

THOMPSON CHAIN REFERENCE

Unbelief

Religious Men

- Abraham, when promised a Child in Old Age [Genesis 17:17](#)
- Moses, when told the Host of Israel should be Fed [Numbers 11:21](#) [Numbers 20:12](#)
- The Disciples, in Failing to Heal a Demoniac [Matthew 17:19](#) [Matthew 17:20](#)
- Zacharias, when Promised that he should have a Great Son [Luke 1:20](#)
- The Disciples, when told of the Resurrection of Christ [Luke 24:11](#)

General Examples of

- [Genesis 19:14](#)
- [2 Kings 7:2](#)
- [Psalm 78:19](#)
- [Isaiah 53:1](#)
- [Matthew 13:58](#)
- [Matthew 21:32](#)
- [Luke 22:67](#)
- [John 3:11](#)
- [John 4:48](#)
- [John 6:64](#)
- [John 10:25](#)
- [John 12:37](#)

Warnings Concerning

- [Deuteronomy 32:20](#)
- [Hosea 8:12](#)
- [Mark 16:14](#)
- [John 3:18](#)
- [John 3:36](#)
- [John 8:24](#)
- [John 16:8](#)
- [John 16:9](#)
- [Romans 11:20](#)
- [2 Thessalonians 2:12](#)
- [Hebrews 3:12](#)
- [Hebrews 4:11](#)
- [Jude 1:5](#)

Unbelief—A Marvel

J. C. Ryle

"He marveled at their unbelief." [Mark 6:6+](#)

The text which heads this page is a very remarkable one. Of all the expressions in the four Gospels which show that the Lord Jesus Christ was very Man, none perhaps is more startling than this. That He who was born of the Virgin Mary, and had a body like our own, should hunger and thirst, and weep and rejoice, and be weary and suffer pain—all this we can, in some degree, understand. But that He who was truly God as well as truly Man, He "in whom dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," He in whom were, "hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," He who "knew what was in man"—that He should "marvel" at anything here below, may well fill us with astonishment! But what says the Scripture? There it is written in plain words, which no ingenuity can explain away, "He marveled at their unbelief."

In handling this subject, I do not propose for a moment to discuss those deep and mysterious articles of the faith which lie at the foundation of Christianity. If I attempted this, I could add nothing to what masters of theology have already said and should probably leave the subject where I found it, if I did not "darken counsel by words without knowledge." What I wish to do is to say something practical about the general subject of unbelief. It must be an astonishing thing, if even our Lord Jesus Christ marveled at it. It must be an important thing, when we hear and read so much about it in the present day. And I shall try to make a few plain remarks upon it.

1. **Let us consider the nature of unbelief. "What is it?"**
2. **Let us inquire why unbelief is so astonishing. "Why did the Lord Jesus marvel at it?"**

1. The nature of unbelief. What is unbelief?

The word so translated will be found twelve times in the New Testament and always, so far as I can see, in one signification. In its fullest sense, of course, it only exists in lands where men enjoy the light of revelation. In heathen lands, where there is little known, there can be comparatively little unbelief. It consists in not believing something which God has said—some warning that He gave—some promise that He held out—some advice that He offers—some judgment that He threatens—some message that He sends. In short, to refuse to admit the truth of God's revealed Word, and to live as if we did not think that Word was to be depended on—is the essence of unbelief.

Unbelief is the oldest of the many spiritual diseases by which fallen human nature is afflicted. It began in the day when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and brought sin into the world. They did not believe what God had told them, would be the consequence of disobedience; and they did believe the Tempter, saying, "You shall not surely die."

Unbelief ruined millions in the day of Noah's flood: they would not believe the great "preacher of righteousness," when he warned them for a hundred and twenty years to flee from the wrath to come.

Unbelief slew myriads in the day when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven. When righteous Lot called on his sons-in-law to escape for their lives, "he seemed as one who mocked." ([Gen. 19.14.](#))

Unbelief kept Israel wandering forty years in the wilderness, until a whole generation was dead. We are expressly told, "They could not enter in—because of unbelief" ([Heb. 3.19.](#))

Unbelief brought, finally, destruction on the Church and State of the Jews some fifty years after Christ left the world. They would not believe nor receive Him as the Messiah, but crucified and killed Him. The primary cause why Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple burned, and God's ancient people cast off and scattered over the face of the world—was unbelief.

