



SUN RIVER  
CHURCH

# BELIEF BARRIERS

SHATTERING OUR  
STRONGHOLDS OF DOUBT

SMALL GROUP GUIDE  
SPRING 2021



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# OVERVIEW

The word 'belief' means different things to different people. Some use it to refer to an unrealistic optimism like when your favorite sports team is down by 100 points with 2 minutes left in the game, but you still 'believe' they are going to win. Others use 'belief' only for a fantasy world as in 'I believe in Santa.' Still others use 'belief' in opposition to knowledge saying 'we know things about the physical life but we can only believe things about the spiritual life'.

But in the Bible, 'belief' is not an uncertain wish. The Hebrew word 'aman' and the Greek word 'pistis' that are translated 'belief' can also be translated 'faith, trust, allegiance, sure, verified'. So, belief in Jesus is based on a knowledge of the unseen reality from which the visible world came into existence. (Hebrews 11:1-3) It is also something that grows as we learn to trust Him more fully (Mark 9:24 'I believe, help my unbelief' and Romans 1:16-17 'from faith to faith').

One of Jesus' closest friends, John, wrote a lot about 'belief' and the obstacles people face in their hearts that become barriers to belief. He was an eyewitness to the events surrounding Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. These events had a huge impact on him, and coming to know Jesus truly changed his life. He wrote these things down with a clear purpose in mind, that is 'so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20:31)

As we go through this series together, our prayer for you is whether there are barriers that have prevented you from turning to Jesus for the first time, or there are barriers that have prevented you from growing in your faith, may God break down those barriers so that you believe and have life in Jesus Christ.

**“Perhaps the hardest thing for sincere Christians to come to grips with is the level of real unbelief in their own life: the unformulated skepticism about Jesus that permeates all dimensions of their being and undermines what efforts they do make toward Christlikeness.”**

**Dallas Willard**

## **PRAYER**

Take a moment to look over all the Belief Barriers that will be covered in this series. Ask God to reveal to you which one affects you the most and then share that with your group. Write down what each person shares so that you can be praying for spiritual growth for each other in these areas throughout the next several weeks in the space below:

# RELIGIOSITY

John 3:1-16

**“A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”**

**C.S. Lewis**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*Nicodemus was curious about Jesus and may have honestly recognized the divine origin of Jesus' power to do miracles. However, as a high-ranking Jewish religious leader, there were several barriers that initially prevented Nicodemus from believing that Jesus was the Son of God. These barriers would have included intellectual pride, self-reliance, legalism and religious traditions of the Pharisees.*

1. How did Jesus' words in this passage cut through Nicodemus' intellectual pride?

2. How did Jesus' words point out the difference between external religious traditions versus internal heart change?

## THE PURPOSE

*John wrote about the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

3. How is this two-fold purpose brought out in the passage?

## THE BARRIER NOW

4. How does intellectual pride, self-reliance, legalism, and religiosity become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

5. How do those things prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

6. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

7. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- Consider genuine worship throughout the day (proclaiming God's greatness over your own).
- Try serving (especially in areas that are perceived as lowly) and intentionally keeping your good deeds a secret.

# SEXUAL IMMORALITY

John 4:1-45

**“God, You have formed us for Yourself,  
and our hearts are restless  
till they find rest in You.”**

**St. Augustine**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*The woman at the well was trapped in the cycle of sexual immorality. The cycle goes something like this: a desire to be loved (thirst), trying to satisfy the desire in the wrong way (sin), feelings of shame, becoming an outcast, avoiding people and heart issues, increased loneliness, increased desire to be loved (repeat).*

1. Where in the passage is each aspect of the cycle made apparent?

2. Which aspects did Jesus deal with and how did He address them?

## THE PURPOSE

*John wrote about the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

3. How is this two-fold purpose brought out in the passage?

## THE BARRIER NOW

4. How does sexual immorality become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

5. How does sexual immorality prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

6. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

7. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- Consider some specific scriptures to memorize and meditate on (Matthew 5:27-28, Romans 6:15-23).
- Eliminate entertainment with sexually immoral content (Matthew 5:29-30).
- Fast from media in general for a time.

