

Greater Than Death

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 March 2015

Preacher: Kristen Moore

[0 : 00] In the church and in the world, we throw the term faith around. Blind faith, in good faith, have a little faith in me, take a leap of faith. But what is faith? And what does it mean to have faith? For the past few chapters, John has slowly been pulling back the veil on what it means to believe, to have faith. For John, the terms faith and belief are interchangeable. And in our story this week, we have two examples, the Galileans and the royal official. And each example has something specific to teach us about faith. And as we look at these two examples in turn, we get a fuller picture about the nature of faith. So if you would go ahead and open your Bibles, if you have one, or grab the pew Bible in front of you, to John at the end of chapter 4 in verse 43. And first we're going to look at the example of the Galileans. They're mentioned first, and so we'll start there.

Their experience teaches us that true faith does not come from demanding more signs and proof. True faith does not come from demanding more signs and proof. Where do I get that? Well, let's look at verses 43 through 45. After two days, he, Jesus, departed for Galilee. For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown. So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the feast.

Now on the surface, the Galileans' welcome seems to be good news. I mean, a welcome to Jesus is much better than a rejection or a leave our town or any other combative phrases that you might come up with.

But John gives us several clues that this welcome is not all that the word implies. First, in verse 44, John says that this welcome was not the honor that was due Jesus as a prophet. Clearly, their enthusiasm stems more from a fascination with everything that they have seen and heard that Jesus can do than it does a desire to actually believe what Jesus has to say. The Galileans, it says in the text, had seen Jesus do amazing things. And like kids at a circus, they're clamoring for more. More miracles, more astonishing works. Amaze us, they say. Entertain us. But we have more than just this clue that John gives us that all is not right with the Galileans' hearts. We have words from Jesus himself. In verse 48, Jesus rebukes the Galileans' kind of thinking. The U in verse 48 is plural. So he is talking to everyone with an earshot, not just the official. Now, the better and coincidentally closer to my heart, more southern rendering of this verse would be unless y'all see signs and wonders. Y'all will not believe. It's plural. Now, this statement isn't, it's not a statement about the importance of signs and wonders in the path to faith. Jesus' words are a rebuke that cut right at the heart of the Galileans' welcome. It's a criticism of their incessant demand for more and more signs and more and more proof.

We've seen this demand for signs all through John's gospel. In the beginning of chapter 2, 2 verse 18, when Jesus clears the temple, the Jews come to him and they say, give us a sign that proves you have the authority to do this. What sign are you going to show us, Jesus? And then at the end of chapter 2, John says that many people believed in Jesus because they saw the signs that he was doing, but Jesus did not trust them. He didn't entrust himself to them.

[3 : 53] And then finally, at the beginning of chapter 3, when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, his first words focus on Jesus' signs. No one can do these signs unless God is with them. The Galileans and the Jews were enamored with Jesus' signs and demanding more and more. Now, don't get me wrong. Jesus' miracles should amaze us. They should create awe in our hearts. They should fascinate us. Jesus isn't saying, ignore all of my miracles. But Jesus is rebuking the hearts that demand miracle upon miracle as proof that Jesus is who he says he is. In his commentary on John, Leslie Newbigin says that the demand for a visible sign means the one who makes the demand keeps ultimate sovereignty in his own hand.

He himself has given the test by which Jesus can prove himself. These Jews are demanding more and more signs and they are setting up their own criteria for what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God.

They're not interested in as much as what Jesus has to say as him checking off all the little boxes in the list that they themselves have created. The Jews have preconceived ideas of who the Messiah should be, what the Messiah should do, and they trust in their own ability to recognize him when he comes.

They're so convinced in their own rightness that they can't see what's in front of them. This reminds me of a conversation that I had with one of my friend's sons, Noah, who was four years old at the time.

We were playing outside and the sun was setting and he suddenly, out of the blue, asked me, Kristen, where does the sun go at night? Now, I studied astronomy in college and I felt really good about being able to answer this question. And so I told him, I said, Noah, the sun doesn't go anywhere.

[5 : 52] We just can't see it because we've turned away and it's on the other side of the earth. And he asked the typical four-year-old question, but why? And I said, well, you see, Noah, the earth is round.

You know, you've seen globes. The earth is round and not only is it round, it's spinning. And I'm realizing this is getting a little complicated for a four-year-old. I was like, and so during the day, we're on the side that's facing the sun, but at night, we're on the side that's facing the moon and is turned away from the sun.

And that's why we can't see it. And he looked at me, shook his head and said, no, that's not it. The sun goes to sleep behind the moon and that's why we don't see it at night.

And nothing I said could shake this four-year-old's belief that at night, the sun went behind the moon to go to sleep. And no explanation or sign that Jesus did could convince Jews that we're trusting in their own ability to recognize him.

In fact, in the middle of his gospel, at John 12, John tells us what becomes of these people who continually demand sign after sign. This is verse 37. Though Jesus had done many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.

