



As I was preparing this week I spent one night writing in my home office, which was not a good idea because I have a 20-month-old little firecracker named Jeremiah who just loves to pound on the door and shout “Daddy!” over and over until I come out and play with him. Somehow he knows I’m there despite my best attempts. He’s been growing at such a remarkable rate lately that I find myself treating him like an older kid, for instance trying to reason with him at dinner when he’s throwing food on the floor, but in fact he’s still an infant! He’s erratic in his emotions and behavior. He loves to smile and randomly giggles, but just as quick he’ll get upset and cry because he’s hungry or sleepy. I’ve realized that the guiding principle of his life is this: it’s all about me! He’s completely self-centered, focusing only on his wants and expectations. Now that’s a normal part of infancy and that’s ok. What’s troubling is when a baby like Jeremiah isn’t growing and developing like it should, in which case we need to do something, like call the doctor.

I’ve found that it’s like that in our faith. Something’s wrong if we’re not growing. Physical growth happens naturally but spiritual growth, growing in faith, well, that requires we look beyond ourselves, beyond our self-centered expectations, and start to look more deeply at the beauty and grace of what has already been done for us by our Savior. We want to grow spiritually like that but don’t always know how. There’s a story in the book of John we’re going to look at this morning that will help us answer this question: How do we grow in our faith?

Open your bibles to John chapter 4. It’s been a few weeks since we’ve studied John so let’s refresh the storyline. It was the time of the Passover Festival, when Jews celebrated God rescuing the nation of Israel from hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt. Jesus travels to Jerusalem and cleans out the temple of people trying to do business there. He stays a bit then leaves Jerusalem to travel back to Galilee, about 70 miles to the north. On the way He travels through Samaria and encounters the woman at Jacob’s well and now we find Him resuming His journey back to Galilee. Let’s pick up this story in verse 43:

Our Expectations can Overshadow Jesus

After the two days he left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country). When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the

Passover Festival, for they also had been there (John 4:43–45).

This seems like a simple prelude to the story that follows, but if you look at these verses one of them seems a bit odd, like it just doesn’t quite fit in with the rest. In verse 44 the author points out that *“a prophet has no honor in his own country.”* Interesting. Now, what’s a prophet? A prophet is someone appointed by God to speak the truth in a way that is meant to reveal God, to reveal His very will. A prophet usually points out our situation in relation to God as well; which most of the time is we are desperately in need of Him. Now, if a prophet has no honor in his own country it means that the people of his hometown hear his words but treat them as trivial and inconsequential. Remember He’s from Galilee, yet in the next verse it says when He arrived in Galilee they welcomed Him, even though a prophet has no honor in his own country. How can that be? The answer is this: our expectations of Jesus can overshadow Jesus Himself. These Galileans expected something amazing from Jesus; they remembered what He did at the Passover Festival in Jerusalem. Back in chapter 2 we read:

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 (verses 23–24).

They believed in Jesus because of the signs they saw but their belief was no deeper. Who were they expecting? A larger than life personality to astound them perhaps, maybe someone they’d get behind because He could give them what they wanted? They certainly didn’t expect a savior who would take away their sins. Jesus knew this as well and would not entrust or commit himself to that group because of their disbelief in Him as the Messiah. So you see the irony in these Galileans welcoming Jesus, their expectations overshadowed Jesus Himself.

If you ever visit our home you’ll immediately notice that it’s being remodeled, mostly by yours truly. That’s a good and bad thing. Good because I get to pull out my very impressive collection of contractor-grade power tools that any contractor has and use them. Bad thing is, I’m a pastor, not a contractor. I’ve spent time in our kitchen and bathrooms making those areas look more visually appealing—new paint, new trim, new fixtures. But there’s one part I try to avoid working in and that’s the crawl-space under our house. It’s a few feet of space between the earth

and the floor joists I would describe as a dark, cold cave. But I have to work there once in a while to run critical plumbing and electrical lines, otherwise we can't use the part of our home I'm working on.

