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John 4:43-54

Eighth Message

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BELIEVING IS SEEING

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

As a boy growing up in the fifties and sixties, my role models for family life came from TV shows like the Donna Reed Show, Father Knows Best, etc. They were hardly a good preparation for real family life, however. Erma Bombeck in her own witty style has this to say about the mothers portrayed on those shows:

They looked better cleaning their houses than most of us looked at our wedding. They never lost their temper, gained weight, or spent more money than their husbands made. They never scrubbed a toilet, were never invaded by roaches, never shouted, and nobody ever knew what they did between the time their families left in the morning and came home in the evening. Their collective virtue was patience. There was no situation too traumatic for them to cure with milk and cookies; no problem that could not be resolved in 24 minutes. I often wondered what would happen if one of their children had slammed a fellow-student against the paper towel machine in the school restroom and extorted their milk money. There's no doubt in my mind: Donna would have called a family conference; Barbara would have met Ward at the door and said, "Dinner's ready"; Harriet would have sent Ozzie out for ice cream.

I relate much better to the true story I heard Bill Buterworth share a number of years ago. Bill was recalling the time he volunteered to watch the children so that his wife Rhonda, who had just had their fourth child, could attend a week of meetings, to be addressed by Joe Bayly, at their church. Realizing they both could not go, Bill was the brave one. He said to his wife, "Honey, you go and hear Joe Bayly and I'll stay home and watch the four kids." This would be his first time alone with all four of them—coming in at 5, 4, 2, and 1 month. Bill kept a journal where he recorded his emotions and frustrations. I will read a few entries from that journal, entitled, "The Week Joe Bailey Came To Town":

My 4-year-old wants to know why it is that when Mommy goes out, the kids have to go to bed when it is still light. I tried to feed them dinner, a real disaster; tomorrow night I'll feed them in the back yard; they'll eat off of paper plates; and they'll be dressed only in underwear and shower caps. The kids always want me to read the alphabet book because they know with that book I can't skip pages. Never close your eyes when you pray with four kids. I always wanted to ask my four-year-old what it is like to sleep on the top bunk with his big wheel. 60 Minutes wouldn't even do a story on our house; they're

safer in the Middle East. The kids are all mad at me now because cupcakes don't float in the tub. My two-year-old has special powers: he can look at a glass of juice and it will spill. I just made a big mistake; I lifted the lid off the diaper pail. That one act clears sinuses, kills roaches, fleas, and ticks, and effectively discourages would-be burglars. I got angry. I said some things I shouldn't have, and my 5-year-old wants to know "who's Joe Bailey and why do I hate him?"

That's more like the real world, isn't it?

Today we come to a passage on faith (I suppose we could call it a reality check) in the gospel of John. If our faith is going to be real, it has to survive in the everyday world we live in. Many of us waste a lot of time trying to conform our life to some myth we have in our mind of what life is supposed to be like. It is my prayer that the account of Jesus' healing of the nobleman's son will help us relate our own faith to the real world in which we live. It's a story about faith and how faith grows.

In our last study we left Jesus at the well in Samaria. As a result of an amazing conversation between them, the Samaritan woman believed in him. She returned to her village and led all the men back to Jesus. He remained there two days to teach them, and as a result many believed and gave their own testimony. In 4:42 they said 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."

After that two-day ministry, Jesus and his disciples continued their trip up into Galilee. We pick up the narrative in verse 43:

And 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.

John actually shows in these early chapters of his gospel his amazement that the farther away Jesus moves from his proper country (which should be Jerusalem, since he is the Messianic King), the more he is welcomed. The people of Jerusalem rejected him. He had been born in Bethlehem, just outside of Jerusalem, and Judea was the "home of the prophets." But, as

John said in his introduction, "He came to his own, but his own did not receive him." This theme runs right through the book.

Verse 46:

He came therefore again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a certain royal official, whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him, and was requesting [Him] to come down and heal his son; for he was at the point of death.

Jesus comes back again to Cana, Nathaniel's hometown (where Jesus changed the water into wine a few months earlier), intending perhaps to stay with his disciple's family for a few days. While he was there a certain Jewish official came to Cana from Capernaum, a small town about 25 miles away. This man was a court official of Herod Antipas, the so-called King of the Jews. The official had heard about Jesus and his miracles (2:23; 3:2), the reports that he had healed the sick, etc. Who knows, he might even have seen some of the miracles himself. Perhaps he was a guest at the wedding at Cana. Now he had heard the news that Jesus had come back into Galilee, and he made plans to find him.

