

“Faith”
John 6:22-40

February 22, 2015

INTRO: I’ve told you before that my homiletics professor in seminary, Dr. Brian Chapell, had a preaching rule he pounded home over and over—the rule was that a sermon had to be about one thing. He used to say: Gentlemen, what’s a sermon about? And we were supposed to answer: One thing.

Everything in our sermons had to relate to that one thing. If you told a joke or used humor to advance the theme of the sermon—fine. But woe to the seminary student who told a joke just to be funny. Or the student who couldn’t resist going down a theological rabbit trail or telling about a Greek word study if it didn’t relate to the theme. Dr. Chapell would politely demolish your sermon in front of the whole class.

So what’s this sermon about?
The passage we’ve just read is the first half of a sermon by the Lord Jesus, a sermon scholars usually call the Bread of Life Discourse. We’ll read the second half next week. It was certainly much longer when he actually gave it. John has given us his Clif Notes version of the Bread of Life Discourse

But from what we have read so far, is this sermon about one thing?
Yes. Absolutely. The Lord Jesus focuses like a laser on his main theme. So what is it?

Look again at verse 29—here is the theme introduced.
The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”
Now look at verse 35—the theme is expanded:
He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.
Now look at verse 36—he applies his theme:
You have seen me, and still you do not believe.
Now look at verse 40—he expands his theme again:
My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.

So what’s this sermon about? The theme is faith. Faith in Jesus Christ. Believing in him and the eternal life that comes from believing in him.

The subject of faith has already been introduced in John's Gospel.
Think, for example, of John 3:16.

“Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

It actually appears even earlier, in the first chapter, verse 12.

“as many as believed in him became the children of God.”

And as you know, it appears at the very end of John
as a summary statement for the whole Gospel, 20:31

“These are written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

The Gospel of John is a book about believing in Jesus Christ—
why you should and what you will receive if you do.

But the significance of the Bread of Life Discourse is that this is the first place
John explains what it really means to believe in Jesus.

Faith and believing are key words in John and in all the Bible.

So it's vitally important to know what they mean.

This discourse is a study in the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ.

Let's look at this passage and ask two big questions:

1. What is it? What is faith in Jesus Christ?
2. Is it easy or hard? Easy or hard to believe in Jesus? What do you think?
That's an important question that this Bread of Life Discourse answers.

Credit where credit is due: Sermon by Robert Rayburn on this passage.

MP#1 What is it?

How do we define or explain faith in Christ?

I bought car off Craigslist this week.

I called the number on the ad and asked the man who answered to tell me about it. He said that they had bought it new, his wife's car, she had driven it carefully, never wrecked, they had it serviced, even oil changed at dealer, and new tires. That sounded good, so I asked him if we could see it.

He said, yes, let's meet at this place in south Huntsville. I work at Arsenal. Oh, I said, what work do you do? He said he was an engineer.

So Allison and I went to see the car. I brought money with us in case it worked out.

On the way Allison said: Did you read the story about that couple in Georgia?

They went to see a Craigslist car and they were both murdered.

I thought: one owner, engineer owner, never wrecked, dealer serviced, new tires—it sounds too perfect. This guy reeling us in for the kill.

We met him. It was this past Wednesday and I noticed ashes on his forehead.

I could see he was trying to fool me into thinking he was a devout Catholic so I would let my guard down.

We liked the car and told him we wanted to buy it.

He said his wife's name was on the title. He could call her to come meet us, but it would really be more convenient if we followed him to his house.

I thought: Yes, more convenient for you to butcher us and bury in crawlspace.

We went with him. Met his sweet wife. Gave them our money.

And they gave us a car with a piece of paper that said, "as is."

What is faith? The great Scottish Presbyterian Alexander Whyte put it this way:

"Faith in its most elementary sense, faith in its first and foundational sense, simply means the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and power of another. You make a statement of fact to me or give me a promise and offer an assurance and faith is that state of mind in me to you, that state of mind in me which accepts your statement and relies on your promise."

Faith is the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and power of another.

Jesus describes faith in him as coming to him.

He who comes to me will never go hungry.

