



## got life?

### The Gospel of John A Bible Study with Stan Key

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF UNBELIEF

*John 7:1–53*

### I. The Great Divide

#### A. The Continental Divide

In the Rocky Mountains, there is an invisible line that **divides** North America into two parts, separating those river systems that drain into the Pacific Ocean from those that drain into the Atlantic Ocean. Theoretically, **every drop** of water on the continent is destined for one ocean or the other. There is no third option.

#### B. The Eternal Divide

1. God also has established a line that cuts through human history, **dividing everyone** into one of two camps. This division has nothing to do with race, gender, economics, education, politics, or even religion. It has everything to do with how one responds to **Jesus Christ**.

*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather **division**. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son... mother against daughter...mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law... (Luke 12:51–53)*

2. John 7–8 makes the “eternal divide” obvious for all to see. People begin to line up on one side or the other. Jesus himself is the one pushing the issue!
  - a. Many **believe** in Jesus and follow him (Jn 7:31; 8:30).
  - b. Many are **hostile** to Jesus and don’t believe (Jn 7:5). Some suggest he has a demon (Jn 7:20; 8:48; 10:20).<sup>1</sup>
  - c. The result is a **division** among the people concerning Jesus (Jn 7:12, 43; 9:16; 10:19). This is apparently the result the Jesus wanted.

### II. Examine the text

#### A. “Jesus, just **prove** who you are, then we will believe in you” (Jn 7:1–9).

1. In saying “show yourself to the world” (Jn 7:4), Jesus’ brothers (who don’t believe in him) are apparently **baiting** him. They want him to prove his claims to messiahship by going to Jerusalem and performing a few miracles. That’s all it takes to cause people to believe in Jesus. Right?
2. In saying that his “time” (*kairos*) had not yet come (Jn 7:6), Jesus is stating that he will not be rushed into his mission.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is **in control** of timing. His “time” (or “hour”) refers to that climactic moment when he will die on a cross for the sins of the world. This will happen only when he determines it.

<sup>1</sup> Jesus said that to attribute his works to the devil is to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, an eternal sin that can never be forgiven (Mk 3:22, 28–30).

<sup>2</sup> On numerous occasions in John, the text underscores that Jesus’ “hour” (*hora*) had not yet come (Jn 2:4; 7:30; 8:20). But when it comes time to give his life for the sins of the world, we read that the hour had indeed come (Jn 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1).

*No one **takes my life** from me, but **I lay it down** of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:18)*

B. But you are **confused** about what constitutes proof (Jn 7:10–36).

1. “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with **right** judgment” (Jn 7:24). Their thinking is fuzzy concerning faith. Jesus goes to the heart of the reason for unbelief. The problem is *not* with the **evidence**, as most people think. Jesus has already turned water to wine, healed the sick, miraculously fed 5,000 people, and walked on water. Soon he will heal a blind man and raise Lazarus from the dead! The problem is not with the evidence, but with **the will!**

*If anyone's will is to do God's will, he **will know** whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. (John 7:17)*

2. Two great thinkers about faith:

- “Do not seek to understand in order to believe; but **believe** so that you may **understand**” (Augustine).
- “There is enough evidence to **condemn** and not enough to **convince**, so that it should be apparent that those who follow it are prompted to do so by grace and not by reason, and those who evade it are prompted by concupiscence (strong desire, lust) and not by reason” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #835).

C. The real problem in the human heart is lack of **thirst** (Jn 7:37–39).

1. At the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn 7:2), there was a climactic water ceremony where the priests would pour water at the base of the altar in the Temple. This was probably a prayer for rain and the blessings of God. For Jesus, however, this was symbolic of the coming of the **Holy Spirit**, which he would make available for all who believed in him. For Old Testament references to water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, see Isaiah 44:3; Joel 2:28; 3:18; and Ezekiel 47:1–12.
2. The Bible is a **food-driven** book. Sin entered the world through food. The exodus journey was determined by whether the appetite for milk and honey was stronger than the appetite for leeks and onions. Jesus is the bread of life and offers living water. When our appetite is fixed on the wrong thing, faith is **impossible**. The question that will determine whether you believe or not is this: are you **thirsty** for God?