Unbelief, we are taught everywhere in the New Testament, is the grand reason why multitudes of professing Christian men and women in every age are not saved, and die unprepared to meet God. It bars the way to heaven, and makes God's glorious promises of mercy, useless and unavailing. "He who believes not, is condemned already." "He who believes not, shall be damned." "He who believes not the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." "If you believe not that I am He, you shall die in your sins." ([John 3.18, 36](#); [Mark 16.16](#); [John 8.24](#).)

Remember, everyone into whose hands this paper may fall—remember and never forget it—it is not so much heinous sin—as unbelief which ruins souls. "All manner of sins shall be forgiven to the men." "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin." "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow." ([Matt. 12.31](#); [1 John 1.7](#); [Isaiah 1.18](#).) But if a man will not put faith in Christ, he places himself out of the reach of mercy. I am bold to say, that even Judas Iscariot might have found absolution, if, after his denial, he had repented and believed. The true cause of eternal ruin is contained in those solemn words which our Master spoke before the Jewish Sanhedrin, "You will not come unto Me—that you might have life." ([John 5.40](#).)

Unbelief is one of the commonest spiritual diseases in these latter days. It meets us at every turn, and in every company. Like the Egyptian plague of frogs, it makes its way into every family and home, and there seems no keeping it out. Among high and low, and rich and poor, in town and in country, in universities and manufacturing towns, in castles and in cottages, you will continually find some form of unbelief. It is no longer a pestilence which walks in darkness, but a destruction which wastes at noonday. Unbelief is even thought clever and intellectual, and a mark of a thoughtful mind. Society seems leavened with it. He who avows his belief of everything contained in the Bible, must make up his mind in many companies to be smiled at contemptuously, and thought an ignorant and weak man.

(a) With some, the seat of unbelief appears to be the head. They refuse to accept anything which they cannot understand. Inspiration, Miracles, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Holy Spirit, the Resurrection, the Future State—all these mighty verities are viewed with cold indifference as disputable points, if not absolutely rejected. Can we entirely explain them? Can we satisfy their reasoning faculties about them? If not, they must be excused if they stand in doubt. What they cannot fully understand, they tell us they cannot fully believe.

(b) With some the seat of unbelief is the heart. They love the sins and habits of life, which the Bible condemns, and are determined not to give them up. They take refuge from an uneasy conscience by trying to persuade themselves that the old Book is not true. The measure of their creed—is their lusts. Whatever condemns their lusts—they refuse to believe. The famous Lord Rochester, once a profligate and an infidel, but at last a true penitent, is recorded to have said to Burnet, as he drew near his end, "It is not reason, but a bad life which is the great argument against the Bible." A true and weighty saying! Many, I am persuaded, profess that they do not believe, because they know, if they did believe—that they must give up their favorite sins!

(c) With far the greater number of people the seat of unbelief is a lazy, indolent will. They dislike all kind of trouble. Why should they deny themselves and take pains about Bible-reading and praying, and diligent watchfulness over thought and word and deed, when after all, it is not quite certain that the Bible is true? This I have little doubt, is the form of unbelief which prevails most frequently among young people. They are not agitated by intellectual difficulties. They are often not the slaves of any special lusts or passions, and live tolerably decent lives. But deep down in their hearts there is a disinclination to make up their minds, and to be decided about anything in religion. And so they drift down the stream of life like dead fish, and float helplessly on, and are tossed to and fro, hardly knowing what they believe. And while they would shrink from telling you they are not Christians, they are without any backbone in their Christianity.

