

## How Can I Believe?

Series: How Can I Believe?

Brad Bailey – April 8, 2018

*“I believe; help my unbelief!” - Mark 9:24 (ESV)*

1. Believing, especially when related to the larger questions about life, always involves the \_\_\_\_\_ of grasping our

\_\_\_\_\_.  
*Such “belief” always reflects the nature of “faith” as it involves trusting what you don’t understand with what you do understand.*

Isaiah 55:9 (GW)

*“Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.”*

Hebrews 11:1 (NKJV)

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

2. Believing always involves a dynamic interplay of our multiple ways of processing and evaluating what is real ....including reason, spirit, intuition, emotion, conscience, memory, imagination, and longings.

3. Believing always involves our \_\_\_\_\_ ideas and values.

4. Believing always involves our \_\_\_\_\_ stages and desires in life.

1 Corinthians 13:10-12 (NLT /TLB)

*“...when full understanding comes, these partial things will become useless.*

*<sup>11</sup> It’s like this: when I was a child I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I became a man my thoughts grew far beyond those of my childhood, and now I have put away*

*the childish things. <sup>12</sup> In the same way, we can see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at his reflection in a poor mirror; but someday we are going to see him in his completeness, face-to-face. Now all that I know is hazy and blurred, but then I will see everything clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now.*

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Main point: Implore the position of humility which we as finite creatures should have in regards to our knowledge and which places the difficult question regarding faith in perspective.

Intro –

**Last weekend we gathered to honor** the death and the resurrection of Christ...what can be understood as the **most profound intersection of divine and human life... between heaven and earth.** And what is so **helpful to realize...** is that **nearly every life** on that transforming morning and ensuing week... were **really confused...** filled with confusion and doubt.

**Mary Magdalene...**the first to find that the tomb was empty...and there were the **linens** that had wrapped his body and his head lying she his body should be... and as she is engaged by an angelic figure... “she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.”

### **John 20:15 (NIV)**

*"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."*

She has now **been to the tomb twice...**she is **deeply troubled** to have found that somehow there are no guards and the **tomb is empty...** and even the presence and words of Jesus do not immediately connect for her. She thinks it the gardener. Why? It's so outside her expectations. It's **too good to be true.**

And after multiple disciples find the tomb empty...and are gathered together in their nearby room....Jesus appears...and they record:

### **Matthew 28:17 (NIV)**

*When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*

Why? While we think it should be obvious ... tomb is empty...and a new form of Jesus is there speaking to them. But it **doesn't fit reality** as they have **ever known it.**

**They also describe how one very specific disciple had to engage this...**one of the 12 disciples...**Thomas:**

When Jesus appeared to some of the disciples the first time, Thomas was not with them. "So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he [Thomas] said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'" (John 20:25)

**They record how it ends...a week later Jesus again enters their midst and Peter sees and touches and worships...but what of his initial posture? [1]**

**Despite what everyone said...and these were his closest friends... we can appreciate how likely he didn't want to be disappointed ...again.**

**He's been grieving a horrible death of one who had loved him so deeply...and even more than love...there was hope. He had come to believe... to hope...and he was trying to overcome the disappointment.**

**In different ways, they are all expressing the question:**

*How can I believe?*

How can I believe what doesn't fit my expectations... my experience... my understanding?

**Today... begin a series entitled: How can I believe?**

I know that some are here for whom this has become so true as to find yourself almost beyond questions.

I have known some who seem equally settled in not believing... committed only to questions.

But I think many if not most of us may appreciate the man who said to Jesus,

*"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" - Mark 9:24 (NIV)*

It was an **honest** and **healthy expression** of a **life moving forward in belief**.

The process of believing is not ignoring questions...but engaging them... getting perspective on the big questions.

I want to help us grow as people who understand that faith:

*Faith has it's questions ...and it's reasons.*

So in the **seven weeks ahead**, we are going to engage **seven questions**:

- How Can I Believe **in God**?
- How Can I Believe in the **Bible**?
- How Can I Believe in **Jesus**?
- How Can I Believe in **One Ultimate Truth**?
- How Can I Believe in a **Good God in a Suffering World**?

- How Can I Believe in **God and Science?**
- How Can I Believe **What is Often Associated with Hate and Hypocrisy?**

**Today...let's briefly consider the very nature of belief.**

**What can often be missed by such questions... is stopping to reflect upon the very nature of believing.**

**If my 13 year old asks me:** Can I drive to the store with you? I may do well to consider what he is asking.

Can he join me while I drive to the store?

Does he want permission to do the driving?

Do I believe he can actually drive?

In the same way...**when we say “Can I believe?”**... we do well to stop and consider what we mean.