All that the Father gives to me will come to me.

And he describes it as looking at him.

Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.
He calls himself the Bread of Life and describes faith as eating him.
And drinking him as living water or even drinking his blood.
Faith is described other places as the hand by which we lay hold of Christ
and the eye by which we look on Christ.
It is described as the feet by which we run to him for safety.
It is described as the nose by which we smell the fragrance of his presence.
When you put all these different images together you see that faith in Christ
is a comprehensive uniting of your life with him that brings profound changes.

Any time you believe in another person,
you are united with that person and your life changes.
Even with something as mundane as buying a used car from someone,
even that requires a meeting of the minds, and brings a small change.
And when you believe in a person enough to marry her—
the unity then is much deeper and changes much more profound.

When you believe in Jesus, you are placing trust in none other than God the Son.
And that union with him produces a revolution in your life.
His loves become your loves. His hates become your hates.
His hopes and purposes become your hopes and purposes.
You become his brother, his servant, his soldier, his subject, his friend,
and a child of his Father in heaven.
So belief in Christ is not something peripheral. If you have it, it controls you.
When you trust Christ for your salvation, then you trust him for everything.
You believe that he hears you and cares for you.
You believe that his purposes for you will be accomplished.

Andree Peterson is a columnist for World Magazine.
Her column this past week was titled: Faith Is The Thing.
The subtitle was: Believing in the absence of receiving.
It's about how in the Christian life, it is often through not receiving,
and not having our prayers answered, that our faith grows.
Let me read you a little bit of it.

On New Year's Eve my husband prayed: "Father, my prayer in 2014 was that another of our children would be saved. Since this did not happen, I am excited that you have an even better plan!"

This is the kind of prayer I would only share “in-house.” To tell it to unbelievers would hand them ammunition and give scoffers cause to scoff, saying we Christians are so stupid that even evidence doesn’t burst our fantasy.

But the kind of faith God prizes always looks foolish. It searches for explanations consistent with God’s faithfulness. In God’s faith-building boot camp there are levels. Level one is praying in faith—and receiving. A notch up is praying in faith, waiting a long time without wavering in doubt—and receiving. The Heisman trophy goes for praying in faith, waiting a very long time without doubting—and not receiving. And still believing.

She mentions Hebrews 11, the faith chapter.

And how the saints are commended for dying in faith having not received the things promised—not having seen the Messiah.

Then she says:

God is not a theory. He’s the Lord. He demands belief in Him above your very senses . . . Any mother’s fool could ask-receive-believe if God were a candy dispenser that automatically dispensed your Twix bar upon insertion of four coins. Where would be the faith in that? Where would be the stretching? Faith is always in the stretching.

What is faith in Jesus Christ? Remember Alexander Whyte:

Faith is the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and power of another. It’s a comprehensive trust in Jesus for forgiveness and heaven.

and for everything else you need.

It’s a confidence in him even when he does the very opposite of what you ask.

Because you are united to him, and what he wants, you want.

That brings us to the second question.

Here, I think, is where the rubber meets the road in this passage:

MP#2 Is faith in Jesus easy or hard?

Did you notice why Jesus preached this sermon? What happened?

The crowds had followed Jesus. They crossed the lake in search of him.

Where is Jesus? We want Jesus. We must find Jesus.

It seems like they believed in Jesus. They certainly believed he could do miracles.

They were following him because he had miraculously fed the 5,000.

They asked him to do more miracles.

That sounds like belief. Is it?

We once had a next door neighbor whose life was chaotic and immoral,

he was often in trouble with the law, he dishonored his parents,

he lied to them and stole from them.

One time he told me that he prayed God would give him a job and he got a job.

I could tell he really believed God answered his prayer.

Did this neighbor of mine believe in Christ just because he believed

God could give him a job if he asked?

How did Jesus respond to this crowd?

He told them: You want bread. You believe I am capable of giving it to you.

But you don't really believe in me because it's not me you want.

I am the bread of life.

And then he went on to explain this point that we just studied—

that faith in him is not just believing he can give you things.

Faith is a comprehensive commitment to him.

