

May 1, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Sign-Seeker or Savior Seeker?

John 4:39 – 54

I think John deliberately contrasts two kinds of people all throughout his gospel: those who are sign-seekers and those who are Savior-seekers. Those who are looking for signs and wonders, and those who are looking for a Savior. And in this section of Scripture, in fact in this entire chapter, the difference is striking. And at the core of this is the question of faith. Just notice how many times in this section we see the word 'believe'. *From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done."* John 4:39; *Many more believed because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."* John 4:41-42; *Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.* John 4:48; *The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off.* John 4:50; *and he himself believed and his whole household.* John 4:53

We need to understand the nature of faith, what it is, what it isn't, what it looks like, how it works, because our salvation depends on whether or not we have it. In this section of Scripture, we have those who had faith right alongside those who didn't. We have the Samaritans and the royal official who believed in Jesus, and we have the Jews who merely received Him. Did you notice the contrast there in verse 45? *So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast.* John 4:45 What was it that made the difference? Why did the Samaritans and the royal official believe – and the Galilean Jews merely welcome Jesus? The word receive there literally means 'to take by the hand'. They gave Jesus a handshake for showing up. I want to argue that the difference had to do with faith, and I think this passage shows us at least three things about faith: **Faith is rooted in thinking, or knowledge, understanding; faith grows through application; and faith is perfected in trouble.** Faith is rooted in thinking; faith grows through application; faith is perfected in trouble. And these three things will determine whether you are a sign-seeker that merely receives Jesus, or a Savior-seeker that believes in Him. Lets look at the text.

From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done." So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more believed because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world." John 4:39 – 42

First of all, **faith is rooted in thinking.** The woman whom Jesus met at the well there in Sychar, did not come to faith on the basis of any miracles that Jesus performed. In fact this passage is remarkable in that respect. Jesus did a lot of miracles during His ministry – but He didn't do any here. In fact, He didn't show any of the Samaritans any signs or wonders – and yet they believed in Him. Look at verse 39 again: *From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done.* John 4:39 Their faith in Jesus rested on what they heard from this woman. In other words, their faith was based on information they received. **'Look at what this man told me – this proves He is the Christ'**. And they processed that information, thought about it, and believed.

I think we have a funny, and unbiblical idea about faith in our culture. When we talk about faith, we are generally talking about the kind of faith that will lead you to believe in God. And some people will say, 'I just don't have enough faith to believe' and they are assuming that faith is some sort of character trait or special ability some people have and others don't. But everyone has some kind of faith. And any faith you have is born out of thinking. I've heard people say, 'I don't really understand this, but I suppose that's why we have to have faith.' And while I can sort of appreciate this sentiment, **what it is really saying is that faith is opposed to reason.** And that isn't what the Bible says at all. What does the Bible say, *'We walk by faith and not by sight.'* 2 Corinthians 5:7 Paul doesn't tell the Corinthians that **'We walk by faith and not by thinking'**. He doesn't say, come to Christ and check your brain at the door. He doesn't tell us that faith is opposed to reason, only sight. In fact, what we see oftentimes with our eyes causes us to lose our faith – causes faith to fail. But faith is not set over against reason. **Faith is rooted in thinking.**

What is the genesis of faith? How do we get faith? Is it by saying, 'I just need to believe really hard – I don't need the facts, I don't want to think about it. I just need to have faith – don't confuse me with evidence'? That's not how faith happens. **Faith is born when the truth of God's word penetrates our hearts.** Turn to 1 Peter 1:23: *for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.* 1 Peter 1:23 When the living word of God penetrates our hearts, faith is born. This is what happened to the woman, to the Samaritans, to the royal official. It is what Paul tells us in Romans 10: *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.* Romans 10:17 The woman hears the words of Christ, her intellect is involved, her thinking is engaged, and faith is born. She runs to tell the whole town – they hear her testimony, their thinking is engaged, they come to Jesus and hear Him and faith is born. Faith is rooted in thinking. D.L. Moody once said, ***"I used to pray daily for the Lord to give me faith. Then one day I read Romans 10:17, which says 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God.' So, I began to read my Bible, and faith has been growing ever since."***

Suppose your doctor tells you that you need surgery to fix something and tells you that you need this procedure to continue living. What do you do? You don't say, 'Don't tell me anything about it – I don't want to know the details – I don't want to know why I need it – I don't want to know what the side effects are – I'll just make an appointment and let's get it done.' No, nobody but an idiot does that. The first thing you do is get a second opinion – if anybody's going to cut me open I want to know that that is the best course of action. You study the problem, you get information on the surgery, you find out how long you will be down and so on. What are you doing? You are thinking about it – and as you think about it and ponder it and study it, your faith in the thing starts to grow. You become convinced that this is what you need. You develop your faith by thinking about it.