**1. Believing, especially when related to the larger questions about life, always involves the humility of grasping our finite limitations.**

*All of the larger questions about life...origins...meaning... source...and if a source ...the nature of that source... and why the evil that runs through us...and so much more. They are all questions about that which transcends our finite nature. We must draw from the limitation of our nature and perspective... and continually form our beliefs.*

***Such “belief” always reflects the nature of “faith” as it involves trusting what you don’t understand with what you do understand.***

It always involves trusting what you don’t understand with what you do understand.

If I trust only what I can fully understand....I can’t believe in anything...including our existence.

**Regarding the larger questions of reality...“certainty” is far more an illusion that we grasp.**

I believe the **problem** we have **discussing beliefs...**involves **the illusion of “certainty”...** our **modern loss of grasping our limited nature.**

- When we say we “believe” in God ... in the living God revealed in the living testimony of the Scriptures... **we must not lose the fact** that we are **declaring our “faith”**... our trust in God... and **not in our superior minds** which claim some form of “certainty.”

- And in like mind...the problem that I see in our modern culture's often proud assertion against belief in God... is **claiming to know far more than they do or even can.**

**I recall that human life** once believed the **world was flat**... we might scoff at the idea...but it reflected their limited perspective. After discovering that it was round we believed that the **sun rotated around the earth**...until we discovered that in truth the earth rotated around the sun. It seems that **we should continually realize** is that we **should never assume we really can grasp the larger reality** from what is always a limited perspective.

If I was to share the **one thing that has stood out to me** as I have **reflected upon the most fundamental cultural shifts within my short lifetime**... it is the **loss of our basic sense of limited knowledge.**

*“The modern world has lost it's sense of mystery...and become so enamored with our knowledge and control...that we have lost our most basic sense of how finite we are...of how little we know and control.”*

I am sure that there has always been a pride among those who were privileged to be among the more educated of their day. But throughout history... there was an increasing sense that **knowledge** was **exciting** and **humbling**. There was a more balanced sense that the very nature of discovery flowed from our profound nature of being finite. Finding bits of order in the grand mystery that transcends us.

Those whose minds seems most acute... understood the limits of their knowledge most.

*“The more you know, the more you know you don't know.” — Aristotle*

*“The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know.” - Albert Einstein*

It was common to hear that truth stated even thirty years ago ...but I haven't heard those phrases much over the past ten years.

We **now freely speak** of with **“certainty”**... of what is **“obvious.”**

**So let me express something** that may need to be said:

*“I could be wrong about everything I believe about God.”*

Not only do I believe I could be wrong...if you can understand what I am saying (and not saying)... the God I believe in is not offended by professing that. .

It's **not a denial of my faith in God...but rather declaring my own finiteness.**

The God I have come to believe in declared quite clearly:

**Isaiah 55:9 (GW)**

*“Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.”*

This is a **reminder...** “**don’t lose your sense of finiteness.**”

I don’t believe that we as finite creatures can ever fully understand what is infinite.  
This is true in terms of our position of perspective and even what is real.

**We speak of God now as if we are the subject and source...and we are speaking of an object to be scrutinized.**

When we say we can’t see God? It’s certainly true...but who says that the **material dimension is more real than spiritual** ... or superior to the spiritual?

**And if God could enter the material physical realm...** would that resolve the deeper nature of what lies between us? It’s quite possible we would crucify him.

**If we cannot come with a humility regarding human reason... we are misguided from the start.**

The perception that science and faith are at odds is rooted in the issue of limitations.  
We will engage this more in a few weeks...but I do want to suggest here that there has **never been an actual problem** between **science and belief in the God** revealed in the Scriptures.  
The problem is simply pride... a pride that allows us to lose the sense of what we know and don’t know.  
We are simply not in a position to grasp infinite reality.

**And as such... all belief** in the larger questions of life is a **matter of faith.**

**Hebrews 11:1 (NKJV)**

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

Substance of things hoped for...that is... **substance...something meaningful...** related to that which not yet manifest fully in our present experience.

“Evidence of things not seen.”

> That is what we form belief upon... substantial signs ... reasons... that lead us. [2]

**What serves our perspective on faith?**

**What helps us keep perspective on the very nature of believing (faith)?**

**2. Believing always involves a dynamic interplay of our multiple ways of processing and evaluating what is real ...including reason, spirit, intuition, emotion, conscience, memory, imagination, and longings.**

We in the western world are deeply **shaped by the Greek philosophers** who **pursued the nature** of reason. And I might add that we do well to embrace what we call our rational potential. It is a gift that we have come to bear.

But **when we think** we are **solely and simply rational in nature**...or that we should be...we will deceive ourselves. [3]

We **have always processed** what we believe **through wider dimensions**. spirit, intuition, emotion, conscience, memory, imagination, and longings. — to name a few.

