

...that Belief is Reasonable

Well, great to see you guys. My name is Kent, if I haven't had the chance to meet you yet. I'm one of the pastors here. If you've got a bible with you, turn with me to John 20. I especially wanted to say a special welcome to all the college students and parents of college students who are here this morning. Most years, this tends to be the first Sunday that some of you guys join us or *re-join* us after moving in, so I wanted to say thanks for being here. We're glad that you're back—Knoxville is just a little bit less fun without you here. Don't get me wrong: *driving near campus* is actually much *better* without you here, but everything else is a little less fun.

I'll give you just a little about *us* if you are new: we are a newer church here in the Knoxville area. We started about three years ago with the goal of reaching anyone and everyone here in Knoxville who did not have a church to belong to. But I will say *one* reason we planted here in the *downtown area* and this close to the University of Tennessee, is because statistically speaking, people ages 18-25 are the most *unreached* demographic in our country. People in that age range *especially* find themselves disconnected from the local church. So as we planted our church, we've sought to make sure that our church was accessible and helpful to *all* people, but especially to people in that demographic because they are so unreached. So all that to say, if you are here and you are somewhere around that age range, we are super glad that you are here. We have been, in many ways, praying you in since day one.

And if you're new at all, it's also a good Sunday for you to be here. Because today we are kicking off a brand new teaching series called *I Just Can't Believe*. It's a series all about the most common objections and obstacles to faith in Jesus. Something we've figured out the longer we are here in Knoxville is that even though we are right smack in the middle of the bible belt, Knoxville as a city is increasingly disaffiliated with religion. A study commissioned by First Baptist Concord right here in Knoxville found that 80% of people right here in Knox County would describe themselves as either "nones" (meaning not affiliated with any particular religion or faith tradition), or "dones" (meaning at one point they *were* affiliated with religion, but no longer are). *80%*. So don't let the church on every corner here in Knoxville deceive you—a lot of those churches are mostly empty.

But no doubt one of the primary reasons for that statistic is what we're talking about in this series: *the obstacles and objections people have to Christianity*. There are things that just make belief in Jesus difficult for many people to get on board with. And over the

years as a pastor, I've found that there tend to be a handful of those objections that come up, in one form or another, time and time again. So in this series we're going to take some time to talk through some of those. In just a few minutes, I'll walk you through *which* objections and obstacles we'll be discussing each week.

But first, I wanted to talk a little about *why* we wanted to do a series like this. When we planned this series out, we honestly had three different groups of people in mind. First...

Those who *openly* struggle with these questions

So some of you here today, and whether you would identify as a follower of Jesus or not, you would openly admit, "yeah, there are aspects of Christianity that are really tough for me." And you're very up-front about the doubts and questions that you have. And if that's you, then this series is for you. We've known since the beginning of our church that **if we are going to effectively reach the people who are disconnected from or disenfranchised with the church, we are going to need to talk regularly about doubt.** It doesn't do anybody any good to just pretend that nobody struggles with these types of things. So if that's you, this series is for you. And second...

Those who *secretly* struggle with these questions

Others of us may wrestle with these doubts and questions, but we aren't nearly as *upfront about* it. For some of us, the struggle is much more behind-the-scenes; it runs in the background of our mind. We've always had doubts and questions and objections about our belief system, but haven't really ever been in a place where we've felt like we could acknowledge that. And to be honest, sometimes Southern hyper-religious culture doesn't help with this. Often when we approach others with questions or doubts we're having, we're told to just get over them. We're told to "stop doubting" or to "just believe." As if we hadn't already tried that approach.

And as a result, a lot of us have gotten really good at *suppressing* our doubts and questions. But the *problem* with that—and we've mentioned this before on Sundays—is that that approach won't hold up forever. Eventually those doubts will rise to the surface in one way or another. For some of us, they rise to the surface when some type of suffering or difficulty hits us and we can't suppress the questions we've had any longer. For others of us, they rise to the surface when we encounter someone whom we really love or respect, but doesn't ascribe to the same belief system we do. We encounter someone who seems like they're very much a "good person," but who doesn't seem like they need God or Christianity to make that work. For example, I still remember growing

up in church, I often got the impression that *everybody* who *didn't* follow Jesus was probably out there on the streets, snorting cocaine and beating up total strangers for sport. And then when I got a little older, it was so novel to me that there were people who held no discernible belief in God, and yet still seemed to be good, moral, respectable people. For others of us, our doubts and questions rise to the surface in college, when a peer or a professor challenges us on some aspect of our long-held belief system. (In fact, for those of you starting college this year, often college is the place where *all* of this starts to happen.) So it could be due to a variety of factors, but **doubt simply will not stay suppressed forever**. So my hope is that this series can be a catalyst to get some of those doubts and questions out from under the surface and out in the open where we can talk frankly and helpfully about them, before some type of crisis hits and *forces* us to. So if *that's* where you're at, this series is for you too. And lastly, this series is for...

