BELIEVING IS SEEING, BUT SEEING IS NOT BELIEVING

John 11:38-57

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John 11:38-57

There is a familiar saying, “Seeing is believing,” but in spiritual matters that is not necessarily true. Sometimes skeptics will say, “Show me a miracle and I’ll believe.” But even if they saw a genuine miracle, they’d still doubt it or look for a naturalistic explanation and find other reasons to continue in their unbelief.

As we’ve seen repeatedly, John wrote his Gospel, and especially the seven miraculous signs that Jesus performed before His death, “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:31). But not all who saw Jesus’ miracles in person believed in Him, just as not all today who read the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels believe in Him. The barrier to faith is that we love our sin. As Paul points out in Romans 1:18-20, all people have adequate evidence of God’s eternal power and divine nature through creation, but they suppress the truth in unrighteousness. If God exists and created all things, then sinners know that they’re in big trouble. So they invent myths, like evolution, to dodge the reality of God so that they can continue in their sin.

If any miracle should have resulted in every person present falling on his face and worshiping Jesus as God, it would have been the raising of Lazarus from the dead. He had been dead four days, so that his body was beginning to decompose. But when Jesus cried out (11:43), “Lazarus, come forth,” life returned to his dead body, he was completely restored, and he walked out of the tomb, still bound with the grave wrappings. As a result, many did believe in Jesus, but in an amazing display of the hardness of unbelieving hearts, others went to report to the Jewish leaders what had happened. And, rather than acknowledging their mistaken views of Jesus, they intensified their efforts to kill Him.

In the narrative, Jesus tells Martha (11:40), “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” Believing would result in seeing. But (in 11:45-46) others who saw this stu-
pendous miracle did not believe, and their foolish hearts were
darkened (Rom. 1:21). The lesson is:

**If we believe in Christ, we will see the glory of God; but if we
see miracles without believing we will be hardened in our sin.**

1. **If we believe in Christ, we will see the glory of God.**

   Jesus’ comment to Martha (11:40) that if she believed, she
would see the glory of God, probably refers to His earlier comment
(11:4), which would have been reported to Martha and Mary, “This
sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the
Son of God may be glorified by it.” Jesus’ aim in all that He did
was to glorify the Father (17:1-5). Jesus is the revelation of God’s
glory to us. As John said (1:14), “And the Word became flesh, and
dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten
from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In heaven, we will see
Jesus’ glory in all its fullness (17:24).

   God’s glory is His essential and intrinsic splendor. The He-
brew word has the notion of weight or heaviness, and thus refers
to God’s worthiness, reputation, and honor (M. R. Gordon,
*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Zondervan], ed. by Merrill
C. Tenney, 2:730). The emphasis in the Bible is on glory as the
manifestation of His attributes. Thus Calvin wrote (ibid 2:732),
“The glory of God is when we know what He is.” He also ob-
served (ibid 2:733), “We never truly glory in Him until we have
utterly discarded our own glory ... whoso glories in himself glories
against God.”

   In this case, Martha’s faith would result in her seeing God’s
glory as seen in Jesus’ intimacy with the Father and in His power to
call Lazarus from the tomb. This miracle validates Jesus’ astound-
ing claims in John 5:21, “For just as the Father raises the dead and
gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wish-
es.” He added (5:28-29), “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is
coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and
will come forth; ...” Because Jesus raised Lazarus, we can know
that He will make good on His promise to raise all the dead some-
day, either for eternal life or for judgment. So this miracle should
result in our seeing the fact that Jesus is the author and giver of
both physical and eternal life and that He has all power over death.
We should apply Jesus' words to Martha (11:40), “if you believe, you will see the glory of God.” First, we should always join Moses in his prayer (Exod. 33:18), “I pray You, show me Your glory!” That was a bold prayer! Moses had already seen the Lord at the burning bush. He had seen God’s power in the ten plagues on Egypt. He had seen the Lord deliver His people through the Red Sea, provide water from the rock, and manna from heaven every morning. I’d be satisfied to see any one of those displays of God’s glory! But, Moses wanted more, and so should we! As we see more of God’s glory, it transforms us into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). So, always pray that God will grant you more faith so that you will see more of His glory.

Also, C. H. Spurgeon (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit [Pilgrim Publications], 59:87) applied this verse by challenging his congregation to believe God for the conversion of sinners who were as corrupt in their morals as Lazarus was in his body. We sometimes see people who are debauched sinners and think, “There’s no way that that person could ever get saved.” If salvation comes from human will power, that’s true. But if salvation is of the Lord, then He is mighty to save the chief of sinners.

John calls Jesus’ miracles “signs” (11:48). Signs point to something beyond themselves. The physical miracles point to deeper spiritual truth. As a dead man whose body was undergoing corruption, Lazarus is a picture of sinners who are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), cut off from the life of God, and morally corrupt in His holy presence. As a dead man, Lazarus had no power to raise himself from the dead. He needed the new life that comes only from God (John 6:63). It required the life-giving word of Jesus to call him from death to life. That’s true every time a sinner is born again.