# NEARSIGHTEDNESS

John 6:1-69

**“When the delight of eternity draws us upward and the pleasure of temporal good holds us down, the identical soul is not wholehearted in its desire for one or the other. It is torn apart in a painful condition as long as it prefers the eternal because of its truth but does not discard the temporal because of its familiarity.”**

**Augustine of Hippo**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*There are several examples in this passage of people who were so focused on the physical world and material things that it prevented them from understanding and believing the unseen spiritual reality Jesus was teaching them about. This is the belief barrier of nearsightedness.*

1. How was the crowd focused on an earthly perspective? What was the unseen spiritual reality? (v15)

2. What were the disciples focused on that caused fear? What alleviated their fear? (v16-21)

3. How was the crowd focused on an earthly perspective? What was the unseen spiritual reality? (v25-27)

4. How were the people defining 'work'? How did Jesus define it? (v28)

5. How did Jesus correct their earthly perspective about what happened with Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness? (v31-33)

6. What was the Jews earthly perspective? What was the spiritual reality? (v41-42)

7. How did they have an earthly perspective? What was the spiritual reality Jesus was talking about? (v52-57)

## THE PURPOSE

*John wrote down the events in chapter 6 "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

8. How is this two-fold purpose brought out in the passage?

## THE BARRIER NOW

9. How does nearsightedness become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

10. How does nearsightedness prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

11. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

12. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- Consider 'treasures' in your life that may possess you more than you possess them. Is there something you need to give away?
- Richard Foster once said, *"God uses our experiences of solitude to enable us to become who we truly are. We begin, slowly at first, to live simply before God. Increasingly we come to see things in the light of eternity, and as a result, successes and failures no longer impress us or oppress us."* Try practicing times of silence and solitude.



# FALSE BELIEF

John 8:31-38

Those who believe they have pleased God by the quality of their devotion and moral goodness naturally feel that they and their group deserve deference and power over others. The God of Jesus and the prophets, however, saves completely by grace. He cannot be manipulated by religious and moral performance-he can only be reached through repentance, through the giving up of power. If we are saved by sheer grace we can only become grateful, willing servants of God and of everyone around us.

Tim Keller

## THE BARRIER THEN

*God promised to bless all nations through Abraham and his descendants. Many Jews wrongly understood this to mean that they were automatically part of God's chosen people. In this passage, Jesus tears down their false belief. It is important to recognize that false belief is NOT doubt but rather an arrogant assumption of deserving salvation based on merit.*

1. What phrases does Jesus use to describe someone who truly believes?
2. What phrases describe someone who is deceived (has false belief)?

## THE PURPOSE

*This harsh exchange between Jesus and a group of Jews was written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

3. How are the ideas of 'truth' and 'freedom' related to this two-fold purpose?

## THE BARRIER NOW

*The belief barriers that have been discussed so far can affect Christians and non-Christians. However, Jesus makes it very clear that the deception of false belief affects whether someone is His follower or not.*

4. What are the false beliefs and deceptions in our world today that prevent people from putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

5. Look back at the phrases Jesus used to describe someone who truly believes. Do those phrases describe you and your relationship with Him?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

6. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

→ Consider reading and studying John 13:35, 1 John 2:15-17, and Galatians 5:16-26.

→ John Piper said, *“If you are a coasting believer, or if you are an unbeliever who thinks you are a believer, you need to be awakened, stunned, brought awake, and brought to a vital love-relationship with Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* So, pray for that!

# DISAPPOINTMENT

John 11:1-48

**“What’s simple is that everything good comes from God, and everything bad comes from man. Where it gets complicated is that everything seemingly good but ultimately bad comes from man, and everything seemingly bad but ultimately good comes from God.”**

**Criss Jami**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*When life doesn't go the way we hope or expect, disappointment can set in causing deep confusion and frustration. Depending on how well we deal with our disappointment, the end result can become a belief barrier.*

1. In the passage from John 11, how did Martha express her disappointment? How did Jesus respond? (v17-27)

2. What was different about Mary? How did Jesus respond? (v28-33)

3. What were the different reactions of the people in the crowd? (v34-37)

4. What was the disappointment of the Pharisees - things not going as they would hope or expect? (v45-48) What was their response? (v53)

## THE PURPOSE

*John included this event in his account of the life of Jesus “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31)*

5. How is this two-fold purpose brought out in the passage?

## THE BARRIER NOW

6. How does disappointment become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

7. How does disappointment prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

8. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

9. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- Read and meditate on Psalm 103.
- Practice submitting to God's ultimate purpose in your current circumstance through prayer. Perhaps kneeling and praying for each part of your body one by one (feet, hands, arms, mouth, ears, eyes, mind, etc.) to be used for His will rather than your own.
- Thankfulness can replace disappointment. Designate a shelf, counter space, or window sill to display an object that reminds you of a past event to be thankful for. Every time you look at the object, give thanks to God for what He did. Switch the object once a week.