**And what of the value we give to others?**

If someone were to believe that our value lies only in being a body of meaningless matter which survived natural selection... how we would respond to one who came to kill one we love? Would it be a response of merely stating that their meaningless material nature serves us well and we prefer they do not destroy them? Or would we believe they hold a value that is fundamentally distinct in beyond functional value? And if we felt that way about them...would it be mere irrational foolishness?

**And what of our longings...**

As C.S. Lewis notes...

*“How could an idiotic universe have produced creatures whose mere dreams are so much stronger, better, subtler than itself?”*

**Longings point towards that which is real.**

Believing involves reasoning ... but reasoning is not merely a matter of material sensory nature. Believing integrates the facets we draw from.

**3. Believing always involves our cultural ideas and values.**

What we believe is always in a **dynamic relationship** with our **cultural views and values**.

This was a **huge aspect** that **influenced every life** which was engaged by Jesus. He did and **did not fit the expectations**. [4]

You may recall when **one of those he would choose first** heard his good friend tell him...that the Messiah had come... from Nazareth. He replied: **“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”**

His mind had paradigms, and this did not fit... so belief was stuck. (Refers to Phillip telling Nathaniel in John 1:35-51)

He certainly **came as a prophet...** but **God’s blessing** was to come with human **power – prestige, wealth, notoriety...** so how could God be among the poor and unclean?

And ultimately what made believing in Christ so difficult was not because of his existence... belief in supernatural...but **his sacrifice**. Divine blessing meant domination and power...not sacrifice.

Culture is powerful. [5]

**To those who would suggest** that somehow the **Christian faith is simply a myth** that the **culture has conditioned people to believe...** I would **challenge three problems with that idea:**

**1. The Gospel accounts bear no resemblance to myth.** They read as actual accounts of real people rooted in historical detail and with not attempt to idealize those involved.

**2. Nothing has been received in new and hostile cultures like the good news of Jesus...**places where it speaks of a truth that has never been known and is often received at the loss of family, community, and even one’s life.

**3. The very issue of being influenced by culture is equally true in influencing whatever one believes.**

No one is objective... believing in God or not believing (which is an equal belief system) faces the same nature of influence... there is equal danger. [6]

There is a desire for what we might call “objective truth”...but there is always the influences of what exists around us. ALWAYS, The real danger is when we think we are somehow perfectly objective. It is appropriate to challenge those who believe to consider of they are merely believing because of what their family or friends believe.

The truth is that MANY have come to believe in God apart from their family and friends.



We are not only influenced by our culture...but also our **personal desires**. We would like to think we just make rational decisions...but **our decisions are deeply influenced by our personal desires and wills.**

#### **4. Believing always involves our personal stages and desires in life.**

What we believe is affected by our own desires. What we believe involves both our heads and our hearts...our inner disposition.

**Many suggest that** belief in God is **just a crutch** for the weak... **a comfort** for those who need some higher force... **an excuse** not to take responsibility for life.

Those are good challenges. **All of these can influence my belief.**

But we do well to recognize that in the same way... choosing to disbelieve in God... to believe that there is no personal source of life to which we owe life... can itself **be influenced by the will that desires to be free.**

There are many personal desires that could influence one's belief that there is no God....

- One may fear how others would be uncomfortable... and critical... and reject them.
- It could be a control issue. One may enjoy the idea that they are free to rule their own life...and not want to acknowledge any higher authority.
- It could be an avoidance of facing any standards of goodness other than the one's we set. (Outwardly the vast majority of people would say they are decent people... based on some form of standard that they use to compare themselves to other people. We may not want to face any deeper standard for love and justice.)

This is why I have come to believe that one of the most valuable questions we should ask ourselves as we consider our own belief in God is...:

**Do I want God?** That is,

***If I discovered that I was living before the presence of God... the All-powerful and All-knowing Creator of everything... would my own will welcome such a moment...or wish it were not so?***

**This also helps us understand how believing always involves the stages of our personal lives.**

**God sees a quality in children.** They **don't presume to know** everything...nor to **control** everything. I believe that it's in that regard that Jesus speaks so strongly against looking down on children. **They represent a quality that we our emerging pride loses.**

### **As we emerge toward adulthood...what happens? [7]**

Natural individuation...a pride in our ability to think for ourselves...but a pride in that very thinking. It is often a stage in which we **fight for the right to believe**... maybe in the early teenage years...maybe in the later 20s. The very nature of individuation can declare a level of certainty that defies reason. It's naturally a season in which we are coming to discover so many new perspectives... and some will seem really appealing.

**But it's also a time when we don't tend to fully grasp what we don't know.**

So there may be a bit of **simplistic certainty** on our belief...or our disbelief.

