

# Battling Unbelief at Bethlehem

by John Piper

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of trusting in God's promises and banking our hope on them in order to glorify God and produce the work of faith.*

**Duration:** 35:16

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Mark 9:24, John 3:16, Romans 4:13-25, Hebrews 11:6, James 1:6

**Topics:** "Faith And Unbelief", "Overcoming Sin"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher lays a foundation for a series called 'Battling Unbelief.' The main conviction behind this series is that all sin, whether in attitude or behavior, stems from unbelief in the promises of God. The preacher lists various sins such as anxiety, envy, and pride, and explains how they all sprout from the taproot of unbelief. The sermon also references Romans 4:13-25, which emphasizes that the promise to Abraham and his descendants came through faith, not the law. The preacher aims to show how battling unbelief is essential in overcoming sin and living a life of faith.

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## Transcript

Romans chapter 4, verses 13 through 25. The promise to Abraham and his descendants that they should inherit the world did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants. Not only to the adherents of the law, but also to those who share faith, the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, as it is written, I have made you a father of many nations.

In the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into the existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, so shall your descendants be. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead, because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. But the words it was reckoned to him were not written for his sake

alone, but to for ours also.

It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Let's pray together for just a moment. Oh Father, we long for the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit in a unique way in this remaining half hour.

To the end that there might be conviction of sin, to the end that there might be conviction of the opening of the eyes of the blind, the humbling of pride, and the lifting up of the downcast, the establishing of the saints, and the quickening of faith in all. We resist now together with our collective faith, Satan and his principalities and powers, asking that you would cause the angels of the Lord to encamp around us and deliver us from his intrusion. So give us free course with you in the transaction of your word and make it a sword a fire and a hammer and a bomb.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen. What I'd like to do today is lay a foundation for the next 14 weeks. The series that we begin today is called Battling Unbelief.

And I want to not only lay a foundation but relate this series to the goal of Bethlehem Baptist Church today and to close with a few references to the nature of this unbelief or belief and how it works itself out in practical daily living. The conviction behind this series is that all sinning, whether attitudinal or in behavior, comes from one thing, unbelief in the promises of God. The tap root out of which sprouts all the weeds of sin is the tap root of unbelief in promises, unbelief in the promises of God.

Let me list some sins off for you to show you what I mean. Anxiety, misplaced shame, indifference, regret, covetousness, envy, lust, bitterness, impatience, despondency, pride, all of these are sprouts that grow from the tap root of unbelief in the promises of God. And they are all sermon titles for this fall to show how in each sermon unbelief is the root of the sin and how we battle that unbelief and thus battle sin in our lives.

Let me illustrate now from a familiar text that's not the one that was just read yet why I think unbelief is the tap root of all sinning. You know, you all know this text by heart even if you don't know the Bible. It's 2nd Timothy, no, 1st Timothy 6 10.

The love of money is the what? Root of all evils. Love of money is the root of all evil. So the tap root in this verse of all evils, that's the literal translation, all evils is love of money.

So let's ask what this means. What is the love of money? First of all, I don't think it means that there's a conscious connection in your brain every time you sin with money. That money is somehow lurking in your subconscious because you could think of a half a dozen sins that you commit every day probably that that aren't related to money and smack your kid in the face.

That's not related to money. It's sin. A lot of things that you could could say.

So you have to ask well now what does this text mean? And so to get at it ask what is the love of money? And you can say right off the bat well it's not the admiration of green paper. It's not the feel of of coins in your hand. Oh this is this nice stuff.

That's not what he means when you say you love money. To really get at what the love of money means you have to ask what's money? It's not real obvious. I mean you you have to ask behind the paper and the metal.

What's money? And I here's my answer to that. Money is the symbol and each culture has a different one. It's the symbol of human resources.

Money is what you can trade for what man can make or offer you. Now I distinguish it then from God's resources and I get that from Isaiah 55 1. Oh everyone who thirsts come to the waters. He who has what? No money.

Come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. So money is the currency of human resources.

You can trade it in on what man can offer you. That's all. Now let's ask what does it mean to love this stuff? Here's my answer.

It means to pin your hopes and pursue your pleasures and put your trust in human resources. That's what it means to love money. Another way to describe it would be to say it means to believe in money.