To believe in Jesus as the Son of God and Creator of heaven and earth means

that you stand ready to obey him and serve him.

To confess Jesus as Savior means to be ready to forsake all others and cling to him.

It means you know you owe him a debt of love

and the only payment for that debt is to give him your life.

When Jesus talked that way, the crowds said: No way. That's too hard.

We'll see their response more clearly next week, at end of sermon.

Christians sometimes talk about faith in Christ as if it were an easy thing.

All we have to do is believe. That's it. It's simple.

But it's not. Faith is the most difficult thing in the world.

Faith is not easier than works. Both are impossible for us.

Both are beyond our powers apart from the grace of God.

Just think for a moment how high the demand of faith really is.

Let me ask you some personal questions:

Jesus has told you he will never leave you or forsake you.

Is it obvious from your life that you are convinced of that?

Do you worry? Do you think about money a lot?

What do you think about more in a typical day: Money or Jesus?

Jesus has told you that you must appear before him on the day of judgment and give an account of the deeds done in your body whether good or evil.

How often do you think?

I'm going to answer to Christ for this action I'm contemplating.

I'm going to answer to Christ for the way I speak to this person in front of me.

I'm going to answer to Christ for how I spend my time at work.

What about his promise that his strength is made perfect in your weakness?

Or that he always lives to intercede for you?

Or that he will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches?

Or that you can do all things through him who gives you strength?

Or that he is coming soon to judge the living and the dead?

Do you really believe in Jesus so much that everything he says is real and dynamic and shaping the way you think and talk and live every day?

If you are honest you will admit—No! And we're Christians!

We would barely recognize ourselves if we really lived by faith every day.

Faith is not an easy thing, or a simple thing.

It is the most difficult and demanding thing there is.

Because it means living in absolute confidence

of the presence and the promises of an unseen God.

Keeping God's commandments is not the hard part of Christianity.

If you have enough faith, obedience will come.

The hard part is believing, and believing to the very end.

Joseph Butler was an Anglican bishop who lived in the 1700s.

He was the CS Lewis of his day and wrote a book in defense of Christian faith.

He spent his whole life in the service of Christ.

But at the end of his life, the doubts came.

There is a famous record of the deathbed conversation between Bishop Butler and his chaplain. (As Dr. Rayburn says: Only in Church of England would a bishop have own chaplain!)

Butler was dying and he said to his chaplain:

“Though I have endeavored to avoid sin and to please God to the utmost of my power, yet because of the consciousness of my continuing sinfulness, I am still afraid to die.”

His chaplain said:

“My Lord, you have forgotten that Jesus Christ is a Savior.”

“True,” Butler replied,

“but how shall I know he is a Savior for me?”

His chaplain said:

“My Lord, it is written, ‘Him that cometh to me, I will in nowise cast out.’”

To which the Bishop replied,

“True, and I am surprised that though I have read that Scripture a thousand times over, I never felt its virtue till this moment. And now I die happy.”

There is the difficulty of faith. Even an experienced churchman has a hard time really believing the truth of something Jesus said. And there is the power of faith. It makes a person ready to die.

One more similar story.

A Scottish minister named James Dunham was dying, this was in the 1600s.

One of his preacher friends was there with him.

Dunham said:

“Brother, for all I have preached and written, there is but one promise to which I can now dare to grip; tell me if I am safe to lay the whole weight of my salvation upon that promise. The only Scripture promise I can remember, or get a good hold of is this: ‘Him that cometh to me, I will in nowise cast out.’”

His friend replied: “You may depend upon that promise.”

There it is again, the difficulty and the power of faith.

And the very heart of faith: One promise to which I can now dare to grip.” Grip is the idea. Grabbing on. Holding on for dear life. Refusing to let go.

If a person believes in Christ that way. If you believe in him that way, even if that faith is as small as a mustard seed, you will be lifted up from the world all the way to the heavenly country.

Why? Because faith unites us to Christ. It's the eye that looks to him.

It's the feet that run to him. It's the hand that grasps him.

It's the mouth that eats him, the living bread.

And through that union his grace is transferred to our hearts and lives.

So what about you? Do you really believe in him?