

Lord I believe help thou my unbelief

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[0 : 00] where we find the passage that our sermon is concerned with this evening. God's word tells us that straightway, immediately, the father of the child cried out and said with tears, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

It's a privilege to be in Inverness and to be ministering God's word to you today. Just a few hours ago, your minister was showing me in his manse the very nice painting that was presented to him when he had been with you for ten years.

I've often wished that I could paint. I've even, once or twice before going on holiday, gone into a shop and bought a book on how to paint or how to sketch.

And I've looked at the diagrams and the techniques there described and tried to paint. Perhaps you've done something similar. I don't know how you got on, but I didn't find it very helpful.

What's the best way to learn to paint? Is it to read a book and to look at the diagrams in it?

[1 : 26] Or is it to stand behind an artist and to see the way that he uses his brush? You may not be able to describe his technique, but it is much easier to see it and to learn it actually being done by a person.

And there are a thousand ways in our lives, a thousand activities of human living which come under that same category from the profound to the trivial.

Have you ever tried to use chopsticks? If you look in a book how to use chopsticks, there are little diagrams and you try to put them on.

But by far the easiest way, if there is an easy way of using chopsticks, is to have somebody just say, no, look at that person. Look at the way they're holding them.

See the way that they eat. And in flesh and blood, it's so much easier to learn. Well, you and I can get through life without using chopsticks.

[2 : 38] We can get through life without painting. But we cannot get through life without praying. And our great concern must be, how can we learn to pray?

How can we pray effectively? You can, of course, buy a book about prayer.

And there are books that itemise and analyse the theology of prayer. I'm not sure that such books are of great practical help.

The Bible, I believe, uses the same effective method that I've described in learning to paint.

It takes us to see someone praying. It doesn't give us an itemisation of prayer. It gives us an example of prayer.

[3 : 40] And that's precisely what we have before us in our text. Here, the Bible recounts the story of this man and his prayer. His prayer is very short.

His prayer is approved by the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. And I want to put it to you this evening that that is a commendable prayer.

It is an excellent prayer for you and me to imitate. It is a good prayer. Let's be sure on that right from the beginning. I'm sure of that because just a few verses before we read of something else that this man said to Jesus.

He said, I brought my child to your disciples. I asked them to cast out the demon but they could not. Lord, if you can do anything, please have mercy on us and help us.

That was a bad prayer. Jesus took him up on it. What do you mean, he said, if you can. All things are possible to him who believes.

[4 : 52] But when the man prays, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Jesus does not say to him, what do you mean? Help my unbelief. Jesus responds to his prayer by healing the boy.

We have here a vivid, simple example of prayer and one that I believe is especially relevant for us as we prepare for the Lord's Supper tomorrow.

It's an encouragement to me that many people have found help and comfort through this prayer. no less a Christian than Martin Luther numbered this among sayings in which Luther found comfort. He published a little book of them while he was in Castle Coburg in 1530 waiting for news of the decisive Diet of Augsburg when Melanchthon and other reformers were there negotiating with the Catholics to see if an accommodation, a compromise was possible.

Luther, not altogether without justification, was rather anxious that Melanchthon might compromise the stand that the Protestants had taken and as he waited there for news he wrote these words on the wall of the castle Lord I believe help my unbelief.

[6 : 27] What do these words tell us about the praying man? Well they tell us that he has a problem and that is the very first value of these words to us tonight.

These words tell us that our problem is often that we are unbelieving believers. unbelieving believers. Our problem the problem of our Christian lives and our lives is that we are unbelieving believers.

Lord I believe help my unbelief. That may sound a strange idea.

Unbelieving believers where do you get that from? In the Bible. But though those precise words are not used outside this verse there are many other ways that the Bible has of describing precisely that problem.

The fact that there is a strange conflict there is an inward contradiction so often in the lives of God's people.

[7 : 45] It was this unbelieving belief that Jesus was speaking about when he said to his disciples the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

By the flesh he didn't mean their physical bodies. That's not the Bible's common use of the word. It means their sinful nature their unbelieving self.