# FAILURE

John 18:1-11, 15-18, 25-27

**“Failure is a school in which the truth  
always grows strong.”**

**Henry Ward Beecher**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*When we fail, it can cause us to feel shame and make us want to run away or give up. The resulting fear of failing again can make us hesitant or even paralyzed. This is especially true regarding trust in relationships. Since trust is vital for a personal relationship with Jesus, both failure and fear of failure can become a barrier.*

1. What was Peter's failure in v10-11? What things did Peter believe and fail to believe that caused this failure?

2. What was Peter's failure in v17, 25-27? What things did Peter believe and fail to believe that caused this failure?

3. In John 21:15-18, how did Jesus respond to Peter's failure? What was restored and what would be the result of that restoration?

## THE PURPOSE

*John recorded Peter's failure in his relationship with Jesus "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

4. How is this two-fold purpose brought out in the passage?

## THE BARRIER NOW

5. How does failure and fear of failure become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

6. How does failure and fear of failure prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

7. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

8. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- God often allows us to fail so that we can become aware of our weaknesses and learn to grow stronger spiritually. Study how several Biblical figures learned from their failures: David (2 Samuel 11-12 and Psalm 51), Elijah (1 Kings 17-19), Paul (Acts 9).
- Our relationship with Christ is not about our failures or successes, but God's grace. We can grow in grace (2 Peter 2:18) and be strengthened by grace (2 Timothy 2:1). Worship to the song 'Grace' by CityAlight <https://youtu.be/VCr6Vvj3nRo>
- Sometimes we try to make up for failure by striving to do more good works for God rather than receiving His grace and forgiveness. Consider incorporating a day of rest (Sabbath) in your weekly rhythm. "Be still and know God." (Psalm 46:10). Take a break from striving.

# PASSIVITY

John 18:28-19:16

**“I am responsible for what I believe and, I might add, for what I refuse to believe, because the content of what I do or do not believe makes a tremendous difference to what I become and how I act.”**

**J.P. Moreland**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*Passivity is a characteristic of someone who abstains from action, holds back from commitment and/or gives in to outside influences. Many times, passivity comes from trying to please people on different sides of an issue rather than upholding truth. It is this failure to act on truth that makes passivity a belief barrier. Keeping an open mind to consider all sides is important, but eventually we need to make decisions and act on them appropriately. When it comes to a decision about Jesus, this is a matter of life and death.*

1. How did Pilate's passivity come out in each of the following sections of the passages in John?

18:28-32

18:33-38a

18:38b-40

19:1-11

19:12-16

*[Note – In Luke 23:6-12 we see that Pilate even sent Jesus to Herod so that someone else would be responsible.]*

2. What caused Pilate to be passive in this whole situation? (19:7,12)

## THE PURPOSE

*Remembering Pilate's involvement in Jesus' crucifixion, John wrote down what happened "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

3. How is This two-fold purpose brought out in the passage?

## THE BARRIER NOW

4. How does passivity become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

5. How does passivity prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

6. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

7. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- Write a list of things that you know to be true about Jesus. Then, write a list of things you are still unsure about and pray for wisdom in those areas to see what is true.
- Overcoming passivity requires purposeful engagement. Try actively loving someone in your life once a week by offering assistance in some way. Or practice intentionally verbally encouraging someone once a day.
- Take a walk through your neighborhood and pray for the people in each house as you pass by. Stop for a couple of minutes to talk to anyone you see. Find out their names so you can pray for them more specifically.

# SKEPTICISM

John 20:24-29

**“Regardless of how you came to doubt, doubt itself is not the problem, but what can be problematic and even tragic is what you do with your doubt.”**

**Ben Young**

## THE BARRIER THEN

*Doubt can come in varying forms and degrees. When we are honest about our doubt, open to truth, and seeking wisdom, it can strengthen our faith. But if we are stubborn, content in darkness and refuse to believe, skepticism can become a belief barrier.*

1. The other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the Lord. Should that have been enough for him to believe?

2. Compare Jesus' words to Thomas in verse 27 with Thomas' words to the other disciples in verse 25. How can the similarities be explained?

## THE PURPOSE

*John wrote about Thomas' skepticism and Jesus' response "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).*

3. How do Thomas' words in verse 28 relate to this two-fold purpose?

## THE BARRIER NOW

4. How does skepticism become a belief barrier today preventing people from initially putting their trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

5. How does skepticism prevent some followers of Jesus from trusting more fully in Him?

6. How does this belief barrier affect your personal relationship with Jesus?

## BREAKING BARRIERS

7. What are some ways you can put forth effort to allow God to transform you in this area? Ask for suggestions from your group.

- Study Proverbs 2:1-8, James 1:5-8, and Acts 17:10-12.
- Write down your questions and doubts as they come up. Send them to a mature Christian who you trust. Then, plan a time to get together to discuss them.
- Read a good book on apologetics like *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, or *More than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell.

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