Others we know who struggle with these questions

Finally, even **if you're a follower of Jesus and would say you've never struggled with these types of doubts and questions, chances are you are regularly going to come across people who do**. If we consider ourselves followers of Jesus, that means we are called to *regularly* build relationships with those who *aren't* followers of Jesus, in hopes that one day they might *discover* Jesus. And if you're doing that *consistently*, you're going to encounter people who have a lot of these types of objections to faith in Jesus. And if that's the case, it sure seems like it would be helpful to know how to speak intelligently and helpfully into those objections when people bring them up.

Now, really briefly on this point: I do want to clarify that when I say "speak into" those objections in other people, I don't mean "argue with them" about those objections. That's different. The goal of this series is not to teach you how to win a Jesus argument with your atheist neighbor. If for no other reason, than I don't think that's really what is needed. I know of very few people who have been *argued into* becoming a Christian. And by "very few," I mostly mean *zero* people. But at the same time, **I know of plenty of people that have decided to follow Jesus because someone knew how to speak intelligently, compassionately, and helpfully into their objections to faith in Jesus**. Because they encountered people who knew how to listen and walk patiently through these objections and questions. So the hope is that as a result of this series, those of us who are followers of Jesus would become, and continue to become those types of people.

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So those are the major categories of people that we had in mind who might be helped by this series. So if you fall in any of those categories (and I think most of us probably do), the hope is that this series will be helpful to you.

So that being said, if you want to know where we're headed each week of the series, you should've gotten a handout with that info on it. Each week, we'll tackle one "I just can't believe..." statement. This week, it's the idea that "belief is reasonable" in the first place. Next week we'll talk about the difficulty people have with the authority of the Bible. We'll cover other ideas like suffering, happiness, intolerance, and finally the issue of Christian hypocrisy. So that's where we're headed. Now I realize that those six topics don't encompass *all* the objections people have. So if you or someone you know has a question that *isn't* on that list, here's what you're welcome to do: text it in. Throughout the series, if you text your question to 865-248-5556, we'll try to answer as many as we can during some midweek podcasts. Sound like a plan? But that's where we're headed for the next six weeks.

Today, we simply need to lay some groundwork. **Before we can respond to these objections each week, we have to first address one big underlying assumption. And that's the assumption that belief in God isn't even *reasonable* in the first place.** More and more in our world today, people don't even think that the words "faith" and "logic" even belong in the same sentence. They're often seen as being on two very opposite ends of a spectrum, two mutually exclusive ideas. Sometimes you'll hear this idea presented as something like this:

"Religion is based on emotion, sentimentalism, and subjectivity, while secularism is based on reason, evidence, and objectivity."

I won't make us raise our hands, but I'd bet a lot of us have heard some version of that sentiment from people before. Maybe we've even thought something like that *ourselves*. It's a really popular perspective to hold. Many believe that religious people are religious primarily for emotional, subjective reasons, while people who *reject* religion have done so because they are rational, thinking, *objective* people. In other words, faith and reason are *opposed* to one another: that you can either be a person of faith, *or* you can be a rational, *thinking* person—but you certainly can't be *both*. So today, I'd love for us to examine that perspective: **is it true that being a person of faith means neglecting or discounting logic and science and reason? Is it true that faith and reason are *opposed* to one another?** I'd love for us to take some time this morning to investigate that.

And to do that, I want us to start off by looking at a story where Jesus encounters someone who has *trouble believing*. That's what our story is about in John 20. This is the story of a man named Thomas. Even if you're new to church and unfamiliar with the bible, there's a decent chance you've heard the expression "doubting Thomas" before; that phrase actually comes from this story. And I think this story helps inform the way we think about faith and reason, and their relationship to one another.

