

“HOW FOOLISH AND SLOW TO BELIEVE”
Romans 1:18-25, James 1:19-25, Luke 24:13-35
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“A number of years ago there appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine an account of a Long Island resident who ordered an extremely sensitive barometer from a respected company, Abercrombie and Fitch. When the instrument arrived at his home he was disappointed to discover that the indicating needle appeared to be stuck pointing to the sector marked ‘Hurricane.’ After shaking the barometer vigorously several times - never a good idea with a sensitive mechanism - and never getting the point to move, the new owner wrote a scathing letter to the store, and, on the following morning, on the way to his office in New York City, mailed it. That evening he returned to Long Island to find not only the barometer missing but his house as well! The needle of the instrument had been pointing correctly. The month was September, year was 1938, the day of the terrible hurricane that almost leveled Long Island.”¹ (9/21/1938)

Disbelief and doubt are common to us as humans. If we don’t understand something, we simply doubt it is true, or we adamantly disbelieve it. Especially when it involves the extraordinary. This man who bought the barometer never thought that it was possible that the instrument was pointing correctly at “hurricane.” Instead, he doubted the instrument, and then disbelieved that it could possibly have been right. But the accuracy of the instrument was proven correct, sadly. But that would not have been able to save his house (or his barometer), but it could have saved others if this man would have begun to tell those around him about the present danger that was upon them. 60 people died on Long Island alone, with over 700 altogether throughout Connecticut and Rhode Island; and thousands were injured, resulting in 63,000 homeless people. This man had been given insight to the impending doom, but refused to believe it, instead, crafting a scathing letter to the company complaining that the instrument was faulty.

¹ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville; Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg. 593)

This type of doubt and disbelief has been noticed throughout our human history. Satan convinced Eve to doubt God's command not to eat of the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, and therefore, sin came into the world (Genesis 3). The people of Noah's day doubted that a flood was coming, and only after the ark was built, animals and Noah's family safely inside, and the doors closed and locked up, did they find out that God meant business (Genesis 6-7). And the whole world was wiped out except for eight people and the animals aboard the ark.

The people of Israel and Judah doubted that an enemy would come to conquer their country and destroy Jerusalem, even after several prophets said it would happen if they didn't turn back to the Lord and repent (Jeremiah 4-6, Ezekiel 12, Hosea 9, Amos 9, etc.). Their doubt and disbelief brought their destruction and their exile from the country when Babylon overwhelmed them.

And then, many doubted that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God, God's own Son. Even after all the amazing things He did and lessons He taught, they chose to crucify Him (Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 18-19). And still more doubted that He rose from the dead, convincing the soldiers who had guarded the tomb to lie and say that the disciples stole the body of Jesus to make it look like he had risen from the dead (Matthew 28:11-15).

Paul describes the disbelief and doubt of humanity in Romans 1:18-32, and that after plenteous evidence that God exists, even when God demands to be honored for all He has done for us, humans still rebel against Him and "...serve created things rather than the Creator..." (Rom. 1:25). So "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts..." (1:24) until they might return to Him and honor Him. He says, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles" (1:22-23). How foolish and slow to believe!

Our doubt and disbelief lead us into destruction. For God does not tolerate our rebellion for long, and He allows us to go our own way, to what WE think is right, but to what is always wrong when we forsake God's will and commandments. When we determine that God's ways are not going to be our ways, and we strike out on our own, in our own wisdom and our own strength, for a while God goes after us. But as we continue to forsake Him and do our own thing, He gives us up to our own foolishness, to suffer the consequences of our own making. He allows us to determine our own way.

For instance, in the March 31, 1997, issue of the magazine, *Newsweek* (pp. 64–65), Jerry Adler wrote about the brilliant astronomer, scientist, author and TV Co-host Carl Sagan:

[Carl] Sagan was fascinated by the phenomenon that educated adults, with the wonders of science manifested all around them, could cling to beliefs based on the “unverifiable testimony” of observers dead for 2000 years. (He would not accept the Scriptural evidence.)