That money can meet your needs. That money can buy you happiness. It's an act of faith.

Loving money is the same as believing in money. Trusting in money. Banking your hope on money.

Now Jesus said you cannot serve money and God. There's another word serve. So we got a whole list of words here.

I think all mean about the same thing. You can't serve money in God. You can't believe in money in God.

You can't worship money in God. You can't love money in God. You can't bank on money in God for happiness.

Now what are we saying? Here's what I think we're saying. Let's picture a coin here. It's got two sides.

The top side says the love of money which now means belief in or banking hope upon money to bring happiness and satisfaction is the root of all evils. That is the kind of heart that banks on human resources for happiness produces every kind of evil that there is. The other side of the coin obviously then is unbelief in God's promises to meet your needs and make you happy.

On the top you've got banking on money. On the bottom you've got not banking on God. So my conclusion from this text is that not banking on God to meet your needs is the root of all sinning.

All sinning goes back to a kind of heart that doesn't bank on God. It banks on what you can do or get or produce here on the human level. Now that's the gist of the next 14 weeks.

All sinning grows out of the tap root of unbelief in the promises of God. Now what I said I was going to do was provide a foundation for this series and relate it to the goal of Bethlehem Baptist Church and that's what I want to try to do now. Here's the goal of Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Bethlehem exists to glorify God. Isaiah 43 7, we were created for God's glory. Ephesians 1 6, we were predestined to be his children to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1 12, we were appointed to live for the praise of his glory. First Corinthians 10 31, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. It's just an unmistakable, resounding, ultimate statement in scripture of why we exist.

Namely, to bring glory and honor to God. Now we say this in a lot of different ways at Bethlehem. We talk about three priorities.

Echoes of last fall, if you were around, remember we said Bethlehem is a vision of God. Glorious, powerful, magnificent in his judgment, in his grace, in his sovereignty, in his holiness and we exist to savor that vision of God in worship, strengthen that vision of God in education and spread that vision of God in missions and evangelism. But in every one of those three priorities, there's one main goal, glory to God.

Whether we're worshiping, educating or reaching out, the goal is that God be glorified. So that's a clear and resounding conviction of Bethlehem Baptist Church. We exist for the glory of God.

Now the text that Cliff read, Romans 4, provides a very crucial answer to the question, how do you glorify God? So let's go to the text and specifically let's read together verses 19 to 21, but let me set the stage for you. Paul is exalting as a model Abraham and specifically what Abraham did when he was promised a son at the age of 100 years old with a barren wife. That's something beyond human resources.

Let's read what he did. Verse 19, he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust, that is no unbelief, made him waver concerning the promise of God.

But he grew strong in his faith. Then the literal translation of the next phrase is, he grew strong in his faith, giving glory to God and being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. So here's my lesson or inference that I draw out of that text.

When you trust or believe in a promise of God, you glorify God. In fact, trusting somebody's promise is the most fundamental honor that you can do that person. And the reverse is also true, namely the greatest contempt that you can bring down upon a person is to say to them, I can't trust you anymore.

So when we don't trust a promise of God, we bring contempt upon him, we blackball him, we give him a vote of no confidence. And when we trust him, we magnify his ability to help us, his wisdom to help us, and his willingness to help us. Martin Luther put it like this, faith honors him who trusts him with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy.

There is no other honor equal to the estimate of truthfulness and righteousness with which we honor him whom we trust. On the other hand, there is no way in which we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked, to be suspicious of him as we do when we do not trust him. Last night, I had to fight the unbelief of anxiety, anxiety that I wouldn't have this message ready for this morning because of how late I started on it.

And the way I fought the fight of faith or against the unbelief of anxiety was to take a very specific promise and believe it. And the promise I took was 2 Corinthians 12, 8, which says, and I just let it be for me straight from Jesus Christ, my grace is sufficient for you. My power will be made perfect in your weakness.

I believed it. Now, what happened in that spiritual transaction of faith or belief? God was glorified. He was glorified as one who is smart enough to get this sermon written.

He was glorified as one who is powerful enough to overcome weariness. He was glorified as one who is merciful enough to do this for an unworthy pastor. You glorify God when you trust him and you bring such contempt upon him when you don't trust his promises.

