

LESSON 5

*January 24-30

The Struggle to Be Real



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 4:43-54.*

Memory Text: "Jesus replied, 'You may go. Your son will live.' The man took Jesus at his word and departed" (*John 4:50, NIV*).

Key Thought: When we encounter Jesus, He challenges us to re-evaluate everything in our lives, even our own self-understanding.

In this lesson we encounter a man whose faith in Jesus is sufficient to propel him to journey 16 miles uphill in order to find Jesus and ask Him to heal his son. If we had observed him, we would have called him a man of faith. Yet, Jesus labels the man's faith as the kind that's merely seeking after miraculous signs and wonders. Jesus exposes his faith as something other than what it seemed to be.

The human heart is deceptive by nature (*Jer. 17:9*). Even at our best we sometimes deceive ourselves and others. But John tells the story of One who not only sees past our image building to the true need of the soul but helps us to a fuller and deeper knowledge of both self and God through His Word.

In this lesson we will examine a living parable of the One whose word is as good as His touch. In the process, we will gain a deeper insight into a more authentic Christian faith.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 31.*

SUNDAY *January 25*

No Honor at Home (*John 4:43-45*).

This passage forms the transition between the story about the woman of Samaria and the story about a royal official in Galilee who approaches Jesus in behalf of his son. It is a startling passage in which, at first glance, two separate assertions seem to contradict each other.

What saying does Jesus have in mind as He approaches His home province? *John 4:43, 44*. What do you think that means?

How do the Galileans react upon Jesus' arrival, and why? *John 4:45*.

As Jesus approaches Galilee, He is mindful that "a prophet has no honor in his own country"; yet, the Galileans welcome Jesus. In the original language, the word *then* occurs at the beginning of verse 45, suggesting that verse 45 is somehow the natural result of verse 44, "A prophet has no honor in his own country. When Jesus arrived in Galilee, therefore, the Galileans welcomed Him!" The welcome of the Galileans is somehow "without honor" to Jesus.

Read carefully *John 4:45*, as well as *John 2:23-25*. How do these verses explain what is happening here?

The welcoming response of the Galileans is just like that of the Judeans, who showed faith in Jesus because they had seen miracles and signs. The Galileans thought they were welcoming Jesus in a positive way. But enthusiasm for Jesus that is based on miracles only is no honor. The Galileans prove to be a people who are awed by miracles and spectacular works but who are slow to believe in Jesus' words. Their excitement about Jesus is based more on selfishness than on faith in who He was.

In probably all of us, there are some selfish motives in our faith (after all, Why do we want salvation, if not to gain something for ourselves?). Must our motives always be pure in our walk with the Lord? Can the Lord still work with those whose motives might not be exactly what they should be?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *John 4:50*

Teachers Aims:

1. To distinguish the characteristics of true faith.
2. To show the correct relationship between faith and works.
3. To give students the tools necessary for nourishing their own faith.

Lesson Outline:

I. Faith and Doubt (*Mark 9:24*).

- A. What appears to be faith often may be merely a reaction to favorable circumstances.
- B. While doubt is the opposite of faith, it is not completely foreign to faithful people.
- C. Doubt can become an occasion to increase one's faith.

II. Faith and Works (*James 1:22*).

- A. There is no contradiction between faith and works, because faith is shown in action.
- B. Works are meant to reinforce one's faith.
- C. Like faith itself, acts based upon faith may not always seem justified by apparent reality.

III. Acting As If You Had Faith (*John 4:49, 50*).

- A. Faith is a gift from God; to receive it, one must have contact (prayer, Bible study) with the Giver.
- B. To nourish faith it is necessary to have a realistic assessment of one's own spiritual state and a willingness to trust God to "fix" it if necessary.
- C. Fellowship with other Christians is also important to a living, growing faith.

Summary: Faith, essentially the belief in things we cannot see, is a gift of God. We cannot simply will ourselves to have faith. But once we have received that gift, we must make an effort to keep it alive. This requires daily submission to the will of God.

COMMENTARY.

Faith is essential for quality of life. Relationships are enhanced, decreased, or disappear, depending on the faith that exists between the persons involved. How much more so in our relationship with God!

This week's lesson portrays the struggle of faith as it outlines three types of faith: the curious, the conditional, and the genuine.

