

Willingness To Believe

Cultivating a Ready Heart

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A commercial plays on the radio several times a day here in Charlotte, and I am sure that it runs in other places too, because this company is nationwide. The first part of it goes something like this: "We Americans are a bunch of cynics. What else could we be when we're told that we'll be prosecuted if we remove a tag from our mattress, that we've already won ten million dollars, that our favorite singer is still alive, that our purchases are a hundred percent guaranteed, that we'll get excellent customer service."

The commercial is right, you know. We are a bunch of cynics. We have a hard time believing anything because we have been given so many promises, and they have been unfulfilled so often.

A cynical person is one who has a sneering distrust or disbelief in something. Someone tells him something, and he immediately does not give it any credence whatsoever. One becomes this way by being burned after placing one's trust in a person or an idea or an institution. If it happens enough times, then anytime something like that comes up, we have a sneering disregard for it, a sneering disbelief. It is easy to become cynical if you are constantly being disappointed or deceived.

If we are not cynical, we are probably skeptical. Skepticism is somewhat different from cynicism. Cynicism tends to have a little rougher edge to it. Skepticism is an attitude of doubt or a disposition of incredulity toward something, meaning you are disposed not to believe. It is an unwillingness to commit to a thing because one feels uncertain that all the relevant facts are known. You are a skeptic because you think, "There's something I'm missing here, and I'm not going to say yes to this, or commit to this, because I don't know all the details here. There might be something that I'm missing, and I'd better not step into this, whatever it happens to be, until I get all the facts."

Now a certain amount of skepticism is healthy so that unscrupulous people do not hoodwink us. We do not want to have the wool pulled over our eyes and have something happen to us or to our families, or to our bank account, or what have you, that will cause problems. But religious skepticism becomes a real problem once we are called and converted.

I am concerned that some of us are losing our credulity toward God. Most people do not use the word "credulity" very much, and over the passage of time the word has taken on

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a meaning that someone is over-believing, that someone is too apt to believe, too ready to believe, and is therefore gullible. The original idea of credulity is that someone is willing to believe, or ready to believe, and it did not have a negative connotation, but it had a more positive one.

Do you know that in religious circles we have a thing called "a creed"? The word "creed" is simply an English version of the word *credo*, which means, "We believe." And so credulity, having that lineage, means that we are believing. What I am talking about today is our willingness to believe God. I am talking about our credulity toward God—we have a willing attitude to believe Him and not a skeptical one nor a cynical one.

There is a lot of information out there that is available to us, both religious and secular. I would be interested to find out how many religious organizations are on the web, because that information is only a click away, and they come at you with far different beliefs from the church's. Our ability to be hoodwinked, or to go after these beliefs that are contrary to what God says, is rather high in these times. I am afraid that this onslaught of information and ideas has made some of us jaded, that we have become hardened and callused to the point that we even made God go through hoops to persuade us. That is not what He wants.

It is good to determine what is true. That is good. That is something we must do, but a calloused skeptical attitude is not one that God desires in us, and especially He does not want us to put Him through hoops to convince us to do something that He says.

This is a topic in which there has to be an understanding that the balance between two extremes is what we are looking for. Finding that balance could be very tricky, and it might take a while, it might take some experience. On the other hand we might need to get burned once or twice before we find just where we should be between this credulity and skepticism. Somewhere being between blown about by every wind of doctrine and total hardness of heart is where we have got to be.

But that is a wide spectrum between being blown about, being gullible with everything that comes up, to, on the other hand being so hardened so that nothing fazes you, and you just stubbornly do what you want to do. Somewhere in there is a godly attitude toward new ideas, new information, and truth. My concern today is for those who have lost the ability to believe even the simple truth without a mountain of truth to back them up. My concern is for those who have lost their credulity, their willingness to believe, and who will no longer take anything on faith.