D. There is a **division** concerning Jesus (Jn 7:40–53).

The passage ends with the remark that “there was a division among the people over him” (Jn 7:43). Some believed Jesus was indeed **the Messiah**. Others were convinced he was possessed by **a demon**.

### III. Unreasonable Doubt

In a courtroom, the outcome of a case is often determined by “reasonable doubt” (not enough evidence to bring about a conviction). But when it comes to the claims of Jesus Christ, the nature of the case is different. Most doubts are **unreasonable** (i.e., irrational). John’s Gospel mentions six hindrances to faith. Most of these are illustrations of unreasonable doubt.

A. **Philosophical** difficulties. Read John 18:33–38.

Pilate's problem is not with the evidence but with the very concept of truth. *What is truth?* As a politician, his concern is with **power**, not truth. He is a **cynic**, doubting the very existence of truth. Like many post-moderns today, Pilate believes in a form of **relativism**. There are no moral absolutes. He is **certain** that everything is uncertain.

*There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative... Some are religious, some atheist; some are to the left, some to the right; some intend to be scientists, some humanists or professionals or businessmen; some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and their allegiance to equality.... The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance.... The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all. (The Closing of the American Mind by Allan Bloom, 1987, 25f)*

To reach people like Pilate typically demands a philosophical challenge to their most basic assumptions (relativism). Before such a person can believe that Jesus is the truth, he/she must discover the truth about **truth**.

B. **Intellectual** difficulties. Read John 20:24–28.

Pilate is a cynic, but Thomas is a **skeptic**. His problem is not with the concept of truth but rather with the need for evidence. He needs a reason to believe. He is an **honest** doubter. Until believing in Jesus becomes a **plausible** intellectual option, he remains stuck in his doubts and skepticism.

To reach people like Thomas (honest doubters), we may first have to help them find honest answers for **honest questions** so that their intellectual obstacles can be overcome and faith becomes possible. Common intellectual difficulties include the following:

- The Bible is full of myths (like the resurrection).
- Being a Christian an anti-scientific.
- But what about the crusades, the Inquisition and slavery?
- Why do Christians hate homosexuals?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?
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C. **Emotional** difficulties. Read John 11:20–27.

1. Martha and Mary struggle to believe in Jesus not because of intellectual or philosophical difficulties. Their problem is **grief** and **loss**; their brother had died! “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...” (Jn 11:21). Martha is a hero because she **chose** to believe in Jesus even when life was falling apart!
2. Jesus made an amazing statement to Martha: “Did I not tell you that if you **believed** you would **see** the glory of God?” (Jn 7:40). Most people think that

seeing is believing. Martha helps us to understand the deeper truth that *believing* is seeing!

3. Sometimes a traumatic life experience makes faith “impossible”: *I can't (won't?) believe in a God who would let my baby die... who permitted my father to sexually abuse me... who didn't protect me from bankruptcy, etc.* As a child, C. S. Lewis prayed that his mother would be healed. She died. So, he became an agnostic. William J. Murray “explains” the atheism of his mother (Madalyn Murray O’Hair):

*It is my opinion that my mother's maniacal campaign to remove all reference to God in public schools and government, plus her heated atheistic campaigns over the years, stem back to this issue. [She] was **mad at men**, and she was mad at God, who is male. Rather than confront her conscience, she determined to deny God's existence. (quoted in Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary by Lee Strobel, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993: 109).*

4. To reach people struggling with emotional hindrances to faith often demands that we **weep** with them (see Jn 11:33, 35, 38), pointing them to the cross of Jesus Christ where he too experienced evil: “My God, my God, why....?”

