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# The Believer's Paradox<sup>1</sup>

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*“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.”*

—Mark 9:24

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### Introduction

This was the honest confession of one whose faith had been put to a most severe test. It issued from a man who had a son possessed by a demon, which grievously tormented him: “wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away” (Mar 9:18). What a sore trial was that for a tender parent! How thankful you should be, my reader, if in the sovereignty of God *you* are blest with normal and healthy children; and how sympathetic we should be toward those who have afflicted ones! No doubt this man had consulted different physicians, and perhaps had conferred with his pastor; but no relief had been obtained. What a testing of his submission to the will of God! Then he sought

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<sup>1</sup> **paradox** – a statement that seems contradictory but may be true.

aid from Christ's disciples, but they had been unable to effect any cure, and "hope deferred maketh the heart sick" (Pro 13:12). Such, in brief, is the background of our text.

And now the great Physician commanded that the tormented one should be brought to Him, but we read "And when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming" (v. 20). Yes, matters generally seem to *get worse* with us when the Lord begins to take us in hand—to demonstrate that our extremity is God's opportunity to manifest His sufficiency. It was thus with the afflicted Hebrews in Egypt. The darkest hour precedes the dawn. But what a tremendous testing of this man's faith to behold his poor son foaming in agony at the Saviour's feet! "And He asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but *if* thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us" (vv. 21, 22). Did the Lord Jesus indignantly rebuke him for questioning His power, and turn away in disgust? No, for "great is his mercy" (Psa 103:11). Instead, He answered, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" (v. 23), and we are told "And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

## The Paradox Presented

"Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." How paradoxical was this language, for it was almost, if not quite, a contradiction in terms. If this man was a genuine believer, then why should he bemoan his unbelief? Or, since he bemoaned his unbelief, with what propriety could he claim to be a believer? It is like a man saying, I am hot, help thou my shivering coldness; I am strong, help my tottering weakness; for faith and unbelief are *opposites*. Ah there are many paradoxes in the Christian life, which are quite unintelligible to the wise of this world. That man has to become a fool in order to be wise (1Co 3:18), that he has to become a pauper in order to be made rich (Mat 5:3), that he has to be made weak in order to become strong (2Co 12:10), are enigmas<sup>2</sup> that proud philosophers cannot elucidate.<sup>3</sup> But thank God, what remains mysterious to the wise and prudent among men, is revealed to those who are babes in His family.

Unbelief is part of *the entail<sup>4</sup> of the Fall*. By nature all of us are "children in whom is *no* faith" (Deu 32:20). Frightful thing is that! To have a heart which distrusts God; to have a heart which is ever prone to lean upon anyone and anything rather than upon the Lord Himself; to forsake the Fountain, and betake ourselves to "cisterns which hold no water." Such is fallen man. Plenty of faith in himself, faith in his fellows, till he be disillusioned and disappointed; but no faith *in God*. That it is which explains why Christ is "despised and rejected of men" (Isa 53:3), so that in the days of His flesh He cried "O *faithless* and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?" (Mat 17:17). This it is which accounts for the universal attitude of men toward both the Law and the Gospel: they believe not the Author and Giver of them, they are destitute of faith in Him; and thus they will continue all their days unless the Holy Spirit sovereignly intervenes and performs a miracle of grace in their hearts.

Unbelief *remains* in the hearts even of the regenerate.<sup>5</sup> Though God imparts to them the gift of faith, he removes not (in this life) the root of unbelief. The heroes of faith, whose portraits hang upon the walls of fame in Hebrews 11, experienced that solemn fact. Look at Abraham, the father of all them that believe: when famine arose in Canaan he went down to Egypt for succour,<sup>6</sup> and so afraid was he to trust his wife in the hands of God, he told a half-lie by saying she was his sister. Look at Moses; afraid to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh after Jehovah had appeared to him at the burning bush and had promised the deliverance of His people (Exo 3); and later, complaining to Him because he had so evilly dealt with Israel (Exo 5:22, 23). Look at David, the slayer of Goliath, yet saying in his heart "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul" (1Sa 27:1). Look at the once intrepid<sup>7</sup> Elijah, fleeing in terror from Jezebel. Ah, my reader, the Holy Spirit has delineated the characters of the saints in the colours of truth and reality; not as they ought to have been, but as they actually were.