Now, if my remodel project is a picture of how we grow spiritually, then like the Galileans when we welcome Jesus we can have our own expectations for Him. We want Him to get to work and stay working at making our lives more appealing and enjoyable, don't we? If we honestly look at the content of our prayers we're usually asking Him for a nice life; give me my dream job, take away my stress, keep me healthy and free from harm. These aren't bad requests, but Jesus doesn't just want to do cosmetic improvements to us; He wants to transform us from the inside out; He wants us to grow which requires a deeper work. We don't want to show Him our crawlspace; the broken, hurting, even sinful places beneath our surface. But He wants to shine a light there and say: "See that? That's part of who you are too; you won't really grow until you begin to deal with that. You'll need my grace though; and I'll give you all you need because I love you." Welcoming Jesus like that is humbling, but it's essential if we're going to grow. What are the hidden areas of your life that you need to welcome Jesus into? We grow in our faith when our expectations of Jesus do not overshadow Jesus Himself.

Faith is Refined Through Suffering

Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick 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" (verses 46–49).

Jesus arrives in Cana where He turned water into wine at a wedding and someone comes to Him who we need to pay attention to. He's a "royal official," meaning he was probably a Jewish officer under King Herod who ruled Galilee at the time. This guy was accomplished, wealthy, and exercised power and influence over others. He had no needs that he couldn't take care of himself, except one. He left his work and his family behind in Capernaum, about 20 miles away, because something was breaking his heart and giving him tremendous grief—his son was dying. Even though he had access to the finest medical technology he was about to lose his child.

Success and accomplishment in life does not prevent us or our family from suffering. No matter who we are, each of us will experience great tragedies in life. It's the reality of living in a world full of sin. Job 5:7 is a memorable verse, it says, "**man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.**" No one is exempt from hurt and pain, and that's certainly true the longer you live, isn't

it? If something bad happens when you're young, it's tragic. But if you live to your 50s + you can't help but experience sorrow.

I think we Americans struggle with suffering more than any other culture. We're allergic to pain. For other societies it's part of life but we think, "How can I be suffering? I don't deserve this, it must be someone else's fault!" We need to keep in mind Jesus led a perfect life and still suffered, why should we expect any different? Saint Augustine said, "God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering."

I've noticed that when tragedy hits in many cases it seems like half of our suffering is the shock that we're even suffering at all! Once we accept the fact that pain is a reality, we have to accept the fact that we need a Savior, not only to save us from ultimate suffering but to give us the grace we need to grow through our fiery trials.

How does our faith grow? It grows when it's refined through suffering. Faith isn't tested and strengthened when things go well, but through gut-wrenching struggles. Maybe you've been let go from work, or the doctor gave you a serious diagnosis. For some of you, your child is hurting; others are worried about their marriage. These are experiences that help drive us to our Savior for grace.

I think the official knew this. With the others, their "faith" in Jesus was weak; it was based on the shallow expectation that He'd perform signs and miracles. But there's something different about the official. He gives a glimpse into what genuine faith is and how it grows. He heard about the miracle of turning water to wine so he comes because Jesus is his only hope. He's so desperate that he left home knowing he could possibly miss the final moments of his son's life. In verse 47 he's begging Jesus; he's a father who'd give anything to save his son. He's doesn't have to admit his weakness and vulnerability, it's obvious. Suffering will do that. Suffering causes us to bring our deepest needs to Jesus. And Jesus uniquely understands us. Isaiah 53:3 says that Jesus is "**a man of suffering and familiar with pain.**" Whatever you're going through He understands because He's been there.

After the official pleads with Him Jesus says something very un-Jesus-like in verse 48: "**Unless you people see signs and wonders you will never believe.**" He's pretty firm in His indictment. Why? He knows what's at stake. He knows we're often not interested in simply trusting in Him and loving Him; what we really want is for Jesus to do things for **us!** It's all about us! We can bargain with Him and say things like, "Lord, I'll trust you if you bring the right person into my life. Lord, I'll obey you if you get me out of this situation; if you change that person's mind. Lord, I'll trust you if... if... if..." Those are not bad requests, and the Lord does graciously answer them. But if our faith rests primarily on our wants and expectations getting fulfilled, then our faith will be fragile and slow to grow because it doesn't rest on Jesus Himself;

it rests on our agendas. There'll be times when God in His sovereignty will say no to something very dear to us and if our hope is built on anything other than Christ we'll despair.

I love the response of the official. He doesn't argue or get angry and leave. I can see him pause and from the deepest part of his heart say, "Sir, come down before my son dies." He's at his lowest point and he pours his heart out. Suffering is the pathway to honest prayer. It's not the only way, but a deep longing for grace gets expressed when we're honest about our pain. Our faith grows when it's refined through suffering.