Some will say (and I am sure they will after hearing this sermon), that I only took one

side of the issue, and that is true. I will only take one side of the issue. Maybe in another sermon I will try to tackle the other side about being too credulous. What I want to do here is find out what God wants us to be, as far as this topic goes, and how willing He wants us to believe Him.

We are going to start in Luke 18:1. This is the Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge. We have to understand this parable in context. If we do not understand where Jesus said this parable, we will miss the point, especially for this sermon. In Luke 17:20, He is giving a prophecy about how things will be at the end time right before His return.

He tells His disciples that things would be going along as normal, and then suddenly things will break out. He tells His disciples that they will need to be ready to act quickly to what is going on around them. They are told to leave everything, to drop everything, and do what God wants them to do. This is the famous "top, not come down" scripture. "If you're on the housetop, don't come down. Just get going and do what God wants you to do."

He then goes on and talks about how they have to be ready to be separated from their closest friends and companions and family members during this time, because God might require them to lose one or more of their close friends, intimate family members, and go do His work, or just be separated from them. We have often thought that maybe this separation will occur, that one would go to the place of safety, and one will not. But it could happen at other times too. That is the context that He goes into in this parable. He is talking about what it is going to be like at the end time.

Luke 18:1 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.

What Jesus is telling them here in this parable is a way to make it through this situation that will occur in the end time, not only to get to that point, but to get *through* that point. So this is how we survive an end time that is full of deceptions and full of activity and full of things just going on that maybe we all cannot keep straight. Not only that, but we also have the stresses of leaving everything behind. We have the stresses of even maybe leaving our loved ones behind, and this is the way we get through this. We have to learn to always pray and not to lose heart.

We know the parable. The lady went to the judge time and time again to get her case heard, and finally he heard her case because she just kept pestering him.

Luke 18:6-8a Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily."

But God is even better than this unjust judge. This judge had to be pestered, and pestered, and pestered, and pestered, and finally he gave in. But God is even better than that. He does not have to be pestered that much. God will avenge us speedily.

Luke 18:8b "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

It seems kind of interesting to me that this goes on the heels of what He had just said, that if we go on and keep on praying, and we do not lose heart, that God will avenge us speedily. And then He seems to turn around and say, "Will I find faith?" "Will people really believe Me when I come back, or will they have left the truth and gone back to the vomit?" (as Peter puts it).

Verse one says that "we ought to pray always and not lose heart." The two words in Greek—"not lose heart"—is interesting. Most scholars say that this means that they are not to become discouraged, or that they should not grow weary. It literally means "that they won't give in to evil." That is very interesting. I do not know why they did not translate it this way in the first place. That is what He is talking about. He is not just talking about giving up. He is talking about giving in, and that is why we need to pray always so that we have that connection with God.

We would give in because we have become discouraged. That is all part of it, but He is worried that we will totally leave Him. That is why He said at the end, "When I come back, will there be faith?" "Will there be faithful people?" "Will there be believers for Me to come back to?" because He is reflecting on the times that He just talked about, how tough it is going to be.

It is going to take a people that are praying always and hanging on for all of their worth to show the faith that is going to be needed to get through those times. So He asks, "When I return, how many will have given up and returned to what they believed before?" Remember, this sermon is about being willing to believe God, being ready to believe Him and His Word, and Jesus is here saying, "How many are going to fail this test and not believe?" He was concerned about this.

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Let us go back to Matthew 24 because the Olivet Prophecy is just full of warnings of this same type, of about how bad it is going to be at the end, how many deceivers there will be, and how the church is going to be pummeled in this area of belief.

Matthew 24:3-5 Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered and said to them: Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying I am the Christ, and will deceive many.

The first seal of religious deception opened up. This has been going on since from before He died, it seems, that there have been counterfeits, that Satan has tried one way or another to deceive the elect through false Christs and false religions. And then we go down in time.

Go to verse 10. This seems to be in our time or maybe just off into the near future.

Matthew 24:10 And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.

That is just added on to the things we saw there in Luke 17.