At this point in the story, Jesus has died and *reportedly* risen from the grave. But upon *hearing* that news, Thomas is having a hard time believing that it—as I think most of *us* today probably would. So I want us to read this story, and pay careful attention to how Jesus responds to Thomas in the midst of his doubt and questioning. So look with me, starting in v. 24:

[24] Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [in other words, he wasn't there to see post-resurrection Jesus for himself] [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he [that's Thomas] said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Thomas draws a line in the sand. He says, "unless I see the risen Jesus, I will not believe that he is risen." And I actually love that he gets even more *specific* than that: he doesn't just want to see Jesus. He wants to see the *marks of the nails* from the cross on his hands, and he wants to place his own finger into the scars, and place his hand into Jesus' side where a spear pierced it. So Thomas is like, "I need to see Jesus himself, and I need to verify that he really was crucified in the way that everyone says he was, and I need to confirm with my eyes and ears and hands that he is now alive." Thomas today would be an intellectual to the core: "I'm not going to buy into anything until I have substantial, verified *proof of it*." That's where Thomas is at. Keep reading with me, in v. 26:

[26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Teleporting into locked rooms seems like it would be pretty convincing, right? Apparently not good enough for Thomas though. Look at v. 27:

*[27] Then he said to Thomas, “**Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.**”*

Okay don't miss this. Jesus shows up, and knows the precise things that Thomas has said he needs to see and investigate in order to believe, and invites him to see and *investigate* those very things. Now, Jesus does eventually tell Thomas to “believe,” but that's *after* inviting him to see and touch his scars. To feel his torn and beaten side. Jesus says to Thomas “here I am. *Investigate. Touch. See. Feel.* Take it in with your senses. Confirm that the incredible things you've heard are actually true. And then, based on logic—based on the verifiable *proof* you've seen with your own eyes—based on that, *believe.*” I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like an invitation to “blind faith.” That sounds like an invitation to reason and investigation, and *then, based on those things, to belief.* Do you see that?

Because then that's precisely what happens next. Look with me at v. 28:

*[28] Thomas answered him, “**My Lord and my God!**”*

Based on logic—based on *proof*—based on what he's seen with his own eyes and confirmed, Thomas *believes* in the risen Jesus. But then this, in v. 29:

*[29] Jesus said to him, “Have you **believed** because you have **seen** me? **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**”*

Gotta love Jesus, right? Never misses an opportunity to teach somebody something. So his statement to Thomas, after letting Thomas verify things with his own eyes and ears, is “good. You've believed because you have seen it for yourself. But there are those who have *not* seen it for themselves, and yet still have *believed.*” And with that, the story ends.

Now, there are a couple very important things I think we can gather from this story about the relationship between faith and reason, and how *they both* relate to our belief or *unbelief* in God. First...

Both belief and unbelief are complex.

Based on what he does and says in this story, I think Jesus knows that belief and unbelief are both complex things. On the one hand, he knows that faith is not *opposed* to reason and logic (which explains why Jesus has no problem with Thomas reaching out and investigating things for himself). But at the same time, he knows that faith isn't produced by reason *alone* (hence why he says to Thomas, "many have not *seen*, and yet *believe*"). **Faith isn't opposed to logic, but it's also not solely dependent on logic, either.** You see, the statement we looked at earlier, about how faith is based on emotion and secularism is based on evidence, is actually way too simplistic to be true. The truth is that **people embrace religion for objective and subjective reasons, and people reject religion for both objective and subjective reasons.**

Let me unpack that a little. On the one hand, it *is* true that some people *reject* God for objective reasons. They do their research, they explore the data, they investigate, and then after all that they decide to *reject* the claims of Christianity. That happens. But at the same time, plenty of people have converted *to* religion for objective reasons, as well. We'll start with one you probably all know:

- **C.S. Lewis**—author of *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*, along with some other, lesser-known books involving witches and wardrobes. Lewis often referred to himself as "the most reluctant convert [to Christianity] in all of England." He spent years and years of his life as an atheist, and then converted to faith in Jesus due to an intellectual conversation with two professors at respected universities. If you read about C.S. Lewis' conversion, you'll find that he came to faith largely *through* logic and reason, not *despite* it.¹
- **Francis Collins**, who you may *not* have heard of, led the *Human Genome Project*, and is widely considered to be one of the leading scientists in the world. He was an atheist and converted to Christianity, because even as a scientist, he found science "woefully inadequate" as a basis for human morality and ethics. In other words, he realized that science could not help him determine what was right and wrong. So he converted to Christianity, not by *ignoring* reason, but because *of it*.²
- **T.S. Elliot**—the famous 20th century poet—his conversion to Christianity was due to his increasing belief that secularism had no helpful response to *suffering*. Christianity, he believed, provided a more reasonable *explanation for* it and *response to* it. So he didn't have an emotional experience that inclined him to

¹ You can read more about this conversation [here](#).