[7 : 08] This demand for proof had actually led them away from the faith, and they had persisted in unbelief. Now, I do want to say that there is a difference between a prideful demand for proof and a humble investigation for compelling truth and compelling evidence that Jesus is who he says he is.

In fact, under this humble category, authors Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel both came to faith through investigating the claims of Christianity for themselves. And they detailed their search and their books, evidence that demands a verdict and the case for Christ.

Jesus' miracles, they do provide us proof of who he is. And many times, Jesus uses visible signs to strengthen or encourage faith in those who hear. Seeing Jesus' miracles should help our faith. But his miracles and the evidence they give can never create or manufacture faith in anyone's heart. Faith is more than an intellectual decision. There may be some people here, or you may know people, who have been putting off believing in Jesus because they have so many questions and doubts.

After 25 years of believing in Jesus, including three years of study for Master Divinity and seven years of professional ministry, I still have questions and doubts.

[8 : 28] And I have landed in the place that I cannot figure out everything about Jesus. Because he's God, and I'm not. Jesus is God, and we are not.

Don't let your questions and doubts lead you to demand more and more proof that Jesus is who he really says he is. Now, if faith does not come from demanding more signs and proof, then where does it come from?

In order to answer that question, let's look at the story, the example of the royal official. Because his example teaches us that true faith comes from hearing and obeying the word of Jesus.

True faith comes from hearing and obeying the word of Jesus. Let's look at his story again. It begins in verse 46. We find out that this man is a royal official who lives in Capernaum.

It's about a 20 to 25 minute trip from Cana. Only the 20 to 25 miles, I said minutes, I meant miles, are all uphill. This man has a son.

[9 : 33] The age of the son isn't given, but the word child points us to under 13 years old. His son is very sick. So sick that the text tells us that he is close to death.

Raging with a fever, stricken with an illness that will not go away. His life is fading away. This father is clearly desperate. So desperate that when he hears that Jesus has returned to Cana, he leaves his son's deathbed in order to see if Jesus can do anything.

He sets out on this day long journey, not knowing if he will see his son alive again. But to him, the risk was worth it. So he arrives in Cana and immediately finds Jesus.

But when he petitions Jesus, when he asks Jesus to heal his son, Jesus seems to rebuff him, to ignore his plea, to turn a blind eye to his pain.

Unless y'all see signs and wonders, y'all will not believe, he says. But the man doesn't want to get into a theological discussion with Jesus. In fact, he refuses to engage Jesus' statement.

[10:40] And single-mindedly pursues the one thing that he wants from Jesus. Healing for his son. So he asks again. Simply, sir, come down before my child dies.

And Jesus replies, go. Your son lives. Now, if you're following along in the ESV, some of you might be saying, no, no.

That's not what the text says. It says, go. Your son will live. I'm slightly a little bit of a Greek nerd. So if you'll indulge me for just a minute. In verse 50 and 53, the words that Jesus uses is not future tense.

It's actually present tense. Your son lives. And when the servants come back, they echo those words as well. They don't say, your son is recovering. They say, your son lives.

Which I think is really important. The son was dying. And now the son is living. There was no recovery stage. That as the story concludes, the next day, the man is traveling home.

[11:42] The servants rush to him and say, your son lives. Then further, the father discovers. He asks, what time did this happen? And he finds out that the fever left him the very moment that Jesus says, your son lives.

Jesus spoke. And all creation bent over backwards to fulfill the creator's words. The fever left. Life immediately returned to the son because of what Jesus said.

And the man who had already believed that Jesus had power and authority to heal is now said to believe him and all his household. And seeing proof of Jesus's power, this man's faith deepens.

Did you notice that in the story? That as soon as Jesus said, go, your son lives. The man went and believed. He left. He went on the 20-mile journey with no visible proof that his son was actually any better.

He believed that Jesus could do it. And now, when he sees this proof, Jesus is not only the one that can save his son from death. He is the savior. He is not only the one that has power and authority to do what he says he can do.

[12:55] But he is the one who has all power and all authority. The Christ, the son of God. For the official, the healing of his son, this miracle, this sign, didn't create faith.

Faith came when he heard and obeyed the word of Jesus. Go, your son lives. Regarding this source of faith, this hearing the word and obeying it, Romans 10, 17 says, So faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of Christ.

Faith isn't something that we work up in and of ourselves. It comes from the word of Christ. It is something that God graciously accomplishes in us when we hear his word.

Ephesians 2, 9 says this, For by grace you are saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God. Faith is a gracious gift of God.

It's given not through our works, but it is given through his word. And we receive it. We receive faith when we hear the word and obey it.

[13:59] The story of the official showcases the power of Jesus' words. Jesus' words restored life to a dying child and at the same time brought new life, eternal life to the official and his household.