I. Faith That Is Curious.

The turning of water into wine at Cana was so dramatic a miracle that it produced different responses: (1) "his disciples

MONDAY *January 26*

It Is Hard to Be Real *(John 4:46-49).*

As is so often the case in John's Gospel, this new story functions as an acted parable, demonstrating the truth of the earlier statement. The problematic, Galilean welcome of Jesus (*John 4:43-45*) is illustrated with a story about a royal official who believes in Jesus yet struggles in his expression of that faith.

What problem does the royal official bring to Jesus, and what does he want Jesus to do? *John 4:47, 49.*

Where did both Jesus and the royal official live? *John 2:12, 4:46.*

Jesus and the royal official had probably spent some time as neighbors in a very small town (Capernaum was little more than one hundred meters across). The man's combination of faith and doubts well illustrates a prophet's difficulty in finding honor at home.

What does Jesus say in response to the royal official's first request? *John 4:48.* **What did Jesus mean by this statement? Was not part of the problem the fact that they saw signs and wonders and yet still did not have true faith?**

Jesus' initial response indicates that the man, like Nicodemus before him, was an example of inadequate faith. It seems that the Galileans on the whole welcomed Jesus outwardly but did not really believe in Him (*John 4:43-45*). The miracles Jesus performed actually may have become stumbling blocks to the people on their way to a true appreciation of Jesus.

A Galilean himself, the royal official is confronted by the reality of his partial, inadequate faith. He is not relying on the word of Jesus but requires physical evidence before he would believe. He is startled to discover that he could not hide his unbelief from Jesus (remember the theme of *John 2:23-25*: Jesus knows!). Realizing that he might lose all on account of unbelief, he finally throws himself at the feet of Jesus in desperation.

What are some helpful ways of dealing with doubt? Is doubt always a negative thing, or can it sometimes play a positive role in a Christian's experience? Why?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

believed on him” (*John 2:11*), leading them to a close relationship with Jesus and His mission; (2) many in Jerusalem believed (*vs. 23*), perhaps wondering whether at last they had found the deliverer who would liberate them from Roman tyranny; and (3) “the Galileans received Him” (*John 4:45, NKJV*), perhaps expecting more miracles.

What is the difference between the disciples’ faith, the faith of the Jerusalem crowd, and the faith of the Galilean patriots? The disciples were to see in the miracle of Cana the launching of a divine mission whereby Jesus would quench the eternal thirst of the human soul. That faith—however dim at first—grew until after the Resurrection. The disciples would be able to proclaim the central quality of that faith—a saving relationship with Jesus. However, the faith of the Jerusalem crowd and the Galileans was one of curiosity. Could this Jesus be the promised Deliverer? Even if He were, they saw in Jesus a deliverer from the Romans, not a Redeemer from sin. The difference between saving faith and curious faith is motive. Is faith motivated by a desire to be saved from sin or by some other good that benefits oneself?

II. Faith That Is Conditional.

The miracle at Cana had an impact in Capernaum, 16 miles northeast (25.6 kilometers). There a nobleman was agonizing over his child who was “at the point of death” (*John 4:47*). The One who can turn water into wine can also turn death into life. At least that much faith must have urged the nobleman toward Jesus. But that is still not faith enough. “Come and heal my son,” was the nobleman’s plea. Yet, it was made not so much out of faith as it was out of love for his son. That is conditional faith. Unconditional faith, however, reverses the order: faith in Jesus, regardless of how much one loves something or someone else. Such a faith says, “I believe in Jesus because of who He is, not because of what He can do. And I know that whatever He does will be for my good.” It is that kind of faith that characterized the young men who faced Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace: “ ‘If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up’ ” (*Dan. 3:17, 18, NIV*). They “were pressured to deny God, but they chose to be faithful to him no matter what happened! They trusted God to deliver them, but they were determined to be faithful regardless of the consequences. If God always rescued those who were true to him Christians would not need faith. . . . We should be faithful to serve God whether he intervenes on our behalf or not. Our eternal reward is worth any suffering we may have to endure first.”—*Life Application Bible*, p. 1481, Daniel 3:16-18.

TUESDAY *January 27*

The Path to Faith (*John 4:50-54*).

