Pharisees would have some ‘*spaining* to do. How then is Jesus able to do all these miracles... and now this unique miracle... that only Messiah was to do...?

So in Matthew 12:24... we read the choice that they made. From their doubt... they turned (decisively) to rejection. And for their explanation for how he was able to perform this unique miracle... well... “*He did it because Jesus Himself is demon-possessed...*” they said. But... He didn’t have your ordinary... everyday demon. Jesus... they claimed... was possessed by Beelzebub (the ruler of demons.)

This... then became the official basis of the rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus. It was their story... and they were sticking to it. ... On the grounds of this teaching (that Jesus performed His authenticating miracles by Satan's Power... instead of the Holy Spirit's power... which is how He did them.)

In verses 25-29... Jesus refuted their argument... and we looked (last time) at the reliability of Jesus' disproof. Then... in verses 30-37... Jesus pronounced judgment on the Jewish generation of that day. That generation... these first century national leaders... who had failed to recognize the coming of their Messiah... (and those who followed their decision)... were guilty of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. They had committed the unpardonable sin.

Unless you are a first century Pharisee... who decided to reject Jesus as the Messiah... or... unless you are a first-century Jew... who followed them in that decision... you do not have to worry that you have ever committed the unpardonable sin. (Let me say that again. Anyone who is listening to me right now... does not have to worry that they have committed the unpardonable sin.) Folks lets keep this... in it's context.

The only time the Bible mentions an unpardonable sin... it is here... when the Jewish national leaders attributed Jesus' unique Messiah-authenticating miracle... to Beelzebub... instead of the Holy Spirit... The Pharisees blasphemous answer... was the official response they gave... spoken... and repeated over and over... to justify their rejection of Jesus the Messiah... Who had performed Messiah-authenticating miracles.

The unpardonable sin was committed by that first century generation in Israel... during Jesus' day... and cannot be repeated by you or I... in our own day.

I have only recently been convinced of this... and it came largely when I studied this week's passage that keeps emphasizing "**THIS** generation." ... From the mention of the unpardonable sin... and throughout today's passage... it is very clear that Jesus is dealing with those of His immediate generation... (Those who alive at that time.) ... None of it makes much sense unless we keep everything in the context in which Matthew records it for us.

As we move forward today... the Pharisees are going to react to Jesus' rejection of them... Jesus – (the rejected Messiah King) - has just repudiated their stupid claim for how He did His authenticating miracle... and then He pronounced judgment on them for their horrible sin... and the Pharisees are left stunned!

The Pharisees will try to retake the offensive by demanding ANOTHER sign... in order to trap Him (if they can.) But Jesus will announce a new policy... regarding His miracles.

Matthew 12:38-40

There is a change in the policy for why Jesus would do His miracles from here on out. It will no longer be for the sake of authenticating Who He is. He will only do one more miracle for that purpose... and He calls it "the sign of Jonah."

Jesus will still do miracles... (He isn't through with those)... but now He does them as training for His disciples (He teaches them mercy) – not to

convince the Nation of Who He is. The nation (as a whole) has already made their irrevocable decision... and judgment has been pronounced.

That present generation saw Rome come... destroy Jerusalem... and scatter the Jews all over the world for 2,000 years... until just before Jesus returns... when He will offer the Kingdom a second time. The unpardonable sin delayed the prophesied Kingdom for 2,000 years... and that generation who committed the sin... suffered horrible doom... and will never be part of it.

But here in verses 38... we see that the Pharisees would still not let go. After Jesus' accurate revelation of their blinded hearts and the folly of their theological reasoning... and after His warning of eternal consequences... they still asked to see *further* proof that Jesus was really the Son of God. ... Hadn't they seen enough already? ... Of course they had. ... (He had just healed a mute demon-possessed man... one of their own tell-tale signs.)

Jesus never rebukes people who seek healing out of genuine need... but He knows these opponents have *malicious* motives.

Many people have said... "*If I could just see a real miracle, then I could really believe in God.*" ... (Have you sometimes thought that...?)... Jesus' response to the Pharisees applies to us. ... We have plenty of evidence — Jesus' birth... death... resurrection... and ascension... and centuries of His work in believers around the world... not to mention all the times He has come through for you and I in our own lives. Instead of looking for additional evidence or miracles... accept what God has already given and move forward. From your doubt... turn right and head toward faith.

