

I. Introduction

- A. A few weeks back I pointed out that from John 1:19-11:46, John uses real-life stories to show that Jesus is God in human flesh.
 - 1. The first chapter has four stories, of which the first two center around John the Baptist giving evidence that Jesus is both human and divine.
 - 2. The third story includes John the Baptist, but the focus of the third and fourth story is on those who – from the basis of a sincere heart and godly life – were looking for the Messiah. However, the more important part of these last two stories is that upon finding Jesus, either those seeking Him declare Him to be the Christ, or Jesus does something that manifests His deity.
 - 3. Today we will finish the fourth story, and in the process we will consider three things. We will look at using spiritual eyes and ears to discern the presence and power of God in the circumstances of life. We will talk about the fact that experiencing the presence and power of God in daily life does not guarantee faith in God or obedience to His will. And we will look at building our faith on God's character, because that is the firmest foundation possible for faith in God.
- B. Pray

II. Why Do You Believe?

- A. John 1:47-51 . . . Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" [48] Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." [49] Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." [50] Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." [51] And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."
- B. I want to begin by focusing on two short phrases in vs 51 that are of interest in relation to studying the Bible, but are not that useful for making us more like Christ.
 - 1. The first phrase is the two word combination which is translated in the NASB as "Truly, truly," and as "Verily, verily" in the KJV, and

as “I tell you the truth” in the NIV. This two word combination is found only in the gospel of John, and it appears 25 times. It’s purpose is to emphasize that what follows is either already true or will come true – and either way, it is of vital importance to the reader.

2. The second phrase is the title “Son of Man,” which appears 13 times in John, 30 times in Matthew, 15 times in Mark, and 26 times in Luke. In most every case, it is used by Jesus when referring to Himself. And in most every case, this title points to Jesus’ humanity and His humility.
 - a. In fact, where “Son of Man” is used, Jesus could have referred to himself as the “Messiah” or the “Son of God” or “Immanuel.” But He didn’t. He refers to himself with a much more humble title – one which shows Him to be human, rather than divine.
 - b. For example, when a scribe said he would follow Jesus wherever He might go, Jesus responded by humbly acknowledging His situation, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:19-20).
 - c. Possibly the best scripture description of the combined qualities of Christ’s humanity and humility, in that it shows Him to be the servant of God in service to mankind, comes from Paul in Philippians 2:5-8.

- C. Moving on to the end of vs 51, Jesus says, “You will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” There are four things I want to point out about this statement, and three of them are the primary focus of today’s teaching.
 1. First, it is probable that Jesus was using a word picture from Jacob’s dream to make the point that Nathanael would see even greater things. This story is told in Genesis 28:11-12 . . . “[Jacob] came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. [12] He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”
 2. Second, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus’ description of the greater things Nathanael would see things he would see or discern through spiritual eyes, not physical eyes – just as the ascending and descending angels in Jacob’s dream were a spiritually perceived reality and not a physical reality.

- a. However, I want to be remind you that spiritually discerned realities are no less real than realities seen with human eyes or heard with human ears or touched by human hands.
- b. Now if you are wondering if there is any support for concluding that Jesus was talking about a spiritually perceived reality. YES THERE IS, and it comes from the fact that nowhere in the gospel of John is it recorded that the disciples saw literal angels ascending and descending on Jesus.
 - (1) And yet, in a spiritually discerned way, they did see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, for they saw the presence and power of God manifested through the signs and wonders Jesus performed and the words Jesus spoke.
 - (2) In other words, just as Jacob could honestly say after waking from his dream, “Surely the LORD is in this place” (Genesis 28:16a), so the disciples could honestly say that surely God is in this place, that is, surely God is in Jesus Christ, and He is manifesting His presence through the signs Jesus performs and words Jesus speaks.
- c. For example, when Jesus turned the water to wine, John tells us that this was the first of many signs which Jesus did, and in performing this sign He manifested His glory, that is, He showed forth His deity, and as a result His disciples believed in Him (John 2:11).
 - (1) Now you may be thinking that since the disciples saw that the water had been turned into wine, it means they saw a physical manifestation. Well, that is true. But what they saw was the end result of the power of God manifested through Jesus.
 - (2) My point being, the disciples did not see the angels of God ascending and descending on Jesus. They did not see the actual turning of the water to wine. They only saw the results of God’s presence and power in action.
 - (3) And yet, because of their spiritual discernment, they attributed the results to God’s presence and power acting in and through Jesus Christ.
- d. So why am I telling you this? My reason for bringing this to your attention is because we have experiences in life which produce results that are just as unexplainable – from a human, scientific perspective – as how the water was turned into wine.

- (1) If we see the end results of such things only through human eyes, or hear about them only through human ears, or hold that there must be a scientific explanation, we will miss seeing that the presence and power of God has been manifested in that place. In other words, we will miss seeing the angels of God ascending and descending.
 - (2) But if we look and listen from a spiritual perspective, that is, with spiritually discerning eyes and spiritually discerning ears, we can know, with some certainty, that though unseen, it is God's presence and power that has brought about the result which we can see.
 - (3) And why does this matter? Because the common result of discerning God's presence and power is stronger faith and a growing conviction that God is at work and is bringing good out of situation after situation.
- e. By the way, John goes on from this story about Jesus turning water to wine to include 15 more signs in the rest of his stories. And though he includes these signs to show that Jesus is God with us, we can learn about God's presence and power from them, and in so doing, gain greater spiritual vision and hearing to discern God's presence and power in our world today.
3. Third, we know that signs and wonders, or words spoken from Christ's own lips – including those recorded in the four Gospels – do not guarantee faith in God or obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord. Nor does it guarantee increased faith in those who already believe, or a settled conviction that God is good, or confidence that God is bringing good out of every situation.
- a. For example,
- (1) The Jewish religious leaders began persecuting Jesus because He healed a man on the Sabbath (John 5:16).
 - (2) When Jesus responded to being asked why He broke the Sabbath laws by healing on the Sabbath, He included the statement that God was His father – thus making Himself equal to God (John 5:18), and as a result these same religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus.
 - (3) After feeding the five thousand with five barley loafs and two fish, Jesus perceived that the crowd was intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king. So He withdrew to the mountain to be alone (John 6:15). However, the crowd found Him, and having seen the miracle through

