

Seeing is not Believing

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Date: 12 July 2026

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[0:00] Praise. Well, we turn now to God's Word, and we continue to read from the Gospel of John in our series to read from John in our series.

more he visited Cana in Galilee where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay ill at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son who was close to death.

Unless you people see signs and wonders, Jesus told him, you will never believe. The royal official said, Sir, come down before my child dies. Go, Jesus replied, your son will live.

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired us to the time when his son got better, they said to him, yesterday at one in the afternoon, the fever left him. Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, your son will live. So he and his whole household believed. This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

Amen. Let's pray together and ask for God's help as we study these verses. Thank you, God, for your word to us that points us to your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that now by your spirit, you would help us to see him for who he is and to respond in the right way by believing in him. We pray in Jesus name. Amen. Well, this passage from John chapter four is basically about believing, isn't it? Believing. John Lennox, the Christian professor of mathematics at the University of Oxford was once in a debate with the atheist philosopher Peter Singer.

[3:09] And it was a big public debate in Melbourne, Australia. And it was all about the existence of God. John Lennox had introduced himself by telling the audience that he grew up in Northern Ireland and that his parents were Christians. And then Peter Singer, he jumped on this and said, this is one of my objections to religion. And he explained that people basically carry on with the religious faith of their parents. He said, it's just a matter of upbringing, not about what is really true. And so Lennox responded, Peter, can I ask you, were your parents atheists? Yes, he replied. My mother was. And so Lennox said to him, well, you're carrying on your parents' faith too, just like me.

And Singer was taking a back and he said, it's not faith. And so Lennox answered, but I thought you believed it. And then the crowd started laughing and clapping. And then the whole clip went viral on the internet because John Lennox had simply pointed out that atheism is a belief system too.

And so not believing in God involves faith just as much as believing in God involves faith. Where Peter Singer believes something other than Christianity to make sense of and to explain the world. And so he's a person of faith because we are all people of faith. Whether we'd see ourselves as religious or not, we are people of faith. And that's why it's important to understand what belief isn't as well as what belief is. What does it mean to believe? Well, this passage that we read at the end of John chapter four helps us to understand because it is all about belief. I wonder if you spotted how many times the word for belief comes up in these few verses. It's mentioned three times because believing is at the heart of Jesus' encounter with this official. This man believed Jesus could heal his dying son. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him about his son living. And at the end of the story, the man and his whole household believed. Now this is Jesus' second sign in John's gospel. And it's showing us the nature of genuine belief, of true faith. And so the application forces us to consider our own personal belief. Because everybody believes. Everybody has faith.

And so the issue is, what are you putting your faith in? And why? What do you believe? It's important that we all know. So we're going to see three things that this passage teaches us about belief. Showing us what belief isn't as well as what belief is. So firstly, we see belief is more than seeing. Secondly, belief takes Jesus at his word. And thirdly, belief develops through difficulty. So first of all, belief is more than seeing. Verse 43 to 48. So the first explicit mention of believing is

there in 48, where we read, unless you people see signs and wonders, Jesus told him, you will never believe.

[6:36] It comes from Jesus. He says these words, after the official, the royal official asks Jesus to heal his dying son. So Jesus rebukes the need for people to see signs and to see wonders before they will believe. Now this gives the context for this whole section. Because people basically want Jesus to perform signs and wonders. They want to see them, but they're not interested in believing in Jesus.

And so there's an indication of this at the start of our reading, verse 43 and verse 44, where we see after the two days he left for Galilee. Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country. So Jesus is coming from Samaritan territory. If you were here last week, we saw he was with the Samaritans and he's moving back into Jewish territory. And John's reminding us of something Jesus said, that a prophet has no honor in his own country. So what's Jesus's own country?

Well, it's the one that he's just arrived in. So it's Galilee, clearly. Throughout John's gospel, we're told that's where Jesus comes from, from Galilee. But Jesus's own country would also include Judea, because Judea is also Jewish territory. And so earlier, Jesus had met with unbelief in Jerusalem at the end of chapter 2. And now the Jews in Galilee follow suit, which is in contrast to the response of the Samaritans, which we saw last week, who believed in Jesus. But hang on, doesn't it say, verse 45, when he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him? Well, that sounds positive, right?

Well, on the surface, they may have welcomed Jesus with open arms, but we read on, verse 45, that they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, for they also had been there.

Passover festival in Jerusalem. Hmm. Just skip back in your Bible to John chapter 2, verse 23 and 24. See what happened. Now, while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. And so the people in Galilee are the same people Jesus would not entrust himself to, because they didn't really believe. And so we're seeing in John's gospel that there is such a thing as false belief. And it's based on seeing signs. And yet we read, that it's an inadequate faith. And Jesus sees right through it. He knows it's shallow. He knows it's superficial. He knows it's short-lived. Because it just doesn't get past this initial excitement of seeing Jesus' miracles. So that people will come to not just believe in him because of the miracles. But believe in him. So belief is more than seeing. And so John's writing with irony here.

[10:07] Because the Galileans who welcome Jesus, they have an allegiance that is only skin deep. They're more interested in the signs and in the wonders than they are in Jesus as the Messiah and as Savior.

