

## The Marvel of Unbelief

**Mark 6:1-6** *Mark 6:1 Then He went out from there and came to His own country, and His disciples followed Him. <sup>2</sup> And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing Him were astonished, saying, "Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands! <sup>3</sup> "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" And they were offended at Him. <sup>4</sup> But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." <sup>5</sup> Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. <sup>6</sup> And He marveled because of their unbelief. Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching.*

Closer to the holidays, Arrive Alive usually airs several commercials that are called shock commercials. They usually involve some scene of horror, a scene of devastation, or real images of the results of car accidents.

Now whether or not you agree with the motive or the method of shock commercials, the intention is to show the ugly reality of something, to cause people to steer clear of it. Other commercials tend to glamorise drinking or partying, but these ads do the opposite - they show the grim reality of what the results of these things could be.

Some accounts in the Bible are rather like those shock commercials. They are there to show us the gruesome reality behind things that we tend to take lightly. They are there to show us the ugliness of something, so that we will run from it.

This passage is just like that. It is there to show us the ugliness of unbelief. Today unbelief has a good name. It is respectable, and even admired. Smart, intelligent people are unbelievers, and it seems to be a badge of honour and humility if you shrug your shoulders about God, sin, heaven and hell.

But unbelief, in God's view is not clean and respectable. It is monstrous. It is shocking. In this passage, Jesus marvelled at the unbelief. This is one of only two instances in which Jesus marvelled, shaking His head in wonder, in amazement, at the stubbornness, arrogance, pigheadedness and plain foolishness of unbelief.

Unbelief is not something *out there*, it is something *in here*, in our hearts. Since Eve believed Satan in the Garden, the human race disbelieves the Word of God. This is not a small thing, because God has made faith the only way to come to Him. We didn't come up with that rule, nor did God consult us. God, the Creator, has made it so that faith is the medium of exchange with God. Without faith it is impossible to please Him. We are saved by grace through faith.

If we refuse faith, we turn away from grace. To grow and accept our own unbelief is to love our own destruction. This passage will show us how foolish unbelief is. We will see it in the people from Jesus' home town. And it will remind us of people we know today. But if we will allow it, it will also show us ourselves, and the sort of things we reject – the temptations to unbelief that we face. This passage will show us four actions of unbelief.

### I. Unbelief Rejects What It Cannot Explain v1-2

*Then He went out from there and came to His own country, and His disciples followed Him. <sup>2</sup> And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing Him were astonished, saying, "Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty*

*works are performed by His hands!*

Jesus had returned to His own country – which is a reference to His home town of Nazareth. He had been back several months before, at the very beginning of His public ministry, and was nearly killed on the same day. He's back, and probably His rising reputation allows Him back into the pulpit.

A little about Nazareth. Nazareth was an obscure little town never mentioned outside the New Testament. Not much more than about 60 acres or 24 hectares, not even one square kilometre. There would have been around 500 residents of Nazareth at the time.

As Jesus begins to preach, the response is again one of amazement. They were shocked, they were struck. We would say: “it blew their minds”. Jesus' teaching was so clear, so penetrating, so filled with authority that it jolted them.

That's also because what often happened in the synagogue, was that when a visiting rabbi came, he had to sometimes speak through a local speaker. He would speak softly into the ear of the local speaker, and the local speaker would speak on his behalf. The local speaker, according to one source... “was to have a good figure, a pleasant expression, a melodious voice, his words coming like those of a bride to a bridegroom, fluency, speech sweet as honey, pleasant as milk and honey, finely sifted like fine flour, diction richly adorned like a bride on her wedding day and sufficient confidence never to be disoriented. And above all, he had to be conciliatory and avoid being too personal.”

Yet, this doesn't seem to have happened for Jesus – they knew He could speak for Himself, and they probably didn't dare put some kind of intermediary between Him and the listeners. And without the diplomatic translator, Jesus' preaching just hit them with incredible force.

The response was amazement, but amazement that led to discontent, frustration, murmuring. They said, “*Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands!*”

To put it another way, how could one who did not study to be a rabbi teach like this? How could one who grew up in this town, with the same influences we had, and listened to the same rabbis we listened to, how could He get this kind of teaching? Where did He get it? How did it happen?

They couldn't explain the wisdom of Jesus. Evidently, when they spoke about His works, they were referring to things they have heard that He has done, since verse six tells us that He didn't do mighty works there. And even so, they are upset. They couldn't explain the wisdom and the power. They wanted a natural explanation.

But there was no natural explanation. Now there was an *obvious* explanation, and that was that He had obtained this from God, since He was the Son of God. But the people of Nazareth did not like that. They wanted to be able to explain it on their terms and in their way, and when they couldn't they just got angry.