Unbelief is *the great burden* of the saint. It grieves his soul: the man in our text *wept* over it—do you? Feign would the Christian be freed from this incubus,<sup>8</sup> but the Lord does not see fit to remove it in this life. Frequently it acts like a cloud that covers the sun, for there is nothing so effectual as unbelief in hiding from us the light of God's countenance. It fetters our spiritual movements and impedes our progress. There are times when the believer fears that his unbelief will utterly sink him. Yet painful though this experience be, it is nevertheless a most hopeful and encouraging sign. It is not until God has communicated faith that any soul is *conscious* of its unbelief! A living faith is necessary in order to recognize our dead unbelief. There must be divine light to see its existence and divine light to feel its power. Here, then, is solid comfort for those who are groaning over this burden: in your *unregenerate* days you were never *exercised over* your unbelief!

To genuinely mourn for our wicked unbelief is a sure evidence that Divine life is present in the soul. Those who are strangers to God certainly do not make conscience<sup>9</sup> of such matters—how can they when they are quite unconscious of the

<sup>2</sup>enigma – something puzzling; an unsolved problem.

<sup>3</sup>elucidate – to make clear; explain.

<sup>4</sup>entail – inheritance

<sup>5</sup>regenerate – spiritually changed by the Holy Spirit; born again.

<sup>6</sup>succour – help.

<sup>7</sup>intrepid – bold, fearless.

<sup>8</sup>incubus – an oppressive burden; a demon.

<sup>9</sup>make conscience – bring into judgment of right and wrong.

plague of their hearts! But the Christian is not only conscious of unbelief, he goes to God and makes humble and contrite *confession* of the same. Yes, it is a sense of this grievous burden which drives him to the great Physician, crying, “Lord, I believe; *help thou* mine unbelief.” A true Christian does not cloak or excuse his unbelief, but honestly acknowledges it before God. Nor does he sit still and pity himself as one who is totally impotent and without any responsibility in the matter. No, he genuinely seeks “help,” which clearly denotes he is *resisting* this enemy, but needs Divine assistance. True, without Christ he can do nothing (Joh 15:5), but he *can* do all things by Christ strengthening him (Phi 4:13).

## The Paradox Solved

Here, then, is the solution to the difficulty and the explanation of the paradox presented by the language in our text. There are two distinct and totally different principles or “natures” indwelling the saint: faith and unbelief, and there is a continual opposition between them. They issue from the “spirit” and the “flesh,” concerning which we read, “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things which ye would” (Gal 5:17). It is this unceasing warfare between the two antagonistic<sup>10</sup> principles that give rise to a *dual experience*: one moment trusting God, the next doubting Him; one moment resting upon and drawing comfort from His promises, the next having no confidence in the same. And this dual and distressing experience moves him to cry “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” Ah, my reader, if *you* are not plagued with and burdened by unbelief, if you do not humbly confess the same to God and seek His help about it, then are you of all men most miserable.

Contrariwise, as we have already said, here is that which provides real comfort for the conscience-distressed and Satan-harassed soul. How often the devil will tell a Christian, “Your profession is an empty one: you do not belong to the household of faith—how can you, when filled with unbelief!?” Listen, dear friend: the man in our text was a genuine believer, yet he owned *his* unbelief; and that is *recorded* for our instruction and comfort. This is one of the plainest possible proofs that we *are* believers. No unbeliever ever shed tears over his unbelief; no empty professor ever groaned because of his questioning of God; no hypocrite is burdened by his doubts and fears. No; such are filled with carnal confidence and fleshly assurance: *they* have not had a doubt about their salvation for years past. They can exercise faith any time, as easily as you can turn a tap and make the water come; but such is not the faith of God’s elect.

## The Text Further Examined

“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” There are four things here claiming our attention. First, the paradox presented: this, together with its solution, we have considered above. Second, a fact affirmed: “Lord, I believe.” Third, a request preferred: “help thou.” Fourth, a confession made: “mine unbelief.” As it is often helpful to depart from the verbal arrangement of a text, we will do so here, and take up its several clauses in their inverse order, looking at this man’s confession, then his petition for help, and then the plea by which he supported his request: “I believe.”