And so that's the context for this encounter that Jesus has with the royal official. So let's read there verse 46. See what it says. Once more, he visited Cana in Galilee, that's Jesus, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay ill at Capernaum. Okay, so this royal official had come from Capernaum, which was about 20 miles away, if you look on your Bible map. And he was probably an official in the service of Herod Antipas. And he's desperate because his son is dying. And he's obviously heard about Jesus' earlier miracles, probably the turning water into wine. And so he wants Jesus to do a miracle for his boy. So verse 47 says, when this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. So the man had some kind of faith in the power of Jesus. He believed Jesus could heal his dying son. But Jesus knows the nature of his belief. And that's why Jesus responds as he does there in verse 48. Unless you people see signs and wonders, Jesus told him, you will never believe. Might sound a bit harsh. Jesus saying this to a man, especially because his son was dying and near death. And yet it indicates just how seriously Jesus takes belief in him.

And in some sense, this man exemplifies the problem with the Galileans as a whole. Because Jesus' words aren't just meant for him, but they're meant for all the people. And so Jesus' rebuke here is in the plural. He says, unless you people. But it's not just a general rebuke for everyone. It's a clear challenge to this man regarding his belief in Jesus. So that he doesn't just believe in Jesus' power to heal, but so that he comes to believe in Jesus himself. He's learning from Jesus, as are we, what genuine belief really is. It's not about needing to see signs and wonders. It's all about

believing in the one who performs them. And that's what this man has got to grasp. In fact, Jesus isn't going to let him see in order to lead him to true belief. Because a belief that's purely based on seeing signs and wonders shouldn't be mistaken for genuine belief. So Jesus is warning against this desire to see signs, expecting that the signs alone are going to be the knockdown argument for believing.

Because what this does is basically turn Jesus into some kind of magic show where we expect Jesus to impress us, giving us what we want to see. We expect Jesus to serve us, to prove himself to us before we commit to do things our way and to do things in our time. But it completely misunderstands how we should relate to Jesus. And that's what's brought out with this official. Because Jesus doesn't just care about performing a miracle on his son. Jesus does steal him, as we spotted when we read it. Jesus cares about the man himself. Jesus cares about his personal commitment to him. And so he's not going to grant his wish like some genie in a lamp. Jesus wants him to truly believe. Jesus doesn't just want to give the man his son back. Jesus wants to give himself to the man. He doesn't want him to be stuck part the way down the road to believing, but he wants to take him all the way. And so that's the first thing. Belief is more than seeing. Secondly, belief takes Jesus at his word. Verse 49 to 52. So the official believes Jesus can heal his son, but that's not enough for Jesus. So the man doesn't give up after Jesus's challenge. Look at verse 49. [15:07] The royal official said, Sir, come down before my child dies. He's urging Jesus to go with him. He's aware of the critical nature of his son's condition. And it's like he's saying, Jesus, now's not really the time to have a big, heavy discussion on belief. Maybe we can do that later. Now's the time for action because my son is dying and I'd love for you to come and heal him. He's less interested in who Jesus is.

I don't even think he's interested in the signs and wonders per se. All he's interested in is Jesus healing his son. But because he doesn't know who Jesus is, he is not aware of the extent of what Jesus can do. He thinks Jesus has got to be on site to heal his son.

So he knows Jesus has got power to perform miracles, but he doesn't know the extent of that power, how great it is. Because Jesus isn't like a doctor who must see the patient. I don't know if doctors actually do see patients these days. They see maybe photos of bits of your body. But anyway, Jesus is not like a doctor who needs to see the patient and then give a diagnosis and then prescribe the remedy. Jesus doesn't need to see him or even be near him in order to heal him. And so the official is discovering this about Jesus because this will help him come to a genuine belief in Jesus. And that's why Jesus gives him the word. Verse 50, go, Jesus replied, your son will live. Jesus is promising his son will be healed. Jesus just needs to say the word. And that's it. Instantaneous full recovery, as we'll see. Not, yeah, he'll get better soon, but he is alive and he is well right now. Now, of course, the official knew none of this at the time. So just remember his situation. Jesus is in Galilee. The dying boy is in Capernaum. The man travels about 20 miles to get to Jesus. It's a long way and it's a long walk, but he did it because Jesus was the last chance his boy had for being healed. Jesus was his only hope. His son would live. And yet Jesus refuses to go with him, telling him, go, your son will live. So all this man had to go on was a word from Jesus. Must have been pretty hard for the man to take at this point. I mean, what if Jesus was wrong? By the time the man got home, his son could have been dead. And he'd have spent that precious time at the end of his son's life, not by his son's side, but on some wild goose chase. And yet the official believes what Jesus says. Look at the second half of verse 50. The man took Jesus at his word and departed. It can also be translated, the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. So Jesus' word alone had to be enough for the man. Not the presence of Jesus, not the signs and wonders of Jesus, as amazing as all of that is, but the word of Jesus. And the man took Jesus at his word and he went on his way, indicating that he had moved on in his faith. He began with enough faith to believe that Jesus could heal his boy. And now he's got the faith to believe the word that Jesus spoke, even though there is no visible sign. And so he's demonstrating that unlike most Galileans, he's not just about the signs and wonders. He believes what Jesus says, realizing that believing is more than seeing. And this plays out in what happens in verse 51 and 52. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living, when he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, yesterday at one in the afternoon, the fever left him.