The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. we have Paul telling the Galatians that the spirit lusts against the flesh and the flesh against the spirit so that you cannot do the things that you would. There is an inner contradiction and an inner conflict. Lord I believe help my unbelief. Most famously you have it in Romans chapter 7 where Paul uses different language.

He says I find another law in my members that the good that I would do I do not. It's no longer I that do it but sin that dwells in me.

[9 : 02] Now Paul is not excusing himself. He's not like Adam in the Garden of Eden saying it was the woman who did it not me when he says it is no longer I but sin that dwells in me.

He is using inadequate human language to try to describe this strange conflict this strange tension this strange contradiction within the Christian.

Lord I believe and yet I'm an unbeliever too. Help my unbelief. Faith and unbelief are mingled in this man.

And I say to you that our problem is that we too so often are unbelieving believers. John Calvin says there is none of us who does not experience both of them in himself faith and unbelief. this is something that is true of all of us. Let's be very clear this prayer is not the prayer of an unbeliever.

[10 : 21] Lord I believe help my unbelief. An unbeliever could not pray that and you and I must not say ah unbelief this man is not a Christian.

If there is unbelief there this man must be outside the kingdom. This man cannot be born again if there is unbelief in his heart.

Not so. This is the prayer of a Christian. We must also rule out the idea that somehow this man is in no man's land.

He's not an unbeliever Lord I believe but he's not really born again. Help my unbelief. There must be some sort of transitional stage.

He must be in some temporary unreal state with one foot almost in the kingdom of light and the other almost in the kingdom of darkness.

[11 : 29] Now it is true that he is living this man in Mark chapter 9 in that unique period when the kingdom of God had come in the person of Jesus Christ but when the gospel age had not yet been fully inaugurated as it was on the day of Pentecost.

In that sense he is in a sort of limbo no man's land but in himself he is not. His characteristic Lord I believe help thou mine unbelief is not an expression of some strange neither the one nor the other.

He is a believer but he is a believer who has a problem of unbelief. it is a clear profession of faith that he makes Lord I believe and it is an honest prayer that he prays Lord help my unbelief a profession and an honest prayer.

Now I say to you that is a reality which faces every Christian we believe but our faith is always mingled with unbelief.

Dr. Stonehouse says this disciples never stand in total darkness nor do they ever in this life emerge into cloudless light.

[13 : 16] Their responses move back and forth between faith and doubt the presence of unbelief does not necessarily point to a complete absence of faith.

Have you got that clear? This is a Christian's prayer and it is a relevant prayer to us. Indeed it is a very relevant prayer to us because frequently this is an extremely severe problem in believers. Let me ask you a question. Suppose you could conduct a questionnaire a survey of not only everybody in the church tonight but every Christian in our church throughout the country every Christian in the world and suppose I know it is not possible for us but suppose it were possible to put a figure on how strong their faith was and how much or how little unbelief there was in their hearts.

What do you think the results would be? How many Christians would there be who had a problem with doubts and unbelief?

How many Christians would there be who had a strong almost unspotted faith? Well John Calvin couldn't conduct such a survey either but out of his great experience of Christians his meetings with Christians from every part of the world and even more out of his great knowledge of God's word he wrote this if we duly inquire what portion of faith has been bestowed on each Christian it will evidently appear that there are very few who are eminent in faith few who have a moderate portion and very many who have but small measure Calvin says there are very few Christians who are eminent in faith there are a few who have a moderate amount and very many who have but small measure this is often a very severe problem with

[15 : 51] Christians it would be altogether amazing if in a congregation like ours this evening Calvin's words were not true and for the most of us for almost all of us these words touch on a very pressing need God certainly thinks so why do I say that well God has given us an inescapable proof that he thinks so what is it well we'll be having it tomorrow morning it's called the Lord's Supper why did God give us the Lord's Supper why is it necessary have you ever asked that question hasn't God given us this the Bible doesn't the Bible make God's salvation wonderfully clear doesn't it tell us in the