What does Jesus say in response to the man's second and more desperate request, and how does the royal official react? *John 4:50*.

“The nobleman left the Saviour's presence with a peace and joy he had never known before. Not only did he believe that his son would be restored, but with strong confidence he trusted in Christ as the Redeemer.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 198, 199.

The shocking word that Jesus speaks to the man is that He does not need to travel to Capernaum; Jesus can heal at a great distance. This is a living parable of the Gospel's message to the second generation of Christians that Jesus' word is as good as His touch. He does not need to be present physically to meet any need.

The second statement of Jesus is the final piece that brings faith to the royal official. He grasps the word of Christ, and he believes. But belief brings with it a test. Would he act on that newfound faith? Would he head home believing that his son will live, or would he continue to beg Jesus to come to his home and heal his son with a touch? His actions demonstrate his newfound faith.

What do these texts say about the relationship between faith and works? *Isa. 58:1-12, John 15:5, James 2:22*.

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon when the royal official encountered Jesus. If he had hurried downhill (Cana is some six hundred meters higher than Capernaum, twenty-five kilometers away), he could have made it back to Capernaum that night (see Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 199). One would think that he would have hurried home to find out whether his son were, in fact, healed. Instead, the fact that the servants were sent out to look for him the day after he met Jesus indicates that he took his time heading home, stopping somewhere for the night. The man not only headed home at Jesus' command; he did so in a manner that indicated he had fully accepted Jesus' word. The evidence of faith is action. If the only reason to hurry was worry about his son, his deliberate journey was the living expression of his confidence in Jesus' word.

Though we are not saved by works, how do works manifest and express our faith? In your own experience, how have works strengthened your faith in the Lord? What is it about good works that strengthens faith? Also, in your experience, how do sinful works weaken faith and add to doubt?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

III. Faith That Is Genuine.

The nobleman's case illustrates a truth in Christian evangelism that Jesus Himself spelled out later: "And him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (*John 6:37*). However dim the faith of one who comes to Jesus, His love is strong enough to help that person understand genuine faith and to help him or her accept the invita-

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 10:30, 31; 12:39; Mark 9:24; Romans 5:5; Ephesians 4:14; Jude 4*

- ❶ Many times in the Gospels, and especially in John, we see examples of Jesus' omniscience. Does the thought of a God who knows everything about you comfort you, frighten you, or both? How does knowing that God is omniscient influence the way you live your life?
- ❷ Why do you think it is easy for people to believe in miracles yet not make needed changes in their lives that such a belief would entail? For example, how can people believe in angels yet ignore God?
- ❸ Faith is usually partially contaminated by impure motives. What, if anything, can we do about this? How can God help us overcome the problem?
- ❹ Even though Jesus could heal the nobleman's son from a distance, the nobleman still felt the need to travel to Jesus. Is it a sin to need "props" for our faith? Explain your answer.
- ❺ How did Jesus respond to the nobleman, and why? What does Jesus' response tell us about His attitude toward our frailties?
- ❻ After Jesus told the nobleman his son would live, what did He tell the nobleman to do? How did the nobleman respond? Why is such a response significant to the Christian life?
- ❼ The story of the nobleman teaches us how faith grows. List four steps that this story suggests are involved in this growth process (*John 4:46-53*). How does obedience help faith to grow? Why do you think the nobleman's household believed?
- ❽ How did the nobleman exhibit humility, faith, submission, and gratitude? In what modern situations should we show these same characteristics, and how?

WEDNESDAY *January 28*

The Solution to Life's Problems *(Rom. 10:17, Hebrews 11).*

According to Paul, how does faith come to a person? *Rom. 10:17.*

Faith came to the royal official by hearing Jesus' word from His own mouth. For the second generation of Christians, faith comes when the word of Christ is grasped in written form or in the oral presentations of those who bring that Written Word to us.

Under the surface of the story in John 4 lies the divine solution to life's problems. The story begins with a point of need. The royal official's son lay dying. When the official heard that Jesus was accessible, he did not linger at home hoping that something good might happen; he brought his problem directly to Jesus. He assumed that if Jesus accompanied him back to Capernaum, His touch would banish the illness that threatened the life of his son.

