

“Barnabas Piper issues a powerful call to leave the gridlock of black-and-white thinking and enter the gray terrain of second-guessing and doubt. This is where we raise our toughest, most honest questions to God. Such an invitation doesn’t push us from the gospel but draws us nearer to the heart of Christ. May we all learn to pray, ‘Help my unbelief.’”

Margaret Feinberg, Author, *Fight Back with Joy* and *Wonderstruck*

“*Help My Unbelief* gives the church permission to exhale. It’s a book that pulls up a chair and looks in the eyes of the doubter and says, ‘You’re not alone, friend.’ Doubt, says Barnabas Piper, is not the antithesis of faith. Rather, it’s a gateway. The key is to ask the right questions, and to be open to God’s answers. For this particular disillusioned pastor’s daughter, Piper’s words are a lifeline—and the key to drawing today’s youth back into Christendom.”

Emily T. Wierenga, Author, *Atlas Girl: Finding Home in the Last Place I Thought to Look*; www.emilywierenga.com

“Too often our struggles with doubt are hidden, pushed into the back of the cupboard like a corrosive agent that is too dangerous to touch. With clarity, warmth, and candor, Barnabas Piper shows us that doubt does not have to be something that corrodes, but rather in its right place can be something that strengthens faith.”

Mark Sayers, Pastor, Red Church, Melbourne, Australia; Author, *Facing Leviathan* and *The Road Trip that Changed the World*

“I’m really excited for you to read Barnabas’s new book, *Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt Is Not the Enemy of Faith*. Barnabas writes in a ruthlessly honest and raw way. This book is going to help an entire generation grow and blossom in their faith in the midst of wrestling with doubt.”

Derwin L. Gray, Lead Pastor, Transformation Church; Author, *Limitless Life: You Are More Than Your Past When God Holds Your Future*

“In *Help My Unbelief*, Barnabas Piper makes a clear and compelling case for faith amid the sea of doubts many experience in Christianity. It’s a necessary book for our generation.”

Matt Carter, Pastor of Preaching, Austin Stone Community Church, Austin, Texas; Coauthor, of *The Real Win* and *For the City*

“Barnabas Piper’s *Help My Unbelief* is an honest, self-revealing, and engaging treatment of an important subject. This winsome and well-reasoned book avoids clichés and easy, superficial answers. It will benefit many—including those who doubt, those who ‘sort of’ believe, and those who believe yet long to do so more completely.”

Randy Alcorn, Author, *Heaven* and *Hand in Hand*

“Some Christians have a simple faith unencumbered by doubt. For the rest of us, things aren’t so easy. We question. We second-guess. We always want to know why. *Help My Unbelief* is the perfect book for us. With accessible prose and unflinching honesty,

Barnabas explores belief that encompasses, is even strengthened by, doubt. Anyone navigating a faith filled with doubts will find Barnabas to be a sympathetic and reliable guide.”

Drew Dyck, Managing Editor, *Leadership Journal*; Author, *Yawning at Tigers: You Can't Tame God, So Stop Trying*

“Sometimes believers can give the impression that the Christian life is always one of triumph and confidence. This book by Barnabas Piper counsels us on how to trust God when our faith is weak and wavering. It calls us away from a demon-like faith that simply knows the data about God, to a childlike faith that cries out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief.’ If you find yourself doubting, or if you love someone who doubts, this book will refresh and encourage.”

Russell Moore, President, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; Author, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ*

“Barnabas Piper’s *Help My Unbelief* is an encouraging, honest look at an essential but underdiscussed aspect of faith: the tension between belief and unbelief. It’s a tension that need not be feared. Piper shows us, rather, how the tension can be healthy and ultimately leave us stronger in our faith. For any believer who has felt alone in their wrestle with unbelief, or who was mistakenly taught that true belief is always ironclad, this valuable and timely book is for you.”

