

“Unbelief Meets a Miracle”

July 27, 2014

Text: John 9:13-17

The account in Exodus of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness might not seem to have any application to us as 21st century Americans—but it does.

It teaches us the danger of unbelief.

God had made a covenant w/ Israel, promising them the land of Canaan, where they would find safety/rest from their enemies.

It was to become a home to them, a home that flowed w/ milk/honey, having rivers of water w/ which to grow their crops of grain/fruit/vegetables.

But their unbelief spoiled all that.

** Heb 3 says=> *“They were **not** able to enter because of **unbelief**”* (3:19).

That 1st generation of Israelite sojourners who refused to believe God were condemned to a lifetime of wandering in the wilderness, because of their unbelief.

Moses must have grieved, as he watched 80+ of them (on average) die every day for 40 years, never having seen/entered the Promised Land.

Jude wrote=> *“The Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently **destroyed** those who did **not believe**”* (Jude 5).

**Spiritual unbelief is really more militant than it sounds;
it’s actually willful *disbelief*.**

Although it hides behind a disguise of mild/reasonable caution, seeking to avoid religious fanaticism, it is, in fact, hardened resistance that digs in its heels behind a defensive barricade of doubt, & it gets a tenacious strangle-hold on people's souls.

Jesus said (Mt 12:30), "*He who is not with Me is against Me.*"

Unbelief answers, "I may be persuaded someday to side with You, but for now I'm going to remain neutral."

In reality, unbelief is not neutral—it's taking sides against Christ, defying His command to believe in Him.

It might look like a mere delay in decision-making.

But below the surface, it's really a decision in/of itself—to stand firm, arms-crossed, in resistance against God's will.

And therein lies the danger=> It is defiance of sovereign/almighty God Himself.

The same God who destroyed all the Israelites in the Sinai Wilderness.

When Jesus came to His own people (the Jews) from heaven as God incarnate, they still refused to believe in Him, and that was a sin which angered God deeply.

* Christ had worked extraordinary miracles before them, which should have persuaded them to believe in Him.

But they wouldn't be persuaded, so Jesus said=>

*"If I had not done among them the works which **no***

one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen & hated Me & My Father as well”
(Jn 15:24).

Jesus’ miracles weren’t just miracles;
They were extraordinary miracles, even by
miraculous standards.

* Not only were Jesus’ miracles extraordinary in quality, they were also extraordinary in quantity, but that didn’t move them to faith either.

Jn 12:37=> *“But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were **not believing** in Him.”*

* In addition to miracle-working, Jesus had revealed God’s truth to the Jews.

Any right-hearted person would have recognized it as such.

But very few of the Jews did, leaving Christ to ask=> *“If I speak truth, why do you **not believe** Me?”* (Jn 8:46).

In Mk 9, Jesus said to them=> *“O **unbelieving** generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?”* (Mk 9:19).

Because of the Jews’ unbelief, their whole race was temporarily disenfranchised from the Covenant God had given them.

Rom 11:20=> *“They were **broken off** for their **unbelief**.”*

The day will come when Israel will repent, believe in Jesus as her Messiah/Savior, & become grafted back into the Covenant God originally gave to their forefathers.

Zech 12=> *“They will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an*

only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn” (12:10).

Meanwhile, what a shameful tragedy it is that so many Jews, and so many generations of Jews, have died in unbelief, & are now in hell, having refused to trust in Jesus (their own Messiah) to save their own souls from sin.

* It wasn't because they sinned so much, or that their sins were so extraordinarily vile/heinous, that God cut them off. God was ready to forgive all their sins through the system of animal sacrifices He had provided, if those sacrifices were offered in faith.

But the one sin He would not forgive was their unbelief.

That's equally true of you/me today, since Jesus said=>

*“Any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people”
(Mt 12:31).*

But apart from believing in Christ, no sin will be forgiven.

Heb 11:6=> *“Without faith it is impossible to please Him [God].”*

- * Nor did the Jews refuse to believe because they lacked sufficient evidence to convince them they should do so.
- * They had seen God open up the Red Sea, providing a way of escape for them from the Egyptian chariots.
- * He had spoken to them like thunder from the pillar of cloud/fire, causing them to tremble w/ fear.

