

SCRIPTURE INTRO:

We are returning to our study of the Gospel of John for the rest of the winter.

The Gospel of John has been called “God’s love letter to the world.”

It has been called “the unique, tender, genuine, chief Gospel.”

There is a famous saying that John’s Gospel is like a pool in which a lamb can wade and an elephant can swim.

In other words, it is both for people who are brand new beginners in their faith, and it is for very deep and mature believers.

INTRO: I’m going to start this morning by reading you a story about faith.

This story comes from Francis Schaeffer’s book, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*.

I first read it in college, and since then it’s been helpful to me ever since.

Before I read it, let me set the stage. First of all: Who was Francis Schaeffer?

He was a Presbyterian missionary and theologian.

Right after World War II, he and his wife, Edith, moved to Switzerland and they established a Christian guesthouse up in the Alps where they hosted people who were searching for spiritual truth—L’Abri.

They spent 40 years there, witnessing to university students and intellectuals.

Schaeffer had a gift for presenting and arguing the Christian faith with people who were critical, hostile, and agnostic.

In this particular passage, he was responding to people who say that Christian faith is irrational, faith is not critical thinking, faith is just wishful thinking.

Faith in God is shutting off your intellect and taking a leap in the dark.

Here is his story:

Suppose we are climbing in the Alps and are very high on the bare rock, and suddenly the fog rolls in. The guide turns to us and says that the ice is forming and that there is no hope; before morning we will all freeze to death here on the shoulder of the mountain. Simply to keep warm the guide keeps us moving in the dense fog further out on the shoulder until none of us have any idea where we are. After an hour or so, someone says to the guide, “Suppose I dropped and hit a ledge ten feet down in the fog. What would happen then?” The guide would say that you might make it until the morning and thus live. So, with absolutely no knowledge or any reason

to support his action, one of the group hangs and drops into the fog. This would be one kind of faith, a leap of faith.

Suppose, however, after we have worked out on the shoulder in the midst of the fog and the growing ice on the rock, we had stopped and we heard a voice which said, “You cannot see me, but I know exactly where you are from your voices. I am on another ridge. I have lived in these mountains, man and boy, for over sixty years and I know every foot of them. I assure you that ten feet below you there is a ledge. If you hang and drop, you can make it through the night and I will get you in the morning.

I would not hang and drop at once, but would ask questions to try to ascertain if the man knew what he was talking about and if he was not my enemy. In the Alps, for example, I would ask him his name. If the name he gave me was the name of a family from that part of the mountains, it would count a great deal to me. In the Swiss Alps there are certain family names that indicate mountain families of that area. In my desperate situation, even though time would be running out, I would ask him what to me would be the adequate and sufficient questions, and when I became convinced by his answers, then I would hang and drop.

Keep that story in mind. It’s going to be very helpful as we study this passage.

We’ll come back to it three times.

One of the distinctives of John is that he calls Jesus’ miracles “signs.”

Did you notice that in the last verse?

He says: “This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed.”

The reason John calls them signs is to say that Jesus didn’t do miracles just for their own sake, he did them to point to things, or to represent things.

They were teaching tools.

Chapter 20, verses 30 and 31 give us the big interpretation of these signs.

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So the signs are given to point to Christ so that we believe in him,
and by that belief, by that faith, we have life.

These two themes—faith and life—are repeated over and over in John.

This passage is a miracle, John calls it Jesus’ second sign.

And this sign is about faith itself.

It is given to help us understand what the Bible means when it says
that we must believe in Jesus Christ in order to have life.

In popular American culture, “faith” usually means spiritual feelings.

Believing in general that there is spiritual side to life, whatever that is. I mentioned a few weeks ago Angelina Jolie’s comments about directing the movie *Unbroken* and how she wanted to depict universal faith.

By which, I take it she means any spiritual belief or feeling. But this second miraculous sign of Christ presents a different picture of faith.

Let’s look at it under three points.

1. Faith starts with thinking.
2. Faith emerges through trust.
3. Faith matures in trouble.

MP#1 Faith starts with thinking

I’ve been in an occasional conversation with a man here in Cullman who tells me that he once believed in God, but then he started thinking, and now he doesn’t even know if there is a God.

And he has told me: I wish I could be like you.

I wish I could believe and pray, but my reason won’t let me.

He is implying, of course, that I don’t think.

Or that my faith is divorced from reason.

There are thinking, critical people, and there are trusting, subjective people.

He’s one of the former, I’m one of the latter, because I believe in Jesus Christ. But faith is not the absence of thinking, faith starts with thinking.

The man in this story came to Jesus to seek healing for his son why?

Because he had heard reports. He hadn’t seen any of Jesus’ miracles himself.

But he had heard stories. People were talking about them.

He weighed those stories, who was telling them.

Yes, he was desperate, and that is an important piece of the picture that we will consider later. But he wasn’t irrational or unthinking.

He thought about and weighed the plausible reports that Jesus had healed people and on the basis of that he went to Jesus.

Consider for just a moment how many things in life you understand and believe in the very same way. You haven’t experienced them yourself, firsthand.

