

## **Do You Really Believe Jesus? (John 4:43-54)**

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It's not hard to express trust in God when life is going well. When the sun is shining, work is rewarding, grades are good, your body is healthy, the bills are paid, marriage is satisfying, and the kids are well-behaved, we're happy to give a shout out to heaven and thank God for all his blessings. Our faith feels strong. The Lord feels near. Ps 103:2 comes easy. "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits!"

It is significantly harder to express the same faith in God when life is falling apart. When the sun is not shining, grades are not good, your body is sick, bills lie unpaid, marriage is stressful, and the kids are out of control. Suddenly, our faith doesn't feel so strong. "Why should I trust you when you're not giving me what I want? When I can't seem to catch a break? When you keep making my life so difficult? You're obviously not for me, so you must be against me." Forget not all his benefits? Hah. What benefits?

When the Lord delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, they shouted his praises. Three days later, they began to run out of water and grumbled until the Lord provided for them. A few weeks later, they began to run out of food and decided the Lord should have left them in Egypt. Apparently, their "trust" in God ran no deeper than whatever he had done for them lately. Can you relate?

If you're a professing Christian, you need to be on guard. If you're exploring what it means to follow Jesus, you also need to be on guard. We need to be ever so careful that our faith rests on who Jesus is, not the blessings he gives. That's precisely the issue Jesus raises and responds to in his interaction with a Galilean official at the end of John 4.

The gospels are not a random collection of stories. They are eyewitness accounts from the life of Christ arranged to accomplish a divinely intended effect. And the way John frames and narrates this particular exchange directs our attention to the nature of true faith, to what it really means to trust and believe in Jesus. The Savior himself addresses the issue by caring for us in two ways in this passage.

### **1) JESUS ENGAGES OUR UNBELIEF WITH ABUNDANT MERCY**

At the beginning of Jn 4, Jesus and his disciples set out from the Jewish region of Judea in southern Israel for the Jewish region of Galilee in northern Israel. They stop to rest in the middle of their trip outside a Samaritan village, where Jesus cares for a socially outcast woman. He reveals her need for the life he alone can provide and before long a multitude of her countrymen join her in trusting in Jesus as "the Savior of the world."

The Jewish response to Jesus is strikingly different. Two days later, Jesus continues traveling toward Galilee. V. 44 identifies the reason. "For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown." It's a proverbial saying that appears in several other gospels. It means the people who are most familiar with someone often have the least respect or admiration for them. They're not special. They're not amazing. They're just one of the neighborhood kids. They're normal. When they show up, no one is particularly impressed.

Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem (in Judea), he grew up Nazareth (in Galilee). He's not a Samaritan. He's a Jew. So why would John quote the proverb in v. 44 to explain his transition from Samaria into Galilee? It would make more sense for the proverb to justify a trip in the opposite direction. "I'm leaving my hometown (Galilee) and going to a new place (Samaria) because 'a prophet has no honor in his hometown.'" But that's not Jesus' direction here. He's not going away from Galilee. He's going toward it.

Listen to how John describes the result of Jesus' last ministry initiative toward people from his "hometown," Jews from Galilee and Judea who gathered in Jerusalem back in Jn 2 for the Passover. Jn 2:23-24, "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people..."

He knew their professed "belief" or "faith" was nothing more than a momentary fascination with the supernatural works he was doing. They didn't trust Jesus as a person. They were simply enamored with his miracles. They were a fan club, not a group of true followers. They didn't come to the party because they loved the host. They simply wanted in on all the food and drinks he was willing to provide.

Jesus wasn't fooled. Notice how John explicitly identifies the Galileans in v. 45 as those who had "seen all that [Jesus] had done at the feast" and "welcomed him" accordingly. By identifying the Galileans in Ch. 4 as the same sort of Galileans Jesus encountered in Ch. 2, John hints with typical irony that their "welcome" falls well short of genuine faith.

And yet it is precisely their unbelief, their refusal to really believe in Jesus, that compels him to return. You guys didn't honor me the first time I came to Cana. So I'm coming back. Talk about a stunning example of compassion! If you're struggling with unbelief, friend. If you're wrestling with whether you can really trust Jesus, take heart in this. His first response is not to wash his hands of you and move on. He moves toward the wayward, again and again and again. He doesn't ignore unbelief. He engages it.



That's really good news if you've grown up in the church or been a Christian for a long time and Christianity is your "hometown" so to speak. Why do I say that? Because familiarity with the things of God cuts one of two ways. Either your faith in Jesus will grow stronger for the nourishment it affords or you will become spiritually desensitized, dull to the glory of God because it feels like you've heard it all before.

If you're growing up in KingsWay, listen very carefully to me. The Lord has given you a tremendous privilege. You have an opportunity to turn to him in faith and repentance at a young age and avoid years of painful wandering in the ways of the world. But that will not happen automatically. You must respond to the gospel you have heard over and over again with personal trust in Jesus. Your parents' faith will not substitute for your own. What you believe is what matters. Tend well to the condition of your soul, friend. Unbelief takes root in the soil of familiarity no less than the soil of ignorance.