There was no need for a further demonstration of His authority and power – for them... or for us! ... If these people could not see the evidence that was so plainly given to them... there could be **no sign** that Jesus might perform... that would change their minds. ... Therefore... Jesus informed them of the status of their hearts — evil and unfaithful — and only offered them the sign of Jonah.

The story of Jonah was a well-known part of their history. ... And it should be part of yours! While I have been away on vacation last month... Derek did such a wonderful job preaching through that book.

There's some debate about Jesus' reference to three days and nights... because technically He died and was buried on a Friday... and then He rose on a Sunday. ... That timeframe doesn't allow for three full nights (or three full days... for that matter). ... However... it was very common at that time to count any part of a day as a complete day. ... Three days and three nights could easily refer to parts of three days... and parts of three nights.

The point is that just as a fish swallowed up Jonah... a prophet who was shortly thereafter delivered from death... so the grave will swallow up Jesus... and He will be delivered from death too.

But there's also a contrast here: When Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh... there was widespread acceptance of God's message of judgment. ... The people repented and changed their ways... asking fervently for the Lord's forgiveness (Jonah 3:5-10). ... Upon Jonah's deliverance... the Ninevites responded with repentance... but the Israelites in Jesus' day were responding with **rejection**.

Jesus attacked the Pharisees' faulty theology... by describing the way in which these "pagan" Ninevites would stand in judgment of these "godly" Pharisees... who were the leaders of God's chosen people.

The Lord promised that... as in the case of Jonah... His own death... burial... and resurrection... would bring great blessing to the Gentiles. Thus the sign of Jonah spotlights a new focus: *the upcoming welcome of Jesus by the heathen*. The Jews were being given a sign that was quite out of the ordinary after all.

The Lord provided two Old Testament illustrations of (gasp!) Gentiles ... who... without Israel's light and privilege... responded when given the opportunity. The first illustration grew naturally out of the reference to Jonah. ... The Gentiles who responded to sinful Jonah (who tried to run from God) ... will rise up and judge these first-century rejectors of Christ. And so will someone else...

Matthew 12:41-42

The Prophet Jonah was a Jew - sent to the Gentiles... and the Queen of Sheba was a Gentile - who came to visit Solomon... a Jew (2 Chron. 9:1-12). ... Because of the bitterness between the Jews and the Gentiles... this reference to the Gentiles must have irritated this audience of Jesus - the Pharisees.

The second Old Testament illustration concerned the queen of Sheba... who "came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon." She had ventured a long, tiring, and dangerous journey to sit at

the feet of Solomon... but the scribes and Pharisees had to make no such effort. The Lord, "a greater than Solomon," was in their midst.

Solomon... for all of his wisdom and the glory of his kingdom... performed no miracles. His touch was powerless to make blind men see or invalids walk. ... The Queen of Sheba was amazed at what she saw in Solomon's kingdom; but what we have in the kingdom of God through Christ far surpasses Solomon's glories. To sit at Christ's table and hear His words, and to share His blessings, is much more satisfying than to visit and admire the most spectacular kingdom, even that of Solomon.

The main lesson behind this history lesson is this: The citizens of Nineveh will witness against the rulers of Israel... for they repented at Jonah's preaching. The Queen of Sheba will also witness against them. She traveled a long distance to hear Solomon's wisdom... yet the Jewish leaders rejected the wisdom of Christ *who was in their very midst!*

(Please stop and consider what is being taught here) ... The greater the opportunity... the greater the judgment. ... From your doubt – turn right and head straight into faith.

The next several verses are still dealing with the first century generation that Jesus was making pronouncement upon. Stay in this context... and you will have a much easier time understanding these next verses.

Matthew 12:43-45

Please notice the last sentence... Jesus added these solemn words: "So also will it be with ... **this** ... **evil** ... **generation.**" ... Obviously this story about demons is about... and has an application... to the nation of Israel...

Jesus was describing the immediate attitude of the nation of Israel and the religious leaders in particular... who were in front of Him at the moment.

Just cleaning up one's life... without filling it with God and the richness of His Word... leaves plenty of room for Satan to enter.

The indwelling evil spirit of idolatry that had plagued the nation of Israel from the days of the judges... to the fall of the monarchy... was exorcised by the Babylonian captivity.