But what happens on the day of the surgery when you wake up and all the fears of being under the knife begin to assail you and you begin thinking that you'll find another option, and you call to cancel the appointment? What has happened? You lost your faith. How did you lose it? Did you get new information that convinced you that surgery wasn't a good idea? Is it because you studied some more about this and decided you could just live with it? No, you lost your faith because you stopped thinking and simply reacted. ***'There's gonna be blood!'*** You didn't get any new information – you stopped thinking about the truth of the matter and started reacting to the visual images you conjured up in your mind. Faith is rooted in thinking and when we stop thinking we lose our faith. ***To walk by faith and not by sight means that you hold on to what you know to be true and you tell your will and your emotions to get on board with it.*** We don't walk by what we feel, or what it looks like or what seems to be the case – we walk by what we know to be true, we walk by faith.

Unbelief is listening to your heart – faith is speaking to your heart. What do you read when you turn to the Psalms? What you are reading is the truth that the Psalmist is speaking into his own soul: *Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.* Psalm 42:11 What is he doing? He is taking the truth, the knowledge of who God is and using that understanding to inform his will and emotions how to behave. Faith is not the absence of thinking – faith is rooted in thinking. How else could the writer of Hebrews have said: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen?* Hebrews 11:1 Or *And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.* Hebrews 11:6 You cannot have convictions without thinking; and the first thing about coming to God is that you know something about Him. Namely that He is – He exists. You have pondered and thought and reached the conclusion that God exists – and you have some knowledge that He rewards those who seek Him. ***Faith is rooted in thinking.***

Secondly, **faith grows through application.** That is, faith grows as you apply your will to the truth, you commit to the truth. You hear the truth, think about the implications of the truth and faith to believe rises up in your heart. And then you allow what you know to inform your behavior. Martin Luther put it this way: faith is ***notitia, assensus, fiducia.*** Faith is ***notitia – knowledge, assensus – assent or agreement; and fiducia – commitment.*** You learn the truth and then trust yourself to the truth – you commit. And the more truth you learn, the more you commit yourself. Look at what happened with the Samaritans. *So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more believed because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."* John 4:40 –

A man had climbed up onto his roof during a flood, and the water was up to his feet. Before long a fellow in a canoe paddled past and shouted, "Can I give you a lift to higher ground?" "No, thanks," said the man. "I have faith in the Lord and he will save me." Soon the water rose to the man's waist. At this point a motorboat pulled up and someone called out, "Can I give you a lift to higher ground?" "No, thanks. I have faith in the Lord and he will save me." Later a helicopter flew by, and this guy was now standing on the roof with water up to his neck. "Grab the rope," yelled the pilot. "I'll pull you up." "No, thanks," he said. "I have faith in the Lord and he will save me." But after hours of treading water, the poor, exhausted man drowned and went to be with the Lord. As he arrived, he met Jesus and complained about this turn of events. "Tell me, Lord," he said, "I had such faith in you to save me and you let me down. What happened?" To which the Lord replied, "What do you want from me? I sent you two boats and a helicopter!" It is not enough to just 'have faith' – it must be applied – you have to get into the boat – you have to grab the rope – you must commit. **Faith grows through application**

And then to provide the contrast, Jesus turns from the Samaritans back to His own people, the Jews of Galilee: *After the two days He went forth from there into Galilee. For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves also went to the feast. Therefore He came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine.*

You couldn't conceive of a more striking contrast: In Samaria, outcast, despised Samaria – Jesus was honored. In Galilee, among His own people – Jesus was not honored. In fact, when He was there at the beginning of His ministry, He stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and read the word of God and the people were so filled with rage that they wanted to throw Him off the cliff. Yet here he was coming back into Galilee and John almost seems to make the point that it was **because** He was not honored among His own people that He returned. *After the two days He went forth from there into Galilee. For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. As if John is saying – Notice the difference here!*

And in contrast to being **believed** by the Samaritans – He was merely **received** by the Galileans. Notice the difference – the Samaritans **believed by faith** – the Galileans **received by sight** – *having seen all the things that He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves also went to the feast.* What is amazing is that in all their seeing, they missed the Savior. They were sign-seekers – not Savior-seekers. You may have heard that old saying, 'Seeing is believing'. Not true. The Samaritans didn't see anything – but they believed. The Galileans saw everything – and they didn't believe at all.

Finally, **faith is rooted in thinking, it grows through application, and it is perfected in trouble.** And we'll close it out with this last story. *And there was a royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum. 47 When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and was imploring Him to come down and heal his son ; for he was at the point of death. 48 So Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe."* John 4:46 – 48

In this story we have a man who has real trouble – his son is dying, and he just walked some 20 to 25 miles from Capernaum to Cana. What he was looking for was a Savior – someone who would save his son. He had no doubt heard about Jesus, and from what he had heard, a little faith was generated in his soul. Otherwise, how do you have a royal official, who in every other case would have travelled in pomp and circumstance, come all this way to ask an unemployed carpenter for help? He may not have ever even met someone of Jesus' s social standing before. Yet here he is, not asking for a sign, but asking for Jesus to come and heal his son. Which makes Jesus's answer to him somewhat puzzling: *"Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe."* **Unbelief always asks for a sign.** But here we have a man asking, not for a sign, but for a Savior. Which leads me to believe that this remark was spoken more for the benefit of the sign-seeking crowd than it was for the Savior-seeking official.