Matthew 24:11 Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

It is interesting that at the end time, even though there were many false prophets throughout the time between His death and now, there will be many false prophets around. There is not just going to be *one* false prophet at the end that we have to watch out for—the right-hand man, the sidekick of the Beast—but there are going to be many false prophets trying to bend your ear, to turn you away from the truth.

Matthew 24:12 And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

Here is another way to be turned off by the iniquities and the sins that are in the world and in the church, by people not following the law. Does that ring a bell for those of you who have left the Worldwide Church of God? What was it that the Worldwide Church of

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God got rid of? The law. It was all *grace, grace, grace*, and *love, love, love*. And where was God's law? It was thrown in the trash bin. They became *lawless*, and deceived many. When you throw the law out, love disappears, and you cease being God's children. That is another way to fall.

Matthew 24:13 But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

We have to hold on. It is an endurance match, not a sprint. We have to be the plodders who just keep on like the tortoise. Go one foot ahead of the other, and keep on believing. Those are the people that will make it to the end.

Matthew 24:23-24 Then if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "There!" Do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, . . .

Now they have miracles backing them up. How hard is it going to be to not follow those things if we see people being healed or demons cast out, or signs and wonders of one stripe or another happening around a certain person? That can turn peoples' heads pretty quickly.

Look what the very next phrase says.

Matthew 24:24b . . . so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

Do you think we are immune? I do not think so. Every one of us has a button that can be pushed, that we will be sorely tempted to let go of the truth and leave God. We have got to be careful. None of us is above that. We can be above that if we are faithful, if we are believing, but if we let down, it becomes possible for us to be deceived.

I am not discounting the toughness of the times. I know what people are up against when these new and various doctrines come up. It is hard to remain a believer in this day and age, but *belief* is the name of our game. That is what we are. We are *believers*, and God's standard is that we believe Him with our whole heart, without reservation, holding fast to the truth in whatever circumstance arises, and no matter what it costs us. We believe, even if it costs us our life, and as the apostles told us it has, because we are to make ourselves *living sacrifices*. Because we have believed, we have given our life to God and this way of life. It is our job to believe. That is what we do, and we are

not supposed to stop.

Jesus, even after His resurrection, was very concerned about this among His disciples. In a way He was discouraged by what He saw, because He had given them prophecy after prophecy, and warning after warning. He had shown them in the Scriptures what was going to happen, and what did they do? They forsook Him when He was taken, and then after He arose they did not believe that He had risen from the dead.

Go now to Luke 24. This is on the road to Emmaus. The two disciples are talking to Him. They do not know that He is who He is, but they are telling Him what had happened.

Luke 24:22-24 "Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see."

Now they had just told Him all these things, and it was very apparent that there was plenty of proof there for them to believe. What does Jesus say?

Luke 24:25-26 Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?"

"Didn't you get it? Why are you so slow to believe what I say?" He was discouraged. He rebukes them for their unbelief. And so in verse 27 He has to start at Moses and go through the entire Old Testament to show them what it was that had happened, and how He had fulfilled all those prophecies. They were right on the scene, and they were skeptical. It is really amazing.

Go now to Mark 16 to where a similar situation happened. This time it is with the apostles, and not just with these two disciples. These are the ones that He had picked to be the leaders in the church, and they showed the same unwillingness to believe.

Mark 16:14 Afterward He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.

The reason He gives here is not that they did not believe the Scriptures, they did not even believe their own brethren in the church who had eyewitness testimony that He had indeed risen from the dead. They should have believed them. That is what friends and brothers do.

You can see that our Savior is not very big on skeptics, especially when it is been very plainly put to us what it is that He requires, what it is that He wants us to know. It is not that hard, but we have, as the Old Testament says, foreheads of flint. We have stiff necks, and as we have just seen, hardness of heart. We are unwilling to believe. That is a human condition. It is not just us. It takes a long time for the Spirit of God to break through our defenses, because we are, so it seems, naturally skeptical. But once we are converted, that should go away. We should be willing to believe what God says.

