

"Lesson in Faith"

If you ask the average person the question: *What are the most important things in life?* You get a predictable list of answers: your health, love, family, friends, a sense of purpose. Some people focus on character, and then you get things like; honesty, compassion, courage, and integrity. There is one thing that usually overlooked in those lists. It is something Jesus says is absolutely critical. There is even a sense in which serious Christians often overlook this one essential thing. If you ask the average Christian, "What are the most important things to do to grow stronger spiritually?" Most people will say things like, I need to be more committed, I need to read the Bible more, pray more, and get connected and serve in a ministry of some kind. All of these are good things, but the list often omits one absolutely critical thing. The one thing often overlooked is faith. You need more faith. You need to deepen, strengthen, and grow in your faith. You need faith put to work in all the issues of life. No matter who you are and what you are presently dealing with in life, at the heart of your problems, challenges, and opportunities are issues that have everything to do with faith. In the Bible, and in the story of Jesus, faith is what brings you eternal life and shapes your present life.

Faith is the theme of the story of a healing at the end of **John 4**. This story is a significant turning point in Jesus' life. From the southern part of Israel, he had begun moving north and passed through Samaria, where he met the woman at the well and spoke to her about the water of life. He had stayed for two days in her village. **Verse 42** is significant. It says, They (the people in the village) said to the woman, *"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."* Now Jesus leaves Samaria and returns to Galilee, the region in the Northern part of Israel. This is where he will carry out the greater part of his ministry. Scholars call this the beginning of his great Galilean ministry. This story contains the first event that begins this new era, and the focus in it is on the meaning of faith.

There are three lessons about faith contained in this story.

- 1st Faith isn't just about what Jesus can do. Faith is about who he is.
- 2nd Faith doesn't make demands on Jesus. Faith trusts in his word.
- 3rd Faith is not a finished product. Faith grows richer with experience.

The first lesson of the story is that....

**I. FAITH ISN'T JUST ABOUT WHAT JESUS CAN DO.
FAITH IS ABOUT WHO JESUS IS.**

There is something interesting about the way this story begins. **John 4:44** says, *Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.* The intriguing thing is this whole area is his home country but the next verse, **verse 45** actually says, so, more literally therefore *when he came to Galilee they welcomed him.* This is jarring and intriguing. Jesus says a prophet is not honored in his own country but when Jesus came to his home country they welcomed him. Isn't that honoring? One famous scholar of the gospel of John, D.A. Carson says when John says they welcomed him he is actually writing with deep irony. ¹

When is the welcome of a prophet not honoring to the prophet? The answer seem to come when almost immediately someone comes to Jesus asking for a miracle and Jesus, in **verse 48** says, *"Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."* The welcome of a prophet is not honoring to the prophet when he is only welcomed for the miracles he can perform and not for the person that he is. Of course in this case we're not just talking about a prophet but Jesus.

What the story suggests is that Jesus detects in the Galileans a welcome that is dependent on signs and wonders. This will develop and grow more obvious during his ministry.

What's clear from this story is that...

A. Some people only care about what Christ can do for them, they are blind to the grace and truth that is in Him.

Jesus had just come from Samaria, where the people were scorned by the Jews. But what had Jesus found in Samaria? He did no recorded miracles there, but in the end, they acknowledge Him as the Savior of the world. He found people who believed in Him because of the grace they saw in his life and the truth they heard in his words. Now, He comes into His own country, and what does he find? The grace and truth seen in the character of Christ meant nothing to these people, just as it means very little to many people today. If he could pull off an extraordinary miracle, perform a sign or a wonder, then that would count for something. I think what we hear in Jesus' words in **verse 48**, is not so much anger as sadness.

The people in that day, like many today, were either absolutely incapable or stubbornly unwilling to see the deeper beauty and power of who he was and what he had to offer. It wasn't enough for God to be standing in their midst, displaying His love for mankind, and speaking to the deepest hurts, needs, and truths of human life. If Jesus could keep the miracles coming, then they would keep flocking out to see him and perhaps develop a kind of superficial faith in Him.

B. Christ wants our faith in Him to be rooted in something deeper than the latest miracle or answer to prayer.

During his life on earth, Jesus healed some people of their sickness, but He didn't heal everybody that was sick. He raised some people from the dead, but he did not raise all people from the dead Why? Because He came, to purchase our salvation by dying on the cross for our sins, and to demonstrate the nature of our salvation by giving us a foretaste or preview of it. Romans 8 talks about this in-depth. **Romans 8:25** says *we hope for what we do not yet have and wait for it patiently.* What Jesus did on earth in healing the sick is a preview and a picture of when he will come again, and there will be no more sickness, pain, or death. But that day has not yet come. So when people are sick, we pray in faith. Sometimes the powers of the age to come break through and are manifested in this present age. Sometimes we have to wait patiently for the fulfillment of our hope of incomparable future glory.