² You can read more about his conversion [here](#).

believe—he actually hated hearing about people who arrived at Christianity that way. He believed because he found secularism *lacking* intellectually.³

And I could go on with examples; there are actually plenty of them. But the point I'm making is simply this: **to say that logic and reason will only lead you to reject faith actually isn't true.** Sometimes it leads to that, and sometimes it leads to exactly the opposite. People *embrace* religion for objective reasons as well. There's plenty of evidence to support that perspective.

Now, on the flip side of that coin, it's often said that *some* people are more inclined *towards* religion because of *subjective* reasons: because their upbringing, or because of a lack of education, or their socioeconomic status, or a variety of other factors. And that very well could be true: there are plenty of *subjective* factors in people becoming religious. But there are also subjective factors in people *rejecting* religion. Plenty of people who *reject* religion have had negative personal *experiences* with religion, right? I mean I don't think that's exactly a secret. And I don't mean to make light of it—there are *plenty* of horrible experiences out there to go around. If I had experienced what some people have experienced at the hands of Christians, I very well might be struggling as much as they are to believe. But as powerful as those personal experiences are, they are still *subjective* reasons for not believing. **Rejecting religion because of bad experiences with it means that you are being, on some level *subjective* about it.**

Beyond that, quite a few secular thinkers have *admitted* having subjective reasons for rejecting faith. I'll give you just a couple. Aldous Huxley, who was a humanist thinker and author of the famous novel *Brave New World* that many of us were forced to read at some point during our education, once said this:

*I had **motive** for not wanting the world to have a meaning; **consequently assumed** that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption [...] For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was **essentially an instrument of liberation**, sexual and political.*

So Huxley actually admits that in many ways, his subjectivity was in the *driver's seat* when it came to him rejecting religion. He says 'I wanted there to be no God, and therefore no meaning, because that meant I could do things that I otherwise couldn't.

³ You can read more about T.S. Eliot's conversion [here](#).

Another example is Thomas Nagel, a professor of philosophy at NYU until a few years ago, once said something similar:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. 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.

Now whether you agree with those statements or not, *like* them or not, you've got to respect their level of honesty. **Some of the brightest secular thinkers out there are completely comfortable admitting that their unbelief is not *simply* logical and rational.** It has at least some *subjective* elements to it. They admit that they have a *vested interest* in God *not existing*. Their conclusions about religion and faith are—at least on some level—subjective.

So I think **there's plenty of basis for believing, like Jesus seemingly does in our passage, that both *belief* and *unbelief* are *complex*. For every single one of us, whatever our beliefs are, we probably have both objective and *subjective* reasons for believing what we believe.** So practically, it's not really fair to say to a religious person, "you're only religious because you don't value reason," just like it's not fair to say to an *atheist*, "you're just an atheist because you're angry at God." They both avoid having a meaningful, rational, and compassionate conversation with someone you might disagree with. Both of those statements ignore the *complexity* of belief and unbelief. The simple truth is that belief and unbelief are complex: there's more going on beneath the surface than we often want to acknowledge or *can* acknowledge. And second...

Both belief and unbelief require "leaps."

Let me explain what I mean by "leaps." In the story, Jesus acknowledges that a lot of people would have to make an intellectual *leap* in order to believe in him. He says "there are many who will not see, and yet will believe." That's an *intellectual leap*: choosing to believe in something that you have not seen. And **so it's true that in order to become a follower of Jesus, you will at some point have "leaps" to make.** You might have to make the *leap* of believing that a God exists, even though there are days and situations and questions that make that very difficult. You might have to make the *leap* of believing that Jesus really *is* God in the flesh and did miracles and himself rose from the dead after three days, even though those things are likely very hard for many of us to swallow.

And for some of us, quite candidly, we have to make the *leap* of believing that there is truth and love and beauty to the message of Jesus, even when we have experienced the very *opposite* of that at times from people who claim to represent him. So becoming a follower of Jesus does require being willing to make a “leap” of some sort.