Instead, Jesus speaks the shocking word that He does not need to travel to Capernaum; He can heal at a great distance. His word is as good as His touch. The man not only takes Jesus at His word; his actions from that time on are a bodily demonstration of his faith in Jesus' word.

Read Hebrews 11. How does this chapter fit in with these issues regarding the exercise of faith?

How can we apply this faith lesson to our problems today? Four steps seem to emerge: (1) Acknowledge the problem. This is not as simple as it sounds but will be discussed further in the next day's study. (2) Take your problem to Jesus in prayer. (3) Receive the word that your need has been met. The words of Jesus to us are found in the Bible. If we want to hear those words, we need to know the Word. That is why continual Bible study is important. (4) Speak and act out God's answer. It is not enough simply to hear the Word. The Word becomes real to us when we act on it and when we tell others about our faith. Genuine belief results in corresponding action.

But what if we are like the royal official? What if our belief is mixed with unbelief? What if we have doubts? This story suggests that the doubts need to be confronted with words of faith and action. Take God at His word. Do what the Bible says, and faith will come.

Why is the actual practice and exercise of faith so important for maintaining faith?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

tion to taste the joy of eternal life. We see this love at work in Nicodemus, the Syrophenician woman, the thief on the cross, and the nobleman.

“The Saviour cannot withdraw from the soul that clings to Him, pleading its great need.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 198.

Jesus tested the nobleman’s faith with this command: “Go. My word is enough.”

Would the nobleman go, rejoicing that the Commander of Life had turned the shadows of death into the bright beams of life? Or, like Naaman of old, would he become angry that Jesus did not recognize his power and position within the world (*2 Kings 5:1-12*)?

The nobleman “believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him” (*John 4:50*) and went his way. The difference between curious and conditional faith and genuine faith is one’s belief in the Lord’s

Witnessing

Video technology has the capability of making people appear as though they are speaking words they are not really saying. The software, created by researchers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has changed the face of artificially animated human faces. Animated human faces will no longer appear jerky and cartoonlike. They will look natural. Although researchers fear the software could be misused, they believe also the new technology can have positive applications in speech therapy and the entertainment industry.

The world we live in today is far more advanced than it was just 20 years ago, but, in reality, we are living in a world marred by sin, a world that is dying. In many places, war is commonplace, and pestilence abounds. Even in more developed countries, millions are homeless or live in poverty, and financial instability threatens the economy. Many people are fearful of what the future holds.

To those living in fear and uncertainty we can offer hope—hope that can be found in the Word of God. However, simply reading the Bible is not enough. We must have a real experience with Christ and encourage others to experience Him for themselves. The nobleman of John 4 had heard of Jesus’ miracles and maybe even had witnessed some of them, but it wasn’t until he had a personal experience with the Lord that he and his household truly believed.

We should encourage those to whom we witness to study God’s Word themselves; to commune daily with Him in prayer, bringing before Him every aspect of their lives; and to seek and pray for a personal experience with Jesus. Only when this happens will He be real to us.

THURSDAY January 29

Steps to Authenticity

What is the natural condition of the human heart? *Jer. 17:9*. **What** is Laodicea's fundamental problem? *Rev. 3:17*. **How** do these two factors work together against us?

“Like a flash of light, the Saviour’s words to the nobleman laid bare his heart. He saw that his motives in seeking Jesus were selfish. His vacillating faith appeared to him in its true character.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 198.

The royal official did not know the depths of his unbelief until confronted directly by Jesus. We, too, are often unaware of our sinfulness and unbelief. We are like Laodicea, the church in Revelation whose self-concept is not confirmed by reality (*Rev. 3:17*). How can you bring a problem to Jesus when your heart is deceiving you, when you do not even know that you have a problem?

The most effective path to true authenticity before God is a devotional encounter with Him.

1. *Through Bible study* we discover that God works with real people who make mistakes, such as David and Peter and Nicodemus. We do not have to be afraid to confess sins and problems to Him; He already knows them. And we find out that He does not give up on people who make mistakes. So, we gain the courage to get real with God.

2. *Through prayer* we seek to be real with God. God prefers that we be totally honest with Him in prayer. Jesus certainly was. “Why have You forsaken Me?” If Jesus could be that honest with God, it cannot be a sin for us! The Lord wants to hear our deepest needs, our deepest feelings, yes—even our anger.