In days like these, we must count it no strange thing if we meet with a vast amount of unbelief in the world. Rather, let us make up our minds to expect it, and to see it under the most specious and plausible aspects. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. No doubt it is startling, when a young man leaves some quiet secluded country home, and launches on the waves of this troublesome world in some busy town, to hear doctrines and principles denied, or sneered at, which he never dreamed of anyone questioning when he lived at home. But surely this is no more than his old Bible might have taught him to expect. Is it not written there, "There shall come in the last days scoffers?" "When the Son of man comes, shall He find faith on the earth?" (2 Peter 3. 3; Luke 18. 8;) Such a young man should say to himself calmly and quietly, "This unbelief is precisely what my father's Bible told me to expect. If I met with no unbelief, the old Book would not be true."

After all, it is some comfort to remember that there is probably less of real, downright, reasoning unbelief than there appears to be, Thousands, we may be sure, do not in their heart of hearts believe all that they say with their lips. Many a skeptical saying is nothing more than a borrowed article, picked up and retailed by him who says it, because it sounds clever, while in reality it is not the language of his inner man. Sorrow, and sickness, and affliction, often bring out the strange fact that so-called sceptics are no sceptics at all, and that many talk scepticism merely from a desire to seem clever, and to win the temporary applause of clever men.

That there is an immense amount of unbelief in the present day I make no question; but that much of it is mere show and pretense, is to my mind as clear as noonday. No man, I think, can do pastoral work, and come to close quarters with souls, visit the sick, and attend the dying, without coming to that conclusion.

2. Let us now inquire WHY unbelief is so astonishing.

What is there in unbelief, which made even the Lord Jesus, the Son of God marvel? No doubt there was something peculiar and extraordinary in the unbelief of the Jews. That the children of Israel, brought up from their infancy in the knowledge of the law and the prophets, trained from their earliest years to look for the Messiah, and to expect a mighty "prophet like unto Moses," taught to believe in the possibility of miracles, and familiar with the story of miracle-working men—that they should reject Jesus of Nazareth, and not be moved by the mighty works which He did among them—all this was truly astonishing and surprising! Astonishing that they should have such privileges—and yet make such a bad use of them! Astonishing that the door of life should be open, and heaven so near—and they should refuse to enter in! But, I suspect, the Holy Spirit would have us look deeper than this. He would have us know that if we sit down and calmly consider unbelief, we cannot avoid the conclusion, that there

is something singularly astonishing about it and never so much so as in these latter days of the world. Let me try to show what I mean.

(1) For one thing, unbelief is a spiritual disease peculiar to Adam's children. It is a habit of soul entirely confined to man. Angels in heaven above, and fallen spirits in hell beneath, saints waiting for the resurrection in paradise, lost sinners waiting for the last judgment in that awful place where the worm never dies, and the fire is not quenched—all these have one point in common—they all believe! The rich man in the parable, when he lifted up his eyes in torment, and asked for a drop of water to cool his tongue, and pleaded hard for his five brethren, had bid an eternal farewell to unbelief. "The very devils," says James, "believe and tremble." ([James 2.19.](#)) Hateful, and hating, and malicious, and murderous, and lying as Satan is called in Scripture, we read that his agents cried, "We know You who You are—the Holy One of God!" "Have You come to torment us before the time!" (Matthew 8. 29.)

But man, living man, is the only intelligent creature who is unbelieving! I say "living man" advisedly. Alas! What a waking up remains for many, the moment the last breath is drawn. There is no unbelief in hell. Voltaire now knows whether there is a sin-hating God; and David Hume now knows whether there is an endless hell. The infant of days, by merely dying, acquires a knowledge which the subtlest philosophers, while on earth, profess their inability to attain. The dead Hottentot knows more than the living Socrates. Surely a habit of soul so absolutely and entirely confined to "living man," may well be called astonishing.

(2) For another thing, unbelief is astonishing, when you consider its arrogance and presumption. For, after all how little the wisest of men know; and none are more ready to confess it than themselves. How enormously ignorant the greater part of mankind are, if you come to examine the measure of their knowledge. The education of the vast majority of people is wretchedly meager and superficial. Most of us cease learning at twenty-one, and then plunge into some profession in which we have little time for thought and reading, and are annually more absorbed in family cares and troubles, and add little to our stock of knowledge. Fifty or sixty years after this, our part is played out, and we retire from the stage, rarely leaving the world a wiser world than it was when we were born!