This man had considerable resources to draw from. He must have gone to great lengths and spent a small fortune trying to find a cure for his son's illness. From the verb tense we learn that the boy had been sick for a long time. But the father's wealth and rank and privilege could not help him now. A high temperature had reduced his little boy of boundless energy to one with about as much life as a limp rag doll. I am sure this loving father had hired the best physicians money could buy. He probably had exhausted everything from exotic medicines prescribed by professionals to folk medicines suggested by his servants. Here was a man who was used to getting what he wanted, but now he was filled with dread over a situation that was beyond his control. He had no more options open to him, and in his desperation he ran to Jesus for help.

He went up to Cana, probably on horseback or by chariot, and begged Jesus to come to Capernaum and heal his child. The verb suggests repeated asking: "Please come down and heal my boy." Is there a parent in this room who cannot identify with this man's plea? While we have never had such a serious situation as this in our family, I remember spending some anxious evenings when one of our boys had croup and couldn't breathe; we couldn't seem to reduce his 104° fever. We all can identify with this man as he approached Jesus, pleading for his help.

In light of this, our Lord's response seems odd:

Jesus therefore said to him, "Unless you [people] see signs and wonders, you [simply] will not believe."

This seems unnecessarily harsh. But there is something that softens the blow: the "you" is plural. Notice that the NASB inserts the word "you people," perhaps referring to the Jews who were looking for signs (2:18), or to Herod and his kind who wanted Jesus to entertain them (Luke 23:8). Jesus knew that many people were following him as if he were the latest sideshow.

Our Lord was wary of being solicited for an exhibition of his powers. He wasn't a master magician who brought out his bag of tricks to entertain people. He didn't do miracles just for the sake of doing them. Miracles had a valid purpose. They were signs, done to authenticate his Messianic office. The OT made it clear that when the Messiah came he would heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and open the ears of the deaf (Isa. 29:18-19; 35:5-6). In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus referred to his miracles as proof that he was indeed the one to come (Luke 4:16-21). So he did expect Jews (who were looking for these Messianic signs) to pay attention to them and take them seriously. The signs should have led them to believe in him.

But Jesus knew that faith based on mere signs was not mature faith. It needed to grow. Some people (who my friend Dave Roper calls "miracle junkies") journey from one miracle worker to another seeking an emotional fix to shore up their faith. Maybe some of us here this morning are like that. We want to see miracles and exciting, supernatural occurrences before we will believe. Such people are prey to religious racketeers who extract thousands, even millions of dollars from a gullible public to use for their own selfish purposes. Christians who act this way are at a very low level of belief, and God must help them move on.

But this father is not there to discuss the nature or the depth of his faith. Here is a worried man, deeply concerned for his son.

The royal official said to Him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

The man is saying, "I am not one of Herod's puppets. I trust you. I believe in you." He probably had a chariot ready and waiting for Jesus to ride back with him.

In his reply, I am sure Jesus was moved by this father's love for his child. The word he uses for the man's son is a very moving term of endearment. We could translate it "my little boy."

But Jesus is prepared to test this man's faith and help him grow. He is going to call him to a deeper level of faith; to believe in him not because of his miracles, but for his words; to believe in him not because of what he can do, but because of who he is.

Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your son lives." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he started off.

Notice that Jesus did not address the child. He did not say, "Child, become alive!" The point of this story is

not that Jesus can heal over long distances. These were words of quiet assurance to the boy's father. The report is so terse we are tempted to miss the drama. Jesus will not go with him! He commands the man to go, giving only verbal assurance that his son is now alive and well (not "will live" as the NIV translates it. Jesus is not predicting the boy's recovery; he is announcing it).

The nobleman now finds himself on the horns of a dilemma: he must either believe Jesus' words and go home to his son, or disbelieve them and look elsewhere for help. He has no other alternative. And he must believe without seeing. Had Jesus gone with him, he could have seen him at work; he could have observed the miracle with his own eyes. But now he must trust him with no evidence other than his words. It is safe to say that the man would not have chosen this route, the way of sheer faith. It was forced on him by Jesus. But he responded with obedience, based only on Jesus' words.

The confirmation came later:

And 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. They said therefore to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour [1:00 p.m.] 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. This is again a second sign that Jesus performed, when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.