You’ve heard reports. And you think about those reports.

You weigh the evidence and that is the very way faith begins.

Some people, like this Cullman man I mentioned, say: You can't prove God exists. I won't believe until you can prove it, or give airtight answers to my questions. And the fact that there are no airtight answers says to him that faith is irrational.

But that's not the way we live.

I suppose we can prove some things—like prove 24 species of fish in Smith Lake. But all the important things of life we accept by faith without airtight proof. You can't prove your moral convictions.

You can give reasons for them, but you can't prove them.

You can't prove this is the right person for you to marry.

You can talk to people who know her or know him, check references.

You can spend lots of time with the person and ask a thousand questions.

But in the end, if you decide to marry, you have faith this is the right person. Just because you cannot definitively prove, scientifically prove this is the right person for you to marry, doesn't mean your marriage is irrational leap of faith. Yes, it's faith, but it started with thinking.

Or suppose a family member has decided to get surgery.

You wouldn't say his decision is irrational because there isn't airtight proof he won't die in surgery or turn into a vegetable, or proof that the doctor got it all wrong.

He thought about the doctor's diagnosis.

He read about it on the internet. He got a second opinion.

He talked to people who had the surgery or who used that surgeon.

Then after thinking, decided to act in faith, and put his life in hands of another.

These are all just variations of Francis Schaeffer's excellent parable.

You are trapped out on the open rock

and the only way to survive is to find some shelter for the night.

You could hope there is a path to shelter somewhere below you

and fling yourself out into the dark and fog, hoping to fall to safety.

That's a kind of faith. But not at all what it means to believe in Jesus Christ.

That's not at all what the Bible means when it speaks of faith.

Instead, you are trapped on the open rock and a man speaks to you.

He tells you to jump into the dark, because there is a path below to safety.

You might not jump right away. You ask questions.

You discuss it with your companions. In other words, you think.

But if you said to the man: Unless you give me airtight proof
and absolutely satisfying answers to all my questions, I won't jump.
Then he would say: I'm sorry, then you will freeze to death.

In reading about the events in France this week, I was struck again with how Islam
cannot bear any criticism of Mohammed or any questions about his claims.
It has to defend itself with violence.

How wonderful that we don't have a problem with our faith being criticized
and questioned. How reassuring that Christ invites us to examine him and claims.

Saving, life-giving faith in Christ
does not start with an irrational or desperate leap in the dark.
It starts, as do all the important matters of life, with thinking.
But it doesn't stop there.

MP#2 Faith emerges through trust.

Faith is born, it comes to fruition, through trust.
You can't have faith without thinking, but thinking is not faith.
That thinking has to lead you to trust Christ, and to act on that trust.

We are told he was a royal official, a nobleman. He was a man of means.
He had money to spend on the best medical care, and no doubt he had.
But all his wealth and influence had failed to save his son—so came to Jesus.
So he came to Jesus and begged him to come
Jesus answered his request with an odd reply.
He didn't speak to the man, but instead addressed the crowd around him.
“Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe.”
You get the sense that people were excited by this man's request.
They were hoping to see a miracle. That was their interest in Christ.
He was fascinating entertainment.

But back to the man. He persisted. He pleaded. Come with me before child dies.
When he asked the second time, Jesus did not put him off.
He answered the man's request, but not as he expected. He said.
“You may go. Your son will live.”
This man was a Jew so he certainly knew about miracles of healing in Scriptures.
Elijah, Elisha and other prophets. There are plenty of stories.
None of the Old Testament prophets performed miracles from a distance.

They had to be present. Often had an object like a staff they used in miracle. It was all intended to show that the power did not come from them or their authority, but that they were merely conduits, God's servants.

That's why this man wanted Jesus to come. He thought Jesus at most a prophet. But Jesus deliberately healed in a way that only God can heal. With a word. Just like God can create with a word. Let there be light. He was challenging the man to believe that he was more than a prophet and miracle worker, but that he was the Messiah and Son of God.

The man's response to Jesus is the focal point of this story, verse 50.

The man took Jesus at his word and departed.

He believed the word Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.

It wasn't what he expected, he would have felt a lot better if Jesus had come.

But he believed Jesus was more than just a man, and he trusted his word.

And he proved that trust by acting on it, by going on his way.

Back to Francis Schaeffer. I'm sure you see this point in his parable.

Faith emerges when you trust your life to the word of the Swiss mountain man and let yourself drop to the invisible path below.

That's what faith ultimately is.

It's taking Jesus at his word and then trusting him enough to act on his word.

It's trusting him with your life.

If he gives you an answer or gives you instruction that is not what you are looking for, or not what you expect, don't continue in your doubts, but be on your way.

Have you ever done that team-building exercise, the trust fall?

Put hands at sides, fall straight back and others catch you.

Point at which you feel your center of gravity shifting, you lose control of it.

At that point, have a choice to give it up, or shift foot try to catch self.

That's trust, what this man did, gave up his center of gravity to Christ.