The way the Lord deliberately moves toward those who previously failed to believe in him demonstrates the abundance of his mercy. And when a desperate, Galilean father approaches him in v. 47, Jesus shows the same kindness, though not in the way we might expect. The man's son is at the point of death. He's a ruler (and presumably rich), but his power and wealth cannot prevent the sorrow that seems inevitable. So he travels some 25 miles from Capernaum to ask Jesus to come and heal his son.

Does Jesus' initial reply strike you as a bit harsh? V. 48, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." Excuse me? Where's the compassion, Jesus? He is being compassionate, friend. He's lovingly inviting this stricken father to evaluate, to reconsider what motivated him to come to Jesus in the first place. For Jesus sees in the man's heart a danger even greater than the physical death of his son, a spiritual problem he shares in common with his fellow Galileans. It's why the word "you" in v. 48 is plural. What's true of this man is true of many, including many professing Christians today.

In many cases, our faith, our confidence, trust, interest, and desire for Jesus, doesn't rest in who he is. We only come running to him because of the blessings we think he can give. When life gets hard, we passionately beg and plead for him to "fix" our physical situation and make everything wrong right. Heal my body. Restore my marriage. Give me a new job.

But we never deal with the most important issue, the issue of eternal importance: Do you believe in Jesus? Are you leaning the entire weight of your life on him, trusting him as your Savior, submitting to him as your Lord, because those two things cannot be separated? Do you see him as the supremely satisfying revelation of the glory of God?



Your Almighty Creator? Your Righteous King? The Holy One before whom angels hide their eyes? The Savior and Redeemer of your soul apart from whom you are eternally damned? Or is he your 24-hour handyman?

Jesus isn't denigrating the value of the blessings he gives. He's not throwing shade on signs and wonders in v. 48. In fact, he's about to perform one of them! Rather, Jesus makes a critical distinction between a self-centered faith that demands God give us certain blessings or pass certain "tests" before we believe in him and a God-centered faith that goes all-in on trusting Jesus on account of who he is.

A "signs and wonders" sort of faith, an "I trust you because of what you've done for me lately" sort of faith, isn't faith in Jesus at all. It's faith in ourselves. It may eventually lead to genuine faith in Jesus, but it doesn't start there. As long as our faith is in "signs and wonders" we're still the ones calling the shots, deciding what's true about God based on our evaluation of his activity in our life.

Is God good because he gave you the spouse of your dreams? Or is God evil because you didn't get the promotion you wanted? Is God just because the sibling who hurt you came back to apologize? Or is God unjust because the relative who violated you never got caught? Is God near because of the spiritual feelings you experienced during the 3rd worship song last Sunday? Or has God forgotten you because it's been 2 years since you really sensed his presence in a tangible way? Does God answer prayer because he finally came through after 5 years of waiting? Or does God not answer prayer because it's been 30 years of waiting?

What are we doing in every one of those situations, friends? We're taking the presence or absence of a particular blessing, a "sign or wonder" on God's part, and deciding whether we will "trust" him because of something he gives, not because of who he is.

In this life, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. There are countless situations where we cannot see or feel his hand. Those are the moments, the years, the decades, where genuine faith shines brightest, friends. For genuine faith, genuine belief in Jesus, is what? Heb 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Faith is not an assurance that God will eventually give us whatever earthly blessing we want. Nor is it a work of merit whereby we "believe it" in order to "receive it." Faith, the genuine article, is a persistent decision to fix our hope in the character and promises of our faithful God, revealed in his Word, and secured by the work of Christ. That's what this fearful father needed most. So do we, my friends.

Jesus was so kind, abundantly merciful, to heal the man's son despite the initial absence of genuine faith, but he did it in a way that gently and firmly forced him to deal with the most important issue. Point #1, Jesus engages our unbelief with abundant mercy.

## **2) JESUS NURTURES OUR FAITH WITH HIS AUTHORITATIVE WORD**

The official appears to have either no patience for engaging the spiritual concern Jesus lovingly raises in v. 48 or he simply doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about. He has only one thing on his mind. My son is dying. I've heard Jesus can help. Jesus can heal. I have to find a way to bring him to Capernaum. V. 49, "The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.'"

The Lord's response in v. 50 is an incredible act of mercy. "Go; your son will live," or more literally, "Go; your son lives." Right now, in this very moment, the encroaching tide of death has been reversed. He is no longer at the point of death. He lives.

Matt 13:58 tells us that Jesus "did not do many mighty works" in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, because of their unbelief. Why not? Because the Lord has established an inseparable relationship between trusting God and experiencing God. Without faith it is impossible to please him. So why did Jesus heal the official's son in Cana not after but *before* the man decided to believe in Jesus?