3. *Through journaling* (a spiritual diary) we can bring both our Bible study and our prayers into sharp focus. The writing process draws out depths of self-understanding that often go untapped without it. The writing process can help us develop a deeper understanding of our need for God in specific areas of life.

4. *Accountability to others* can enhance our accountability to God. Authentic Christians usually can point to specific people who understand and love them yet can share frankly regarding the quality of their behavior.

Through exercises such as the ones above, we can gain a more accurate awareness of the barriers we set up against God in our lives.

If we know our own hearts are corrupt, if we know our own motives are not pure, if we know we are sinners to the core, why must we place our whole hope only in what Christ did for us at the Cross? See *Rom. 5:8, Col. 1:14, 1 Tim. 1:15, 2:6*.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

word. “So He has said, and so it shall be.” It is not for us to question how and where.

“Not because we see or feel that God hears us are we to believe. We are to trust in His promises. When we come to Him in faith, every petition enters the heart of God. When we have asked for His blessing, we should believe that we receive it, and thank Him that we have received it. Then we are to go about our duties, assured that the blessing will be realized when we need it most.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 200.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: God has equipped the swordtail, a popular aquarium fish, with an unusual way to preserve itself. If the male, or males, die off, leaving only females, one of the remaining female swordtail can grow an elongated tail fin, or sword, and change into a male. This is a pretty remarkable feat for a four-inch animal. Many of us yearn to radically change things about ourselves from the superficial to the spiritual—everything from our noses to our jobs to our pasts. Unlike the swordtail, however, which can switch its identity to preserve itself, we lack the power to transform our characters or remove our sins, apart from Christ.

Thought Questions:

❶ What God enables the swordtail to do in order to preserve itself from extinction is amazing, but it doesn’t even begin to compare to the way Christ transformed into a human baby to preserve our race from certain extinction. By this stunning act, He forged an unbreakable bond with every person in the human race. How does His truth inspire faith in us that no sin, once confessed and forsaken, can ever force us apart from Him? What impetus does this give our spiritual walk with Him?

❷ In the context of His relationship with the universe, God refers to Himself as the “I AM.” Why? How has modern culture and its emphasis on the “individual” affected the biblical foundation of relying on the great “I AM”?

Application Question:

Is it possible for 100 percent reliance on God to cause a lack of self-confidence? Why, or why not? Explain how dependence on God builds a highly motivated, secure, and self-confident individual. What are the elements of today’s culture that encourage us to believe that all the potential for success lies within us? What can the church do to safeguard our youth from such beliefs?

FRIDAY January 30

Further Study: Many people are troubled by the idea of accountability. They suggest that we should take everything to God in prayer (Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 119). While Ellen White makes statements that support such a concept, she also underlines the importance of being accountable to other Christians.

“It is your duty to counsel with your brethren. This may touch your pride, but the humility of a mind taught by the Holy Spirit will listen to counsel, and will banish all self-confidence.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 315.

“When men’s hearts are softened and subdued by the constraining influence of the Holy Spirit, they will give heed to counsel; but when they turn from admonition until their hearts become hardened, the Lord permits them to be led by other influences.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 425.

“There are souls perplexed with doubt, burdened with infirmities, weak in faith, and unable to grasp the Unseen; but a friend whom they can see, coming to them in Christ’s stead, can be a connecting link to fasten their trembling faith upon Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 297.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read Hebrews 11:6. Why is it impossible, without faith, to please God? What does that mean, to “please God”?
- 2 How does the attitude of the Galileans toward Christ compare with that of the Samaritans in the same chapter? What lessons should that comparison have for us?
- 3 If faith is a gift from God (*Eph. 2:8*), why is the exercise of faith so important? Why does the Lord not just keep renewing the gift, regardless of what we do?

Summary: Jesus returns to Galilee and finds a people who express faith in Him that is based on His ability to do miracles. Using the example of the royal official, the author of the Gospel both exposes the emptiness of such faith and points the way to true faith. Through the words of Jesus, we gain a more authentic understanding of our own sinfulness and of the barriers we erect to avoid intimacy with God. But when faith is actively expressed in words and actions, it enables us to take hold of the solutions to life’s problems that God offers to us through His Word.