## The Confession

*The Confession made*: “mine unbelief.” We will, very briefly, observe four things in connection with the same. First, it was an *honest* confession. This is the first thing that God requires from any praying soul: sincerity, genuineness, reality. He is not to be imposed upon by cant,<sup>11</sup> nor will the mere uttering of words, however scriptural, gain His ear. Then be frank and artless<sup>12</sup> in all your dealings with God, and never pretend to be what you are not: to the very end of your earthly pilgrimage, you will be (in yourself) a vile sinner, unworthy of the least of His mercies. This man did not claim to possess a faith that never wavered or boast that he was free from doubts and fears. No, he honestly *acknowledged* that the sum of his faith was frequently eclipsed by the dark clouds of unbelief. O to be delivered from all guile<sup>13</sup> when approaching the Throne of Grace.

Second, his confession was an *humble* one. That is the next thing which God requires from the praying soul: that he strip himself of the rags of self-righteousness and come before Him as one who is sinful and needy. This is very evident from the Epistle to the Laodiceans: they refused to abase themselves and take their proper place before the Lord. His charge was, “Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17). Alas, to how many professing Christians do those solemn words apply today! To all such Christ says, “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see” (v. 18). It is just at this very point that the Christian is distinguished from the hypocrite: the former humbles himself and takes his place before God in the dust, acknowledging his wicked unbelief.

<sup>10</sup> **antagonistic** – expressing hostility or opposition.

<sup>11</sup> **cant** – often repeated words or phrases of professional men.

<sup>12</sup> **artless** – simple, sincere, free from deceit.

<sup>13</sup> **guile** – deceit

Third, his confession was a *feeling* one, and this is the next thing which God requires from each praying soul, for He desires “truth (reality) in the inward parts” (Psa 51:6). It is not accurate and pious expressions, but a real sense of need in the soul which constitutes the essence of prayer. I might as well kneel down and worship gods of stone, as offer to the living God a prayer of words alone. That the confession of our text *was* a feeling one is evidenced by the fact that it was accompanied by *tears*. If the writer may be permitted to speak for his readers, is it not at *this* point that we so often fail the worst, especially in the confessing of our sins. Alas, how little are our hearts affected by them: how mechanical and impenitent<sup>14</sup> are the owning of our faults. Lord, melt our hard hearts.

Fourth, it was a *representative* confession, by which we mean it was suited to the case of all God’s children. There will never come a time in this world when such language is unfitted even for those who are members of the household of faith. No matter how much God is graciously pleased to increase our faith, indwelling unbelief will still be present to struggle against it. It is just this element which renders the prayers of Scripture so pertinent to the saints of all ages: they exactly suit their case and express their sentiments. “As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man” (Pro 27:19).

## The Petition

Let us consider next *his Petition*, for there is much in the details of this incident which affords us valuable instruction on the subject of prayer: “*help, Lord.*” First, look again at the *occasion* of it. This was an overwhelming anxiety over his afflicted son, finding relief in unburdening his heart to the Lord. And that is what all real supplication<sup>15</sup> is. There is far more genuine petitioning of God in seasons of adversity than during times of prosperity; and that is the reason why many a grief-wrung ejaculation,<sup>16</sup> or an inarticulate<sup>17</sup> groan reaches God’s ear, when many a nicely worded and carnally-admired “prayer” never reaches any higher than the ceiling of the room. Read through Psalm 107 and observe the repeated “Then!” When there is a real sense of need, a burdened soul requires no external “helps” as to what to say and how to say it; a cry spontaneously emanates<sup>18</sup> from the stricken soul and wings its way to heaven.

But there was something more than the pitiful state of his son which prompted this petition: the father was conscious that his own unbelief was hindering the desired blessing (or why did he cry out for “help” against it), and that was unbearable. If you had to carry a basket containing some articles which weighed only a few ounces, you would never think of asking someone for a helping hand; but if you were staggering along with a load that weighed twenty or thirty pounds, you would beg assistance—unless you were too proud and independent to seek it. And so it is in heart matters: the more we make conscience of the thoughts and intents of the same, the more we are exercised over that which is disorderly and God-dishonouring. The more we grow in grace, the more keenly we shall feel such irregularities.

Second, consider the *spirituality* of his plea. The more spiritual the soul becomes, the more spiritual are its petitions. It is a sure mark of spiritual immaturity when relief from bodily ailments are more valued by us than deliverance from moral maladies, or when material mercies are prized above an increase of our graces. This man did not cry out, “Lord, heal my son”—that had been *natural*; but “Lord, help mine unbelief”—that was truly *spiritual*. The fact is that many of the most spiritual prayers issue from those who regard themselves as being the least spiritual; yea, who seriously doubt if they have any spirituality at all. Unspiritual souls never pray for help against unbelief. It is much to be thankful for when we are made painfully conscious of our unbelief, for thousands of church-members never are so; and it is a still greater cause for praise when we are honestly burdened thereby, and moved to pray for deliverance.