Because God refuses to let us to box him in, even with our faith. We think we can, don't we? We think, "Alright, I'm going to pray. I'm going to give. I'm going to do all the things I'm supposed to do. And that way God will *have* to give me the blessing I want." Isa 45:9, "Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles?'"

The Lord acts in response to our faith but sometimes he acts despite our unbelief. Why? Because he is God and we are not. He is God and our faith is not. In the same moment Jesus invited this trembling dad to evaluate his faith he asserted his sovereign power and healed his son.

He didn't do exactly what the official asked him to do. The father wanted Jesus to "come down" to Capernaum. He had heard people were healed when they got close to Jesus and assumed his son's deliverance required the same. He thought he had it all figured out. "Here's what you need to do, Jesus, and here's exactly how you need to do it."

To which Jesus says, "Yes and no. Yes, your son will live. But no, I'm not coming with you because you need to walk by faith, not by sight. You need to trust me. You need to

believe me. You need to go back home with confidence in the word of my power. "Your son will live." Friends, Jesus' way of caring for us amidst our own cries of demand, our own assumptions that we know exactly what God should do, hasn't changed. He gently and firmly invites us to step out in the obedience of faith.

We try to strike bargains with God, don't we? We say things like, "Ok, Lord, I'll obey you, but first you have to give me what I want. You fulfill your end of the deal and then I'll fulfill mine. You put my blessing on the table where I can see it (a spouse, a job, a healing, the salvation of my kids, etc.) and then I'll gladly do whatever you say."

That's not what it means to follow Jesus. Following Jesus requires taking him at his word and obeying him accordingly long before we get to see the fulfillment of his promises or the answer to our prayers. By definition, faith isn't acting on the basis of what we can see. It's acting on the basis of what God has said. Genuine faith is God-focused and word-centered. For it's through the pages of Scripture, collectively revealing the glory of Christ and him crucified, that God makes himself known to us. Faith says, "Lord, because you have said it, I will obey. Because you have made a promise, I know you will keep it." You're a faithful God.

In v. 50, John tells us the man decided to believe "the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way." It was a step toward genuine faith. We could say the same today about someone who begins to believe the words of Scripture. And as the man journeys home, something remarkable happens. He runs into his servants on the road. "Sir, your son lives!" they say. "When did he turn the corner?" "Yesterday, at 1 in the afternoon."

On the previous day, he believed "the word" Jesus had spoken was an accurate statement of truth and acted accordingly. I believe my son will live. In v. 53, however, genuine faith in Jesus finally takes root in his heart. He hears the servants' report and realizes, "Jesus didn't just reveal the truth. He wasn't peering into the corridor of time and discerning my son would live. In that very moment, he intervened in my son's body and healed him by the word of his power."

He makes the connection. He comes face to face with the divine authority of Christ and chooses to believe in him. Confidence in the words of Jesus is eclipsed by trust in the person of Jesus. V. 53, "The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' And he himself believed, and all his household."

A man who showed up looking for nothing more than a gift of healing from Jesus was transformed into a man who leaned the weight of his life on Jesus. Signs and wonders



faith became genuine faith. Jesus used the one thing the man most wanted (the life of his son) to lead him to the one thing the man most needed (faith in Jesus).

Am I the only one in here who likes to eat at Chick-fil-a? I didn't think so. I want you to imagine something with me. Imagine I bring a friend from out of town who's never eaten there before. We pull up, get out of the car, and I immediately walk over to the CFA sign in the parking lot and begin holding and caressing it. "Look at this sign," I say. "Isn't CFA amazing?" You'd rightly think I've gone crazy. Why? Because the sign is a gift, but the sign isn't CFA. It points you in the right direction, but you have to go inside the restaurant to enjoy that juicy piece of crispy chicken.

Friends, there are times Jesus pours out incredible spiritual and physical blessings in our lives. When that happens, take care that your faith doesn't come to rest in the blessings he gives, but who he is. His blessings are good gifts, but they're ultimately just a sign. They're meant to direct your gaze back to the giver who alone is able to satisfy your soul. It's what Jesus did for the official in John 4. It's what Jesus is eager to do in our hearts today. He delights to nurture our faith, to strengthen our trust in him, through his authoritative word.

## **CONCLUSION**

Edward Klink, "True belief in God occurs when the things the person sought for themselves get eclipsed by the God who alone can provide them. The appropriate response to Jesus is one that learns to find meaning and life not merely in what he gives but in who he is." Many people are only interested in the blessings Jesus can give. Only a few come to place their faith in who Jesus is. Wide is the road that leads to destruction. Narrow is the way that leads to eternal life.

Praise God he engages our unbelief with abundant mercy. Praise God he nurtures our faith with his authoritative word. But do not presume upon his mercy or assume the authenticity of your faith. Test your faith. Examine your faith. Take care that it ultimately rests on who Jesus is, not the blessings he gives.