Trust Jesus for Who He Is

"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 as 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 (verses 50–54).

These first verses are pivotal. Remember the official wanted Jesus to go touch the boy or lay hands on him. Instead Jesus simply says, "*Go, your son will live.*" Remarkably, the official leaves, trusting Jesus without a sign. It was enough that he had faith simply in Jesus' word. Later on in chapter 20 Jesus will say, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" Genuine faith means we allow the Lord to work in whatever way He sees fit, even if He doesn't line up with our expectations. It means believing in Jesus and therefore joyfully obeying what He commands us to do even when we don't have a sign to go on, and even when we can't see what the end results are.

As the official journeys home we see that sometimes we have to wait to see the answer to prayer, maybe even until after this life for God to fully heal our pain. I wonder what was going through his mind on the journey home? It seems like he took his time; it took him more than a day to get home when the trip was only four hours by horse, which he probably had. I think he was totally relieved and assured of his son's health. Hebrews 11:1 says, "*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*" He was assured of what he did not see and confident in what he hoped for.

I can't imagine the joy when he got home, lifting the boy in the air and embracing him. But the healing was not the greatest miracle of this narrative. That's in the second to the last verse: "*So he and his whole household believed.*" Sure, physical healing is wonderful, but it's temporary. None of us will live forever. More importantly, his whole household—family and servants—are now spiritually healed through faith and will live in eternity. God can

rescue you from death, but He will always rescue you through death. By faith, when you die you'll wake up in the arms of Jesus and you'll have ultimate liberation and joy. How comforting.

The author concludes by saying this is the second sign Jesus performed in Galilee. It's not until chapter 20, verse 30, that we find out why he recorded all these events and miracles in the book of John. He says, "*these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*"

Remember our original question: how does our faith grow? Today's story tells us that our faith grows when we trust Jesus for who He is, not for what He can do for us.

We don't rest our faith on our expectations or on signs themselves, like the Galileans, but on the Savior whom the signs are pointing to. Today we have an even greater sign—the cross! On the cross the bible says that He "*took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,*" (Isa. 53:4) meaning He took our spiritual sickness, our sin and suffering and He died for it. Jesus fulfilled God's requirement for sin. God has an unyielding insistence that sin and evil be punished. So Jesus "took our infirmities" and gave us His innocence and righteousness in return. And He trampled death when He rose three days later. That's the good news!

And if there's anyone we'd compare ourselves to in this narrative it's the official, coming to Jesus in faith, bearing our needs. But we're a lot like his son, aren't we; helpless without grace. God the Father watched His own Son die so we that we could live and become sons and daughters of His by faith.

The implications for our spiritual growth are profound. First, we need to examine the very motivation of our hearts. Do we serve God just because He's worth it? Do we trust Him and love Him just for Himself? Nowhere in the bible does it say faith in Him guarantees us an easy, pain-free life. If we make that our idol we'll use Jesus as a means to get it. Like the official, trust God simply for who He is and let your faith be demonstrated in your actions.

Next, we want to avoid pain, but we don't realize that it can be a gift if it's the means through which our faith is refined and strengthened. Without His son getting sick, the official may never have approached Jesus. Addressing our hurt requires us to slow down and reflect. We have to admit that something's wrong: acknowledge that you've been hurt, that you're grieving over the loss of someone, or that your biggest dream was just shattered. No matter what, God wants you to bring those hurts to Him. I've found in life that it's not so much that we need our struggles taken away as much as we need God's grace to get through them. Will you take some time this week to slow down and acknowledge the areas you're hurting in and ask God for the grace you'll need? Someone asked C.S. Lewis once, "Why do the

righteous suffer?" "Why not?" he replied. "They're the only ones who can take it."

I also think this narrative speaks to fathers and to their influence on the family. If you're a father, you have a significant spiritual influence on your wife and children. How did the official's household believe unless he told them about real faith? Take time to pray for and pray with your wife and children. Do what will help you grow yourself, taking time to study to go deeper into the gospel message so you can share your new insights about the Lord with your family and strengthen their faith.

You've heard the expression, "seeing is believing," but with faith it's really the other way around. That's why this sermon is titled *Believing is Seeing*. May we be people who believe that in Jesus we have all the grace we need to grow in our faith.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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