

How Shall We Believe?

1 Kings 17:8-24, John 4:43-54 (ESV)

January 21, 2007

“The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.” There is the miracle in today’s reading. “The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him.” You may have thought that the healing of the boy was the miracle. It certainly was not inconsiderable. John identifies it the second sign which Jesus did. And we shall come back to that. Yet I submit to you that it is even more remarkable that the man believed in Jesus and believed what Jesus said. Healing the body is a wonderful thing. Here we are witness to the healing of the soul. Let us rejoice and be glad in this. Let us seek the grace of God so to believe ourselves.

There is a progression of belief in today’s reading. The official from Capernaum began with a general belief in the power of Jesus to heal. This belief first grew, presumably, from the testimonies of others and from the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit. This general belief was real but limited. The man was willing to travel eighteen miles for the sake of his son, but he also thought that Jesus would need to travel the eighteen miles back with him to do any good. This limitation on his belief may have been the occasion for the rebuke which Jesus gave him: “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” This suggests that Jesus was not interested in signs and wonders, as such. The man’s reply suggests that he was not interested in signs and wonders, either. “Sir, come down before my child dies.” He was not looking for a show. He was looking for his son’s life. And he believed that Jesus could help him, even if he thought he had to be present to act.

Jesus was not disdainful of such general belief. If anything, he was appreciative of it. So Jesus said to the official, “Go; your son will live.” It is as if Jesus said, “Go on your way. I do not need to go with you. By the power of my sheer say so, your son will live. That is a promise.” Note that the words of Jesus Christ were not a prayer, as were the words of Elijah when he cried out to the Lord for the life of the son of the widow of Zarephath. The words of Jesus Christ were not a simple prediction of the future of which he was an observer but not an active participant. Instead, the words of Jesus Christ were a promise, and the word of Jesus was the very power of God going forth from him to accomplish that which he purposed and to succeed in the thing for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11). And that is when the miracle happened. “The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.” The general belief with which he approached Jesus, that Jesus could heal even his son, was replaced with the specific belief with which he

left Jesus, that Jesus *would* heal his son. Thanks be to God! That is a whole other level of faith.

There is great joy in specificity. It is good to know that God created the world. It is even better to know that God created you and me. It is good to know that God loves the world. It is even better to know that God loves you and me. It is good to know that Jesus came to save the world. It is even better to know that Jesus came to save you and me. It is good to know that God forgives sin. It is even better to know that he forgives your sin and my sin. It is good to know that God gives life. It is even better to know that God gives life to you and me. There is great joy in specificity. So it is not insignificant that at the very moment Jesus promised, “Your son will live,” the man leapt beyond general belief and “believed [specifically] the word that Jesus spoke to him.”

This specific belief had specific implications. It was not an empty belief. It was a belief that called for action and obedience. So the man “went on his way.” The man left Jesus standing in Cana and went home to Capernaum. In some sense, that mirrored his action in coming to Cana. But in another sense, it was very different. The official came to Cana to see Jesus with a general belief and hope that Jesus could come and help his son. But he left Cana without Jesus and yet with the specific belief and hope that Jesus *would* help his son. How could the man do that? How could the man turn away from Jesus and travel home alone? The only way he could do that was by his very specific belief in “the word that Jesus spoke to him.” Jesus made a promise to him, and the man believed him. Jesus, whom he probably had never seen before, made a promise to him, and “the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.”

Do you see the significance of this specific belief for us? The man believed and so realized that Jesus did not have to be physically present to give the gift of life. How did Jesus work? Jesus worked through the power of his word. Do you see what this means for us? Jesus is not physically present with us, either. But we have his words, and we have his word. We have his gospel. We have his good news. We have his promise. We have his forgiveness. We have his eternal life. Are we ready to believe his word? Are we ready to receive his gospel? Are we ready to live his good news? Are we ready to share his promise? Are we ready to rejoice in his forgiveness? Are we ready to proclaim his eternal life? Are we ready to believe his word? How shall we believe?