Brett McCracken, Author, *Gray Matters* and *Hipster Christianity*

Help My Unbelief

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BARNABAS PIPER

Help My Unbelief



WHY DOUBT IS NOT THE
ENEMY OF FAITH


the goodbook
COMPANY

For Grace and Dianne:

*You will fight unbelief. My hope for you is
that when you do, you believe enough to cry,
“Help.” For when you do, God will answer.*

*I know this because he has answered me, and he
promises to answer those who cry out to him. He
has even answered when I didn't know to cry out.*

*May you live for Jesus, and may your
belief in him shape everything you do.*

*Love,
Daddy*

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FOREWORD

This book is a tragedy. No, it doesn't end tragically (it is filled with hope), but its very existence is tragic; the author's first-hand experience with the subject matter (doubt and unbelief) is tragic. The need for this book is tragic.

Adam ate the fruit, after all, and the world is now full of broken people with broken emotions and broken minds, looking at the world out of broken eyes. Every human ever born has had a broken relationship with his or her heavenly Father, each urgently in need of mending. Unfortunately, we spend a lot of our time staring at ourselves to see how we feel about him and acting as if our feelings have any authority over truth and falsehood. As if taking our own temperature tells us anything about God's.

We have a Father who is trustworthy and good, but we stare at his reflection in whatever carnival mirror we might generate, and we fail to connect, to trust... to truly believe. We struggle to trust him when things get hard or, as Barnabas Piper describes perfectly in this volume, when things are totally fine and dandy, when we have good families and great churches and whole heaps of head knowledge.

It doesn't matter what all *we* might have; *we* are still broken. We disobey. We fail. We sin. And every sinful act is an act of unbelief, a failure to truly live out what we affirm.

Thank God that our salvation is not dependent on an absence of our own fears. Our failures. Our doubts. In fact, our salvation is not dependent on us at all. It doesn't depend on how we feel. It doesn't depend on how well we answer challenges and questions, and it doesn't depend on how deeply and authentically we really, really feel our answers deep down in our hearts.

Our salvation is on the cross. No matter how broken we may be, no matter how much we might struggle and fail to see and to know the truth (every truth) clearly, we can rest in the One who sees all and knows all. When we cannot see, we are still seen. Even when we stare at our own sputtering joy (and the more we stare, the more it sputters) so intently that we lose sight of the cross, the One on the cross does not lose sight of us.

We are his. We cost him everything. And his clear eyes will never lose track—or ownership—of what he purchased. His confidence never wanes. Feel how you may, struggle how you may, once bought, once loved with his blood, you cannot slip from his hands.

For those who are his but still doubt, for those who have ever loved him but disobeyed, the task is as simple as it is impossible for us to do on our own. We are to see as clearly, to love as surely, to rejoice as confidently, and to know the Father as fully as he does.

It is the journey of journeys, the trek we shall never finish, and it begins today, with one foot lifted. Now the other. Repeat. The answer to all your doubts and failures begins here: *You are not the answer. He is.*

Help My Unbelief

Do you want to believe? Then you already do. And that is the beating heart of this book.

Belief is from God. Ask for it, and in the asking, you have already received.

Do not worry about your own weaknesses. Stop fearing your own sickly reflection and your distressingly philosophical navel. Ignore your empty emotional hands. Those are your qualifications for his grace. His hands are full. And you are in them.

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

And so it will be until the graves are emptied.

N.D. Wilson

INTRODUCTION

“I was born into a Christian home and accepted Jesus at a young age.” You’ve heard this line or something resembling it a thousand times. If you, like me, grew up in a churchgoing family, this was the opening chord to so many testimonies you heard at Sunday school or youth camp or wherever. It was the opening to mine.

I was born to John and Noël Piper on March 31, 1983. My father had been a pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for almost three years. My birthday fell on Maundy Thursday, a solemn day in the church calendar commemorating the Last Supper. From my very first day I was tied inextricably to the church.