* He had stopped the Jordan River, welcoming them into the Promised Land, and allowing them/their-children to cross-over on dry riverbed.

* He had sent hornets before them to chase out the giants that had made them feel as little/vulnerable as grasshoppers.

In the same sense, you/I have been given every reason to believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, and the salvation of our souls.

Some say, “But my sins have been unforgivably wicked!”

Ans: Just believe in Jesus, & you’ll discover they really aren’t unforgivable after all, as you had feared, because God, in His infinite grace, is infinitely forgiving.

* Nor did the Jews refuse to believe because God hadn’t drawn them w/ sweet/reasonable/loving encouragement to do so. He had led them like a faithful shepherd, so they would want for nothing, under His providence.

He had told them (Isa 1:18)=> “*Come now, and let us **reason** together, ’ Says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.’”*

The same is true of us.

Jesus calls to us like a good shepherd saying=> “*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest*” (Mt 11:28).

The conclusion=> We have every reason to believe in Jesus Christ; and we have every reason to fear unbelief—the deadliest weapon in Satan’s arsenal of evil.

As we will see in today’s text, & the passages we will examine in the weeks to come, unbelief gets a subtle grip on people’s hearts, which gradually makes them intractable, irrational, hostile, & hard-hearted.

I pray that if you are spiritually immobilized in the grip of unbelief, this study of Jn 9:13-17 will break you loose, & set you free.

In today’s text we see the tenacity of unbelief’s resistance, when confronted with the reality of a great miracle=>

- * It resists empirical evidence
- * It resists reasonable argument
- * It resists personal testimony.

*** Unbelief Resists Empirical Evidence**

[John 9:13]=> *“They [neighbors] brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind.”*

After Jesus had healed a man who was born blind, the man apparently went home, & was questioned by his neighbors about his healing.

As we saw last time, some of them couldn’t believe he was the same blind-man they’d known for so many years.

They didn’t know what to make of such a miraculous occurrence in their neighborhood, so they brought the man to Pharisees who could help them sort it all out.

These were very religious people for whom virtually everything that happened had religious implications/overtones.

They hoped the Pharisees (prob. their local synagogue leaders) could explain how the miracle had happened, a/w/a the significance of it all.

It was unlikely that the Pharisees could respond objectively in this case, because many members of that party were jealous of Jesus' increasing influence over the Jewish people.

We will discover that, while the ex-blind-man seems to be getting dragged about helplessly by his neighbors, God is doing His secret/gracious work w/i the man's heart.

In fact, even as the Pharisees' hearts would grow harder/harder toward Christ, this man would gradually come to believe in Jesus=>

1st, as a prophet (9:17);

2nd, as an extraordinary miracle-worker sent from God (32);

3rd, as the "*Son of Man*" (the Messiah) and as One to be worshiped—i.e., the Son of God—God Himself (9:38).

When the man reached this final step, he had undoubtedly come to believe in Jesus as his own Savior/Lord.

So thru-out this passage we see a divergence towards 2 extremes=>

- * The Pharisees' reaction, when confronted w/ the fact that Jesus has undeniably performed a mighty miracle, will be to stiffen their opposition against Him all the more, illustrating the irrational tenacity of unbelief.
- * On the other hand, the healed man, will grow more/more open to Jesus' claims to be Messiah, the Son of God sent to save men/women's souls.

This pattern of divergence is one we often find when people are confronted with the truth of Jesus Christ.

[Verse 14]=> *“Now it was a **Sabbath** on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes.”*

This verse contains a key to understanding this whole episode, because the Pharisees' main objection to Jesus' healing the blind man, was the fact that He did it on a Sabbath Day.

They felt He had violated the Sabbath law on 2 counts=>

- 1) He had mixed His own saliva w/ dirt, making clay, & they considered that the equivalent of doing work by kneading dough.
And that, they said, was breaking the Sabbath law.
- 2) They also said that the very act itself of healing on the Sabbath, unless necessary to save a life, violated the Law.