Go now to John 20 to another incident of the same stripe. This has to do with Thomas.

John 20:24-25 But Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

He demanded the ultimate proof. "I want to see Him. I want to touch Him, and until that time I am going to stubbornly deny what you've said. I will deny everything you told me, and everything you've seen." Even though there were ten men there, plus others who had seen Him already, Thomas had a very stubborn streak. Now, it is good to want proof. Thomas had another very good quality in that once things were proven to him he was stubbornly going to hang onto them, but at this point, when all the proof was leaning in one direction, he was not showing the readiness of heart, the willingness of heart to believe that he should have.

John 20:26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"

Not only is He going to allow Thomas to do these things, He is going to just appear suddenly in a house where the doors were shut, the windows were closed, as if He had walked right through the walls. He is going to pile the proof on for Thomas.

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John 20:27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

Take it personally. Do not be a skeptic. Be a believer.

John 20:28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

I guess Jesus finally got through Thomas' skeptical defenses.

John 20:29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Which is better? To see and believe, or to not see and believe? Jesus obviously gives us a very pointed answer. It is better not to have seen, and believe. To take something on faith is better than to have mounds of proof before we are willing to believe something God has said.

Let us go to II Corinthians 4. This has been a persistent problem in the church. People have been unwilling to believe, and it gets especially worse when there are stresses and persecutions and trials going on. It is easy to believe in the good times, but when things start getting rough, people start edging away from the truth. It is not that they want to. They do not consciously back away, but because of the situation, they find themselves backing away because it is too tough. Evidently the Corinthians, or Paul at least, was experiencing stresses here, and so he is trying to help the Corinthians through this.

II Corinthians 4:12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.

What Paul is talking about is that he has a death sentence over him just about wherever he goes, but he is saying that what this does is it is producing eternal life in the people of God through his preaching. Because he is out there being an apostle and doing all those things, he is having to face these stresses, but what it produces is eternal life in the people.

II Corinthians 4:13 But since we have the same spirit of faith, according to

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what is written, "*I believed and therefore I spoke*," we also believe and therefore speak, . . .

That was Paul's attitude. He is saying that you and I have this same spirit, and what it does is, that if you are in this same spirit of faith, if you believe something God says, it is going to come out in the minister in words, in what he preaches and administers. In lay people—in **all** believers—it is not only going to come in as belief, but it is going to go out in practice. He could just as easily have said, "I believed, and therefore I did. I obeyed." Paul is trying to get something across to them here.

II Corinthians 4:13-14 . . . we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you.

He is saying, "We can do this no matter what kind of stresses are around us, who's chasing us with an ax or a big pile of rocks, because we know that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will, if God certainly may allow the ax to chop my head off, or the rocks to crush me and I die, raise me from the dead. I know that I'll be raised. And not only will I be raised, but I'll be raised when you'll be raised. I'll be raised with you." And so there is no fear. Sure, there is certainly the human fear of death, but we have this hope that goes before us that allows us to shrug those things off and do what God says, because we know that God raised Jesus from the dead, and He can raise us up too. We have just read that there in Luke, Mark, and John that God raised Jesus from the dead, and He can raise us up too.

II Corinthians 4:16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.

That is the prayer that Jesus said in that parable in Luke 18.

II Corinthians 4:17 For our light affliction . . .

Maybe he was minimizing this, but he was showing the weight of affliction versus the goal on the other side.

II Corinthians 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is

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working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, . . .

It is so much better what we are going toward than this little gnat in our face that is bothering us.

II Corinthians 4:18 . . . while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Is that not interesting? That is the same thing Jesus said to Thomas, but just put in a different way. If we believe when we have not seen, it is far better than to require this mountain of physical proof. We are looking for the things that are eternal—things that are not seen. If we get this attitude that we have to have all this proof on every little thing, it is going to slow us down. It is going to impede our growth. It may even stop our growth altogether, depending upon the conclusions we reach. God wants a willing heart in us to believe Him.