I spent my first thirty years as a pastor’s kid, marked by consistent and rigorous scriptural teaching. I knew my Bible inside and out. I was the Sunday school answer man, helped lead youth group worship, and generally looked the part of a good Christian boy. In my book *The Pastor’s Kid*,¹ I describe in detail how all this “good Christian” stuff was hollow, though. It wasn’t outright hypocrisy or overt rebellion (most of the time). The hollowness came from

my lack of belief and inability to even explain what that meant. I thought I believed, but I didn't even know what belief was.

When I was seven years old, I walked into my dad's study at home one day and told him I wanted to follow Jesus. I don't remember why. It might have been fear of hell, it might have been a desire to spend eternity with my family, or it might have been guilt. I sat on his knee and had a conversation also now long forgotten. Then we pulled out my illustrated NIV children's Bible, opened up to a blank page at the beginning, and wrote a profession of faith. My childish hand wrote about my need for a savior and how I believed Jesus was my only hope and now my life would be his forever.

From that day forward I have considered myself a Christian. I know I am a sinner. That much is obvious to anyone who knows me. I believe God is holy, so much so that he cannot abide sin in his presence. I believe I cannot do a single thing to purify myself enough to gain access to God. I believe that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."² And I believe in the perfect Son, Jesus, the only man who ever lived a life of perfection and thus was able to be the flawless sacrifice and bear God's punishment for my sin and those of everyone else who believes. I believe Jesus rose from the dead and thus has shown himself to be the conquering King who will one day return to "wipe away every tear" and reside in a newly created earth where "neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore."³

I have believed these truths almost all my life. And yet...

And yet I have committed sins that have deeply wounded others and nearly destroyed my relationship with Jesus.

And yet I have looked Scripture full in the face and decided my way is better than God's; I would rather be my own god.

And yet I doubt the promises God gave even though he provided the surety: his beloved Son's very life. My troubles are bigger than God's love no matter what he says.

And yet I am skeptical. I know what Scripture says and I know the arguments, but the questions stack up. Some people think, *God says it, I believe it, that settles it*. But it doesn't settle it. Did God really say it? I don't really believe it. Nothing is settled.

And yet my belief is weak. Or maybe it's not there. Or maybe I don't really know what belief means. And that's what this book is about—not each and every question and doubt you have, but a look at the more fundamental question. *What is belief?*

You have your own “and yet.” Maybe yours inserted itself before you even professed belief; all the claims of the Bible and this man, Jesus, are just too much to assent to. You struggle with questions of evil and pain and the existence of God. You are a skeptic, either willfully or because you just can't help it. I cannot answer all your questions. I don't think anyone on earth can. But answers exist. They are found in belief, with or without empirical evidence to back them up. I hope to show you that it's worth it to risk believing.

Or maybe your “and yet” is on the other end of the spectrum; you have so willingly followed Jesus that you have never raised a question about life's hardships or God's promises. You follow blindly but faithfully. But is this because you truly believe without doubt or because you fear where questions might take you? Are you afraid that questioning or even, gulp, *doubting* might open a Pandora's box of sin and judgment? My goal is to help you see that belief isn't blind faith and that questions,

if asked well, are building blocks for stronger faith rather than stepping-stones away from it.

If your “and yet” lies somewhere in the middle or is some combination of both, this book will still help you by exploring belief from both ends. It will look at “I believe” and “Help my unbelief,” the expression of a desperate man in Mark 9. These juxtaposed phrases represent the reality of every follower of Jesus no matter how mature, new, stumbling, or strong. We believe. And we don’t. We follow. We fail. We are weak, and we need help.

In these pages I hope you find words to bolster your belief. I’ve included an appendix with reading suggestions that address specific doubts; but the truth is that no amount of belief moves us beyond “Help my unbelief.” Rather, the stronger our belief, the more urgent our plea. That’s why I’ve also included true stories interspersed between the chapters to demonstrate how belief and unbelief can play out together in real life.