And does unbelief befit a creature like this? Is it seemly for him to talk in a skeptical and sneering tone about the revelation which the Eternal God has been pleased to make of Himself, and the unseen future, in that marvelous Book the Bible? I appeal to common sense for a reply. "Honest doubt" is a fine thing to talk about, and men are fond of saying it is "better than half the creeds." But when a man tells you he is troubled with skeptical and unbelieving feeling about Christianity, while he has probably never thought deeply about religion at all, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that one of the most foolish things in much unbelief, is its astonishing self-conceit.

(3) For another thing, unbelief is astonishing, when you consider its unfairness and one-sidedness. Who has not known that some of the minor facts and miracles of the Bible are the ostensible reasons which many assign why they cannot receive the Book as true, and make it their rule of faith and practice. They point to the ark, and the passage of the Red Sea, and Balaam's donkey, and Jonah in the whale's belly—and ask you sarcastically if you really believe such things to be credible and historically true. And all this time they refuse to look at three great facts which never can be denied, and which no higher criticism can possibly explain away.

(a) One of those facts is the historical Person Jesus Christ Himself. How He can have been what He was on earth, lived as He lived, taught as He taught, and made the mark

He has certainly made on the world—if He was not truly God, and One miraculously sent down from heaven—is a question which those who sneer at Balaam's donkey find it convenient to evade.

(b) Another fact is the Bible itself. How this Book, with all its alleged difficulties, written by a few Jews in a corner of the earth, who wrote nothing else worth reading, can be the Book that it is, so immeasurably and incomparably superior to anything else penned by man, and hold the position it holds after 1900 years' use—how all this can be, if the Book was not miraculously given by inspiration of God, is a knot which cannot be untied.

(c) The third and last fact is the effect which Christianity has had on mankind—the amazing change which has taken place in the state of the world since Christianity—and the difference at this day between those parts of the globe where the Bible is read, and those where it is not known. Nothing can account for this, but the Divine origin of Scriptural religion. No other explanation will stand.

Now these three great facts are coolly ignored by many unbelievers! They will talk by the hour about minor difficulties in the way of faith, while they refuse to touch the weighty, patent facts which I have just been naming. The difficulties of infidelity are a wide and interesting subject, which deserves more attention from the defenders of Revelation than it receives. But the unfair and unreasonable extent to which many nowadays concentrate their minds on small disputable points of revealed religion, while they refuse to look at the great standing evidences of God's truth, is to my mind one of the most astonishing features of modern unbelief!

(4) Fourthly, and lastly, unbelief is astonishing when you consider how the vast majority of those who profess it drop it, and give it up at last. Few of us perhaps have the least idea how seldom any man leaves the world an infidel. The near approach of death has a mighty effect on consciences, and brings into fearful relief the utter superficiality of much that is called scepticism. The very people who go through life sneering and scoffing at Christianity, continually break down in their own last hours, and are glad enough to send for the ministers of religion, and seek comfort in the old doctrine of the despised creeds. Some, with a mighty swing of the pendulum, go from one extreme to another, and, after living sceptics for years, are willing to be read to, and prayed with, and receive the Lord's Supper, after neglecting every Christian ordinance and despising God's house for scores of years. Wretched indeed must systems be, which prove so useless and comfortless in the hour when comfort is most needed!

But the wonder of all wonders is, that these failures of unbelief are so notoriously and constantly occurring, and yet men will not see them, and the ranks of scepticism are perpetually filled by fresh recruits. If those who profess to deny Revelation generally died happy deaths, and left the world in great peace and joy, holding their opinions to the last, we might well expect them to have followers. But when, on the contrary, it is the rarest thing to see an unbeliever dying calmly in unbelief and giving no sign of discomfort, while the vast majority of unbelievers throw down their arms at last, and seek for the very religious consolation which they once affected to despise—it is impossible to avoid one broad conclusion. That conclusion is—that of all spiritual diseases by which fallen man is afflicted, there is none so truly astonishing and unreasonable as unbelief.