I believe that God is calling us to a place in which having emerged into adult role of forming beliefs... we have the same humility as a child ... knowing that we only see in part.

**The Apostle Paul** knew a lot about the **dangers of a certainty that refuses even God. He was the perfect product of his religious tradition... was certain he was fighting for what was true... until he realized he had been wrong. He had thought too highly of his grasp of truth. And he wrote beautifully of a maturity that grasps the humility to know we see only in part.**

### **1 Corinthians 13:10-12 (NLT /TLB)**

*"...when full understanding comes, these partial things will become useless. <sup>11</sup> It's like this: when I was a child I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I became a man my thoughts grew far beyond those of my childhood, and now I have put away the childish things. <sup>12</sup> In the same way, we can see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at his reflection in a poor mirror; but someday we are going to see him in his completeness, face-to-face. Now all that I know is hazy and blurred, but then I will see everything clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now.*

Closing Prayer:

### **Notes:**

1. They record... "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

John 20:28-29 (NLT)

"My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed. Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

2. A good though challenging read on the nature of faith was found at:

<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/oxford/sermon10.html>

3. John Lennox is Professor of Mathematics (emeritus) at the University of Oxford and Emeritus Fellow in Mathematics and the Philosophy of Science.

“I appeal to the heart as well as the head since God is not a theory but a person and so a holistic approach is apposite--but I don't appeal to the heart as *opposed* to the head!

All scientists presuppose and therefore have faith in the rational intelligibility of the universe.

Indeed, one of my main reasons for believing in God is that we can do science. The mathematical intelligibility of nature is evidence for a rational spirit behind the universe. If we take the atheist view, then rationality dissolves.

As distinguished philosopher Alvin Plantinga of Notre Dame neatly puts it:

“If Dawkins is right that we are the product of mindless unguided natural processes, then he has given us strong reason to doubt the reliability of human cognitive faculties and therefore inevitably to doubt the validity of any belief that they produce – including Dawkins' own science and his atheism.

Atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel says “Evolutionary naturalism implies that we shouldn't take any of our convictions seriously, including the scientific world picture on which evolutionary naturalism itself depends.”

4. Another element of cultural views was how the religious leaders has not grasped what God had spoken about the Messiah suffering and being raised up. It was that which Jesus had to correct. Even after he rose...he came alongside two men on the Emmaus Road – Jesus had to help them see what was culturally a blind spot.

5. The Scriptures warn us about the nature of cultural and group pressure that can be stirred by wanting to alleviate it's own wrong.

Exodus 23:2 - "You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice;

Exodus 32:1-5 - Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 - "When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.

2 Chronicles 13:7 - and worthless men gathered about him, scoundrels, who proved too strong for Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, when he was young and timid and could not hold his own against them.

Proverbs 1:10-15 - My son, if sinners entice you, Do not consent.

Proverbs 13:20 - He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will suffer harm.

Matthew 27:24-26 - When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves."

Mark 15:15 - Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Luke 23:23-24 - But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail.

Acts 5:33-40 - great example of one who stood against the "tide" of mob thinking.

Luke 23:50-52 (NLT) - Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph. He was a member of the Jewish high council, 51 but he had not agreed with the decision and actions of the other religious leaders. He was from the town of Arimathea in Judea, and he was waiting for the Kingdom of God to come. 52 He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man

6. Cynicism and doubt have become a form of social conformity

In Kelly Monroe Kullberg's "Finding God Beyond Harvard" she writes, "I went to [Harvard Divinity School] expecting to be challenged by both secular and Christian professors, students, and a broad curriculum. But by the end of an orientation lunch, I gathered that one was not to speak of Jesus or the Bible without a tone of erudite cynicism. I quickly learned that subtle mockery trumped reason." Nonreligious educators, she realized, rather than face the tough question of life and faith, were instead resorting to *the juvenile tactic of ridiculing what they did not understand*. She quotes theologian *Dallas Willard*: "*We live in a culture that has for centuries cultivated the idea that the skeptical person is always smarter than one who believes. You can be almost as stupid as a cabbage, as long as you doubt. Today it is the skeptics who are the social conformists.*"

7. More about stages of faith which had help frame the process involved:

James Fowler's Stages of Faith - <http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html>

Brian McLaren - Good slideshow of the 4 stage model:

<https://www.slideshare.net/brianmclaren/stages-of-faith-1920055>

Brian sharing about these stage (video) - <https://vimeo.com/63204987>

A comparison of both M. Scott Peck's stages and Brian McLaren's stages -

[http://www.sayyesor.no/topics\\_spiritual\\_development.html](http://www.sayyesor.no/topics_spiritual_development.html)

Stages of the journey - \*adapted from the critical journey by Janet Hagberg & Robert Guelich - <http://kathyesobar.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/stages-of-faith.pdf>