



Sermon

The Power of Corporate Unbelief

Mark 6:1-13; Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

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Last week I mentioned the power of corporate unbelief. The subject comes up in our readings today and I find myself being drawn to this subject so that we may learn to have greater belief in God's goodness.

Nazareth despises the familiar

After telling us of Jesus' activities in Galilee and the remarkable miracles and healing, Mark tells us he went back to his home town, to Nazareth. News about him had travelled. But instead of expectation he was met with "tall poppy syndrome"; they cut him down. Because they knew him as the local carpenter and his family were there, they said, "He's nothing – just the local builder. Who does he think he is?" And they missed out; they despised the familiar. Some thoughts about that rejection:

In the passage from Ezekiel we heard God commission Ezekiel to prophesy even though the people would not respond. It was necessary that they hear - that God's warning be given to them even though they would not respond. It was so for the people of Nazareth. They would know a prophet had been among them although they did not honour him. And he was more – far more – than a prophet!

Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. He wondered at it; he marvelled that they were so full of unbelief. So, he moved on to preach to those who would listen to him.

Corporate Lack of Faith

Besides the question of relationship with Jesus and to his preaching, there was the impact of their unbelief. Mark 6:3-4:

He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.

Think of it: Jesus, God incarnate, could not do any miracles there! Their unbelief stopped him. Literally, that is what it says! I checked the Greek lexicon and sure enough the word used means "able, capable, have the power." He was unable, incapable, without the power to do any miracles there except heal a few people.

We learnt something of this when we moved from Nottingham to Carlisle. In Nottingham, I was on placement at a charismatic church. The vicar gave me an assignment of helping him build up the use of the gifts of the Spirit. We taught both theory and practice and started to give opportunities for the use of the gifts - and they flourished. There were a series of significant healings. As people's expectancy grew, so it became even easier. Then, we moved to a church in Carlisle where although the people were strong in their faith, they had been taught that healing was not for today. When we next prayed with someone for healing, it was like running into a brick wall. Nothing! We persisted; it was six months before Helen and I had a healing prayer answered; eighteen months before one of our small healing team had an answer to healing prayer.

My conclusion was that we were up against corporate unbelief. Our belief and expectancy had not changed but we couldn't do there what we had done just a few months before 200 miles away.

May be it is not lack of faith but misplaced faith? Jesus said we only need faith as small as a mustard seed and we can move mountains. Perhaps the problem is that we have too much faith in sickness and very little faith that God is able to do anything.

You may ask, "Why does healing prayer not always work?" I have previously pointed out that unforgiveness is a strong block to healing. Now we can add, corporate unbelief or perhaps corporate belief in the power of sickness is another reason for unanswered prayer.

African Ease

On our trips to Africa, we find it much easier to pray for healing and see results than it is in New Zealand. On my last trip, I exclaimed to Andrew Allan-Johns in the midst of people being healed all around us, "It is ridiculously easy to get people healed here – and so much harder at home!" He agreed. Why is that? The best explanation I have come up with is that the African has a strong belief in the supernatural world and expects it to be powerful whereas our culture wonders whether there is a supernatural dimension. But when we come back and tell of the amazing things we have seen, so many dismiss or explain it away. There is almost a perverse pride in not being credulous like those simple people who get healed easily. We on the other hand are rational people ... who don't get healed or see the works of God – hmmm!

There was Samuel being healed of blindness. Before we prayed the other villagers told us that everyone knew he had been blind since birth. We had seen a helper leading him around over the previous two days. His eyes had some sort of scaly growth over the cornea. After we prayed three or four times, he announced he could see and proved it by correctly counting the number of fingers held up both up close and at a distance of 8 metres. We showed him blue and red on our clothes and he was then able to point to those colours correctly on his own cloak and a woman's blouse. It was amazing and yes my mind boggled too. But I saw it happen!

Yet when we told good friends here in Auckland, whom we have known for 34 years, the response was, "I don't know what to do with that," and to start talking about power imbalance and the man wanting to please us. He might have wanted to please us, but how did he suddenly have the ability he hadn't had before? It was very clear. My point is that we too readily dismiss things we cannot understand.

The Power of Unconscious Unbelief

Let me give you another example. For some years, I had a condition of the jaw joint which prevented me opening my mouth freely – it became quite difficult. I had quite a lot of prayer over a year for it to little avail. Then a couple at Theological College prayed for me; there was click and suddenly I could open my mouth more but still not fully. Over the next couple of years, I sought further prayer but there was no change. One day, I said to the Lord, "Why isn't my jaw healed?" And I had the thought, "Because you don't believe I want to heal you!"

Well, I was surprised, because I thought I had believed. However, he was showing me that I had an false sense of unworthiness which prevented me believing he would heal me.

So I said, "Lord, I thought I believed, but if you say I don't, I will believe what you say rather than what I think. I repent of my unbelief. I choose to believe that you do want to heal me and I reject the idea that you do not want to heal me." I prayed again for my jaw joint. About an hour later, I wondered how my jaw was and found I could open it fully.

Do you see how that misbelief of which I was unaware had blocked my prayer for healing?

Thorn in the Flesh

When we are struggling with the issues of faith for healing, people will often bring up Paul's thorn in the flesh. Mostly they suggest it was an illness, or maybe a demonic affliction. Ken Blue in his book, "Authority to Heal", points out that Paul would have memorised the entire Old Testament and that there is a similar idiom there. It is used of enemies being a constant irritant or affliction to the people of God.

Numbers 33:55 But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.

Joshua 23:13 You may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes ...

Judges 2:3 ... I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides ..."

Ezekiel 28:24 "No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbours who are painful briars and sharp thorns.

So it is a reasonable thought that Paul was referring to people who caused him grief, torment, and opposition – and he lists a considerable amount of those things in the same chapter. It needn't be an unhealed sickness.

Resolution

Now I am not saying all this to condemn anyone – rather I am trying to illustrate the problem so we can break through into belief in God's involvement in our lives.

How can we break through our own unbelief?

1. Keep trying. Be with people who do believe. See the miracles as they pray. This is important - the breakthrough will come.
2. Catch your thinking when you start rationalising away these things.
3. Be prepared to persevere for the answer without giving up easily.
4. There may be specific spiritual blocks. For me, on one occasion I identified doubt, scepticism and unbelief in myself. On the occasion I recounted earlier, it was a misbelief. It may be a misplaced belief – having more faith in the disease than in God's willingness or ability to heal it.
5. I have found it powerful to refute wrong beliefs specifically and out loud. Then make the choice to believe what God says.

It may be different for you, but it is worth considering whether some such problem is there.

I believe that Jesus is in the same business he was in 2000 years ago – he is still sending out disciples to tell people that they do not need to be under the rule of the kingdom of darkness but they can come under God's rule instead. He still empowers us as his representatives to set people free from the enemy's troubles. But what we believe is important – we can block his best for us by faulty beliefs. So to us as to them he says, "Change your mind and believe!"