human eyes only, they wanted Jesus to continue feeding them earthly food – to which Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs (and spiritually discerned their true meaning), but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” (John 6:26).

- (4) And I could go on, but I will end with something John said in John 12:37, “But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him.”
- b. So why am I telling you this? Because signs and wonders are definitely an effective way to draw a crowd so the gospel can be proclaimed in the hearing of many.
 - (1) However, they are not a guaranteed way to produce saving and life-transforming faith in God and in His son, Jesus Christ.
 - (2) If we are going to depend on anything for effective evangelism –
 - (a) Let us depend on a godly life in ourselves, for that is what makes us consistently useful to God for such work and gives us a light that shines in such a way that others who see that light see God’s glory and worthiness.
 - (b) And let us depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to convict and draw people to faith in God.
 - (c) And let us depend on the power of the living word to cut through the lies and self-deceptions of those who have never heard and those who are resistant.
 - (d) And let us depend on wise, thoughtful, persistent prayer.
 - (e) And finally, let us depend on the fact that there is no such thing as an effective evangelism method – if effective means getting the results we seek. But if effective means being a consistent and persistent witness to whomever will listen, and sowing seed wherever we can, then let us do that and depend on God to work out the results.
4. There is a fourth and final thing I want to point out about Jesus’ statement in vs 51, and it hinges on my last point that not everyone is brought to faith by signs and wonders. So keep that truth in mind as we work our way through this fourth and final point.
 - a. As you may recall, back in vs 48, Nathanael asked how Jesus knew him. Jesus explained by saying, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

- (1) Nathanael responded with “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel (vs 49).
 - (2) Then Jesus responded to that by saying, “Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (vs 50-51).
- b. Now remember that signs and wonders do not guarantee faith in God or the kind of faith that produces a godly life. Therefore, it is my belief that the inference of Christ’s question, “do you believe because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree,” is that Nathanael’s faith – at that time – was based on Jesus doing something miraculous.
 - c. So what is wrong with that, you may be wondering? Absolutely nothing. In fact, signs and wonders ought to influence us toward faith in God, trust in Christ for salvation, and the kind of obedience that produces a godly life. But as the scripture makes clear, signs and wonders do not guarantee faith in God or the kind of faith that produces a godly life.
 - d. Therefore, though faith based on miracles is good, such faith is prone to weaken or dwindle when miracles do not continue to happen. Sadly, there are those who need recurring miracles or a sense of the presence of God to maintain ongoing faith.
 - e. It is also true that faith based mostly on signs and wonders is prone to become distrust, or even unbelief during times of trials and tribulation – and this is especially true when it appears God is not bringing any relief or healing or provision or protection.
 - (1) In other words, patiently waiting on God can be faith building, but having to wait on God when our faith is built on what God does or doesn’t do is too often faith breaking.
 - (2) The point I am trying to convey is that though faith based on signs and wonders is good, and such faith ought never to be dismissed as second class faith, it is not the firmest foundation for faith.
 - f. The best and firmest foundation for Christian faith is the character of God.
 - (1) Having said that, let me affirm once again that faith in God based on witnessing His presence and power through some miraculous sign or hearing a Spirit empowered message, is good faith.

- (2) But to have a faith that is unshakable, that is reliable through the good times and the bad times, and that holds tight to the conviction that you are safe in God's hands regardless of the circumstances, you need a faith that is based on God's unchanging character.

III. Conclusion

- A. What is your faith built on? Why do you believe? How steadfast and sure is your faith when being challenged by trials and tribulations?
 1. If it is primarily built on God's miraculous interventions or miraculous provision or miraculous healing or the promise of eternal life, then you will be easily tempted to unbelief or mistrust when times are difficult and God seems absent.
 2. But if you build your faith on God's character, then regardless of the circumstances, your faith will remain steadfast and sure.

- B. Though there are many examples in the Bible of faith based on the character of God, but I will give you just two.
 1. First, Job's faith was built on God's character, and we know this to be true because he said that even if God should slay him, he would continue to trust in Him (Job 13:15).
 2. Second, in the NT there is the story about the Canaanite woman with a demon possessed daughter who was imploring Jesus to heal her daughter. When Jesus said it wasn't good to take the children's bread (the miracles reserved for the Israelites) and throw it to the dogs (Gentiles), her response shows that her faith was based on Jesus' character, for she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27). In other words, she believed Christ's character was such that He would allow her to get close enough to the table to eat the crumbs that fell to the floor. And He did, for as you know, He healed her daughter.

- C. Psalm 36:5-9 . . . Your lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness reaches to the skies. [6] Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are like a great deep. O Lord, You preserve man and beast. [7] How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. [8] They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. [9] For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.