But here’s **what doesn’t get talked about nearly as often: *rejecting God also requires you to make a leap.*** It requires that you make the *leap* of believing that Christianity is the most successful hoax ever pulled off. That it has successfully deceived 2.18 *billion* people living today, and even more people throughout history, over the course of thousands of years. That’s a *leap* you’ll have to make. You’ll also have to make the leap of believing that everything that you and I see and love and enjoy is only here by accident. That happiness, and truth, and love, and beauty, and forgiveness, and meaning—all the things that for most of us, make *life worth living*—that all of those things are just compelling to us simply because of chemical reactions in our brains. That they have no meaning in and of themselves—it’s just that believing in those things helped our ancestors survive, so we continue to believe in them for that reason alone. It requires you making the *leap* of saying that there *is* such thing as right and wrong, there *is* such thing as justice and injustice—even though there is hardly any logical, rational basis in for saying that. We may not think of them that way, but those are also *leaps* you have to be willing to make, in order to believe that there is no God.

So at some point, **both belief in God and unbelief require you to make “leaps” that are not entirely rational or logical, and some of the best thinkers on both sides of the issue have acknowledged this. So the question really *isn’t*, ‘do I want to be completely irrational and believe in God, or be completely rational and not believe in him?’** That’s not it. **The question, rather, is ‘*which* slightly irrational leap do I want to make? Which direction do I want to be at least a little bit irrational, *in*? Which *leap* am I most comfortable with?’**

There’s an author by the name of Sheldon Vanauken who I think articulates this predicament quite well. Vanauken was a friend of C.S. Lewis who also wrestled mightily throughout his life with the truth claims of Christianity. At one point, he wrote a book called *A Severe Mercy*, in which he wrote this, speaking about these two “leaps” we all have to choose between:

*There is a gap between the provable and the proved. **How was I to cross it? If I were to stake my whole life on the risen Christ, I wanted proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted to see him eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got***

*none of these...It was a question of whether I was to accept him—or reject. [But then look at his realization in this next part] **My God! There was a gap behind me as well! Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble—but what of the leap to rejection? There might be no certainty that Christ was God—but, by God, there was no certainty that he was not. This was not to be borne. I could not reject Jesus. There was only one thing to do once I had seen the gap behind me. I turned away from it and flung myself over the gap towards Jesus.***

One way or another, whatever you decide to believe or *not* believe, there is a gap there. There is a “leap” that you will have to make, either way. The question is “*which* leap will you make?” Jesus, in John 20 comes to Thomas, dealing with this very question, and says “here is my bruised and beaten body, offered up on the cross for you. Put your hand in my side, feel the scars on my hands. Explore the evidence for yourself, and decide what is true.”

And I want you to see this morning that **the invitation from Jesus is in many ways the same to us today:** Jesus says to *us*, “here is my body, beaten and broken on the cross for you. And here I am, risen and reigning in the world. And if you will acknowledge that those things truly were done *for you*—Jesus says I won’t just *ask you* to “fling yourself over the gap” towards me—I will meet you precisely where you are and *walk that gap* with you, however long it takes, and however fraught with difficulty and doubt it might be.” That’s what Jesus offers *us*, through his death and resurrection.

Now, some of us might hear that and think, “but see, that’s precisely *it*—if I got what *Thomas* got, then maybe I’d believe, but I didn’t. I don’t have enough faith to ‘not see, and yet believe.’” But even then, I think of *all* of the disciples, who say to Jesus on one occasion, “increase our faith, Jesus!” And Jesus responds by saying ‘all you need is faith the size of a *mustard seed*.’ In case you’re wondering, mustard seeds are pretty dang small. And Jesus says, ‘if you have even *that* amount of faith, I can work through that faith to accomplish incredible things.’ So how about let’s all—every one of us, those with a whole lot of faith and those with not much at all—gather at the feet of Jesus and say with the disciples, ‘God, increase our faith.’” And trust that he will *grow* our faith along the way.

So let’s do this—feel free to go ahead and put your bible, your stuff away. And once you do, I’d love if we could all just close our eyes for a second. I’m not trying to make anything weird for you, not trying to make you uncomfortable. But if you’re here today and you’re not a follower of Jesus—or if you *are* and you still have deep, troubling,

burning questions about Jesus—the invitation to you is much like the one given to Thomas: to come and investigate. Not to come and check your brain at the door, not to come and just automatically assimilate to what everybody else here believes. But to come and investigate. **I want you to know God isn't scared to let people do that.** And that's his invitation to you. Today if you're willing, I would offer this: **pray and ask God to reveal himself to you.** Right now, if that's you, just on your own, pray: "God if you're real, will you reveal yourself to me?" And that might happen suddenly right now, it might happen gradually over the next six weeks, or it might happen over the next *year*—I don't know, and I've seen God do it all different ways. But I know he desires to do it. And Scripture tells us that "he rewards those who earnestly seek him."⁴

So let's pray for that.

⁴ Hebrews 11:6.