"You're so smart, why do you believe in God?" he once exclaimed to [cleric Joan Brown] Campbell. She found this a surprising question from someone who had no trouble accepting the existence of black holes, which no one has ever observed. "You're so smart, why don't you believe in God?" she answered. . . .

Sagan never wavered in his agnosticism (his unbelief).

Upon his death in 1996, "There was no deathbed conversion," [his wife Ann] Druyan says. "No appeals to God, no hope for an afterlife, no pretending that he and I, who had been inseparable for 20 years, were not saying goodbye forever."

"Didn't he want to believe?" she was asked.

"Carl never wanted to believe," she replies fiercely. "He wanted to *know*."²

² (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 13-14)

Here was a classically trained scientist, with the wonders of the universe all around him, who could not let himself believe in a higher power that created the universe that we live in. He adamantly proclaimed that it all happened on its own, without direction or design. With all of the intricacies of this universe at his fingertips, Carl Sagan would not believe in an all-powerful, omnipotent, almighty God who fashioned every bit of what we know today in our universe. He doubted and disbelieved that there was any supreme God who made it all happen. A man given great intelligence by the One we call God the Father, refused to accept anything more than himself. If God does not exist, “the only thing left is us,” he once said. And that he bet his life upon. His desire to “know” rather than to believe, prevented him from first believing so that God could make Himself known to him.

Paul tells us in Romans 1:20, “*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse*” when they refuse to accept Him. Therefore doubt and disbelief drive them away from any kind of faith in the Lord God Almighty.

We find it happening in our own day, too. We get so wrapped up in ourselves that we miss the presence of the One who made it all. We doubt that His Laws have any real benefit, or consequence, to them, and we turn to our own ways, living in our own little universe here on earth, and we give up our belief in God’s influence in our lives. So our hearts grow cold, and we become judgmental and critical of all things, and we lose our happiness and joy in life.

Think of this: “Jim Smith went to church on Sunday morning. He heard the organist miss a note during the prelude, and he winced. He saw a teenager talking when everybody was supposed to ‘bow in prayer.’ He felt like the usher was watching to see what he put in the offering plate, and it made him boil. He caught the preacher making a slip of the tongue five

times in the sermon by actual count. As he slipped out through the side door during the closing hymn, he muttered to himself, ‘Never again! What a bunch of clods and hypocrites!’

“Ron Jones went to church on Sunday morning. He heard the organist play an arrangement of ‘*A Mighty Fortress*,’ and he was thrilled by the majesty of it. He heard a young girl take a moment in the service to speak her simple, moving message of the difference her faith makes in her life. He was glad to see that his church was sharing in a special offering for the hungry children of Nigeria. He especially appreciated the sermon that Sunday - it answered a question that had bothered him for a long time. He thought, as he walked out the doors of the church, ‘How can a man come here and not feel the presence of God?’

“Both men went to the same church on the same Sunday morning. Each found what he was looking for.”³ Both men had their hearts set upon their desire, and they found what their heart was speaking to them. Their decision about God drove their attitudes and their observations. One could see only what was wrong; the other was blessed by what was right.

The apostle James speaks it correctly when he tells us, “*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...Do not merely listen to the Word...Do what it says*” (1:18, 22). If we listen to the Word of God, but never let it become an active part of our lives so that we might become transformed to what God desires of us, what value does it have to listen to it?

In Confirmation Class, Jeter and I just studied the value of “Studying and Learning the Scriptures.” There are five key steps to getting God’s Word into our lives. 1) Hear it spoken to us, 2) Read it for ourselves, 3) Study it so that it becomes clear, 4) Memorize it so that we can use it every day, and 5) Meditate on it both day and night so that we become one with it (The Hand Illustration). Unless we use each step for treating God’s Word for us, Satan can easily take

³ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 40-41)

it away from us. But if we implement hearing, with reading, and studying, and memorizing and meditating on God's Word, not only does it get harder for Satan to remove the Word from us, but it begins to guide our words and actions so that we can become pleasing to the Lord our God.