And so, my conclusion concerning the relationship between this sermon series and the goal of Bethlehem is this. The goal of Bethlehem is to glorify God without trusting his promises. This goal aborts.

We may as well close up shop if we are not the kind of people who have learned day by day to battle unbelief that threatens to grow like a root in our hearts every day and to fight the fight of faith and to be victorious as we trust God's promises. Now, what I want to do in the rest of the minutes we have is to say three things about this faith that glorifies God. Belief that glorifies God.

What is it? Number one. Belief that glorifies God means banking your hope on the promises of God. Belief that glorifies God means banking your hope on the promises of God.

Now, you might say, well, that's obvious. You've been assuming that all along. But there are a lot of people who don't consider this obvious.

Let me try to draw out what I'm really saying so that you can test whether you are with me or not. What I'm really stressing here is that faith is future oriented. Faith is future oriented.

It is belief in promises that have to do with your future, whether it's a sermon seven hours away or whether it's heaven 7,000 years away. Now, the past, events in the past relate to faith only as guarantee of promises, as securing or purchasing what God intends to do for us in the future. Did you notice in the beginning of this text in in verses 13 and 14 that Abraham is the heir of the world and so are you.

Blessed are the meek. They shall inherit the earth. Now, how did you get to be an heir of the world and why can you live your days in the grand hope that all creation awaits the revealing of the sons of God? Answer, a past event, namely the death of Jesus for sins and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

But faith does not stand facing backward in history like this and lead its life like this. That's not the way faith works. Faith looks back, notices the magnificent love of God in Christ, turns to the future and on the basis of that secured love and promise banks its hope on these promises purchased at Calvary.

That's the life of faith. That's the faith we're talking about here. Let me try to show you this in the text.

We've seen in verses 19 to 21 that Abraham is being lifted up as a model of faith and the particular kind of faith that he had was belief in promises. Now, what does this have to do with his justification, his being reckoned righteous by God? Look at verse 22. That is why his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.

So how was Abraham reckoned righteous before God? By banking his hope on promises. Abraham's faith, as you can see in verses 19 to 21 very clearly, was a banking of his hope on the promises of God. That's what justified him.

God, by that faith, justified Abraham. Now, if you say, well sure, Abraham lived before Jesus and so he had to look forward but we live after Jesus and so to get justified we all look backward. That would really miss Paul's point here if you argued that way.

Let me just show you that by reading on with you. Verse 23, but the words it was reckoned to him were written not for his sake alone but for ours also. So what was said to Abraham about his faith was meant for our life too.

And then he goes on, verse 24, it was it will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord. Now, notice what it does not say. It does not say that righteousness will be reckoned to us if we believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

It says righteousness will be reckoned to us if we believe in God. What kind of God? A God who raises his son from the dead that he might forever make intercession for us, that he might forever reign at his right hand until he puts all our enemies under his foot. A God who raises Jesus so that he can one day bring all the promises of God to fulfillment and this history to consummation.

The faith that justifies is not belief that Jesus died for your sins and rose again. It is banking your hope on the promises that were purchased when Jesus died for your sins and rose again. Now, the reason I think this is so crucial is because there are so many professing Christians today who have intellectualized faith till the point where it simply looks backward to events and affirms them as true and then turns to the future and lives just like the world.

So that the faith has lost its total dynamic because it isn't biblical faith. A man left the first service here and he said, I'm so glad you mentioned those first three, those, those three points at the end because I was just witnessing to a friend at work yesterday who can, who insists he's a Christian. And as we talk, he says, look, I believe that Jesus died for my sins and I believe that he rose from the dead and I believe the Bible.

And David said, yeah, but what difference does it make in your life? And he kind of said, well, not much, but I believe those things. I believe them all and so I'm a Christian. And there are millions of people who think they're Christians for that reason.

The devils believe these things and tremble. What this text is trying to get across to us is that Abraham is the model for us and Abraham's faith was a banking of his hope on promises and that's why God justified him. The death of Jesus Christ for sin and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead are utterly crucial and indispensable in our faith, but the proper place for them is as the foundation, the guarantee, the security, and the purchase of everything God has for us.