[19:49] So the man did go a long way. He had to stop somewhere for the night, because it's not until the following day that the servants meet him to share the good news that his son was no longer

dying, he was alive. And so the man checks to confirm the timing of when his boy got better. And it's exactly at the time when Jesus gave the word. And so it's a step forward for the official to believe the word that Jesus spoke to him, which really is the application for us. We must take Jesus at his word, because it's obvious that from this story, Jesus knows what's best for us. And Jesus will do what's best for us, even when it is going to be challenging for us. And even if it makes no sense to us at the time, Jesus' way of working is always perfect. And Jesus' way will always be far better for us in the long run. And that's exactly what happens with the official. His son is not only healed, but he's forced to hang on to Jesus' word alone, which enables him to come to true belief.

And that takes us to our final point. So belief is more than seeing. Belief takes Jesus at his word. And thirdly, belief develops through difficulty. Verse 53 and 54. The official came to believe. What's the difficulty? Well, it was the difficulty that his son was dying. And so his faith developed, it grew, it matured, it strengthened through this tough life experience that the official had. And so the episode concludes by stating his belief in verse 53. Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, your son will live. So he and his whole household believed. When he confirms that his son got better at the exact time Jesus said, your son will live, he believed. The stunning realization developed and deepened his faith in Jesus. Jesus paved the way for this, didn't he? Through the story. From the man asking for help through to Jesus performing the healing. The man believed Jesus could heal his son. He believed the word that Jesus spoke.

He believed in Jesus himself. He believed in Jesus himself. It all developed through difficulty. The difficulty of seeing his son dying, but also the difficulty of Jesus's rebuke, followed by Jesus's refusal to do it the man's way. But by Jesus doing it his better way, it was not only for the benefit of the man's belief, it was also for the sake of his household, because we read that they believed too. Which means for us, you've got to be ready to experience difficulty if you're really going to believe in Jesus. So becoming a Christian, it's not always easy or simple or straightforward. It can sometimes be challenging, it can involve trouble, and it can involve suffering. But all of this helps you really, truly, genuinely believe. So verse 54, this was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee. While Jesus performed other miracles, like in Jerusalem at the Passover festival in chapter 2, John says that this is the second sign that took place in Cana of Galilee. Now remember the first sign, the water into wine, Jesus revealed his glory, and what happened? The disciples believed in him. And through the second sign, Jesus reveals his power over life itself. And what happens? The official and his household believe in him. And that's what the second sign is surely about, isn't it? Because Jesus promises in verse 50, your son will live. And then in verse 53, this is repeated, telling us Jesus has ultimate power over all of life. Jesus has power over death. [24:39] So just as the disciples believe the first sign, so the official comes to believe this second sign. What are they believing? Believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, which is John's purpose in writing his gospel, isn't it? What he says in chapter 20, verse 30 to 31. So all of the signs that John lays out for us point towards Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of God. So whatever you are when it comes to Jesus, and whatever your response to Jesus is right now, and I'm not assuming that everybody in here is a Christian believer is a Christian believer who does have faith in Jesus, then can you see what the implications of this is for you? Because this sign shows us what it means to believe in Jesus. But the sign also shows us what it doesn't mean to believe in Jesus. And so it may be that you don't believe in Jesus, but you reckon that, well, if you just had some signs and some wonders, then that would help. If something extraordinary happened before your very eyes to convince you, surely you say to yourself,

I would believe. I wouldn't need anything else out of all the evidence I'm after. But don't be so sure. Of course, signs may help, but seeing alone isn't believing, as Jesus makes clear. So don't wait for something amazing to take place, to happen before your very eyes. Instead, let the signs that we read about here in John's gospel be the evidence. See them, and then take Jesus at his word. Believe what Jesus says in the gospels and in the rest of the spirit-inspired word of God. And like this man, do what Jesus says.

Obeys him, knowing that when you listen to Jesus and do what he says, Jesus is speaking the truth. And when you hear what Jesus says, trust that Jesus knows what is best for you. And like the official, discover that Jesus is worthy of all your faith in him. He's the Messiah. He's the son of God who came into this world to die for our sins so that we would not perish, but have eternal life. So believe in Jesus.

And if you do believe in Jesus, then the question for you and for me is, is my faith in Jesus growing? Because don't miss how difficulty in your life, difficulty, trouble, suffering, hardship, don't miss how having that can actually develop and deepen your faith in Jesus.

Now I'm sure it would have been easier for the official if Jesus just went home with him and healed his boy before his very eyes. And yet Jesus doing things his way may have been harder for the official, and yet it enabled him to better grasp who Jesus is. And it brought him to a genuine belief in him.

[28:25] And so keep trusting Jesus through every difficulty you encounter in life. It will help you. It will help you believe.