Jesus instructs us in the same way as we learn from His encounter with the two men walking to Emmaus on that first day of the week after Jesus' crucifixion. They had seen all that had happened to Jesus, and they had learned all of what had happened that very morning, but they were doubtful. Listen to what Jesus does to help the men grow in their faith. This is Luke 24:13-35. (READ Luke 24:13-35)

These two men had been followers of Jesus, but they only heard the Word; they never implemented it into their lives, so it was not living in them on that first day of the week. They were talking about all of the events that happened to Jesus, but they failed to believe what the prophets had said about Him, that he must be crucified and die and then rise from the dead to bring salvation to those who would believe. Their minds were so stuck on the here and now, that resurrection from the dead never entered into their minds. They were so disappointed that Jesus did not become their military Messiah that they missed the whole point of the prophetic definition of the Messiah - the One who would take away the sins of the world. They were in danger of traveling down that slippery road to doubt and disbelief.

So, out of love for them, and the desire to help them grow in their faith, Jesus confronts them with their slowness to believe all that had been told about Him in all of the Scriptures. Jesus wanted them to get beyond the wonder and mystery of the previous week and move on toward belief in Him so that they might know for sure that He had really risen from the dead. They, too, wanted to know for sure about the truth of the Scriptures, but they had to have faith

first before they could move on to fully knowing. That's what kept them from recognizing Jesus in the first place. They could not believe that anyone could rise from the dead.

So Jesus gently explained to them all of the prophecies in all of the Scriptures to help them understand the importance of all of what had happened the week before. But these two men had to be willing to accept the truth of the Scriptures before they could know they had become fulfilled right in their presence. As they heard Jesus' explanation of the Scriptures, it began to click in their minds the true intention of the Messiah. And their hopes increased. So much so in fact, that when they got to Emmaus and Jesus was showing that He intended to go on from there, they "*urged Him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So He went in to stay with them*" (Luke 24:29). Their hearts were burning within them to know more about the Messiah, but they still did not recognize Jesus, until He "*took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them*" (24:30).

Was it then that they saw the nail marks in His hands that suddenly opened their eyes? Was it in the way that He blessed the bread and broke it and gave it to them? I believe the answer is "Yes" to both of them. All they had heard that day put the pieces together about what Jesus' ministry was all about. Then seeing Jesus' scarred hands, and being a part of the breaking of the bread with Him again, were all the keys that unlocked their vision and gave them full understanding of Jesus being right there, risen from the dead. And Jesus didn't just get up from the table and dismiss Himself from these two disciples. He just disappeared right before them! Suddenly gone!

It was probably the fastest return trip to Jerusalem that had ever happened up to that time. These two could not wait until the next morning to tell the others what they had experienced. It was all true - Jesus was alive! Risen from the dead! The true Savior of the world! The Messiah!

And as we know, the other followers of Jesus were experiencing the same excitement as these two joined them. They had heard Jesus. They had studied the Scriptures with Jesus. They believed the Scriptures and experienced the risen Christ Jesus in person. What overwhelming joy was now theirs! All that had been said about Jesus was fulfilled. He Is The Messiah!

No more doubt was left in them. No more disbelief niggled at their brains. They had experienced the Risen Jesus, and their lives were transformed. They would never be the same. They now knew beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus was the Savior of the world.

Friends, it is so easy for us to become so surrounded and infused with doubt and disbelief. But Jesus wants us to believe in Him so that we might know that He is exactly who the prophets said He is. Jesus wants us to open up our eyes, our hearts and our minds to come to know Him as our risen Savior so that we might be the ones who go from this place with the knowledge of who He is, and to be able to tell those around us all that He has done for us, so that they might come to believe and know Jesus as well.

There are so many yet who are slaves to doubt and disbelief. It doesn't take long for us to see it - if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. So many have yet to hear the truth of Jesus and experience it for themselves of His great love. We are the messengers and the givers of Jesus' love. But we must first know Jesus is our Savior so that we can take Him into the world. Yet that is our call as His followers. Let's pray.

Father, there is so much doubt and disbelief in us that keeps us from fully believing that Jesus is our Messiah, the Christ, Your only Begotten Son. Move within us today so that we might also experience Jesus' presence with us and become transformed by Him, too. Open up our hearts and minds to know Him so that we might tell many others of what He has done for us. This we pray in Jesus' Mighty and Powerful Name. AMEN.