

Faith That Satisfies — and Saves What It Means to Come to Jesus

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the nature of saving faith as portrayed in the Gospel of John, emphasizing the act of believing as a spiritual action of the soul in receiving, coming, drinking, and eating Christ. It challenges the notion that faith is merely passive and highlights the continuous need to drink and eat from the eternal life-giving water and bread that is Jesus. The message also addresses the implications of authentic belief in the Apostles' Creed and how true faith leads to unity and love, especially in times of relational stress like during a presidential election.

Scripture: John 3:36, John 6:35, John 4:13, John 7:37, John 15:5, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Romans 15:5, 1 Peter 3:8

Topics: "Saving Faith", "Unity in Christ"

Description

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Transcript

Three impulses are shaping this message. One is that we're in the middle of a series on the Apostles' Creed, and I had in my mind ever since the beginning of the semester to speak into that. Second, eight weeks ago I finished the first draft of a book on the nature of saving faith, subtitled Reflections on Receiving Christ as a Treasure, and I wanted to give you the overflow of fresh thoughts on that.

And third, we are hours away from finding out who was elected the President of the United States, an election that has put significant stress on the bond of peace that holds Christian brothers and sisters together in love, and I thought it would be good to say something about that. So those are the three impulses that are shaping this message. Is it possible to build a coherent message around those three things based on the word of God? So you judge, I'll pray.

Father, as I held my hands out and said, you give and take away, you give and take away, I could not but think of Tim Chalise right now, whose son, the age of these students at Boyce College, just died yesterday. Out of the blue, no explanation. We've tasted that here at Bethlehem, and since there's so many students here and we live in such a fragile time, this emotionally touches all of us because we love Tim Chalise and we want to pray for him now.

Just be on that family with an extraordinary sustaining grace. And help us here now, help me to be faithful to your word. Grant that all of us, as Christ is lifted up, would drink deeply the living water and would eat with satisfaction the bread of heaven.

And may there flow from our hearts rivers of living water for the sake of the unity of the church. I ask this in Jesus' name, amen. One of the most provocative observations that I'm aware of about the nature of saving faith is the observation that the book in the Bible that deals most relentlessly with the issue of saving believing is the Gospel of John, which never uses the word faith, never uses the word belief, but uses the verb believe 98 times.

That cannot be an accident. And for years I have been wrestling with what is he trying to say in always using the verb 98 times and never once using the noun faith or belief. Very strange.

So I'm going to suggest what I think is part of the answer to why. I think it's a very important part of the answer. And I don't think it's the whole answer.

I think it's a part of the answer that is often overlooked, often minimized in the church to the weakening, the weakening of the church and her radical witness in this world. So I leave to you to finish the rest of the answer, but I commend to you this important part of why does John write that way? Often you will read in commentators and people who are wrestling with this statements to the effect that John wants to communicate that faith is not passive, it is active. And that sounds right.

But regularly those commentators go on to imply that they mean something like faith causes us to be active in obedience, in love. But when they make the move from saying faith is active to saying faith brings about action, they have made a move that overlooks and minimizes one of John's crucial intentions. That's what I'm gonna argue.

I don't think John chose to emphasize the verb believe because believing causes actions other than believing. It does, but so does faith and Paul talked that way. I don't think that's what's going on.

I think he chose the verb believe because believing in its very nature is a kind of acting, an acting of the soul, not the body, an acting of the soul and the heart before the acting of the soul produces any other actions of the body or the mind. And the kind of acting of the soul that believing is reveals something crucial about the nature of saving faith. Now, keep in mind, in dealing with John, we are dealing with saving faith or John would rather say, saving believing.

Whoever believes in the son has eternal life. How many times does he say that? I got 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 times that I just put in the parentheses here to impress you that I looked them up, at least nine. It's all over John.

This is a book about life. This is a book about saving people from the wrath of God. Chapter three, verse 36, so that you will not remain under the wrath of God.

I want you to have eternal life. That's why I'm writing this book, chapter 20, verse 31. The point of my book is life, salvation.

How do you get it? Believe on the son of God. That's the point of the book. This is a book about saving faith or saving believing.

So what's the nature of saving believing in the gospel of John? What kind of soul action, heart action, not body action, not this. You can't see this. There's no spatial geographical movement.

It's an act of the soul, an act of the heart. Let's begin with chapter one. You can look at these with me.

I'm gonna look at three or four passages. Chapter one, verses 11 to 13, where John shows us that believing in the name of Jesus is virtually interchangeable with receiving Jesus. Verse 11, chapter one, Jesus came to his own and his own people did not receive him.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. So notice the grammatical way he handles these words. To all who did receive him, who believed.

In his name. So John chooses his words to make it plain that receiving Jesus is what believing does. It receives Jesus.

He interprets the action of the soul in believing as receiving. That's what the soul does. The soul receives Jesus.

And we shouldn't limit it to once. I mean, a lot of people just use this text for conversion. I'm gonna argue that this receiving and this believing are eternal.

That is, as long as you exist, you will be receiving Christ. That is, you will be believing Christ. Now, a double question rises.

Receiving Jesus as what? And what soul act of receiving? What is it? What is the act of receiving? I'm gonna mention two answers to those two questions. Receiving as what and what is receiving. And then I'm gonna go to the text and show you where I'm getting these two points.

So first, receiving Jesus is the soul's act drinking the living water that Jesus is, drinking with sweet soul satisfaction. That's what receiving is and that's what we receive. It is a drinking and it is a drinking of Christ who is the living water with sweet soul satisfaction.

Number two, receiving Jesus is the soul's eating the bread of heaven that Jesus is to the soul's satisfaction. Those are my two answers. To receive as what? Living water, bread of heaven.

What is receiving? Drinking and eating to the soul's satisfaction. So turn with me to John 6.35 for the place, the primary place, not the only place. You could go to chapter four, you could go to chapter seven where he talks in these same terms, but here's the main text, 6.35. And here he's showing that Jesus is eternally satisfying bread and water.

The two staples of life, that is eternal life. If you don't eat this bread and you don't drink this water, you perish forever. And if you drink them and eat them, you live forever.

I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me, notice the parallel, coming so as not to hunger. And now whoever believes in me shall never thirst. So the parallel between coming so as not to hunger, believing so as not to thirst tells us that Jesus believes, thinks, says, believing is a coming to drink, a coming to eat.

That's the act of faith. That's what faith does. It comes to eat.

It comes to drink. There's no spatial movement. There's no physical movement, no geographical movement at all in this coming.

This is not a coming that moves the body. What is moving is the heart. It's moving the soul, the will, the affections, the capacities of the soul to drink, the capacities of the soul to eat and taste and savor and be satisfied.

This coming to the water is the movement of thirst in the soul. This coming to bread is the movement of hunger in the soul, moving toward life, towards bread and water. These are soul movements, not body movements.

They are the heart actions, desiring, longing, drinking, feeding, embracing, treasuring, tasting, feasting on Christ. And then notice in John 6, 35, the two phrases, shall not hunger and shall never thirst. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

Now the words not and never imply that coming to Jesus for soul food and soul drink issues in eternal life. Eternal life, not temporary refreshment, but eternal life. If your soul finds its thirst and your soul finds its hunger satisfied in Jesus, you will live forever.

You'll never hunger, you'll never die. John 6, 58, whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. So what is believing in the gospel of John? First, it is receiving Jesus.

And what do we receive him as, as we receive him? We receive him as living water, life-giving water, eternal life-giving water. We receive him as bread from heaven and this Jesus water and this Jesus bread are two staples of eternal life, food and drink. And if we do not eat this bread and we do not drink this water, we perish.

That's what it means to receive and to believe. And so it goes all through the gospel of John. I'm just gonna jump over all of it, except to say, we could preach a message on receiving Jesus as water, bread, savior, glory, friend, helper, Lord, teacher, shepherd.

But what these texts say is to receive any of them is to eat, to receive any of them is to drink unto the soul's satisfaction. So when I ask, why does John never use the noun belief or faith, but uses the verb believe 98 times? My partial answer is this, John loves to foreground believing as a spiritual act of the soul in receiving, coming, drinking, eating, loving Christ. This is not yet a movement of the body.

That's in John two, how it produces love. We'll get to that at the end. This is not yet that.

This is the inner drinking, the inner feasting on Christ. What is moving in the act of believing is not the body, but the affections, soul hunger toward Christ, soul thirst toward Christ. John loves to speak of believing, not so much as a condition or a state of the soul, but as an act of the soul, a spiritual imbibing, a spiritual ingesting, a spiritual embracing, a spiritual savoring of the all satisfying glories of Christ.

Believing is not a state of satisfaction. Believing is not a state of pleasure in Christ. John wants to emphasize that we never put down the cup of living water as though we'd had enough.

We never lay aside the loaf of the bread of heaven as though we were stuffed. Believing doesn't do that, it doesn't do that. It puts the cup to the lips continually.

It bites into the loaf continually. Believing is receiving constantly, coming constantly. Christ is ever giving himself as food and drink for our souls.

We are ever putting our lips to the cup, our tongue to the bread. To use another image of John, life, I mean, faith or believing is like being a branch in a vine. Chapter 15, I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. So believing is what a branch does. What does the branch do? It drinks or dies continually.

It eats, it never stops. It abides drinking forever. That's its life.

Now, no doubt, there is far more. To why John uses the verb 98 times and the noun faith, never. But I'm commending to you that one of the reasons he does that is because he wants you to be saved, to have eternal life.

And you do not have eternal life if you are not receiving Jesus as the satisfying water for the thirst of your soul. You're not, you're not saved if that's not what Jesus is for you. You're not saved, you're not in possession of eternal life if you're not eating the satisfying bread for the hunger of your heart.

If Jesus isn't precious, life-giving water for you and precious life-giving bread for you and your daily portion is not to feed and drink, you have good reason to doubt that you're not born of God. And he doesn't want that to be true of you. And that's why he writes the way he does.

Now, this has implications for the Apostles' Creed and how we say it. And this has implications for the relational stress of the present presidential election and the relationships that have been tried by it. Let's take those one at a time, see how it applies.

When we say in the Apostles' Creed, I believe in God the Father Almighty, I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, I believe in the Holy Spirit. The little phrase, believe in, is pistuo eis, very common in the original Greek, early Greek versions of the Apostles' Creed. And that's hopeful, isn't it? It's not pistuo hati.

We don't just believe that these facts are so. The devil believes all these facts are so. All of them, even our Lord, if he's thinking about you, he knows he's your Lord.

The devil would never say he's my Lord. I thought about that, this is not in my manuscript. Actually, he would, he did, in fact, when the demons came to him and threatened to cast him out.

And he said, I know who you are. You are the Holy One of God, meaning you can do with us anything you want. That's a confession of faith that sends to hell.

So be careful that even that phrase, the devil could affirm. So this is not pistuo hati, this is pistuo eis, I believe in, and the implication would be I'm moving in, I'm leaning in, I'm eating, I'm gonna eat this truth to my soul's good, as I say these words. 34 times in the Gospel of John, he uses the phrase pistuo or some form of pistein, eis.

Very common, out of his 98 uses, 34 of them are with eis. Like John 3, 36, whoever believes in the Son, believes in the Son, has eternal life. That's the language of faith, that's the language of drinking.

Putting your face in the fountain, putting your lips on the bread. But here's the problem, three times in John's Gospel, 223, 830, 1242, believe in does not mean saving faith, it's fake faith, and he still uses believe in. I'll give you one example, John 223.

Many believed in his name, when they saw the signs that he was doing, but Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew what was in all people, and knew what was in man. This is fake. But John was willing to use the phrase believe in for the fake faith implication.

Here's the point, saying we believe in God the Father, saying we believe in God the Son, saying we believe in the Holy Spirit, may not be an expression of saving believing. And if it's not, after this message, and you ask the question, why is it not? Why is my saying this not an authentic believing? You're gonna remember Jesus' answer, because you're not receiving, eating, drinking, these greatest of all realities, as the satisfying nourishment of your soul, you're not. And he knows who is and who isn't.

He knows how many millions of people will be in hell, who recited that almost every week of their lives. And he doesn't want that, I don't want that, and therefore I commend Christ to you, to be savored in the Apostles' Creed. They are glorious truths.

Finally, what about the stresses that the presidential election has put on our relationships in the body of Christ? Jesus said in a related text, John 4, to the woman at the well, these words. He's taking the point further. John 4, 13, everyone who drinks of this water in the well will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst again.

The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Add to that the same point, only even more relevant, from chapter seven, verses 37 and 38. If anyone thirsts, he lifted up his voice, that's why I'm lifting up my voice, as he cried.

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. What does that mean? In other words, when we turn from the broken cisterns of the world, including politics, and drink from Christ, our hearts not only become deep, tranquil reservoirs of satisfaction, they also become rivers of living water flowing out.

The sweetest experiences I know, the sweetest experiences of being filled with the fullness of Christ are those moments when the rivers of affection carry everything before them, all obstacles in love to my brothers and sisters. Let me say it again. The sweetest experiences of eating and drinking the bread and the living water who is Christ, and being profoundly and deeply and sweetly satisfied, the sweetest experiences of those moments is the connection between that and the overflow of rivers of affection that carry before them all obstacles in the embrace of my brothers and sisters in love.

So last Sunday, Ray there is sitting where I usually sit, and Noel and I have sat and stood there for seven years or so, and Renee is here on Sunday morning, has been, and they lead us to Christ. With songs like this, those two great songs, they lead me to Christ. These are pinnacle moments in my walk with Jesus.

I don't know how it is with others, but I love corporate worship with God's people, especially the singing part. Jason's a great preacher, I love that too. But oh, do I love to sing with God's people if the lyrics are rich, which they are.

That's what we do here, right? God help us. And I was standing there this Sunday, this past Sunday, and as I was drinking from Christ, waves of affection broke over me for Wayne Grudel and Eric Metaxas and Doug Wilson and Al Mulder and John MacArthur, just to name a few of the people that don't like what I wrote. All of them precious brothers whose perspective on this election are, not just were, very different from my own.

The disagreement is sharp, but what can I say? The more deeply I drink, whether I'm alone at home on my knees or whether I'm with God's people, hands lifted, communing with, feeding on, drinking from, the beauty and the truth and the worth of Jesus, I find myself more deeply in love with these men than ever. I love them. So in conclusion, I commend Christ to you as soul satisfying living water.

I commend Christ to you as soul satisfying bread from heaven for the sake of your eternal life and for the sake of the authenticity of your affirming glorious creedal truth and in the hope that from your Christ satisfied heart will flow rivers of water for the sake of the unity of Christ. Let's pray. We lift our hungry and thirsty hearts to you, Christ.

And we put our lips to the cup of living water and we put our tongue on the bread of heaven. And we ask that the affectional capacities of our soul would be enlivened, quickened, awakened, made able to eat and drink and savor with satisfaction all that you give us of God. Bless these brothers and sisters.

Grant that there would flow from them rivers of living water that carry before them all obstacles to love and establish unity in the body of Christ. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

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