One of the reasons I believe that this man was asking in faith was that he persevered, even though he was seemingly rebuffed. *The royal official said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."* John 4:49 In effect he was saying, 'I don't care about signs and wonders, my son is dying and I believe you can heal him'. And Jesus responds to his faith and says: *Go; your son lives.* John 4:50a And John records that He **believed.** *The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off.* 4:50b His faith was rooted in the knowledge of what Jesus had been doing – it grew as he applied what he knew and travelled 25 miles to get to Jesus, so when he was rebuffed his faith didn't falter but grew. And then when Jesus said 'Go, your son is alive' he didn't keep pestering Him to come, but started back home full of faith.

Unless you apply what you know to be true – unless you commit, you cannot say you have faith or that you believe. **And until our faith is tried in the furnace of affliction and trouble, it really isn't faith.** Faith is only faith when we have no other means of support. Faith only works in the dark. And trouble has a way of knocking out all our props and obscuring the light. George Mueller wrote: **God delights to increase the faith of His children...I say, and say it deliberately—trials, difficulties and sometimes defeat, are the very food of faith...We should take them out of His hands as evidences of His love and care for us in developing more and more that faith which He is seeking to strengthen in us.** George Mueller

When this man started back home, he only had the word of Jesus that his son lived. He may have thought that Jesus would have come back with him and waved His hands over the boy and said some magic words and his son would have been healed. But the truth was, he left Cana not really knowing if his son lived or died. We can say we believe in God, but until we commit, we cannot say that is real faith. He came to Jesus perhaps knowing it was his last chance for his son. There's no tomorrow here. And without understanding that faith was birthed and grew in this man, and was tried in the furnace of affliction, you cannot understand how he could just turn around and go home. Jesus didn't do anything – didn't even break a sweat. He just said – '*Go, your son lives.*' And there is no way for this man to know that is true unless he goes home.

And he starts off home. The reason we know he probably walked, is because he doesn't meet his servants coming from his home in Capernaum until the next day. His son was deathly ill, he had met Jesus and gotten what he came for, so it isn't likely he is going to wait around Cana very long – he probably left right away and travelled through the night. *As he was now going down, his slaves met him, saying that his son was living. So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. Then they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, "Your son lives"; and he himself believed and his whole household.* John 4:51 – 53 John had already recorded the fact that this man believed, but here again he tells us he believed. What's going on? I think what is going on is that in the furnace of affliction, the Lord perfected his faith. Because not only does he believe, but evidently he led his whole household into faith. He not only had faith – he had saving faith. He had moved from thinking to commitment to a fully orbed belief.

For those who are saying right now, 'I wish I could have faith like that – I wish I could trust God that way' – you can. **What you are really doing is refusing to mistrust yourself, or things other than God.** You already trust in a lot of things – perhaps it is trust in money, or your job, or your social status, or your education, or in someone else, or you just trust in yourself. Now there's a shaky foundation. There are a great many things we rely on for affirmation, for peace and security and for meaning and direction. And the trouble with all those other things is that when they tumble and fall, we tumble and fall. This is why trouble is God's gift to us – **it exposes the rotten root of our faith and causes us to look to Jesus.**

We begin to see that we have put our trust in things **far less reliable** than God and His word, and we have trusted in things that are subject to change and are prone to fail, and when they change or when they fail, we collapse. In the words of Samuel Rutherford, writing to a friend to encourage her to put her trust in Christ and not in things, **"Consider how in all these trials (and truly they have been many) your Lord has been loosening you at the root from perishing things, and hunting after you to grip your soul. Madam, for the Son of God's sake, do not weaken His grip on you, but stay and abide in the love of God...Build your nest in no tree here... for the Lord of the forest has condemned the whole woods to be demolished."** **Faith is perfected in trouble.**

Are you a sign-seeker or a Savior-seeker this morning? Is your faith grounded in what you can see or what you know? Is it rooted in thinking or moved by circumstances? Are you merely listening to your heart this morning or are you speaking to your heart? Is the faith you say you have applied and growing? Have you gotten into the boat or are you still on the roof? Do trouble and suffering shatter your faith or do the fires of affliction perfect it? Do you have a faith that understands that God reigns in the darkness as well as in the light, and that God fulfills His own purpose through suffering which exposes the rotten root of unbelief and causes us to lean entirely on Him? My prayer is that we would be Savior-seekers.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Grant us the grace of a faith that isn't rooted in what we can see but what we know of You. Cause faith to rise up and grow in our souls as we seek You and not signs. Let the truth of who You are dictate the course of our lives, and not our eyes or our fickle hearts. Your grace is relentless, Your joy everlasting, Your power knows no limits, Your goodness no boundaries. Your loving hand has orchestrated every part of our lives and Your word tells us that nothing can ever separate us from Your love. You bring order out of the chaos of our lives and trouble and affliction merely expose the weakness of the objects of our trust. Let the testing and the fire prove and strengthen our faith and tighten Your grip on our souls, so that we delight only in You through Jesus Christ, spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the name of our precious Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.
Go in peace.***