The question you might ask at this point is=> Where in Moses' Law are either of those activities forbidden on the Sabbath?

Answer=> Nowhere. These were manmade regulations, written by rabbis & added to the Law, that had (in most Jew's minds) equal authority w/ God's Law itself.

Jesus repeatedly healed people on the Sabbath, in order to make 2 points=>

1) Works of necessity/mercy (such as pulling a farm animal out of a ditch—or healing) are proper on the Sabbath.

** 2) He was/is the Lord of the Sabbath, who had created Sabbath-observance for man in the first place.

So proper use of the Sabbath was whatever He said it is.

Jesus kept emphasizing these truths by repeatedly healing on the Sabbath=>

* E.g. He commanded a demonic spirit to come out of a man, during a Sabbath synagogue service (Lk 4:33-36).

The demon threw him down on the floor, then came out.

* On another Sabbath, as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, He saw a man w/ a “*withered*” hand.

He knew the scribes/Pharisees were watching to see whether/not He would heal that man on the Sabbath, so He said to them=> “*Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?*” (Lk 6:9).

When they failed to answer, Jesus healed the man, in a silent answer to His own question=>

It is always lawful to do good on a Sabbath.

Luke says the Pharisees were “*filled with rage.*”

* In Lk 13, Jesus laid His hand on a woman who had been bent over double for 18 years, and He healed her (13:10-17).

This too occurred in a synagogue, on a Sabbath, right in front of the religious officials.

* In Lk 14, Jesus went on the Sabbath to the house of an important Pharisee for lunch (Lk 14:1-6).

There He encountered a man w/ “dropsy”—a kidney/liver ailment that causes the body to retain fluids (edema).

Jesus healed the man right in front of the scribes/Pharisees gathered there in the Pharisee’s house.

* In our study of Jn 5:1-9, we saw Jesus heal a man at the Pool of Bethesda, who had been lame for 38 years—again, on a Sabbath.

Then He told the man to rise, take up the mat on which he had been lying, and carry it away—strictly against rabbinic tradition/regulations.

The religious leaders became furious w/ Jesus over all this.

* And now again, we see that it was on a Sabbath that Jesus healed the man who had been blind from birth.

Not once in all of this had Jesus ever really violated the Sabbath, by engaging in everyday work.

He said it was like rest for Him (not work) to do good to those in need=> God's work.

It was His meat/drink to heal them, & it refreshed His spirit.

The Sabbath was a day set apart to bring God glory.

What could bring Him more glory than for Jesus—or for us—to minister to others in God's name, so that they respond, by glorifying our God?

The Pharisees' accusations that Jesus was violating the Sabbath simply reflected their legalistic perversion of God's own Sabbath Law, based on their false rabbinic interpretations of God's Law.

Now the Pharisees' slavery to their own error was confronted w/ empirical evidence of God's healing the blind man, on a Sabbath day.

Their unbelief was about to meet a miracle, that was obviously done w/ God's power.

But as we'll see, their unbelief was impervious to real facts.

[Verse 15]=> *“Then the Pharisees also were asking him [the blind man] again how he received his sight. And he said to them, ‘He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see.’”*

Not content w/ second-hand reports about the man's healing, the Pharisees asked him to repeat his story for them.

In doing so, he gave them firsthand evidence that God had healed the man through Jesus=> there he stood, looking at them.

The man's response was honest/bold/concise/accurate.

But as we'll see, it didn't change the Pharisees' minds 1 iota,

because they weren't open to the facts.

Their own preconceived notions about Jesus were not open to debate/dispute.

They rarely are for proud people like them who are settled comfortably in the assumption they know all truth.

* **Unbelief Resists Reasonable Argument**

This is another reason unbelief's resistance to the truth is so tenacious or unstoppable, when confronted with a divine miracle.

It's difficult for a person to find the truth thru reason, if he cannot relinquish the notion that his own preconceived ideas are the truth.

If he's not willing to unlearn what he thinks he already knows, he cannot learn anything that might contradict it.

When pride/emotion get involved, it's virtually impossible.

