

Help for Unbelief

In an article which appears in the February 2006 Reader's Digest, entitled "When Faith Goes Too Far," Daveed Gartenstein-Ross writes:

Before I was an FBI informant . . . , I was a devout believer in radical Islam. That meant I had to remember a lot of rules. I could never pet a dog or shake hands with a woman. I could eat only with my right hand, and before prayer, I had to roll my pant legs above my ankles. I accepted all this.

And more. I believed that non-Islamic governments were illegitimate, that jihadists were brave holy warriors carrying out the will of Allah, that Jews and other non-Muslims were inferiors who had to be conquered and ruled..

In my sermon last Sunday I made the assertion that there is truth that is not experienced as being real. There are those who preach about the truth of God's forgiveness who have never discovered forgiveness for themselves. There are those who will affirm the truth that God answers prayer but they cannot give an example from their own experience. There are those who will affirm the truth that the Holy Spirit will guide our actions, but they have no experience of being led. What these people believe is true but it hasn't yet become real.

The article I just read to you gives us another possibility, namely that there are people who affirm lies and experience them as reality. Although what they believe is not true; it is very real to them. One of the reasons we live in a very scary world just now is that there are thousands of young Moslem men who believe it is Allah's will for them to kill Americans or anyone else who opposes their interpretation of the Koran. They believe that if they blow themselves up in the cause, they will go to paradise and be rewarded with 72 virgins to pleasure them for eternity. Is what they believe true? Of course not. It is a lie from the very pit of hell, but for them it is very real, so real that they will strap on dynamite and explode for it.

And these are not alone. There are many other people who believe things that are not true. They believe that the white race is superior to the black race. They believe in reincarnation. They believe pornography is good. They believe they were abducted by aliens from outer space. What they believe is not true but they

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believe it so strongly that for them it is real--real enough to kill for, real enough to die for. Every dangerous cult and fanatic in the world have their basis in untruths that are experienced as reality.

Something else we need to consider here is that this can even happen in the Church. Some traditions, old wives' tales, harmful things said to us or done to us as we were growing up, can take on the appearance of truth and we can experience them to be real, when--in fact--they are lies. Brennan Manning writes: "The tendency of many Christians is to remake Jesus of Nazareth, to concoct the kind of Jesus we can live with, to project a Christ who confirms our preferences and prejudices."*

This is the scariest thing in the world. It is awkward to believe truths that have not yet become real to us but at least we have the truth. But, when we believe lies and experience them as reality this is a real bondage, making us a danger to ourselves and others. Jesus put it this way: In Matthew 6:22-23, he says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. **If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!**"

Listen to Paul's word in our Scripture lesson for this morning: Romans 10:1-3 say, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

What Paul presents is a tragic scenario. He says that the Israelites are "zealous for God." That means that they want to please God, and that's a good thing. The problem is that their approach to God is without knowledge, and is therefore based on a lie. The lie is that they can establish their own righteousness through good works apart from faith. This is their reality but it just isn't true. **For them it was real but it wasn't true.**

In Romans 10:4-8, Paul goes on to explain, "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into

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heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

Some people hold truths that they have not yet experienced to be real. Other people think their lies are real. What we see in these verses is the convergence of truth and reality, which is what we long for. Here we have the truth and know in our experience that this truth is real.

This doesn't mean that our truth needs to be proven by the scientific method. We are never going to have a complete CSI, crime scene investigation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, ending with conclusive proof that Jesus died and rose again. Paul says it's not a matter of someone going up to heaven to bring Christ back down or a matter of someone going into sheol to bring Christ back from the land of the dead. That's not what we need; nor would it guarantee our salvation if we had it.

What we do need is this: "the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." I need to tell you that this verse used to trouble me; the thing that troubled me was the belief part. Confessing with my mouth, "Jesus is Lord," is something I can do--I mean I can say those three words "Jesus," "is," and "Lord." I can blurt it right out: "Jesus is Lord!." The harder part was believing in my heart. I mean what do you do about that? You either believe it or you don't.

To make matters worse, God asks us to believe the most unbelievable thing of all. To believe that Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons, multiplied loaves and fishes, walked on water; these things would not be so difficult. The power of mind over matter has yet to be fully explored or understood. There are many strange things that have happened in this world that no one has been able to adequately explain; miracles do happen. But, raised from the dead? Plants and trees, yes, they sort of recycle themselves, but insects, and all manner of other animals, and man too for all appearances, seem to stay dead. When they're dead they're dead, and

how can any secularly educated modern person think otherwise?

But we need to pay close attention to our text. Notice again exactly what Paul says, He says, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your **head** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Is that right? No. If you have your Bible handy read it out loud. Verse 9 says: **“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”** The important word here is “heart.”

Songwriters, Lenny LeBlanc and Paul Baloche, wrote the song “Above All,” made popular by Michael W. Smith. The song begins: “Above all powers/ Above all kings/ Above all nature and all created things/ Above all wisdom and all the ways of man/ You were here before the world began.”

The truth is there is no way we can wrap our finite minds around the infinite wisdom of God. Our mortal minds, damaged and twisted by sin, and instructed by other minds also damaged and twisted by sin, cannot comprehend the immortal and holy mind of God. That’s why nobody can think his way into heaven. We can’t work our way into heaven and we can’t think our way into heaven. This faith through which we receive salvation is a miraculous gift from God and it doesn’t come through human reason; nor is it compatible with human reason. It’s a seed implanted in our hearts, Spirit communicating with spirit. It is a divine mystery--”deep calling unto deep.”

The only part we can figure out with our intellect is that life outside of God is pointless, hopeless, and empty, which is why many of the world’s greatest writers and philosophers end up committing suicide. Their reason only leads them to despair. But when we are willing to accept the truth that God’s ways are above our ways and that God’s thoughts are above our thoughts, and allow the living Word of God to get past our intellectual defenses and speak to open and child-like hearts, then we can be saved. Then, hearing the message of Christ’s death on the cross for us and His resurrection from the dead for us, we can be saved.

When we humble ourselves to receive this deeper knowledge as a gift from God, then we can confess with our mouths, “Jesus is Lord!” And, we can believe in our hearts that God did, indeed, raise Him from the dead. And, when we go with that, we cross the threshold into a brand new world and begin a new journey. We are

born again. We become the children of God. When we give Jesus Lordship of our lives, we discover that He is alive above us and within us. We still can’t wrap our minds around it, but we can experience Him. The truth of the cross and the truth of the resurrection become real in our lives. The truth stream and the spiritual life stream converge, and it all becomes real. We become real in Him.

Now our message today leaves us with three choices. Choice number 1 is that we can base our lives upon lies and allow those lies to become our reality. Here, many paths truly do lead to the same destination and that destination is hell. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13, “. . . wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.”

Choice number 2 is that we can base our lives on human reason and allow the world of reason to become our reality. If we go the way of the secular philosophers and refuse to waver in our allegiance to the god of reason we will end up in despair; suicide, insanity, drug and alcohol addiction; it too is a path to self destruction.

Choice number 3 is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. This is the choice which leads to life, abundant, free, and eternal. Paul says again, "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

The choice is yours.

*Brennan Manning, *Above All*, (Brentwood, TN, Integrity Publishers, a division of Integrity Media, Inc., 2003), p. 49.

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Romans 1:1-11

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