Let me illustrate this from verse... Where is it? Well, let me go on to the second point and then illustrate it with Galatians 2.20. The first point I'm making about faith is that it is future-oriented and that being future-oriented, it is banking hope on the promises of God. Now, here's the second point that will lead us to that text. The second thing I want to say about faith is that it produces what Paul calls the work of faith.

I get that phrase from 1 Thessalonians 1.3 and 2 Thessalonians 1.11 and you could all say as well as I could what that means. What does the phrase work of faith mean? It means work that you do which comes from faith. It's the fruit of faith or the product of faith.

The work of faith is the product of faith. What is the work? It's righteousness, holiness, love. Galatians 5.6, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail but faith working through love.

Faith is a dynamic. It is a power. James says if all you do is look back and make doctrinal affirmations with your faith, it is dead and comparable to the faith of devils who believe far more true doctrine than most Americans do.

Believing true doctrine saves nobody. The point is if faith is a banking on promises and is future-oriented, it will guide and govern your life and produce the work of faith. Now Galatians 2.20, I am crucified with

Christ.

It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me and the life which I now live in the flesh, listen, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Now what does that mean? I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Here would be my paraphrase if I were the Apostle Paul.

Here's what he does. He gets up in the morning, he sees a whole list of challenges before him that might make him angry or bitter or fearful or depressed and he glances back to Jesus Christ crucified and he says that is how much I am loved and with that love all the promises of God were purchased for me and he makes a link with Romans 8.32, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, will he not with him freely give us all things, namely every promise that God has ever made to his children were purchased at Calvary. And so living by faith in the Son of God who loved you means banking on the promises of that Son and that Father guaranteed by his love which was shown so clearly when he died and rose again.

Living by faith is not backing into the future with worldly aspirations affirming doctrinal truth about Jesus Christ. That doesn't save anybody. It means glancing back, establishing yourself in the love of Christ, knowing that he purchased 10,000 precious and very great promises for us and walking by the power of those promises through faith in those promises right into the lion's jaws if necessary.

One other text on this second point that faith produces the work of faith comes from Jeremiah 17, 7 and 8. Listen, blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. He is like a tree planted by waters that sends out its roots to the stream. He does not fear when the heat comes because his leaves remain green.

He does not have anxiety when the drought comes because he does not cease to bear fruit. Now just put the first line and the last line together. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord because he does not cease to bear fruit.

If your faith is not the kind of future-oriented banking on the promises of God that produces the fruit of righteousness as it's called in Philippians 1, 11, it isn't saving faith. No amount of intellectual affirming, no amount of intellectual agreeing with all the Bible will take the place of hoping in the promises of God. Well, the last point is only 30 seconds long.

Namely, this battle of faith or battling against unbelief is a lifelong battle. When you become a Christian by banking your hope on the promises of God secured in Jesus Christ and decisively submitting yourself to him as your Lord and Savior, the battle has begun, not ended. I believe God has brought us to this series at Bethlehem because he loves us and because he has some remarkable victories for your own heart, your own family, and your own workplace, and this church.

I think there are victories in store for us this fall, and you know why I think that in relation to this series? 1 John 5, 4. This is the victory that overcomes all worldliness or the world. What? Your faith. If we could learn as a church how to battle unbelief and how to fight for faith, the victories that we would see in the overcoming of sin, in the winning of unbelievers, in the establishing of the saints, in the meeting of budgets, and other unimportant things like that would be absolutely stunning in our midst.

So, I'm going to ask you just to pray with me for one last minute before we leave. Would you bow? And as you bow, let's all admit together before the Lord that we, every one of us, is struggling with sin. Every person in this room is struggling with sin right now.

Some temptation besets you repeatedly. Maybe it's a new thought to you that that sin is connected with unbelief in a promise. And I just want you to pray in the next 30 seconds that God would reveal that connection to you and rededicate yourself to battle the unbelief that lies beneath whatever sins are your besetting trouble.

Let's pray. Faith is the victory. Faith is the victory.

Oh, glorious victory that overcomes the world. That's a great refrain to end the service with and begin a new week. Let's sing it a couple of times.

Faith is the victory. Faith is the victory. Oh, glorious victory that overcomes the world.

Faith is the victory. Faith is the victory. Oh, glorious victory that overcomes the world.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you might abound in hope. And all the people said, Amen.

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