II Corinthians 5:7 For we walk by faith, not by sight.

Faith and belief are two sides of the same coin. We walk by what we believe. We live our lives according to what we believe, by those unseen things that are eternal, not by the things that we see around us, the circumstances we see around us. In this way, if our eyes are on the goal (it is kind of ironic to say if our eyes are on the things that we cannot see), we will be saved.

There are other things that are eternal other than the truth. One is our character. Our salvation is eternal, and of course eternal life is eternal. God's righteousness is eternal. God's faithfulness is eternal. Those are the things that guarantee that we will be okay if we keep our eyes on them. Some may say this is blind faith, and in a way it seems like it, because it is something you cannot see. Is that not what happens when you are blind? You cannot see. But that cannot be true in this spiritual case.

If you want a definition of blind faith, it is *trusting or believing without any proof*. That is certainly not what we have with God. If we believe that God is, that He fulfills His promises, and that we have committed ourselves fully to Him and to His way of life, that is all the proof we need. God Himself is the guarantee of our belief. Because God is, we believe. That may sound kind of esoteric. It is not.

Let us go to Hebrews 6. Paul lays it out here so simply. At least to my mind it is very simple what Paul says here. Remember he is talking to these Hebrews who were slipping away. They were slowly neglecting their salvation. They were allowing things to occur that were dragging them away from the truth, and Paul was trying to rescue them, to bring them back from the brink.

Hebrews 6:11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end.

This may seem like a mouthful, but all he is saying is, "We expect and want each one of you to make it, to be fully assured, to have the same diligence, to endure and be saved."

Hebrews 6:12 That you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Later in chapter 11 he gave the examples of all those people of faith who he said have inherited the promises, and who will inherit them with us. He says we need to imitate these people.

Now we get into the meat of this. He is talking about the promises and how we can be sure that they are going to be fulfilled.

Hebrews 6:13-16 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.

When men have a contract, let us say, and it is bound by an oath, that is the end of the matter. Case solved. Everything is going to go through exactly as the contract says. It is bound by an oath, and both sides are bound to do their part.

Hebrews 6:17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, . . .

God did not have to make an oath to show that His promises were going to be fulfilled,

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but He did it for our sake so that we would understand that He is not going to go back on what He said.

Hebrews 6:18 . . . that by two immutable things . . .

These two immutable things are God's promise and His oath. Not only do we have the original promise, but we have the oath that backs up the promise. Immutable means changeless.

Hebrews 6:18-19 . . . that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil [meaning Christ Himself].

What this passage does is give us three proofs that what God says is true and will come to pass. If we diligently believe and live God's way, and if we endure to the end, we have these three proofs that these things are going to come to pass for us.

Verse 13 is the first proof. God is so sincere about bringing His promises to pass that He made a solemn oath to do it, even though He did not have to. He made an oath. When God swears, that is the end of the matter.

Verse 17 is the second proof. God's nature, His character, is immutable. Remember Malachi 3:6 says, "I change not." Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." This is saying the same thing. God's counsel—His instruction, His words, what He says—is immutable. It does not change. He is the same God that He was in the Old Testament as He is in the New Testament, as He is today, and as He will be millions and billions of years from now. God's counsel does not change. That is the second proof.

Verse 18 is the third proof. God cannot lie. What He says, He does, so we can trust His every word. If we see it, if we read it, if we believe it, and then we act, it is going to happen. It might take some time. It might be a while before the fruit is produced, but it is going to happen. God cannot lie. If He says that He will heal all our diseases and forgive our sins, there you have it, and we can believe it.

Now those sorts of things may not happen in this life. We have come to understand that.

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Sometimes, let us say in the event of healing, it is delayed until the resurrection. But what a wonderful healing that will be. A person dies in pain, or wasted, or in an awful car accident, or by some other means, and the next minute that he is aware, he wakes up with a spirit body and the power of God. What a healing!

