

IS IT MORE THAN ILLUSION?

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Exodus 3:1-6; 1 Peter 3:8-16

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This is the first time I've introduced a sermon series when giving the third sermon. Palm Sunday focused on *What Did Christ Claim?* Easter was *What Did Christ Change?* Both weeks we discussed "*What Do You Believe?*" and considered the reason for faith. In life we often plunge into something and then come back up for perspective. That's what we are doing today.

All of us go through different stages of faith. There is *indifference*. "Don't bother me. I know what I believe and I don't care what you think." The only way indifferent people grow is in spite of themselves. If you are indifferent, you'll be challenged in this series; and you may grow in spite of yourself. Stage two is *inquisitive*. Inquisitive people search for truth. Some are skeptics who don't believe. Some are believers who accept certain teachings of Christ and struggle with others. They have difficulty reconciling their faith with what they observe in life and may waver between belief and unbelief. Some inquisitive people are committed believers who hunger and thirst to know more. They are *inquisitive*, but they're better described as *infectious*. Infectious Christians have experienced things because of their faith. They have been helped, they hunger to know more, and they want to help others. If you are *inquisitive* or *infectious*, you will be excited about the help and direction this series offers you.

We all need help and direction because frequently we don't know what we believe. We have feelings rather than convictions. "*I feel good about that. I feel uneasy about that.*" There is a

reason behind each feeling. When you identify the reason, you expose what you really believe. During this series, you'll uncover what you believe. You will verbalize, put to words, the beliefs that influence every move you make.

Abraham understood that beliefs influence the moral behavior of a society. He feared barbarianism in Egypt because they didn't fear God. Abraham's own beliefs led him to take great risks in leaving his homeland, but his doubts and fears led him to lie and risk the life of his wife in barbaric Egypt. **His views of God dominated his life and behavior.** Similarly, our faith and doubts dominate our lives. What then are those beliefs and doubts? Are our views about God accurate? Is your life constructed on truth or myth? What reason is behind your faith or doubt?

Once a 13-year-old girl in Confirmation told me that she believed in Jesus because I'm a nice guy she could trust. It's affirming to be called nice, but what about the nice atheist, Buddhist or Moslem? The Apostle Peter wrote that we should always be ready to give a **REASON** for the hope within us. Reason implies that there is logic behind our hope. What's your hope and what's your reason?

Did you ever hear about the great canals on the planet Mars? Sir Percival Lovell was the astronomer who discovered them. He spent years squinting into the eyepiece of his giant telescope in Arizona, mapping them. Years ago when space probes orbited Mars and mapped its surface, they found no canals. Do you know what the astronomer saw? Lovell suffered from an eye disease that made him see the blood vessels in his own eyes. The canals and channels he so meticulously mapped were the results of his illness, now called "*Lovell's Syndrome.*"

Even as Lovell's disease clouded his grasp of reality, a spiritual disease affects us. St. Paul wrote of his unbelieving colleagues and friends:

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read... Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their

hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:14-15)

Paul concludes a chapter later in 2 Corinthians:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot SEE the light of the gospel... (2 Corinthians 4:4)

I've discovered that you cannot argue people to faith. I cannot convince you of something you don't want to believe. If you suffer from the syndromes of pride and bitterness, it doesn't matter how good the logic is. That is why Jesus said:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him... It is written in the Prophets, "They will all be taught by God." Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. (John 6:44-45)

Jesus said again:

No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. (John 6:65)

A spiritual conflict must be won to believe. God in his mercy must enable us, or we won't believe. If you struggle with faith, you need more than reason. You need a spiritual light to shine in your darkness. Even people who saw Jesus do great things didn't believe.

If you have a child or friend who doesn't believe in Christ, it's not that they need someone to better explain things. They need healing from a syndrome that interferes with their spiritual vision. You will not come to God because of your ability to reason. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians asked, "**Where is the scholar?**" No one believed because of scholarship. Paul wrote, "**Where is the philosopher of this age? Where is the wise man?**" Truth is not simply a matter of reason! It requires a gift, a grace. Why? First, truth in a relationship requires revelation. Each party must disclose himself to the other. Second, blind people need help. The human family is blind. We've sinned. We're destructive. Our reasoning is skewed. You will come to God when in his mercy, he gives you the power to humble yourself and be taught of God. God

gives grace to the humble. He resists the proud. **Pride not reasonable doubt is the primary barrier to faith in God.**

Paul's pride was stripped when in mercy a lightning bolt robbed him of his physical sight. Only then could this great and devout rabbi be taught of God. In the same way, Peter said:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...

There is no place for pride in sharing the truth because *true faith comes not from reason but from realization!* Believers answer questions not because of superior knowledge, but because they have received an undeserved gift. For Moses faith was a gift that came from God disclosing himself in the oddity of a burning bush.

Because God is reasonable, the Christian faith is reasonable; *but the Christian faith is not achieved by reason. It is received through revelation.* The Gospel is good news about a God who cares enough about you and me that he has acted to reveal himself.

During a blizzard a farmer heard a thud on his picture window. It happened again and again, and he realized that birds caught in the storm were trying to get in. He closed the curtains so they would stop, but he realized they were going to die without shelter. He bundled up, went outside, propped open the barn door and turned on a light; but they wouldn't go in. He tried to scare them in. They wouldn't go. He put seed and bread out, but he couldn't entice them. His heart was full of compassion, and he racked his brain for a way to save them. The thought came, *"If I became a bird like them so they would no longer fear me, I could lead them in."* In that instant, with wind stinging his face, snow blinding his eyes and birds nearing their death, that farmer became a believer. He realized what God had done for him in Jesus. God became one of us to save us. He wept and wept. He now realized God's great love for him.

Have you realized God's great love for you? I don't know what's happened in your life? I do know that God is reaching out to you to reveal himself. Don't let pride or bitterness cloud your vision. He loves you. Let Jesus take your hand and lead you to safety and freedom.