The examples of the Galileans and the royal official teach us two specific truths about the nature of faith. True faith doesn't come from demanding more signs and proof, but true faith comes from hearing and obeying the word of God.

So what does that mean for us today in Vancouver in the year 2015? First, if you aren't a Christian, if you haven't believed yet, this means you should keep investigating Christianity.

Continue seeking to know who Jesus is. Keep coming to church. Keep asking your questions. But most of all, keep reading the Bible. This book contains everything that anyone needs to know about God, about Jesus, and about life.

The temptation we face today is not necessarily to ask Jesus to do more and more, to prove more and more of his power, but the temptation we face today is to pit Jesus against culture, and against science, and against political correctness, and ask him to prove himself true based on our criteria.

[15 : 21] At the end of his book, in chapter 20, verses 30 and 31, John writes, Jesus did many other signs as well. And these, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and you may have life in his name.

John's purpose in writing is so that whoever reads, including you and I, might see what Jesus did, hear what Jesus said, and believe in him. So keep reading John.

Keep coming to these sermon series on John, because he specifically wrote this book so that people could know who Jesus is. And as you read, and as you listen to the word preached, ask that God would give you the gift of faith, that God would help you hear Jesus' word and obey like the royal official.

And if you are a Christian today, the example of the royal official speaks loud and clear to us as well. We came to faith and belief through hearing and obeying Jesus' words, and this word is the same means that God uses to reinvigorate our faith today.

Submitting our hearts and our minds to God's word can rekindle our cold affections and strengthen our weak faith like nothing else. The words we read from Psalm 19 speak so clearly to this.

[16 : 43] The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. Has your faith lost the vitality it once had? Return to the word of God.

Has a love for the world replaced a love for God in your heart? Return to the word of God. Do you feel distant from God, that he who was once most personal to you has become a mere acquaintance?

Return to the word of God. But too often, instead of returning to the word of God, we become complacent, and we take God's word for granted.

We've been in Bible studies. We sit under great preaching. We know what the word says. And so, we stop really listening. A perfect example of how this stopping listening works comes at the expense of my family, whom pretty much none of you know.

I grew up in a family in southern Virginia. There are four of us, my mom, my dad, my sister, and me. And every summer, we would go on a trip to the beach without fail. In fact, they're coming out this summer to go to Vancouver Island to go to the beach because that's just what Forbes is due in the summer.

[17 : 54] And so, this particular beach summer trip happened about 10 years ago when I was still in college. And we were actually coming back from the beach. And we had this big red minivan.

And my sister would always sleep on the middle bench. And I would stretch out and sleep on the back bench while we were traveling. And so, I was actually laying down on the back bench. And my parents and sister were playing the alphabet game.

I don't know if you're familiar with it. It's a common car trip game, road trip game, where when you see a sign, you shout out the word and the letter. And the idea is to go from A to Z and to be the first person who gets all the letters in order.

So, for example, if you saw Vancouver on a sign, it could be for V, it could be for A, N, C. You get the point. You're smart people. So, they're playing this game. And it was nearing the end of the game.

And they were getting really, really heated. Everybody was looking for Z, which is a really hard letter to find. So, everyone's looking for Z. Z. They're not really paying attention to the road. And all of a sudden, my dad slams on the brakes.

[18 : 55] Tiger squealing. I almost roll off the back seat. And all of a sudden, he's going, where is all this traffic coming from? Why is everybody stopping? You know, the anger covering up the fact that he almost endangered the lives of his family to win a game.

And I sit bolt right up in the back seat. And I'm like, you don't know where this traffic is coming from? And he's like, no, you do. You've been laying down in the back the whole time, not paying attention. I was like, no, no, you're the one who hasn't been paying attention. Because three times on this trip, I have heard each one of you say, W, slow.

X, expect. Y, delays. Three times my entire family had read three separate signs that were telling them to expect delays and to drive slowly.

And none of them paid attention to the words. They were, in the thrill of the game, they had actually stopped reading the signs and were only looking for what they needed and what they wanted.

[20 : 00] And too often, we approach God's word that way. We can't pick and choose what we want to hear from the word of God. We can't manipulate it to suit our purposes and our desires.

We need to listen, really listen. And then we need to obey. True faith comes from hearing and obeying the word of Christ.

When Moses, Old Testament hero, prophet, was encouraging the people of God to return faithfully to following God, he said this in Deuteronomy 32, 46 and 47.

This is where we're going to end. I think it's very appropriate. Moses said, Take heart to all the words by which I am warning you today that you may command them to your children, that you may be careful to do all of the words of this law, for it is no empty word to you, but your very life.

The word of God is no empty word to us. It is our life. May we read it. May we meditate on it. May we pray through it, study it, memorize it, dwell on it, treasure it, and may we obey it.

[21 : 14] May we rediscover our love and our devotion to Christ as we hear and obey his words. And may our faith deepen and strengthen as we return to the word of God.

Amen.