Bible that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins doesn't it assure us that those that come to him he will in no wise cast out doesn't it say that if you ask anything in my name I will give it to you doesn't it give us instance after instance that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me and hasn't God given us that word in the power of the Holy Spirit with preachers sent to explain it why do we have the Lord's Supper as well why did God give us something else to show us that Christ is ready to forgive sins that Christ is present to feed his people was it that on second thoughts God decided that the Bible wasn't clear enough and people might be mistaken of course not why then did

God give us the second and the answer the only answer is this God gave us the Lord's Supper because he knows how weak our faith is and how prone we are to misbelieve and disbelieve and doubt even the clearest statements of the Bible so treating us like children he gives us a visual aid a vivid ceremony to press home to us the trees of the gospel my friends the very fact that there is such a thing as the Lord's Supper in addition to the word of God is clinching proof that the great majority of Christians have a problem with weak faith and much unbelief but it is not a disastrous problem all that

I've said makes that plain it is the problem that we share with this man it is a very severe problem in most of us but it is not a disastrous problem it is part of the battle of the Christian life the battle with indwelling sin why does God leave Christians imperfect when they are converted why does he not make us perfect in faith and holiness obedience and love the moment he regenerates us by his spirit well because he has a good reason for leaving sin in our lives for as long as we live in this world he leaves sin in our lives whether it's the particular sin of unbelief or any other form of evil in order that we may be driven to trust always and totally in Jesus

Christ in order that we might be humbled more and more and may learn that lesson that we are so slow so reluctant to grasp that we in ourselves can do nothing that all our righteousnesses are filthy rags why does God leave his children with an imperfect faith well says Dr.

[20 : 34] Ferguson in his book on John Owen such a sense of sin of unbelief is necessary to true assurance sorrow without faith in forgiveness is legal bondage assurance without sorrow is presumption that is if we can go through life saying I believe I never have any doubts I'm absolutely sure always and totally and perfectly in everything that God has said then there is a terrible danger that arrogance and self deceit and vanity will be dominant in such a person's life assurance without sorrow is presumption this man says Lord I believe help my unbelief it's not a disastrous problem it's a problem that can be beneficial to us but it is a problem that must be faced up to don't sweep it under the carpet don't say to yourself what this man might have been tempted to say oh I want

Jesus to help me I want him to minister to my son so I'd better put on my best appearance Lord I believe in you without reservation Lord you're wonderful you can do anything Lord I believe come on let's see you heal my son our religion frequently gives the impression that that is the way we think so often the prayers that we pray in prayer meetings make it sound to the outsider these people never have any problem with temptation these people never have any problems with doubt we are afraid that if we express doubts and fears and problems in our prayers before others they will think that we're not real Christians but unbelief cannot or rather must not be swept under the carpet that's the way to hypocrisy and to misery don't despair because of unbelief recognise it admit it confess it you are not the first

Christian to face an inward battle between faith and unbelief the point is you've got to make a correct diagnosis of your Christian life you've got to say that trouble that difficulty that doubt that darkness that lurks in my life what is it it is unbelief am I the only person to have it no it is a common disorder is it a fatal disease does it mean that I'm not a Christian no it is something that God in his grace is using and will cure ultimately make a correct diagnosis a while ago there was an Agatha Christie play on the television and the villain in that play was the doctor and one of the potential victims that the doctor had his eye on in his dastardly scheme was an elderly man the doctor's way of preparing that man perhaps to be eventually murdered was to make the man feel that he was seriously ill the doctor would take his blood pressure and shake his head and say well

I suppose you're not too bad but you'll have to be very careful and the man depressed by the doctor's false diagnosis imagined himself as we're all prone to do to be on the verge of death he became inactive he sat in his chair he just waited to die how many of you have let the devil be your doctor and say to you you've got doubts you've got fears if you were a real Christian you wouldn't have that you have not altogether a perfect assurance you're not fit to be at the Lord's table you're probably or possibly not even a Christian at all things look very bad for you and we say to ourselves oh do you think so oh dear let me feel my pulse yes it is very weak it feels very intermittent and we depress ourselves and become more and more gloomy all because we have let a wrong diagnosis take root in our minds if Martin