You may ask, “Doesn’t the sinner have to choose to believe?” The Bible is clear; yes, the sinner must choose to believe. But no one who is dead in their sins is able to choose to believe until the Spirit of God quickens them from the dead. We saw this in John 1:12-13, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” Those who believe didn’t do so because
of their will (which is not “free,” but bound in sin), but rather because God caused them to be born again (1 Pet. 1:3).

So go to the Father in believing prayer and ask Him to save those who are so dead in sin that they stink! And, Jesus’ words apply to any who have not yet trusted in Him for salvation: If you will believe in Him, you will see the glory of His love, grace, and justice at the cross. If we believe in Christ, we will see the glory of God.

2. **Jesus’ miracles should result in faith in Him as Savior and Lord.**

   First, we need to affirm that...  
   
   A. Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead.

   John reported this miracle so that you would believe in Jesus and have eternal life in His name. But Satan always attacks essential truths. So, it’s no accident that liberal critics dispute that this miracle really happened. They argue that John presents the raising of Lazarus as a crucial event that precipitated Jesus’ death at the hands of the Jewish leaders. If this is so, they say, why do the other three Gospels omit this important event? They conclude that John fabricated this story to illustrate some spiritual truths about Jesus. For example, William Barclay concludes (*The Gospel of John* [Westminster Press], 2:103), “It does not really matter whether or not Jesus literally raised a corpse to life in A.D. 30, but it matters intensely that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life for every man who is dead in sin and dead to God today.” Strange reasoning!

   That’s like saying that it doesn’t really matter whether Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, as long as we learn the spiritual lessons from the story. Paul refutes that nonsense by arguing that if Christ is not literally raised from the dead, our faith is worthless (1 Cor. 15:1-19). If Jesus did not literally raise Lazarus from the dead, then John’s credibility as an eyewitness of Jesus’ glory is worthless. His entire Gospel becomes just a clever fable, alongside Aesop’s fables, but not worth staking your life and eternal destiny on.

   It’s clear that John is narrating an event that he saw take place in actual history. The story does not read as a concocted fable or myth. It is straightforward and realistic, with many factual details. Even Jesus’ enemies acknowledged that He was doing many miracles (11:47). They couldn’t question that Lazarus had been dead
and now was alive. So Jesus’ critics who lived at that time didn’t doubt the fact that Lazarus was raised from the dead, but modern critics, living 20 centuries later do doubt it!

Thus what we have here is not a parable or a fable making some moral point. Rather, it is a historical account of Jesus raising a decomposing corpse to life. But John wants us to apply this actual miracle to our lives:

B. This miracle should cause you to believe in Jesus as your Savior and Lord; and if you already believe, to increase your faith in Him.

John views faith in Christ as both initial and ongoing. The disciples believed in Jesus in chapter 1, but in chapter 2, after Jesus turned the water into wine, we read (2:11), “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.” In 6:69, Peter affirms, “We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.” But here in chapter 11, Jesus tells the disciples (11:15), “I am glad for your sakes that I was not there [before Lazarus died] so that you may believe.” Martha clearly confesses her faith in Christ (11:27): “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.” But (in 11:40) Jesus still challenges her to believe.

Apply this to yourself: If you have never repented of your sins and put your trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, that’s where you begin a relationship with Him. That’s when you move from spiritual death to eternal life. If you do not believe in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you are still under God’s wrath (3:36). The Bible commands you to believe in Jesus and be saved (Acts 16:31).

But, you don’t stop with that initial belief. Your faith in Christ needs to grow and it will grow as you see more and more of who He is. This miracle shows that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. He is, as He told Martha (11:25), the resurrection and the life. He is the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh and laid down His life willingly on the cross so that whoever believes in Him has eternal life (3:13-17).

This miracle shows that Jesus can do what mere men cannot do. Religion could not raise the dead. All that the Jews could do
was offer consolation to Mary and Martha. The scribes and Pharisees could not raise the dead. Even modern medicine, with all of its advanced knowledge, cannot raise to life a body that has begun to decompose. But Jesus could do what no mere man could do. He spoke the word and Lazarus instantly came to life.

This miracle illustrates our insufficiency and Christ's all-sufficiency. One reason that we don't trust the Lord in our daily lives is that we feel sufficient or adequate in ourselves. We may ask Him for a little help now and then, but we don't acknowledge what He told the disciples (15:5), “apart from Me you can do nothing.”

In commenting on Jesus’ prayer life, Paul Miller observes (A Praying Life [NavPress], p. 44), “If you know that you, like Jesus, can’t do life on your own, then prayer makes complete sense.” He goes on to devote a chapter to “learning to be helpless.” When we recognize our own insufficiency and helplessness, then we cast ourselves on the Lord and our faith grows as He answers. As Hudson Taylor, the great pioneer missionary to China, said, “All God’s giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them.”