God does not look at life like we do, and so we have to understand certain things. Does not God say that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts? Sometimes we are not going to understand just because His ways are so much above our ways. But we can trust Him. We can believe when He says, "I will heal *all* your diseases." That is the end of the matter. He said it. We believe it, and that is great. We can go on in faith and with the hope of attaining those things because Jesus Christ Himself has been raised from the dead and is now there at God's right hand through the veil. He has opened it up for us, and we will follow. That is how it works.

Let us go back to Hebrews 3. Here is an example of people that did not believe: the Israelites. The Israelites are the classic example of a people who had hardness of heart. They had hearts of stone rather than hearts of flesh. Paul is writing to the same Hebrews who were having this problem. He is approaching it from a different angle. Similar, but a little bit different.

Hebrews 3:7-9 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years."

That is amazing! For forty years these people saw miracles, plagues, signs, destruction, opening of the Red Sea, opening of the Jordan River. They saw the Cloud and the Pillar of fire every day. They saw manna come down forty years, and they hardened their hearts and would not believe the words God said. Now Verse 10 becomes understandable.

Hebrews 3:10-11 "Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.' So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.' "

That is it! They are not getting in. The Promised Land is verboten to them. Now Paul comes back with:

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Hebrews 3:12-13 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called Today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

That is where we get this unwillingness to believe. It is the deceitfulness of sin that makes our heart hard and unyielding to God, because sin tries to get us to give in so that we can pamper our flesh in one way or another, or as John says, our mind. "The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of our lives." One way or another sin tries to finagle its way past our defenses to get us not to believe, to give in to evil, and it is deceitful. We sometimes allow it to trick us.

Hebrews 3:14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.

We have been seeing this time and time again; that we are to steadfastly hold on to what we believe all the way to the end. It is an endurance race, a marathon, and we have got to be tough to keep believing what God has said.

Hebrews 3:15-17 While it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For who, having heard, rebelled? [They heard, and they rebelled.] Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? [The answer is yes.] Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned [Yes.], and whose corpses fell in the wilderness?

That is right. God said they were not going to enter His rest. They sinned. They rebelled. They showed their hard hearts, and they died in the wilderness. They did not make it.

Hebrews 3:18 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey?

See, he is making you think: "What do we have to do to make it into God's rest?" The answer is in verse 19.

Hebrews 3:19 So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

What does that mean to us if we are to enter in? We have got to **believe!** What did I say before? I said that belief is not only believing as we think of it in our mind. What did Paul say? He said, "I believed, and thus I spoke," or "I believed, and thus I did. I obeyed." These Israelites did not enter God's rest because they did not believe, and thus they did not obey. Paul is saying that if we want to enter God's rest we have to believe and obey. God's rest is so much greater, because it is not just the physical Promised Land, for us it is the Kingdom of God. We have to believe and obey to enter God's rest.

Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it [like those corpses in the wilderness].

We should have a good bit of healthy fear of not making it, because that will give us motivation to make it, to believe and obey.

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

Moses and Aaron preached until they were blue in the face, and because the people did not believe, it was like falling on deaf ears. They might as well have had no ears for the good it did. Only two out of that entire couple million people made it the whole forty years. It is just incredible. Only two believed.

How many believed Christ? One hundred twenty names, as it says there in Acts. That shows a great deal of hardness of heart, that only 120 would believe. Yes, the church is small, because the same type of percentages work today just as they did back then. To make it into the Kingdom is no easy task. There are hurdles in front of us, and we are currently going through the paces now. If we believe and endure to the end, then we will be saved and make it into His rest, but it is a long journey.

There are some people who believe, or at least they claim to believe, while they are in church, but the actions of their lives throughout the rest of the week seem to say otherwise, and God takes that up in these verses.

Psalms 106:24 Then they despised the pleasant land. . . .