In the present age, the miracles serve as signs. At the end of the story, in **verse 54**, John says this was the second “sign” Jesus did when he had come to Galilee. The miracles are not the main thing. They are signs that point to the main thing, which is Jesus. So this story introduces what is going to be one of the major themes of the life of Jesus. The miracles he performs are designed to point to him, but many people focus on the signs and not the Savior!

Imagine the National Park's Service commissions an artist to do new signs for one of our beautiful National Parks. The signs are designed to lead people to stand in awe of the stunning vistas. There are waterfalls, geysers, and mountain peaks. But what if the signs are so well done people gather to gawk at the signs at the parking lot or the trailhead and never actually the signs to the breathtaking beauty of God's artistry? That's what happens when the signs of grace that show up in life become our focus instead of the Savior of the world.

Faith isn't just about what Jesus can do. Faith is about who Jesus is.

That's the first lesson in faith here's the second,

II. FAITH ISN'T ABOUT MAKING DEMANDS ON JESUS. FAITH IS TRUSTING IN HIS WORDS.

Verse 47 says, *When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.* What's your most desperate need? Is it more desperate as a parent with a suffering child? So desperate that you leave the bedside to travel 20 miles to find someone who *maybe* can heal him? If so, how would you feel if when you ask him to come with you, he takes the occasion to rebuke your dependence on signs and wonders? **Verse 48**, *So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."* But notice what happens next. **Verse 49** *The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."* The man doesn't falter. He asks Jesus again. But Jesus never does what the man asks him to do. Instead, **verse 50** says, *Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live."* *The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.* ⁵¹ *As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.*

A. We make our requests, but Jesus responds in his own way.

Think of the test of faith here. If you refuse to leave without Jesus coming, that would show you don't believe him. If you do leave, to go back home without Jesus coming with you, you've got nothing to show for your efforts but a promise in your heart – a word spoken. By the time you get home, if your child isn't better, it's another 20 miles – forty miles round trip to get back to Jesus on what, on foot, by a donkey? This man thinks Jesus needs to go home with him to help him, and Jesus doesn't do what he asks. Jesus doesn't conform to his request or opinions about what needs to happen or how this ought to work. But in the end, the man receives what he most, and he receives even more because he learns something about the power of Jesus and the meaning of faith.

B. We have to believe the words that Jesus speaks

The last words in **verse 50**, are key, *The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.* This is a tremendous insight into faith. Faith isn't just an effortless feeling of absolute certainty. It is choosing to take Jesus at his word, to trust him, and act accordingly. The reason the Bible exhorts us to believe rebukes us for our failures

to believe, and praises those who have great faith is because faith is not just a feeling of confidence over which you have no control. It is choosing to trust in Jesus and act accordingly.

We all exercise faith in many ways. When I broke my arm, there were spiral fractures and comminuted, or splintered fragments that drove up into the wrist. So there was concern about the best treatment to give the best chance for recovering full use. My doctor told me he could put a cast on it and just let it heal, or he could do surgery to restructure the bone and then put in a long metal plate and a dozen screws that would run from my elbow to wrist. I don't prefer surgery, but I asked him what he recommended, and he said the surgery. There was no way to attain absolute certainty about what would be best. So what do you do? You think about it, you think about the doctor, do you have reason to believe him? Well then maybe you should. But faith is involved because you don't know how it will go. You have to choose to trust. In **2nd Corinthians 5:7**, the apostle Paul says *we walk by faith and not by sight*. Don't think he means we walk by faith and not by thinking. He is saying faith has to take us beyond what we see, beyond appearances, beyond what can be seen. To walk by faith means you trust God with what you cannot see because that actually makes the most sense. You don't give in to your hurts, emotions, or expectations. You choose to believe the words of Christ and of God.

This is the second lesson. Faith doesn't make demands on Jesus. Faith trusts in the words of Jesus. There's a third lesson in the story.

III. FAITH IS NEVER A FINISHED PRODUCT FAITH GROWS RICHER WITH EXPERIENCE.

Look at **verses 51-53**: *As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.* ⁵² *So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him."* 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.* Think about this. Jesus said his son would live. In **verse 49**, it said the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him. And yet here we see the reality of the human heart. But when his servants tell him the son is recovering, he doesn't say, *of course, I knew that would happen, and I can tell you the time when the fever broke*. No! He asks, *When did this happen?* Why does he ask that? Because he's amazed! When they say *yesterday at the seventh hour*, he knows that's when Jesus told him, *your son will live*.