As you read, I pray you will be encouraged and challenged, cut down and built up. I pray you will see the frailty of your belief and the strength of what you believe in. And I pray that belief will be more than an assertion; may it be a living thing in your soul that shapes and drives you in all you do.

Chapter 1

TENSION

No one could help the boy. The demon was destroying him with seizures and fits that flung him into fire and water. His father was desperate. He loved his son and would move heaven and earth to save him; if he could not find a way to help his boy, he would lose him. The man heard of a teacher, a teacher who walked on water, calmed storms with a word, and even raised the dead. But the teacher did something more. He looked demons in the eye and banished them with a word; the man knew because the teacher had done it to a whole swarm of demons by sending them into a herd of pigs that immediately turned tail and rushed into the sea to drown. If anyone could help his son, this teacher could.

The father took his scarred and frail son and found Jesus, or rather found his followers. He asked them for help, but they could do nothing. In his fear and hurt, the man became angry and spoke harshly to the followers. Defensive and ashamed of their powerlessness, they lashed back. Just then Jesus arrived. Mark's Gospel tells the story of what happened next:

And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.¹

More than any other story in Scripture, this one exhibits the Christian experience of belief. It doesn't explain it or clarify it. It doesn't describe it or give direction. Instead, it captures the experience perfectly. At first blush, this story has little to do with our daily lives. We live in a decidedly natural state with tangible lives. Most of us live modern, technologically driven lives in the Western world, and this story seems almost fanciful and a bit frightening. It's the kind of thing that happened long ago in a

galaxy far, far away. After all, it's the story of an exorcism but without the Hollywood flair and excitement of Linda Blair spewing out pea soup and oatmeal.² In this real-life exorcism, the Son of God exercised his power and exorcised a demon. Victory was had, and a boy was saved. But as with so much of Scripture there is something more here. In fact, a single sentence from this story holds the keys to the mystery of belief.

On my right forearm I have a tattoo. I'd long heard the advice "Don't get a tattoo unless it's something you want on you forever." I took this advice to heart as a teen and through most of my twenties. It saved me from a handful of potentially embarrassing decisions. (Remember when barbed wire tats were popular? I don't have one.) I got my tattoo a couple of weeks before my thirtieth birthday. I was old enough to know better and to know exactly what I was doing. I had lived enough life to find something I wanted permanently inked on my body. It isn't art. It isn't flashy—just simple script serving as a reminder my soul needs to see every day.

"I believe; help my unbelief."

In my mid-twenties I went through what rightly could be called a crisis of faith—a true test of whether I should devote my life to what I grew up believing about Jesus. I was faced with the decision of walking away from it all, because that would be the easier thing to do, or turning to Jesus and giving him all of my life. (I'll share more about this later.) For most of my life I had felt the pull, the tension of faith. I had felt the draw of sin and given in often. I believed in Jesus, but I doubted. I believed in Jesus, but I didn't. Then one day I stumbled across this story from Mark. I'd read it dozens of times, but this time it grabbed me. That one sentence grabbed me.

The father's words gripped my heart with a vicelike power. In five words he explained so much of the Christian's experience, of my experience. That simple sentence is the key to the struggles, the ups and downs, the winding road of belief. In a breath he expressed the highest of heights, the strength of virtue, the emptiness of doubt, and the yearning for something onto which he could hold. He spoke of being pulled in two opposite directions, one of peace and the other of chaos and fear. And he spoke of clinging, holding fast, knowing to whom he should look. All this in five little words.

SEESAWS AND TUG-OF-WAR

Christians who don't know the tension of "I believe; help my unbelief" might not be Christians at all, or at the least they might be very infantile ones. Our faith is one of brutal tensions. Not everyone can express this, but every Christian knows it. We feel it in our guts. We feel the motion of the up and down and down and up. We feel as if we're going to bust in half as we're pulled in two directions at once. To not recognize the significance of these words indicates a simplistic, thoughtless belief. It isn't a mark of maturity but rather of not being mature enough to know our own weakness and need. Tension is our state of being for all of this life, and to live as a believer is to live in it.