D. **Biblical** difficulties. Read John 5:39, 46.

Ironically, studying the Bible sometimes **creates doubt** rather than faith! This is certainly true for “liberals” and “higher critics” who search the Scriptures looking for errors or human explanations for what it says. But more poignantly, it can also be true for orthodox believers who study the Bible in the wrong way. This was true of the Bible scholars in John 5. They searched the Scriptures thinking that they could find life in the book! They failed to recognize that the purpose of Bible study is not to know **the Bible**, but to know **Jesus**.

E. **Social** difficulties. Read John 5:44 and John 12:42–43.

Faith is simply impossible as long as we care more about the **opinions of others** than of God. If such persons do, in fact, claim to believe, you can be sure it is very shallow and unstable. Paul speaks of this obstacle to faith when he says: “Am I now seeking the **approval** of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal 1:10).

F. **Moral** difficulties. Read John 3:19–21.

1. When someone “**loves the darkness** rather than the light” (Jn 3:19), you can be sure that no amount of proof is going to bring them to faith. In fact, the more such a person is confronted with the moral claims of the Gospel, the deeper their unbelief becomes. In exasperation Jesus said to some Jewish leaders, it is “**because** I tell you the truth [that] you do not believe me” (Jn 8:45). Atheistic philosopher Thomas Nagel at least was honest enough to admit it:

*I want atheism to be true... It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a god: I don't want the universe to be like that... (Quoted in The Reason for God by Timothy Keller, 119).*

2. No one can know the truth of Jesus until they are “**willing** to do God's will” (Jn 7:17). The fact of the matter is that if Jesus is Lord, our lives will have to **change**! For the one who is unwilling to give up his self-centered activities,

stop watching pornography, cease cheating on his income tax, sleeping with his girlfriend, or getting drunk on the weekends, faith in Jesus will simply be impossible. Bonhoeffer said: “only those who believe obey, and only those who obey believe” (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

#### IV. Steps to Faith

- A. We need **more than** evidence. God gives enough evidence to make faith **possible**; not enough to make faith inevitable. When God spoke in an audible Voice from heaven so that all Jerusalem could hear, it still was not enough to bring the nation of Israel to faith in Jesus!

*The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had **thundered**. Others said, “An **angel** has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the **judgment** of this world...” (John 12:29–31)*

- B. The Eternal Divide is a reality today even as it was 2,000 years ago. But how to get on the right side of the line? How to ensure that my destiny lies in the right “ocean”? For the **honest seeker** these steps can make a difference:

1. “Doubt your **doubts**. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything...” (I Jn 3:19–20).
2. “Surrender your **will**. If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (Jn 7:17). “It is not certain that everything is uncertain” (Pascal, *Penseés*).
3. “Receive **Jesus**. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn 1:12).
4. “Allow God to give you the **gift of faith**. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the most important thing you have learned in this lesson?
2. Think of someone you know who is a confirmed atheist (or agnostic, cynic, skeptic, etc.). Has this lesson helped you to better understand their unbelief? Explain.
3. Think of your own spiritual journey. Which one of the “difficulties” to faith was the hardest for you to overcome? (Philosophical, Intellectual, Emotional, Biblical, Social, or Moral).
4. Has this lesson caused you to think differently about the way you currently witness to those around you?

## **Spirit of Faith, Come Down**

By Charles Wesley (1746)

*Spirit of faith, come down,  
reveal the things of God,  
and make to us the Godhead known,  
and witness with the blood.  
'Tis thine the blood to apply  
and give us eyes to see,  
who did for every sinner die  
hath surely died for me.*

*No one can truly say  
that Jesus is the Lord,  
unless thou take the veil away  
and breathe the living Word.  
Then, only then, we feel  
our interest in his blood,  
and cry with joy unspeakable,  
"Thou art my Lord, my God!"*

*O that the world might know  
the all atoning Lamb!  
Spirit of faith, descend and show  
the virtue of his name;  
the grace which all may find,  
the saving power, impart,  
and testify to humankind,  
and speak in every heart.*

*Inspire the living faith  
(which whosoe'er receive,  
the witness in themselves they have  
and consciously believe),  
the faith that conquers all,  
and doth the mountain move,  
and saves whoe'er on Jesus call,  
and perfects them in love.*