Third, its *meaning*. This man recognized that the Lord was the only one who could effectually aid him. Ah, it is a grand thing when we are brought to the point where we realize that none but God Himself can subdue the workings of this evil in us. All self-help is vain; all fellow-creatures are powerless to render any relief—they cannot relieve themselves, still less others. Then “Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall *sustain thee*” (Psa 55:22). This man definitely applied to Christ. It is indeed a blessed thing when we are so oppressed by our unbelief that we betake<sup>19</sup> ourselves to the great Physician: so many groan under it, but do no more; others hug it to themselves, and get no further. “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief”: put forth Thy gracious power and subdue this God-dishonouring spirit; enable me to strive against it. Suffer me not to excuse it, or to pity myself for it and fatalistically<sup>20</sup> yield to it. Cause me to regard it as an evil to be hated, an enemy to be resisted, a sin to be confessed.

Fourth, mark its *comprehensiveness*. His petition was exceeding brief, yet it covered much ground. As faith is the root from which all good works proceed, so unbelief is the source of all evil. This is our master sin, “*the sin which doth so easily beset us*” (Heb 12:1). Unbelief is the cause of all our troubles and failures. This is the strategic point where Satan concentrates his forces against us, and therefore it is *here* above all that we need Divine *help*. “Lord, I believe; help thou mine

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<sup>14</sup> **impenitent** – unrepentant.

<sup>15</sup> **supplication** – earnest, humble request or plea.

<sup>16</sup> **ejaculation** – sudden, violent utterance.

<sup>17</sup> **inarticulate** – not able to be expressed understandably.

<sup>18</sup> **emanates** – moves or flows forth.

<sup>19</sup> **betake** – commit.

<sup>20</sup> **fatalistically** – regarding every event as unavoidable.

unbelief”: Lord, I do expect Thee to undertake for me, yet I am not able to exclude all doubting; I am persuaded of Thy power and pity, but enable me to rely upon Thee more fully and constantly.

## The Plea

We turn now to *the Plea* which accompanied this prayer for help, for so we may legitimately regard these words, “Lord, I believe.” His cry for divine assistance, accompanied by an humble confession, was made on this ground: because I believe, Lord, take pity upon me and subdue mine unbelief. To obtain the granting of our petition it must be backed up by some valid and suitable argument. Prayer is something more than presenting a request to God; it is *pleading with Him*, presenting some reason why He should grant that for which we ask. There are various pleas we may make; such as, because I am in deep need of the same, because Thou hast promised to supply it, because it will be for Thy glory to do so; for Christ’s sake. This is what the Lord means when He says, “Produce your cause, saith the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob” (Isa 41:21).

First, then, this plea was a *necessary* one, for God will not hear an unbeliever. “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb 11:6). “Lord, I believe,” not as I would do, nor as I should do; yet I deny not Thy existence, I question not the verity<sup>21</sup> of Thy Word, I am persuaded Thou canst not lie, I doubt not Thy power, Thy goodness, Thy mercy. I *believe*, though feebly, haltingly, spasmodically.<sup>22</sup> I appeal to Thee, O Thou Searcher of hearts: Thou seest the little spark of fire beneath the smouldering flax, the flicker of faith behind the clouds of unbelief. Ah, is it not at this point we so often fail: when presenting our petitions we must *accompany them with suitable pleas*, for then God sees we are in earnest. Study carefully Christ’s prayer in John 17 and observe how each request is supported by a reason or plea—either before or after, in the words “that,” “for,” etc.

Second, it is an *instructive* plea. What valuable teaching is there here for those who desire to pray aright! In our ignorance and foolishness, *we* had probably concluded that such a prayer as this man made was unsuitable and unseemly—a contradiction in terms. It is recorded for our learning. One great lesson it inculcates<sup>23</sup> is that we ought never to look on our graces without also viewing our infirmities; nor should we confess our sins without also owning the Spirit’s fruit in us. For example, if I am made sensible of my deep need of more humility, when asking God for the same, I should acknowledge my pride; contrariwise, when confessing my pride, I should thank God for humbling my heart to do so. If I am begging for more patience and submission, I must confess my self-will and fractiousness;<sup>24</sup> yet also thank God for making me feel my need of the opposites.