Unbelief hates things it cannot explain. Unbelief wants to be in control. It wants to have an answer, and a ready reason for everything. That way, it can feel in control. It can feel that it is not in the dark about anything, and the universe is running according to a plan that it has signed off at the bottom. And once you throw in something which will upset the world view, the response is usually anger. Things that can't be explained feel like intruders, invaders, and they must quickly be repelled.

Remember when Jesus began explaining to a crowd that He was in fact the ultimate manna from heaven, and that people needed to take Him in for their real life? The response was anger.

**John 6:41-42** <sup>41</sup> *The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven."* <sup>42</sup> *And they said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven'?"*

Look at how angry people get when they encounter something in nature that their theories of evolution or cosmology cannot explain. They hate it, and fight against any explanation that involves God. Recently a genetic scientist, Richard Lewontin, wrote this "We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs..." Why? He tells us why: "We cannot allow a Divine foot in the door."

Unbelief hates what it cannot explain. Unbelieving relatives hate explaining the change in a converted family member. But what about us? Do we sometimes get angry with the strange providences of God? Do we sometimes complain, blame, and murmur when what happens is not easy to explain?

What did William Cowper tell us in his hymn?

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err  
And scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.

Unbelief rejects the inexplicable. But there is more to this unbelief that made Jesus marvel.

## **II. Unbelief Resents The Unexpected**

<sup>3</sup> *"Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?"*

The inhabitants of Nazareth ask if this is not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and the brother of the sisters who were still present in Nazareth, and had no doubt married the men of Nazareth.

What do they mean by this? Each of those things is a way of saying, we know this Jesus. He is a product of Nazareth.

We can piece a few things together here. Jesus had followed in the profession of His adopted father, Joseph. The word translated *carpenter* literally means builder. An early church tradition says they made yokes for farm animals, which would have made them woodworkers and carpenters. But if not, they were builders of some sort, a respected trade in Israel of the time.

At some point, we don't know when, Joseph had died. The brothers may well have moved on to

other towns, and perhaps Mary was with them, while the sisters had married people in the town and were still present. But before Jesus left the town to begin His public ministry, He had been a well-known resident for around thirty years. When you are in a town of 500 for thirty years, you can be sure that everyone knows you and you know everyone.

And there is little doubt that the people of Nazareth knew something was different about Jesus all along. Even the words they use here are different – *son of Mary*. You did not usually call someone the son of his mother; you always referred to the father, even if the father was now dead. The fact that they do so means they knew something was different about Jesus' birth. Remember, Mary was with child, and then visited Elizabeth for three months, then returned, and Joseph was minded to divorce her. When they went down to Bethlehem, she was nine months pregnant, and the people of Nazareth no doubt assumed that she had been unfaithful. And though they had seen strange things, like when he remained behind in the Temple at twelve, speaking with doctors in the faith, and though He grew in wisdom and seemed very different, He was still *theirs*. He was Yeshua, the boy from down the street, the lad who worked with Yosef, His father, and made some fine woodwork, the respectful young man who managed the house when Joseph died.

Now here He is, preaching like an Elijah, doing more works than Elisha, claiming the title of Son of David. They could not accept that someone so close to home, someone so familiar, might be the Chosen One, the Anointed One, the Messiah.

It was unexpected. They did not plan it or predict it. So they resented it.

Something twisted is in human nature. I don't know how true it is, but it's said that if you put crabs into a pot, when one starts to crawl out, another one will pull it back in. Humans are like that too. If one seems to be promoted, those nearby will resent the promotion, and try to cut him back down to size. If one appears to be promoted, then they will try to demote him.

These people could not accept the idea that God's grace might have favoured Mary uniquely. They could not accept the idea that grace does not wait for their permission, and might do something unpredictable. They were self-blinded by pride – how could one we knew be something more than we knew? How could there be divine power apart from our permission? Can one so familiar to us be above us? Can one from among us be selected by God to be used?

They missed the fact that God is always doing the unlikely, with the unworthy. They could not imagine that God would favour a poor virgin with the Messiah. They could not accept grace is sovereign, and often leapfrogs over hard hearts.

Unbelief resents and so misses the unexpected. Paul tells us that the Greeks in general refused the message of the cross because it was foolishness to them. How likely is it, they thought, that the God of the universe, should become an obscure Jewish man, and die the death of the worst criminals in the backwaters of dusty Judea? Unexpected, unpredicted – and therefore unlikely.

In fact, when Jesus had come to Nazareth earlier, they had nearly killed him for preaching just this.