God used the Babylonians. The Jews repented with deep sorrow... and after 70 years in captivity He allowed them to return to their land. The house was "swept, and garnished [decorated]". The Pharisees and rabbis made sure that they cleaned the house and embellished it with formalities and traditions. ... The Pharisees became classic moralists. ... They thought that they could reform their own lives... by following God's laws... and a ton of other rules and regulations that they threw in for good measure. But they had sought no new tenant... so eventually the evil spirit will return.

The nation had been purged of the demon of idolatry... which had plagued them in the Old Testament. ... But reformation was not enough.

Reformation could cleanse... but it could not fill. ... The nation should have received the Saviour and been filled with spiritual life. Instead... the people rejected Him and the end was destruction... that is going to get far worse!

You see... after we are raptured off this earth... Idolatry will be reinstated in Israel. The rebuilt temple in Jerusalem will be turned into a new world center for the worship of the beast - the antichrist (Rev. 13). The evil spirit will return with seven other spirits worse than itself. Thus the last state of the Jews will be worse than the first.

But I think there is also a personal application. You see... It is not enough for you and I to clean house. ... We must also invite in the right tenant. The Pharisees were proud of their "clean houses," *but their hearts were empty!*

Mere religion... or reformation... is not enough! ... Ridding our life of sin is the first step. ... We must also take the second step: filling our life with God's Word and the Holy Spirit. Un-filled and complacent people are easy targets for Satan.

Are you filling your life with God's Word...? ... (LISTEN) God may be speaking to you right now... about joining one of the terrific home groups that will be studying God's Word together. Stop by the table on your way out this morning... and participate in this excellent way to put God's Word in your heart and life.

... ..

Now we come to the final section of our passage. This closing segment is even more startling than what we have been seeing... and it connected because it contrasts those who rejected Christ... with those who receive His Messiahship.

While Jesus was addressing His present generation of leaders and their followers... there was an interruption. Jesus was given the news that His mother and brothers had arrived. This gave Jesus the opportunity to make quite a statement that made the contrast between His rejectors and His receivers.

Matthew 12:46-50

(Just as a side note)... There is no mention of "father," which may indicate that Joseph had died by this time (Joseph is never mentioned after the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12... that see in Luke 2:41-51). Jesus' family may have been trying to bring Him to His senses. I am sure they knew how things had heated up between Him and the religious leaders. ... As the eldest son... Jesus would have been responsible for the care of the family... if Joseph had indeed died.

But Jesus' messianic mission takes priority even over familial loyalties. ... By interrupting the Lord, His relatives had inferred that their business with Him was more important than His Messianic mission. ... He had to reprove them for their presumption in thinking that they could take Him home and out of harm's way.

Having rebuked His human family members... the Lord pointed to His disciples and acknowledged them... and all who would believe in Him - to be His real "brother, and sister, and mother." There is now a new family... in which the ties are spiritual... not natural.

The Lord's brothers eventually found their way into that family. The last view we have of Mary is in the upper room where... with other believers in the Lord Jesus... she had taken her place as one of His disciples (Acts 1:12-14). Jesus' brother... James... becomes quite a leader of the church... and a writer of the New Testament book that bears his name.

But what Jesus declares here... is that the strongest relationship today is the relationship between Christ and a believer. (LISTEN) ... if you are a child of God... and you have unsaved family members... you are closer to

Jesus Christ... than you are to your own siblings... and even the mother that bore you. You are more closely related to other believers than you are to unsaved members of your family. This is tremendous! He is talking about a new relationship.

Hear the **humbling invitations** given throughout this chapter in Matthew. Make the correct decision from your doubts. Head straight into belief and into this new family!

For all who have worked hard to reform yourselves... trying to be righteous... rest in the Lord of the Sabbath... Who is righteous for you.

To all who are bruised and broken... whose light is struggling to find life... humble yourself before the One who brings hope to the hurting... and ask Him to heal you. Move from doubt... to belief!

To all who are struggling under the weight of sin... come to the One who is the Power of God — to the One who is stronger than your enemy.

To all who fear death... come to the greater Prophet who conquers death.

To all who seek wisdom... come to the only wise King.

And to all who long to be loved... come to the Only One... Who brings you into the family where God is Father.