We are born sinners incapable of making ourselves pleasing to God yet called to be holy as God is holy.

We are finite creatures seeking to understand an infinite God.

We trust that God is good although the world he created and sovereignly rules is filled with badness.

Help My Unbelief

We think in terms of scientific evidence, proof, and logic though our holy book tells of miracles and supernatural occurrences.

We believe God is omnipresent though we can see him nowhere.

We have one God in three persons but not three gods.

We defy the economy of earthly power by following a leader who died to save us, who willingly laid down his glory and power, and who calls us to be the least in order to be great.

We live in this world but are told it is not our home; we are not of this place.

Our king came and ushered in his kingdom but then left with a promise of his return. So we wait.

We are saved by faith, not by good or moral works. But faith without good and moral works is dead.

We are called to consider suffering as joy.

We follow the teachings of a book that is in part clear and in part mysterious and enigmatic.

Each of these tensions holds true for every Christian. They ebb, flow, spike, and ease off, but they're always present. At points they have overwhelmed me, and other times they have hardened me because they seemed too much to accept. And all the time I feel the roiling of the seesaw's rise and fall. My heart plays tug-of-war with me, sometimes over doubts and other times over sin. I trust but not as I should, not always. I obey but not as I ought, not always.

I don't take many things at face value; I question nearly everything. The upside of this is that I'm curious and love to learn. The downside is that I am a cynic who trusts my own impressions and opinions instead of trusting others'. This means that as a child and into my teens, I found it easy to disregard teachers or even my parents. I wasn't usually rebellious, just dismissive

(though often with a snide retort thrown in to show my wit and wisdom). As I grew older, this questioning turned into a subtle sort of pride; I saw myself as the arbiter of truth in my own life. I *knew* the Bible was true. I knew all the answers about theology, faith, and the Christian life. But underneath it all was that pride giving me the permission to ignore what I knew, to give in to greed and lust and dishonesty.

And as sin does, it fed my doubts about others and fed my confidence in myself. At no point, though, did God ever let me forget him or leave him completely. At one level I *did* believe, I did know, I did follow. I wasn't throwing myself into sin; I was simply accepting sin in my otherwise Christian life. I wanted to be a follower of Jesus, and I wanted to be a follower of Barnabas. I believed and I doubted. Back and forth, back and forth. And in the end, here I stand. I believe; help my unbelief.

AS IT SHOULD BE

We are so impressed by the scientific clank ... that we feel we ought not to say that the sunflower turns because it knows where the sun is. It is almost second nature to us to prefer explanations ... with a large vocabulary. We are much more comfortable when we are assured that the sunflower turns because it is heliotropic.

The trouble with that kind of talk is that it ... tempts us to think that we really know what the sunflower is up to. But we don't.

The sunflower is a mystery, just as every single thing in the universe is.³

—Robert Farrar Capon

In the post-Enlightenment Western world, we live by rules of science. Theories are posed, evidence is gathered, facts are disputed, and in the end, truth is discovered. At least truth about some things is discovered. But the model of scientific discovery simply does not apply to much of life. One of the not-so-subtle tenets of Enlightenment thinking is disregard for the supernatural and the subsequent magnification of mankind. Man has superseded deity as the primary force and value in the world. We can see this even in the gut reaction to the story I shared from Mark earlier. When we hear of demons and exorcisms, they don't seem present or real. They seem more like tales of dragons and ghouls and knights in shining armor. To put stock in such fanciful stories, according to many, has the same value (at best) as finding the morals in the Grimms' fairy tales.

To many modern thinkers, though, belief in God and a holding to religion are akin to intentional stupidity. Faith is built, they say, on tradition and custom taking hold of our minds and a refusal to think in any other direction. (In some cases they are correct, but that is hardly a fair characterization.) Because they cannot see God or plausible evidence of his being, to believe in him is outright madness. To them, believing in God is like holding fast to the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus.