

What Does the Bible Mean by Believe?

A simple review of historical documentation ought to give someone plenty of confidence that Jesus Christ was a first century Jew in Palestine who had a considerable following. But when the Bible speaks of believing in Christ, is it saying that we simply need to believe that he was a person that lived? While the belief the Bible beckons entails belief in the historical Jesus, its call to faith or trust in Christ goes beyond just belief in the facts.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible is John 3:16. There Jesus states: "For God so loved the world that whoever believes in him will not die but have eternal life." The question becomes what kind of belief was Jesus speaking about? Fortunately, Jesus gives us a very strong indication in the preceding two verses. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Of course, to understand what Jesus is getting at here we need to know a little bit about his snake in the desert illustration.

In the Old Testament, when the Israelites were on their way to the Promised Land, they complained incessantly. To teach them a lesson, God sent a bunch of poisonous snakes into their midst. Seeing the gravity of the situation, the people repented and cried out to God. At that point God told Moses to fashion a bronze snake on a pole and to instruct the people to look at the snake on the pole if they were bitten. If they did so, their lives would be spared. Suppose you were in a tent at the time and a snake came and bit you. You could have sat in your tent and tried to squeeze the venom out. You could have believed the stories about how others were saved when they looked at the pole and even enjoyed their stories. You could have said, "You can't tell me that only bronze snakes will make me better; that's so exclusive." Whatever the case, if you didn't get out of the tent yourself and look at the snake on the pole, you would have died. God simply did not provide any other means by which you could live.

When we consider Jesus' illustration, we get a good understanding of the kind of belief he is calling people to in order to receive eternal life. He is not looking for someone to simply know some facts about him or even like the Jesus stories. And he is certainly not looking for someone who is trying to heal himself from the dings and failures of life. Rather, he is looking for you or I to realize that there is no way to be saved apart from him. Just as the people in the desert desperately looked to the snake on the pole for life, so Jesus says we must look desperately to him for life as well.

Another way to illustrate the kind of faith to which the Bible calls people is to consider wedding vows. Let's suppose a man and a woman stand before a pastor to be married. The pastor asks the man, "Will you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" The proper answer, of course, is to say, "I do." But let's suppose that instead the man says, "I really think she is pretty, don't you?" The pastor may repeat his question, and the man might say the second time, "I really like the way she cooks, and I think it's super that we both like to ride bicycles." At this point, everyone would recognize the man is not really willing to be wedded to the woman. He may know all kinds of things about her and even like many of them. But knowing lots of things about a person and even liking them doesn't mean you put your life into their hands. When the Bible calls you to believe in Christ, it is not asking you to declare that you like him; it is asking you to put your life into his hands.

One of the great hurdles to biblical belief is the absence of absolute certainty. Some argue, "Since I can't be absolutely certain that eternal life is only found in Christ, I can't really believe in him." But this type of thinking creates a bar for belief that is not realistic. Let's suppose angels came down from heaven and

handed you a personal note from God. Or suppose that God himself shows up and says, "Believe in me!" Would that be enough to be absolutely certain? Probably not, since there is always the chance you were hallucinating! Every day we place our trust in people and in things we are not absolutely certain about. I am not certain my car's brakes will not go out today, but I trust them enough to drive my car anyways. I can't prove that my wife will never leave me, but that does not keep me from trusting that she won't. Even biblical greats like John the Baptist had doubts, but in the end the evidence was enough for them to say, "I am pushing all my chips into the middle of the table." This is what God is asking us to do. He is asking us to consider the weight of the evidence and trust that only in Christ can we find eternal life and therefore "sell the farm" in order to get it.

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