Luther could pray this prayer if John Calvin numbered himself among those to whom it applies then you and I should not become suicidal if we find that we need to pray it also Lord I believe help my unbelief unless the Christian is aware that this unbelief is a common symptom even in a healthy Christian life he may well sink in a mire of despair and live in bondage and fear all his life no matter how genuine his profession let's try and remedy this disease or help it as well as diagnosing it here there are two things that I want to say to you just briefly as we draw towards a close firstly we see that the root of this condition the root of this unbelief is disbelief in Jesus

[26 : 57] Christ Lord I believe help my unbelief why is this man recognising unbelief what has made him admit it and pray in this way well for that you need to go back a couple of verses to his request Lord if you can do anything take pity on us and help us verse 22 then if you're reading one of the modern translations of the Bible verse 23 will read something like this and Jesus said to him if you can all things are possible to him who believes you see the man had just said to Jesus if you can if you can do anything help us and Jesus picks out those words of his and he says what do you mean if you can what do you mean by saying that to me if I can let me tell you all things are possible to him who believes

Jesus is saying I can do anything I have all power the question is do you believe do you draw from me the undoubted power that I have this man doubts the ability of Jesus that is his unbelief he has said to the son of God if you can he doubts whether Jesus is able to help him and it is following that

challenge that he says Lord I do believe help my unbelief he recognises that this unbelief that wells up in his life is at root a doubt an unbelief a disbelief in Jesus Christ himself now those gloomy feelings those doubts that swim around in our minds and our lives need to be stripped bare they need to be seen for what they are for doubt and disbelief love to dress up in other clothes they love to come most of all dressed in the clothes of humility

I would not presume to say that I'm a believer I would not presume to come to the Lord's table I'm not worthy to sit there when I think of the Christians that have sat there when I think of those godly I'm not worthy to sit alongside there sounds very humble but it is disbelief in the son of God that is being expressed the humility is a false disguise what you are saying is to put it in truer language I do not believe that Jesus Christ will forgive me I do not believe that Jesus is able to help me I do not believe Jesus when he says whosoever will may come

I disbelieve Jesus when he commands his people to come to the table unbelief can cloak itself in learning too yes we believe Jesus Christ but we you know we're learned people we've read studied science and we keep an open mind on certain of the things that the Bible claims to teach and we're not prepared to commit ourselves to them it's very difficult you know to square them with the theories of this and that and the other sounds very learning disbelief in Jesus the son of God has put his imprimatur upon this book the Bible it is the truth he tells us and to hide behind our learning cannot disguise disbelief in

Jesus sometimes unbelief hides in the clothes of charity well of course I'm a Christian but you know those people next door to me who don't have any faith at all those people down the road who belong to another religion altogether I wouldn't say that they're not going to heaven I wouldn't like to be harsh and uncharitable but that's not true charity that is disbelief in Jesus Christ who said no man comes to the father but by me all unbelief at root is a rejection of Jesus Christ and his word sometimes it may be direct unbelief do you remember that occasion when the disciples were in the boat in the storm and they shook Jesus awake and they said

[32 : 38] Lord don't you care that we're perishing they disbelieved the love the power of Jesus himself sometimes in times of great crisis and stress sometimes under great intellectual pressure and doubt we may be tempted to doubt and disbelieve the very truths of Jesus is he really coming again did he really rise from the dead direct unbelief in the Lord sometimes though it may be deduced unbelief as was the case with this poor man I asked your disciples to cast him out and they could not if you can please help me the man's disbelief in Jesus where's it come from it's come from the inability of Jesus his disciples they could not therefore

I'm not sure that you can how sad it is that our doubts and our unbelief are all too often fuelled by the failures of other Christians perhaps there are ministers in the church whose doubts are fuelled by presbytery meetings perhaps there are elders whose doubts are fuelled by Kirk session meetings perhaps there are Christians in members in the church whose doubts are fed by the gossip and the slander of the church doorstep after the service consciously or unconsciously they may go away saying well if Christians behave like that is it really true is it really worth being a Christian but what we must see is that all of that is just another way of doubting Jesus Christ true inexcusably Christians do fail Christians ministers churches are not consistent and that does put a stumbling block in the way of others but we must not let it we must not let the sins of believers make us disbelieve in the Lord Jesus Christ well we need to get the diagnosis correct unbelief doubt and fear is a common symptom in believers but we also need to get that diagnosis correct in this sense unbelief is a very serious thing this man's doubts were a disbelief in the Son of God those doubts and fears that we have we may relate them to the failures of other

