Why Men Do Not Believe

Paul, in writing to the Thessalonians, asked the brethren to "pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith." (2 Thess. 3:2 NAS) The question I want to deal with in this article is why men do not believe. This is a question that has bothered me over the years, for it seems only natural to believe. Yet, I cannot deny what is obvious to all, just as Paul said, "not all have faith." What does the Bible have to say about the reasons for unbelief?

Paul said of himself, in talking about his past, how he was a persecutor of Christians, and then says, "I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief." (1 Tim. 1:13 NAS) Thus, there was a time in Paul's life when he was an unbeliever. Yet Paul, then known as Saul, was an honest man, for he said, as recorded by Luke in Acts 23:1, while he stood before the Council or Sanhedrin, that "I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day" (NAS) or, as the NKJV puts it, "in all good conscience."

It would be easy to say unbelievers are all dishonest, but that will not work. Paul's case proves just the opposite. Paul, or Saul, was present from the very beginning of the Christian religion. In Acts 7, we are told that those who stoned Stephen "laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul." (Acts 7:58 NAS) And then we read in chapter 8, the first verse, that "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death." (NAS) This was in the earliest days of Christianity.

One wonders why Saul was blinded to the miracles that were occurring in Jerusalem. Working back from Acts chapter 7, back from the time of Stephen's stoning, we find in Acts 6:8, "Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people." (NAS) The footnote to verse 8 in the NAS says "attesting miracles." Even earlier in Acts 5:12, we are told, "By the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people." (NKJV) Is it likely that Saul was totally ignorant of these events, of what had been going on? Read also Acts 5:15-16. Was he unaware of how Ananias and Sapphira had been miraculously struck down? Was he unaware of Peter healing the lame man at the temple gate in Acts 3? Was he unaware of the veil of the temple being rent on the day of Christ's crucifixion? Were the priests denying that? More questions could be asked.

It is highly unlikely that Saul was totally unaware of everything that had been transpiring. He says in Acts 22:3 that he was raised in Jerusalem. That does not necessarily imply he was an eyewitness to everything that went on there, but one is reminded of what Cleopas said to Jesus, unknowingly, on the road to Emmaus, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" (Luke 24:18 NAS) That was said before the disciples generally knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, but one wonders if much the same could not be said of Saul in the days of which we speak. Are you the only one who does not know of the miraculous events occurring here in the name of Jesus Christ?

Yet, Saul was an honest unbeliever. My point is this: here we have a man with a world of evidence before him, but he is not willing to accept it. Why not? How do we explain it? I cannot explain it except for one statement that Paul made later.

I refer to Gal. 1:13-14, "For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." (NAS) Vine says the Greek word here for zealous means "an uncompromising partisan." Thayer says "one burning with zeal." Not just zealous but burning with zeal.

With unbelievers who are extremely zealous, even in their error, their misguided zeal blinds the mind and heart to the extent that even miracles have no effect upon them. Those who were responsible for crucifying Jesus were aware he had raised Lazarus from the dead and that he had done "many signs" (John 11:43-47). Paul, evidently, was of that type of unbeliever for a time. No doubt, this is one reason it is so hard to convert one who holds false doctrine zealously. It seems they are untouchable with the truth; they are truly blind.

Paul says in Rom. 10:2 of his fellow countrymen, "I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." (NAS) They were where he once was—religious but unbelievers—zealots. The Bible teaches that zeal itself is not a bad thing (Gal. 4:18); it is good, but it must be based on knowledge.

Looking back over all of this, the one lesson that ought to be burned into our minds is that zeal does not make right. Zeal proves nothing about truth or error. The Catholics were zealous centuries ago, while burning men and women at the stake, just as Saul was in agreeing that Stephen ought to be put to death. ISIS was zealous in its radical Islamist beliefs while slitting men's throats in Syria some years back. Zeal is no measure of truth.

Extreme zeal blinds. It gives one tunnel vision, all the while destroying one's ability to reason. Many hold to atheism with extreme zeal, along with the theory of evolution, especially in the academic world. The Nazis of Germany of WW II come to mind as another example. People often have extreme zeal for whatever they believe in, resulting in the truth being hidden from them.

We also learn from Paul's case that truth is not dependent on my feelings about it. I may be totally opposed to the truth in all good conscience, but that will not turn my error into the truth, nor will it transform the truth into error. Jacob believed a lie and was sure Joseph was dead upon seeing the blood-stained robe of many colors (Gen. 37:33). His feelings did not make the error true. Trust your feelings and you risk your eternal life. "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool." (Prov. 28:26 NKJV) We must trust what God's word says and not our feelings about it.

Yet, I think there is little doubt that in religion today, feelings generally prevail over what is plainly recorded in scripture. How I feel about an issue is what matters. It is also what will destroy. It is what God says about an issue that counts, not how I feel about it.

Too many of us want to tell God how he ought to view matters, view them the way we think he ought to.

Men also fail to believe when their minds will not allow them to think otherworldly. The truth is incomprehensible to them, beyond belief. They can only believe what they see or know with their senses. They live by human instinct. They cannot think beyond the physical flesh and blood realm of existence. Life after death, the resurrection of the dead, God, all these things are beyond comprehension to them. It just cannot be. It is incomprehensible. They see themselves as advanced evolutionary animals, but never consider the first cause or source.