Even this specific belief, miraculous as it was, was not the end of the story for the official from Capernaum. “As he was going down” the mountain, “his servants” were already coming up the mountain to meet him and to tell him the good news “that his son was recovering.” Thanks be to God! And when he inquired about the details, he determined that the improvement had begun at the very hour when Jesus

had made the promise to him. It may be for our sake that John emphatically repeats here the previous promise, “Your son will live.” And yet it also provides the occasion to say of the man again, “And he himself believed, and all his household.” It is significant that John uses this word for a third time now. And I am convinced that this third occurrence of the word marks the additional progress of the man’s belief from his initial and general belief, through his intermediary and specific belief, to a more mature and what, for lack of a better term, I shall call a growing belief.

The belief of the official from Capernaum was a growing belief in at least two ways. You will note that at this third level of belief it no longer says simply that he “believed the word that Jesus spoke to him.” Instead, it says more absolutely, “he himself believed.” Though it does not explicitly say this, I take it to mean that he believed not only the word of Jesus but also and even more so believed in Jesus Christ himself and therefore in the God and Father of Jesus Christ. That certainly makes sense in the context of the rest of the gospel, from John 1:12 about believing in his name, to John 3:16 about believing in the only Son of God, to John 6:35 about believing in Jesus the bread of life, to John 20:35 about believing that Jesus is the Christ. This whole book is about believing in Jesus, and that is where the official has arrived by the end of this reading. He has a mature belief and therefore a growing belief, for the riches of Jesus Christ are inexhaustible, and true belief in him is ever growing.

There is another way in which the official’s belief was growing. “He himself believed, and all his household.” The man’s belief was uncontainable. It was infectious. It was grateful. It was joyful. It was convincing. His belief was such that all his household believed: his wife, their children, the servants, everyone. We would have to think that the belief of this official probably continued to spread even beyond his household. Perhaps it will spread even to us.

There are at least two other things to note about today’s reading. One is the strange interplay between signs and wonders on the one hand and the word on the other hand. Jesus performs many signs throughout this book, including the sign in today’s reading, and while their purpose seems to be to lead people to belief, he seems keenly aware that they always run the risk of leading to a fascination with the sign itself instead of to belief in the doer of the sign. Perhaps that marks the difference between welcoming a prophet and actually honoring a prophet, which would involve heeding his words. Perhaps that is why Jesus rebukes the official for a belief that is dependent upon only signs and wonders. Perhaps that is why John recorded for us this early incidence of belief based on the word, belief based on the promise, belief based on what Jesus said before the believer saw any evidence that it was true. And again, just as we no longer have Jesus physically present with us, we no longer have his signs and wonders available for us to see, so it is good for us

that saving belief is not based on seeing them. But we do have his word. We have the word of his gospel not only about his signs and wonders but also of all his teachings, of his life, death, and resurrection, of his love and forgiveness, of his leading people to believe, and especially his word about God his Father. Thank God we do have his word!

The second thing to note has to do with the purpose and the power of his word. I indicated earlier that we would return to the miraculous healing of the official's son. The point here is that the will of God is for life. More particularly, the point is that the word of Jesus Christ carries the power of life. Just as God created the world by his word, so does Jesus Christ give life by his word. When he said, "Your son will live," his word made it so. It is also the case, of course, that when he said, "Your son will live," he brought belief to life in the official. And the word of Jesus Christ can still do that for you and for me today.

Finally, then, the word of Jesus Christ is God's gospel to us and for us, and the official's belief is remembered as a model for us. How shall we believe? Shall we fail to believe at all? Could it not be the case that we in the church of Jesus Christ are at the greatest risk of a kind of hometown familiarity with Jesus that fails to honor him properly? Lord, help us! Shall we begin with a general belief? Maybe your curiosity wants to be satisfied, maybe your pain wants to be comforted, maybe your loneliness wants to be consoled, maybe your heart wants an anchor for this stormy world, or maybe your soul wants a reason for being. So, shall we believe generally in God? That is good, of course, but it is not enough.

How shall we believe? Shall we rise beyond a general belief to a specific belief in the word of Jesus Christ? God, grant us the grace to believe the word of Jesus Christ! And yet, there is even more. Shall we be given a mature and growing belief, a belief in the person of Jesus Christ himself and therefore in God his Father, a brave and uncontainable belief that we are ready and eager to share with all the world? Come, Lord, and give us life!

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org