A few days ago I was talking to Allison about financial matters related to our children being in college. And I began to lament that I had not done other things with our money in past years.

But Allison said: Look, Andrew, during those years we made a decision to tithe, we made a decision to give to other ministries, to send kids to Christian schools. We spent that extra money by faith, because we believed that's what the Lord wanted us to do. And that's how we have to continue to life, by faith.

That's exactly right. Faith is trusting Christ's word in every area of your life.

It's trusting him when he says you are forgiven, no condemnation.

So you don't try to atone for your own sins by acting out of guilt or shame.

It's trusting him when he says he delights over you, rejoices over you with singing, and that you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

So you can love yourself and accept yourself as you are, not listen to world.

It's trusting him when he tells you to honor and respect your husband, to love your wife, to obey your parents.

It's trusting him when he tells you to be content with what you have.

It's trusting him when he says that God sees all you do and that you reap what you sow and God will not be mocked.

It's trusting him when he tells you that he will never leave you or forsake you, and that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.

Even when he does something in your life or gives you an answer you don't understand or want—you trust him. That's faith.

And once again. It's not irrational. It's not jumping into the dark.

You've thought and considered, you've asked questions,

you've considered the evidence and talked to other people who know him.

But faith is finally taking him at his word and going on your way.

Brings us to the third point.

MP#3 Faith matures in trouble.

Verse 50 says that the man believed, that he took Jesus at his word.

But then, a few verses later, when he came home and found son healed, and when he inquired about the time it says that then he believed.

He believed, and then he believed more.

His thinking led to trust, and then more thinking and deeper trust.

But notice that the setting in which this whole cycle of faith happened was a setting of suffering, wrestling with God, finding his answers.

This is important.

The reason we usually move toward Jesus, grow in trust is because of suffering.

What would possess a nobleman to travel 25 miles to beg help of poor carpenter?

The only thing that usually moves us toward Jesus is suffering.

As we've already noted. The money and influence he relied upon to take care of all the contingencies in life had failed him. He was desperate.

Suffering reveals and exposes the things we are trusting in besides God.

Sometimes we don't even know what those things are until they start to fail us. In Schaeffer's faith parable, the hikers are moving out on the exposed rock, but when the fog rolls in and it gets dark, they realize to horror their plan has failed and will end up killing them.

It takes suffering to realize that the things you are trust are failing.

That opens you to hear the word Christ.

I told you just a few months ago in another sermon about my experience on Marco Island as a young assistant pastor. How my boss, Pastor Bruce Fiol told me the effect the stock market crash in 1987, Black Monday, how it effected the wealthy retirees in that community.

For days, many of them were walking around like zombies.

None of them were going to be homeless. None of them were going to starve.

But the source of their comfort and security was threatened, almost catatonic.

It was a tremendous time for ministry and for faith to mature and be stretched.

Lots of believers had to face themselves and be honest.

Trouble made them do what? Think again about the claims of Christ.

Think again about the promises of God. Is this real? Is it true?

Will God supply all my needs? Is his presence more precious than silver?

And then from that, some of them moved to a new level of trust.

Yes they trusted Christ before, but not completely. Also trusted their money.

It was trouble that matured their faith.

Oh no, you say—Is this what I have to expect from the Lord? Trouble.

Things going well in my life, should I be waiting for the other shoe to drop?

Is he about to pound me with troubles?

No, we shouldn't live in that fear. This is also part of faith.

He as revealed this to you so that you will trust him now and be prepared.

You know the tides of trouble come.

When the come, the sandcastles people build will be washed away.

You know that—so you don't invest your heart and soul in them.

And he has also revealed that he is good.

And if he does bring troubles to you, it's his mercy.

He doesn't always do things the way we want or expect.

The nobleman wanted Jesus to drop everything and come with him.

He put him off, used his request to make a point with the crowd.
He told him he was not going with him, to go home for his answer.
The man could have said. This isn't what I want. I'm not putting up with this.
But the Lord, in his mercy, was jerking the man around, shifting his center of gravity and to ultimately lead both him and family to life-giving faith.
That's mercy.

It's been use a thousand times but it never gets old.
The conversation Susan has with Mr. Beaver in
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.
The children have just found out the king of Narnia is a lion.

Susan asks: Is he safe?

Mr. Beaver laughs and says: Safe? No, he's not safe. But he's good.

Our Lord Jesus Christ will do whatever it takes
to make you think about his claims more deeply and trust him more completely.
But you can be assured, that all he does in your life is good.
Just has he was good to this man.

Herbert Booth was the son of William and Catherine Booth,
founders of the Salvation Army. Listen to this hymn he wrote.

Blessed Lord, in thee is refuge,
Safety for my trembling soul.
Power to lift my head when drooping
Midst the angry billows' roll.
I will trust thee. I will trust thee. I will trust thee.
All my life thou shalt control.

In the past, too, unbelieving,
Midst the tempest I have been,
And my heart has slowly trusted
What my eyes have never seen.
Blessed Jesus. Blessed Jesus. Blessed Jesus.
Teach me on thine arm to lean.