But this story is not just about believing in Christ so that we will see God’s glory, or about how seeing miracles should result in our growth in faith. It’s also a warning against seeing God’s mighty works without believing:

3. Seeing a miracle without believing results in further hardening of heart.

This account of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus is a case study in the frightening nature of unbelief. We can learn three lessons:

A. Unbelief is not based on insufficient evidence.

What further proof of God’s power could you want than to smell the stench of the rotting body as they rolled the stone from the tomb, hearing Jesus’ loud command, and then seeing the formerly dead man stumble from the tomb, still bound in his grave-clothes? Yet, some who witnessed this spectacle went away to inform Jesus’ enemies so that they could intensify their plans to have Him arrested and executed!
Of course, this wasn’t the first miracle that these enemies of Jesus had witnessed. They acknowledge that He is performing many signs (11:47). They had seen the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years, who used to beg at the Pool of Bethesda, now walking because Jesus healed him (5:1-14). They knew that the man born blind, who used to beg by the temple gate, now saw because Jesus healed him (9:1-34). But they rejected both of these miracles because Jesus had done them on the Sabbath. And now, Jesus does the ultimate miracle by commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb. What further evidence could they ask for? But their unbelief was not based on insufficient evidence.

The same is true today. We have the evidence of fulfilled prophecy, including over 300 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. We have the eyewitness accounts of His teaching and miracles. There is the evidence of Jesus’ empty tomb, backed up by the changed lives of the witnesses, who all at first doubted His resurrection, but later were willing to suffer and die because they knew that He was alive. There is the evidence of intricate design in all of creation, from the molecular level up to the global level. But unbelief due to the hardness of human hearts suppresses the evidence.

B. Unbelief is based on selfish interests.

The real heart of unbelief is seeking your own way while you leave God out. There are two groups here, representing two levels of unbelief.

First, we see the unbelief of Caiaphas and the chief priests and Pharisees (11:47-53). The basis for their unbelief is clear (11:48): “If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” They had a vested interest in the system as it was and they were afraid of losing it. If the people believed in Jesus as Messiah, they feared that the Romans would intervene and they would lose their power and their comfortable living through controlling the temple. Ironically, by killing their Messiah, the very thing that they feared came on the nation as God’s judgment when Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70.

Caiaphas, who was the high priest, was a shrewd, calculating politician. First, he discredits what everyone else had said by flatly
stating (11:49), “You know nothing at all.” Then, he postures himself as being concerned for the people (11:50), “... it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.” He meant, “If we really care for our nation, we’ll eliminate this rabble-rouser, Jesus.” But he wasn’t really concerned for the nation, but for his own self-interest and power.

But John shows the irony in Caiaphas’ words: as high priest he was unwittingly prophesying that Jesus would die for the nation, and (11:52), “not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.” John is referring to all of God’s elect around the world. They were not yet children of God, but as God told Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:10), “I have many people in this city.” They were not yet saved, but they would be saved through Paul’s preaching, because they were God’s chosen ones. As Jesus said (John 6:39): “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.”

The lesson that we should learn is that you cannot frustrate God and His sovereign purpose. You can oppose Him and for a time it may seem that you are succeeding. They killed Jesus. But, in the end, God always wins. That’s the message of the last book of the Bible: God is going to win and all who oppose Him will lose.

The second group that did not believe was the common people (11:55-57), who went up to Jerusalem for the Passover. They were not openly hostile toward Jesus, but neither were they committed to follow Him. They were just curious onlookers on the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. They were content to go on with their religious festival while they discussed whether or not Jesus would show up and what would happen if He did. But they didn’t dare take a stand for Jesus, because that would put them on the bad side of the religious authorities. So their interest in protecting themselves caused them to be passive while the religious leaders murdered an innocent and good man.

The lesson here is that to be neutral towards Jesus is to be unbelieving. Self-centeredness is the heart of unbelief. The result of their self-interest was counter-productive, in that Jesus went away, because His time had not yet come (11:54). To have Jesus withdraw from you is the ultimate tragedy! The third lesson is:
C. Even devoutly religious people can be unbelieving.

Again, there is an ironic warning in 11:55: “Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves.” This refers to the second group of unbelievers that we saw. They weren’t openly hostile toward Jesus, but neither were they committed. They were “good church-goers,” who went through the outward rituals, but they weren’t willing to stand openly for Christ.

I hope that that doesn’t describe you! It is possible to be devoutly religious, to attend church regularly, to partake of the Lord’s Supper, and yet not to be fully committed to Jesus Christ, especially when that commitment might cost you something.

Conclusion

So I conclude with the warning of Hebrews 3:12: “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” The Jewish leaders asked (11:47), “What are we doing (about this miracle-worker)?” It’s a good question to ask yourself: “What am I doing with Jesus?” The options are: (1) Oppose Him; (2) be neutral toward Him as you practice your religion; (3) believe in Him as Savior and Lord, no matter what it may cost you. If you believe, you will see the glory of God in Christ. But if you see the miracles reported in God’s Word and do not believe, you’ll be hardened in your sin and the Savior will withdraw from you. You don’t want to go there!

Application Questions

1. A skeptic says, “I don’t believe in miracles because I’ve never seen one.” How would you reply?

2. A fellow Christian says, “If those who are dead in sin can’t believe of their own free will, how can God command them to believe?” How would you reply?

3. If unbelief is not based on insufficient evidence, what is the role of apologetics?

4. What are some practical ways to be on guard against “an evil, unbelieving heart” (Heb. 3:12)?