They despised their reward. They despised the Promised Land. They despised where they were going, where they were heading. They did not believe His Word. That is how they showed they despised it, because they did not believe what God said.

Psalm 106:25-27 But murmured in their tents, and did not heed the voice of the LOORD. Therefore He lifted up His hand in an oath against them, to overthrow them in the wilderness, to overthrow their descendants among the nations, and to scatter them in the lands.

Notice the two points that he links here with the Israelites' unbelief. The first one is that they despised the Promised Land, which was their inheritance. It was not good enough for them. They always wanted to go back to Egypt, did they not? The second point is that they complained in the privacy of their own homes where they thought no one could hear them. Sure, they were out there cheering with the best of them when Israel came back with the victory over their enemy, or whatever was happening, that the whole group was together, but when they got back to their tents, they murmured. They showed God that they really did not believe. And so these people who outwardly looked like they were believing were inwardly unbelieving, and they died in the wilderness too, because God sees and hears everything.

Just because we make a good show among the brethren, it does not mean that we fool God one bit. That is why I mentioned earlier that God desires belief from the heart without reservation, no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the cost to ourselves. We are not going to fool God.

Psalm 111 is the starting point for coming to this willing heart of belief.

Psalm 111:10 The fear of the LOORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever.

Did you catch the order of things? *The fear of the LOORD* is the beginning. We have to have a healthy respect and reverence for God. We have got to remember just who He is. We have to remember that He is Eternal, that He is Almighty, that He is all powerful. He is Sovereign over all. He provides everything. He knows everything. He is aware of everything. If we understand these things, if we understand our relationship between big Him and little wee us, because all the power is on His end, we fear. We fear because

we are little, and He is great.

If we begin there, then we start acting in wisdom, because we know that if we step off the line He is powerful enough to give us a pretty good spanking. We understand that He holds in between His fingers life and death, and not just our physical lives either. Our eternal life is our relationship with Him. So that is where we begin.

After we have this understanding of our position relative to Him, then what happens? We get a good understanding, yes, but what has to happen first? We have to do His commandment. We are getting into the belief thing again. Now we understand our position relative to God. We believe, we obey, and then we understand. Is that not interesting? The proof comes **after** we believe. This world wants proof **before** it believes, but it is unwilling to keep God's commandments, and so it never understands. But God says, "You understand where we stand by each other, and you do My commandments, and then you'll understand."

Do you remember Mr. Armstrong writing in his autobiography that he saw in God's Word that there are seven annual holy days, and he said, "We've got to keep them, Loma." Someone could have said, "Well, what do they mean?" "I don't know." He did not know. He kept them, and I believe it was seven years before he got an inkling of what they meant. God tested him for seven years before He revealed the symbolism of those days, and how they showed God's master plan marching through time.

That sort of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding does not come unless you keep the commandments, and you do not keep the commandments unless you believe. He had to start with a heart that was willing to believe what God says in His Word. We cannot get the cart before the horse. It does not work that way with God. First we believe, then we obey, and finally we understand, and it may be a long time before it finally clicks. That is the way faith works. It believes. It acts, and by experience and fruit that is produced, we understand finally. That is just the way it is.

Now we will go back a little further. The father of the faithful—Abraham—in two very clear situations showed the way he acted. He is the human example of our faith. In Genesis 12 God told him, "Abraham, get from your country and go to a land that I will show you." What did Abraham do? Did he say, "Could you please send a travel brochure? I need to see if this is a land that my family and I will really like, and then I'll decide."

No. He got up. He gathered his family and his things, which were considerable, and off he went. It was only later that God revealed why. A few years down the road God

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appeared to him again and said, "Abraham, I know I gave you this boy, but I want you to go to Mount Moriah and put him on top of the altar and slit his throat." Did Abraham say, "Now wait a second! That wasn't part of the original bargain. What is this going to get me if I do this? How do I know that You're going to resurrect this boy?"