Man's fall in sin has seriously impaired his mind's ability to reason, on a spiritual level.

This, in part, is why Prov 3:5 says=> *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart And **do not lean on your own understanding.**"*

Not that we aren't to use our understanding, we just aren't to lean/totally-depend on it, as we seek for the truth.

The Pharisees erred in leaning too heavily on their own understanding.

[Verse 16]=> *“Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, ‘This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.’ But **others** were saying, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And there was a division among them.”*

The Pharisees equated “keeping the Sabbath” w/ obedience to their own rabbinic regulations about the Sabbath.

That fundamental error had led them to the wrong conclusion.

Because Jesus ignored their regulations, they judged Him to be a Sabbath-breaker, & therefore a sinner who was *“not from God”*—was not sent by God, as a teacher/prophet or anything else.

Legalistic/unbiblical theology so controlled their thinking, that it blinded them to their own illogical conclusion.

But now a 2nd group of Pharisees emerged, who disagreed w/ them, & who challenged their conclusions about Jesus.

Their argument was based on little more than common sense.

It wasn't really even an argument, just a question—*“How can a man who is a sinner perform **such signs**?”*

Not just *“signs”* but *“**such signs**”* (such great signs).

Are signs/miracles a conclusive/infallible proof of spiritual authority? No.

* Pharaoh's magicians performed signs—even apparently changing their staffs into snakes, to counterfeit God's changing Moses/Aaron's rods into snakes.

* Mk 13:22 says that in the end times=> *“False Christs and false prophets will arise, & will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect.”*

So this 2nd group of Pharisees had a weak argument, but they'd happily arrived at the truth, as they simply sensed Jesus' goodness/mercy.

It just didn't make sense to them that God would enable or empower a sinner to perform such powerful/miraculous/benevolent works.

This was the same argument offered by Nicodemus when he said to Jesus (Jn 3:2)=> *“Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for **no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.**”*

Confronted with the reasonable argument of the 2nd group of Pharisees, the 1st group still refused to admit their error, or believe in Jesus.

These bigoted enemies of Jesus just dismissed their opponents' logic, & continued on unaffected, like the people about whom God had said in Deut 32:20=> *“They are a perverse generation, Sons in whom is no faithfulness.”*

Again this demonstrates just how tenacious unbelief can be.

It's a subtle form of sin, but it's powerful/dangerous to the soul.

And this is why, unless the H.S. changes a person's heart/mind, no one can argue him out of unbelief, or into believing.

*** Unbelief Resists Personal Testimony**

As we saw last time, our personal testimony of how Jesus has saved our souls can be helpful in leading others to Christ.

By it, we can glorify our Savior, & it may give us an opening through which to share the truth of the gospel in Scripture with them.

But personal testimony has its limitations, because unbelief is so impregnable/impenetrable, it resists it like thick iron plate resists a pebble thrown at it.

The truth of God's Word is far more powerful/effective in evangelizing sinners because Heb 4:12 says=> *"The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit."*

The Pharisees' reaction to the blind man's testimony, again illustrates just how resistant unbelief is to the truth.

We will see that continuing resistance next time, but for now we hear the man testify to what he'd come to believe about Jesus.

[Verse 17]=> *"So they said to the blind man again, 'What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?' And he said, 'He is a prophet.'"*

Not wanting to deal w/ the rival Pharisees' unanswerable question, the 1st group of Pharisees turned to the man himself.

That was a mistake, because he had come to a solid conclusion about Jesus, while the others were still just asking questions about Him, and contemplating possibilities.

He declared that Jesus was a prophet.

A “*prophet*” in Scripture was anyone who received direct revelation from God, & proclaimed it to other people.

His prophecy may have been delivered in the form of a warning, an exhortation, a rebuke, a command, or a prediction.

Sometimes it was authenticated by a divine miracle.

Jesus’ healing persuaded the man who had been blind from birth that He was indeed a prophet.

In his statement that he considered Jesus to be a prophet, we hear the 1st stirrings of infant faith in his heart.

I want to close by taking you back to the Sinai wilderness, where we started, where Israel was condemned to die due to her unbelief.