A good Bible example of this was when Jesus went back to his hometown—Nazareth. The Bible reads in Matt. 13:54-58, "And coming to His home town He began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?' And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household.' And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief." (NAS)

They said of him, "Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers?" That should have been easy to answer if you were willing to admit the man did miracles. They admitted he did. However, all human reasoning was against Jesus being associated with deity, for they had known him and his family all their life. It made no sense to them. It just could not be. It was impossible.

Another example was when Jesus was resurrected. You remember when Mary Magdalene saw Jesus after he was resurrected and then went back to the disciples and told them. The Bible says, "They refused to believe it." (Mark 16:11 NAS) Then, when the two who were with Jesus on the road to Emmaus came back and reported the same to the disciples, after Mary had, the Bible says, "They did not believe them either." (Mark 16:13 NAS)

They were like Saul on the road to Damascus; they had to personally experience the miracle to believe. Jesus had to come into their presence, and when he did, he rebuked them for their unbelief (Mark 16:14). Men do not rise from the dead. How is it possible? It was beyond the realm of all human reason and experience, too wild to imagine.

What do we learn from these two examples—Jesus' trip to his hometown and the disciples' refusal to believe the resurrection? We learn that some cannot believe because their mindset is such that if a thing is outside the realm of human experience and personal knowledge, it is unfathomable and cannot be. The mind is closed to such things.

Today, we would say they have a scientific mindset. If a matter is outside the realm of scientific study, unrelated to all known laws of physics and science, then there can be no

truth to the thing. Much of the world today does not believe in life after death or a resurrection of the dead. Their mindset will not allow it. Nothing exists that is beyond the realm of human scientific knowledge, as they see it, for that would be impossible, nothing otherworldly, that is, nothing of another dimension or realm of existence.

They are so stuck in this way of thinking about life that they have come up with what they consider the scientific answer to the earth's creation and life on earth. They will tell you what happened millions and millions of years ago with a straight face and will consider you a fool if you doubt them. They are convinced that men evolved from who knows what over eons of time. They do not think that is an incredible thing. They can believe that because they think they can reason that out scientifically. The only foolishness with them is the idea of God.

But what else does the Bible have to say about why men do not believe? Paul says in 2 Cor. 4:3-4, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (NAS)

When a person is young and seemingly has what he or she perceives to be 40 or 50 years of productive life left in this world, it is easy to get so caught up in education, acquisition, achievement, career building, marriage, and raising a family that there is no time or interest in a spiritual life. This continues once started pretty much on into old age.

These are people who don't believe because they have never given themselves a chance to believe. There is always too much to do, too much going on, to even give thought to God or the gospel.

Luke describes these people as those beside the road, "who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved." (Luke 8:12 NAS) The Bible says, "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." (1 Cor. 2:14 NAS) The natural man is the man caught up in that which is natural to man—the desire for the life of this world. The things related to God are foolishness to him, the Bible says.

In Matthew's account of the parable of the sower, Jesus says of such a one of whom we are speaking that he did not understand the word and thus "the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart." (Matt. 13:19 NAS) He does not say why such a person does not understand, but we know without his saying simply by asking a couple of questions. Did God give us his word in such a way that it could not be understood and thus was to be hidden from man? No! What was God's intent when he gave us his word? That we know it and understand it!

A man who does not understand God's word is a man who has no desire to give it the time and attention necessary to learn it, for he has other things of more interest on his mind. He is Paul's natural man of 1 Cor. 2.

The natural man here is one whose mind is centered solely on achievement and enjoyment of this world. Jesus said, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" (John 5:44 NAS) This is the kind of man we are talking about, a man centered on achievement or acquisition in this world.

Then there are men who simply enjoy sin, which the Bible speaks of as the "passing pleasures of sin." (Heb. 11:25 NKJV) Jesus said, John 3:19-20, "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." (NAS) "Men loved the darkness" is just another way of saying they loved sin. These are people who do not want to believe, for they love sin (love the darkness) and thus are unwilling to believe.

I have not at all exhausted this study of why men do not believe. I am always searching to understand better, but it is time to conclude for now. I conclude with this: belief is a choice. If it were not, how could we be condemned for not believing? "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16 NKJV)

We believe what we want to believe, and we can always find a way to justify our belief. That said, there is always a motive for believing the way we do. This is not to say evidence does not exist for what we may or may not believe, but it is to say our heart's desire often leads us to not weigh the evidence fairly and impartially. We become subjective rather than objective in our reasoning process. Truth does exist, but the heart makes it hard to find in the minds of men.

If the God of the Bible does not exist, it frees us up to enjoy what the Bible calls "the passing pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25 NAS) without any threat of retribution. We can achieve and receive the adoration and praise of men. It is a lot more convenient if God does not exist, at least in the here and now. We do not want him to exist; we do not want the Bible to be true, if our love is for this life and this world.

Those who do not believe have the same evidence as those who do believe. What makes the difference then? Often it comes down to just this one thing. The believer has a desire for "a better, that is, a heavenly country." (Heb. 11:16 NKJV) The unbeliever is satisfied with this world and does not want another. One wants and desires God, the other does not. The evidence remains the same for both.

If the unbeliever came to belief he would have to change his life. He loves this world. It is soothing to his soul to not give the Bible a thought. We believe what we want. The unbeliever wants to believe it is not so, for he has a great stake in it not being true. He has staked his eternal life on it not being so. The Bible cannot be true for if it is he stands

condemned. He has no desire to believe that. We believe what we want to believe. That is why disbelief is a sin. It is a sin because it was and is a choice, at least among those who could have known. Bad choices in life just about always lead to disaster. The Bible being true, surely the choice of disbelief will be no exception.