Third, it was an *acceptable* plea. God is pleased when His people own their relationship to Him, pleading that they are His children, and acknowledging the Spirit’s work within. It is a false and reprehensible<sup>25</sup> humility which refuses so to do. Observe the example of David: “O *my* God, I *trust* in thee: let not mine enemies triumph over me” (Psa 25:2); “In thee, O LORD, *do I* put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness” (Psa 31:1); “Preserve my soul; *for I am holy*: O thou my God, save thy servant that *trusteth* in thee” (Psa 86:2). Observe how Asaph pleaded with God the relationship which Israel sustained to Him: “Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old” (Psa 74:2). This is the very ground taken by our great High Priest when interceding for His people: “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; *for they are thine*” (Joh 17:9). We, then, shall pray acceptably if we plead “Lord, I am Thine, undertake for me; I am a believer, subdue mine unbelief.”

Fourth, it was a *prevailing* plea. Of course it was: had not Christ said, “If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth” (Mar 9:23). This dear man’s petition gained the day: the Lord undertook for him, and his poor son was made whole. When we really believe, the battle is half, nay nine-tenths, won. It all turns upon that: it is the prayer of faith which gains the ear and moves the hand of God. Hence, when we read of Abraham that “he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom 4:20), *we* should cry “Lord, *I believe*, help thou mine unbelief.” As we read, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not; and it *shall* be given him” (Jam 1:5), *we* should cry “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief,” for it is written, “but let him *ask in faith* nothing wavering” (Jam 1:6).

## Applications

We may apply our text to those *seeking salvation*. There may be a reader of this article who is halting between two opinions. He is convinced that Christ alone can meet his needs and satisfy his soul, yet he finds it so hard to give up the world and abandon his idols. He knows full well that in Christ alone is eternal life to be found, yet Satan still has such a hold upon

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<sup>21</sup> **verity** – enduring truth.

<sup>22</sup> **spasmodically** – fitfully; intermittently.

<sup>23</sup> **inculcates** – teaches and impresses, often by repetition.

<sup>24</sup> **fractiousness** – a cross or snappish temper.

<sup>25</sup> **reprehensible** – deserving rebuke; blameworthy.

him that he cannot surrender to the Lord Jesus and forsake the pleasures of sin. Then come to Him and say, “Lord, I believe; *help thou* mine unbelief.” Or, it may be, he feels himself to be such a godless wretch that he fears his case is hopeless: having sinned so grievously against light and privileges, he dares not venture upon the Gospel promises. Come to Christ and cry from the heart, “Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

Our text may be applied unto *God’s providences*. The Christian can say “the LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psa 23:1), yet when circumstances seem to be all against him, he is unable to appropriate the blessed truth that God shall supply all his need (Phi 4:19). Fearful that he shall come to abject destitution,<sup>26</sup> he is unable to fully trust the Lord. Then come to Christ and say, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” Many a one can say I am sure that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28) means what it says, yet there are some things in his circumstances which he finds exceedingly difficult to believe will issue in real good for him. Instead of submitting to God’s disposing<sup>27</sup> will, he is often full of rebellion; instead of kissing the rod, he finds himself kicking against it. Then come to Christ and say, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

Our text may be applied to *personal assurance*. How many a Satan-harassed believer is exclaiming, I greatly fear that I cannot be among the saved, for if I were, I surely would not sin as I do. In view of the raging of my lusts, the frequency of which they overcome my every effort to resist them, it would be presumptuous to affirm that the reigning power of sin was dethroned within *me*. My friend, David cried “iniquities prevail against me” (Psa 65:3). But you say, My heart is such a sink of iniquity, I dare not claim to be regenerated; often I do not loathe sin, nor even desire to. Ah, but it is not always thus: are not such seasons followed by contrition and confession!? Yes, you say, but right after I fall again into the mire, sometimes deeper than before; ah, but do you *stay* there? Do you completely abandon the Throne of Grace? Does not a cry of distress go up from you to God? Then *continue* crying “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” May God add His blessing to this sermon for His name’s sake.



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<sup>26</sup> **abject destitution** – extreme poverty.

<sup>27</sup> **disposing** – regulating; setting in order.