This story illustrates for us one of the most important steps to growth in a believer's life. This man came to Jesus because he had heard of or perhaps even seen him perform a miracle, and as a result he had some form of belief. But Jesus wants to take him to a much deeper level, a more profound level of trust: to a belief in the unseen. The writer to the Hebrews says that faith is "being assured of what we hope for and being certain of *what we do not see*." What we have here is the maturing of a man's faith; his moving from belief in Jesus because of what he could see, to belief in Jesus even though he could not see. And this is the kind of faith that Jesus wants to see in us.

Some of you are living in situations where all you have to go on is faith in unseen realities. You can't "walk by sight." Some of you are living in bad family situations. I know this to be true, because you have told me so. There are no promises that God will make your home into the haven you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. Can you trust him even though others never come through? Can you trust him that he is there even though you can't see him? That is the deeper faith to which God is taking you.

Maybe you struggle with habitual sin in your life—the sin that knows you by name, the sin that knows you like a book. Just when you seem to detect progress, when you seem to be overcoming, you fall on your face. God says that sin "will not have dominion over you." Can you keep trusting his word? Can you pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down? C. S. Lewis once said, "No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall, of course, be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home . . . The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give up." Can you believe that one day you will be perfectly pure even though you are not now? Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work. You are depleting those precious savings and beginning to wonder if the right job is ever going to come along. Can you continue to believe that God will never leave you or forsake you; that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing; that you can "do all things through Christ who strengthens you"?

Are you suffering physical or emotional pain which seems to have no end? Can you believe that that "momentary light affliction is producing in you an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"? Can you believe that suffering is making you into a man, into a woman of God, drawing you to him and purifying you of self-interest and self-glorification so that *his* glory can be seen? You can if you look at the things that are not seen (2 Cor. 4:17-18). Can you believe God for an errant child who seems to be out of control? Can you still trust him and be content? This is what God is calling us to: to believe in Jesus because of his words, not because of what is observable.

This story ends well; the nobleman's boy was healed. But it doesn't always work out that way. We won't always see the promise granted here on earth. Sometimes we must wait for heaven and home.

I will always remember January 26th of this year. It was a Saturday, and I was halfway through teaching a seminar at our annual Men's Retreat when someone handed me a written message. All it said was, "Call home now. It is extremely urgent." You can imagine the thoughts that began to go through my mind. The telephone was a good 200 yards away, so I was preparing my heart and praying as I walked to make the call. When I called, my wife Kathy answered, much to my relief. She told me that that very morning, our good friends Peter and Jana Lynn Perkins had found their 17-month-old son Jack, dead in his crib. They had gone into his bedroom to awaken him, but he wouldn't wake up. He was gone. He had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. I immediately left the retreat and went to be with my friends. I couldn't stop my tears as I watched Peter say goodbye to his little boy whom he would never again tuck into bed. He would never again see his son playing in the yard. He would never again hear him scampering through the house, his boyish noises

trailing behind him All I could do was cry with him. Some of you here this morning know the pain that my friends are feeling today. My heart is with them. I know this will be a difficult day for Jana Lynn. Their hope, and our hope today, is fixed on the unseen.

Hebrews 11 speaks of men and women who gained approval through their faith though they did not receive what was promised:

...who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed [acts of] righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received [back] their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced and, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men) of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

One of my favorite stories in the OT is told in 2 Kings 6. It involves the prophet Elisha and his servant.

The king of Syria, Ben Hadad II, was upset with Elisha because he kept tipping off King Joran of Israel to Syrian troop movements. (God was providing inside information for Elisha.) So Ben Hadad decided to put an end to the prophet. He stormed in with his entire army to besiege the city of Dothan, where Elisha and his servant were staying. During the night the Syrians circled the city and waited for dawn. The next morning, Elisha's servant awoke early. He looked out over the walls and saw the army and began to panic. He woke up Elisha and told him the bad news: "It's all over. What are we going to do?" Elisha said to him "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them." We can imagine the look of bewilderment in the servant's eyes. "Let's see," he says, as he begins to count, "one, two . . ." Elisha, too, senses his fear. The next verse says, "Elisha prayed and said, 'O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' And the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." Elisha and his servant captured the entire Syrian army and led them off to Samaria!

Facts are not always as they seem, are they? We cannot evaluate a situation in terms of what we can merely see. What is observable is real, but it is not the ultimate reality. Behind what we see is an all-powerful, all-loving God who has promised to reconcile all things to himself. He is committed to conforming you and me into the image of Christ; and what God has begun, he will certainly complete. Let us trust him for that today.

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