**Luke 4:23** He said to them, "You will surely say this proverb to Me, '*Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.*'" <sup>24</sup> Then He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. <sup>25</sup> "But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; <sup>26</sup> "but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. <sup>27</sup> "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was

*cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."*<sup>28</sup> *So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath,*<sup>29</sup> *and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff.*

He had pointed out that of all the widows in Israel, Elijah was sent to a Gentile widow. And of all the lepers in Israel, Elishah healed Naaman the Gentile leper. What was he saying? God can do the unexpected, when the people are hard and unbelieving. Yes, Israel is God's chosen, but when no one was open and receptive, God chose to do miracles of grace on the Gentiles. He did the unexpected, because grace can leapfrog over hard hearts. This message was so offensive to them that they tried to push him off the cliff.

Unbelief resents the unexpected. So you find people rejecting Christianity because the gospel goes to unexpected places in unexpected ways. And people who you would never have thought come to Christ, and it messes up people's nice predictable way of living. And they're offended.

What a perverse thing – to reject God's Word, because He does things we did not expect. To reject the truth because He does things we cannot explain. But this is the ugliness, the astounding perversity of unbelief.

### **III. Unbelief Refuses the Messenger**

*And they were offended at Him. <sup>4</sup> But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house."*

The Nazarenes were offended at Jesus. The word for *offended* has the idea of stumbling over someone, tripping. They could not get past how familiar He was to them, and how well they knew Him, to hear what He was saying, and believe in Him. His familiarity bred contempt in them. Jesus knew that was what was going on, because He quoted a fairly well-known saying of His time: A prophet is always honoured except in his own town and household and among his own relatives.

In other words, when prophets carry God's message, the message is received when the people don't know the messenger too well. Then they ignore him and listen to the message. But if they know him very well, they can't get past him. He is all they see, and they refuse to listen to what he says, and to look at what God does through him.

And in the spiritual realm, something twisted happens too, where people reject a message because of the one who brings it. Now make no mistake, the Bible says that Christians are to be blameless and not bring shame or distraction onto the message they bring. But Jesus certainly wasn't blameworthy here.

The problem is that unbelief, when it wants to reject, finds an excuse in the messenger. Some relatives reject the message just because it's their son, or their daughter, or their brother or sister that got saved. They stumble over the message because someone so close to home believes it.

Some children will listen to a message or counsel or a book if it comes from a friend or a speaker they have never met. But if their own parents tell them that, they will not believe it. They stumble over the messengers, just because they are close to home.

Some parents will refuse to accept the work of God being done in their children, because it outpaces their own growth, and that can't be right. They must set that straight, because my own flesh and blood could not have a clearer view of God's Word than I do.

Or the visiting preacher, who arrives and says all the same things that the pastor who has been there for ten years has been saying, but it's as if revival has come! "We've never heard this before" Yes, we have, but we've heard from the same old familiar pastor, and he's so familiar to us we don't really pay attention any more.

Unbelief cannot believe that God can draw straight lines with crooked sticks. It stumbles over the messenger. In Christ's case, the stick wasn't even crooked. But familiarity breeds contempt and that familiarity gave their unbelief an excuse to reject.

Unbelief rejects the unexplained, resents the unexpected, refuses the messenger, but it all results in one fourth action:

#### **IV. Unbelief Resists the Work of God**

*<sup>5</sup> Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. <sup>6</sup> And He marveled because of their unbelief. Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching.*

Here is the great tragedy of unbelief, it must sleep in its own bed, it must eat its own dish. The text says that Jesus could do no mighty work there, except for a few healings. Nazareth missed out on seeing lepers cleansed, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame walking, great deformities being overcome, great miracles of creation being done or maybe even resurrections performed. They missed out on seeing the great power of Jesus, precisely because they refused to believe in powerful Jesus.

Does that mean that the hands of Jesus were tied by the unbelief of the people? Does it mean that God is powerless where faith is not present, as if it is the energy that fuels Him?

No, ***Isaiah 59:1** Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. <sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.*

This is not about divine ability; it is about human willingness. And though God can sovereignly overrule unbelief, though He can overcome rejection, though He can refuse our refusals, He does not have to. He can choose to do as much work as there is faith present.

God can also say, like He did to Jerusalem,

***Matthew 23:37** <sup>37</sup> " O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*

The lack of faith does not hinder God's power; it resists God's willingness.

***Hebrews 4:2** For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.*

This is the great tragedy of unbelief: it says, I cannot believe because there is no evidence. Then, when God turns away, it says, "See, I told you! No evidence!" It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. These people said, "How can there be anything special about Jesus?" And in response, Jesus did very little special things around them.

Though unbelief walks around in navy-blue suits; though unbelief walks around in black velvet

dresses; though unbelief speaks in a cultured accent and smiles a magazine-cover smile, the Bible shows us it is something quite monstrous. It is a vicious rejection of God, simply because He does what we cannot explain, what we do not expect, and uses people we wouldn't have chosen.

Let us flee from unbelief. Let us see it as an act of violence against God's character, and turn from it. Let us do the only sane and reasonable thing – believe that God is trustworthy, and able to perform that which He promises.