What did he do? He saddled the donkey. He took Isaac, and he did it to the point where the knife was flashing down, and God stopped him. That is the way he worked. He believed God when God spoke. He acted upon what God said, and then he understood later on. That is the way it works in faith. We have become very skeptical where we have to have the proof first, even when God speaks, and that is sad.

Go now to Matthew 18 and we will wrap this up.

Matthew 18:1-5 At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."

What does Jesus mean when He says that we have to become like little children? This is the attitude that we need to cultivate in ourselves. Obviously He is making a comparison between adults, which the disciples were, and their yammering for "Who's going to be the big guy around here," and a little child who humbly came when Christ called him.

What was the difference in their attitudes? Christ gives it one word. Humility. But think about this difference between adults and children. Adults are jaded. They are sophisticated. They are set in their ways in many cases. They have gone down the road. They are experienced. They have been tricked before. They are cynical. They are skeptical. They are proud. They are ambitious. They want to be "top dog."

Notice in this scripture that this was a little child. Children, when they are little, have a natural humility when they are among adults. They defer to adults. They are often very quiet and let the adults handle things, because they are smaller. They are less knowledgeable. They understand the difference between themselves and adults. Adults can smash them. Adults can spank them. Adults can dismiss them. Adults can do all kinds of stuff that kids cannot do, and so little children tend to have this natural

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reticence, a humility. Because of this they are teachable when adults speak.

Children are willing to believe what adults say, because adults have been around the block. Do not adults know? The kid does not know. You can ask a kid, "How do you change a tire?" The kid is going to say, "I don't know. I've never changed a tire before, but I know that my dad has." And so the dad goes out and teaches the boy how to change a tire on the car, and the boy listens because he is teachable. He is willing to sit there and to have instruction given to him because he knows that when he gets older he wants to have a car too, and when you have a car you are sometimes going to have to change a tire.

Kids tend to be teachable, where adults have to be convinced. They have to be persuaded. There has to be something in it for them before they will lend an ear.

Children are willing to believe what they are told, whereas adults tend to doubt first and want proof. Christ says it is this child-like humble attitude of being willing to hear and to be content with our place that a child has, to become one of His brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of God.

So what are we, as members of God's church, as brothers and sisters of that Savior? Are we jaded, sophisticated, skeptical, hard, calloused? Is our first reaction, "Oh yeah?" "Prove it." "Show me." I know we have a lot of members that are "Show Me" Staters, but that is really not a Missouri trait. That is an American trait, and it is probably more than that. It is probably a human trait. When we get to be an adult, we tend to want to have things proven to us before we give our consent.

Are we more like a child, like this little child here in Matthew 18? Are we willing to believe? Are we open to God's instruction? Are we tender and yielded to the Potter's hand? Are we like the Bereans of Acts 17:11 who it is said were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica? They had a noble mind. They were willing to believe, but they were also willing to go and search the Scriptures daily to find out whether Paul was telling them the truth.

They had a positive, willing attitude to what God was saying to them through the apostle Paul. Now they are memorialized for all time as an example to us of the way we should be when we hear the truth of God. Do we have a ready mind, a willing attitude, a credulity toward God, that we are willing to believe anything He says, and do it? We should be. That is the way God likes it.

We will close in Luke 8:8. This is Luke's version of the Parable of the Sower. This is

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actually the explanation of the parable.

Luke 8:8 But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold. [These are the good ones, the ones with the proper example.] When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

This is important for those who are willing to believe, willing to listen to Christ. This is the explanation from Jesus' own lips.

Luke 8:15 But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart [a virtuous and generous heart, a willing heart to entertain the truth], keep it, . . .

Notice that. It is not just that they heard, but they keep it. That means they obey it. They hold on to it.

Luke 8:15 . . . and bear fruit with patience.

We sincerely desire to be good ground for Christ, bearing fruit a hundredfold toward God's Kingdom, and this is how we do it. We hear God's Word with a noble heart. We keep it. We do it. And then we grow.