As he had travelled through the night and the next day, he held on to the words of Jesus – and he trusted Jesus enough to commit and to act and go home with hope and expectation. But now we're told again that he believed. It's not that he didn't believe at all before. It just that now he believes in a deeper way. Isn't that just like you and me? Faith can be real but uncertain and even weak. We can choose to trust God while fighting off all kinds of questions and even fears, but then God proves faithful, and faith grows stronger. Our life of faith is never finished or absolutely perfected. It grows richer with experience. How does faith grow? Not by asking for signs and wonders but by choosing to treasure Jesus and to trust in his words. Don't think that a weak faith that is just barely holding on to the words of Christ is of no value. Commit to trusting in those words of Jesus that are hard to trust and act in obedience to those words. Faith will grow when faith is used.

This is so important. Nothing is more important.

A. We are saved by a faith that grows richer over time.

Remember, the woman at the well and the Samaritans in her village believed came to believe Jesus was indeed the Savior of the World. In the two days Jesus spend with them how much did they understand? How sophisticated was their faith? Like the man in this story it was a simple willingness believed the words that Jesus gave them. What kind of word does Jesus give us when it comes to our salvation? Here's one example: **John 6:40** Jesus said, *For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*” He doesn't say everyone who obeys the rules, or get's it right, or does more good than bad, or performs the required rituals but everyone who looks and believes. Not *some* or *most*, but *everyone* who believes in him!

How does he save us? Not by giving us new laws to obey or even an example to follow. He saves us from the judgment of God by taking our place and being judged *for* us. He dies on the cross and pays our debt. What you do to receive Salvation is you believe in him. You choose to take him at his word. You need a Savior. And Jesus is the Savior of the world. His love is profound, and his sacrifice is sufficient. Take him at his word, trust in him, and he will save you. That faith that just takes him at his word in the beginning can be a very simple act of faith but it will grow richer and deeper with experience.

We are saved by a faith that grows richer over time and then...

B. We live by a faith that grows richer over time.

In **John 7:38**, Jesus says that it is by believing that we drink the water of life and experience the upwelling power of the Holy Spirit. In

Galatians 2:20, Paul says *the life I now live in the flesh I live through faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Take the most beautiful goals and go after them with enormous efforts but without faith – with unbelieving effort and you will get stress and bitterness and failure. But take good goals and efforts rooted in faith and you will move mountains. Faith is indispensable. How does it grow? It grows deeper as you use it. As you take Jesus at his word and act accordingly faith grows richer and deeper.

Conclusion

Faith is often neglected but absolutely essential. Faith is the means by which we receive the saving, healing, life-changing power of God.

One of the results of Albert Einstein's work is the equation $E=mc^2$. Einstein demonstrated that even a small amount of mass or material contains an enormous amount of energy.² The amount of energy in a pencil would be equal to its mass multiplied by the square of the speed of light – a colossal amount! A common example of this is that 1 gram of water. The Science website, "How Stuff Works", says -- if its whole mass were converted into pure energy via $E=mc^2$ -- 1 gram of water would contain as much energy as 20,000 tons of TNT exploding. It seems hard to imagine. Maybe that's the way it sounded to the disciples of Jesus when he told them in Luke 17 that faith the size of a mustard seed could uproot a tree and cast it into the sea. Jesus didn't say that to prod his disciples to attempt more spectacular signs and wonders. He told them that when they responded with disbelief to him telling them, they should forgive others seventy times seven. Their question was really, *"Where can I find the power to live the way you call me to live?"* His answer was they must put faith to work.

Put faith to work in your life where it is needed most. Place your faith in Jesus the Savior and the healer. Faith is the one thing, the most important thing you need to put to work your struggles, your burdens, your worries, your marriage, your family, your life. Where do you need to take Jesus at his word and act on it? Do it.

Amen

Prayer of Response

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Savior of the world. We do believe in you and yet we ask you to please help us overcome the persistent unbelief that so easily rises up within us in the midst of the problems of life. Give us the grace to recognize where we are worrying without praying, and striving but not trusting. Help us to let go of the stressed out and demanding spirit that tries to control what cannot be controlled, so that we can live and work in faith, and not in fear. Enable us, Lord, to put faith to work in all the issues of life. We ask in your powerful name, Amen.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, John 4:43-54.

² <https://science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/everyday-myths/einstein-formula.htm>