Imagine if you will, how those parents felt, as they looked at their children, who would be allowed to enter the land.

And how children felt, as they looked at their parents.

Fathers/mothers must have thought sadly, “My son will see the Promised Land I set out to find, & my daughter will go up to the Lord’s house & sing His praises with joy. But God has sworn in His wrath that I must die in this harsh/bleak waste land.”

Today, like then, God's purposes are never frustrated.

If we ourselves refuse to believe in Jesus Christ, others will.

If we refuse to come to God's wedding feast for His only-begotten Son, He will send His servants out into the streets to bring in outcasts who are willing to believe in Him and to rejoice with Him.

He will not allow heaven to go empty, or His Son's death to go to waste, & to fail to save the souls of His elect.

But it's not as if the salvation of one generation, or of one individual, is as good as that of any another.

I dread the thought that anyone I care about—my own family, the people in my congregation, others whom I know—should ever be consigned to hell, knowing the truth, but refusing to believe it.

I hate the unbelief which sin has inflicted on people I love.

I say with Hagar, when she thought her child would perish:

"Do not let me see the boy die" (Gen 21:16).

I.e., It may be going to happen, but don't make me watch it.

For all practical purposes, unbelief is your worsts/greatest enemy.

If there's any possibility that you haven't come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ because unbelief has gotten a grip on your heart/mind/soul, pray that God's Spirit will break through it, soften your heart, & give you saving faith.

If you have loved-ones caught in the tenacious grip of unbelief,
pray fervently/frequently for them, that God will break that
grip & deliver them, unto eternal life.

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Text: John 9:13-17

1. Spiritual unbelief is really more militant than it sounds; it’s actually [16 willful] *disbelief*.

Heb 3:19; Jude 5; Mt 12:30

2. When Jesus came to His own people (the Jews) from heaven as God incarnate, they still refused to [16 believe] in Him, and that was a sin which angered God deeply.

Jn 15:24; 12:37; 8:46; Mk 9:19; Zech 12:10

What a tragedy it is that so many Jews are now in hell having refused to trust in Jesus.

- *3. It wasn’t because they sinned so [10 much].

Mt 12:31

- *4. Nor because they lacked sufficient [18 evidence] to convince them.

- *5. Nor because God had not drawn them with sweet, reasonable, [14 loving] encouragement to do so.

Isa 1:18; Mt 11:28

6. The conclusion: We have every reason to believe in Jesus Christ; and we have every reason to fear [18 unbelief].

In today’s text we see the tenacity of unbelief’s resistance when confronted with the reality of a great miracle...

*** Unbelief Resists Empirical Evidence**

[John 9:13]

Throughout this passage we see a divergence towards two extremes...

- *7. The *Pharisees*, confronted with a miracle, will [16 stiffen] their opposition.

- *8. The *healed man* will grow more and more [10 open] to Jesus’ claims to be Messiah, the Son of God.

[Verse 14]

Jesus repeatedly healed people on the Sabbath in order to make two points...

*9. Works of necessity and mercy are [14 proper] on the Sabbath.

*10. He is the [10 Lord] of the Sabbath.

Lk 4:33-36; 6:9; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn 5:1-9

[Verse 15]

11. Not content with secondhand reports about the man's healing, the Pharisees asked him to repeat his story for them; he gave them firsthand evidence that God had healed through Jesus—there he stood, [16 looking] at them.

*** Unbelief Resists Reasonable Argument**

Prov 3:5

[Verse 16]

12. Now a second group of Pharisees emerged who disagreed with the first group, and who challenged their conclusions about [12 Jesus].

Mk 13:22; Jn 3:2

13. Confronted with the reasonable argument of the second group of Pharisees, the first group still [16 refused] to admit their error.

Deut 32:20

*** Unbelief Resists Personal Testimony**

Heb 4:12

14. The Pharisees' reaction to the blind man's testimony again illustrates just how [20 resistant] unbelief is to the truth.

[Verse 17]

Gen 21:16

15. For all practical purposes, [18 unbelief] is your greatest enemy.