Christians we may hide them behind charity or learning or humility but what they are is a rejection of the Son of God keep the two things together Christians have trouble with such doubts and unbelief but also such doubts and unbelief are serious sins they are intolerable sins they must be dealt with if you have them it doesn't mean that you're not a Christian if you have them you cannot rest contempt to have them if you have them don't despair but if you have them don't relax either you must fight them and that's where our prayer once more is so helpful Lord I believe help my unbelief Lord help my unbelief the remedy the remedy of our unbelief lies in the hands of Christ it is Christ who can and must help us do you remember that other great prayer that was prayed to Jesus in somewhat similar circumstances Mark records it earlier in his gospel the leper who said Lord if you are willing you can make me clean that's a great prayer you see he's recognizing that he's at the right place he's at the only place where he can get help Lord you can if you are willing and of course

that story and the whole gospel assures us of the willingness of Jesus to deal with all who come to him he is willing there's no doubt about that and he can make us clean he can help us he and he alone can deal with our unbelief this man did not say oh Lord

[38 : 04] I do believe but would you mind waiting around while I must go away and sort out my unbelief Lord I recognize now you challenge me that there is disbelief in my heart Lord please don't go on to Jerusalem I must go away somewhere quiet I must meditate I must think this thing through I must read the Bible more I must wait for something to happen to me and then Lord when I've got rid of my unbelief I'll come to you and ask you to heal my son don't try to deal with unbelief yourself and then think of coming to Christ Lord help my unbelief Lord it is you and you alone who can deal with my weakness that is what the Lord's Supper says to us you see the Lord's Supper says to us we are hungry

Christians the Christian life is often a life that leaves us spiritually starving we haven't got food in ourselves but it says where's the food it's at the table how crazy it would be if you got an invitation to a banquet that said there is wonderful food on the table but make sure you're not hungry when you come make sure you're fully fed and then come to the banquet you come you're invited to come precisely because you are hungry and you need to be fed Jesus Christ is the remedy to our unbelief our doubts and our fears should not keep us away from the table until we've got rid of them they should drive us to the table that there Jesus Christ would deal with them if we feel that our Christianity is poor our faith is frail and weak then don't say when it is stronger when it is richer I will go to the table the beggar doesn't say I've got no money and there are those rich people there out in the street but you know I'll save up some money until I can buy some better clothes until I look respectable and then I'll go in the street and I'll see if they'll give me some money no it is precisely because the beggar is penniless precisely because he is dressed in rags that he must go to the street where the rich are and seek their arms and the Lord's supper is addressed to us who are as Luther said the truth is we are all beggars we've got no strength in ourselves we've got no spiritual wealth in ourselves and it says here it is come take eat drink and yet our doubts say to us well when I'm stronger when I'm richer when I'm more assured I'll go to the Lord's table what a sad travesty of what the Lord's supper is for here says John Calvin is food for the spiritually hungry here is medicine for the poor spiritual sick here is arms for spiritual beggars come to Jesus Christ for he alone and he assuredly is able to deal with your unbelief believer as you come to the Lord's table tomorrow face up to those bad periods in your Christian life to all your weakness and ineffectiveness your failures you know those up and downs that you lament and get depressed over what are they Lord I believe help my unbelief and come to the table tomorrow urgently praying that prayer and there taking the help that Jesus the Lord gives to deal with the weakness of our faith and if there is anyone here tonight who has long trusted

Christ but has never come to the table let me urge you to do something very drastic do not think down again into all those conflicting doubts and arguments and ifs and bounds just pray this prayer Lord I believe help my unbelief and believe me when I assure you on the authority of God's word that the help that Jesus provides for your doubts and your fears includes the Lord's Supper come to the Lord's table that there the Lord may indeed help your unbelief may God teach us to pray and bless us through his word Amen from once into halfhold yup comes to door hum

[43 : 53] BRAND buds