

A DIFFICULT TEXT ON THE NATURE OF SAVING TRUST

John 2:22-25 - "When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. [23] Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [24] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people [25] and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."

This is a very demanding little paragraph. I say demanding because I think it **demand**s more thought than other whole chapters. That's the reason I've limited our study today to these four verses. And **verse 22** was already considered in our last teaching. But the remaining three verses have a certain bite to them that can't be danced around.

It's the placing of these remarks that jars just a bit. John is about to launch into that wonderful account of **new birth** and **living faith** and **John 3:16 promise** in the account of **Nicodemus**. Evangelicals rightly eat up this Jesus sermon on how to be "**saved**."

But right before John delivers chapter three with the glories of saving faith he cautions us that Jesus doesn't **believe** in everyone who **believes** in Him. When is a person a Christian? Who gets to decide if I'm a Christian or not? Is it just up to me? Can I just **self-pronounce** myself a Christian? And if I **say** I am, I **am**? Is a person a Christian just because he or she believes in Jesus? Or "**asks Jesus into his or her heart?**"

This is the enormous issue served up in this little text. Our text is bluntly clear - "**Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing**"(23). And then, in striking contrast, "**....But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people....**"(24). The people believed, on **their** part. Jesus didn't, on **His**.

We have a simple goal in front of us. Our task this morning is to drill down into answering these two questions - "**What is wrong here? Why isn't Jesus committing Himself to these "believers?"**"

1) **IT IS TEMPTING TO REJECT THE FAITH OF THESE NAMELESS BELIEVERS BECAUSE JOHN SAYS THEY BELIEVED BECAUSE THEY SAW THE EVIDENCE OF JESUS' SIGNS**

John 2:23 - "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name **when they saw the signs that he was doing**."

Many people jump on this as the root of the problem. Certainly Jesus **did** come down very hard on the crowds and many of the religious leaders when they **pretended** they **would** believe if only Jesus would prove Himself to them:

John 6:29-30 - "Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you **believe in him** whom he has sent.' [30] So they said to him, 'Then **what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?**'"

What sign do you do? Are you kidding? These are the same people among that crowd of 5000 that were fed with 5 loaves and two fish. Really? You need a sign and then you'll believe?

So yes, Jesus did come down hard on those who never would get **enough** proof to repent and yield their heart to Jesus Christ. He hated it when people made a **game** of faith. He hated being **played with**. He knew when people were just being **crafty** with Him - when they **pretended** lack of evidence. Then and now Jesus nothing to do with **clever** people.

But there's no hint of that in John's words in chapter two. In fact, John *tells* us he recorded all the things - the *signs* - Jesus did precisely so people would believe in Jesus as the Christ. He says that was the very reason for his whole gospel account:

John 20:30-31 - "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John is clear as a bell. *"I'm recording these signs of Jesus so that you might believe!"* So no, I don't think Jesus' issue with these believers was their conviction being founded upon the signs He did. I think there is something else going on in this tough little text.

2) **THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING IMPRESSED WITH JESUS AND PLACING ONGOING TRUST IN JESUS**

John 2:23-24 - "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [24] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people...."

On the surface these believers seem to fulfill the conditions of John's marvelous promise of his prologue in **John 1:12** - "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...." There's the condition - "believed in his name." And John uses the very same words to describe these people in **2:23** - "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing."

Yet something is clearly wrong because, as John goes on to record, *"...Jesus, on his part did not entrust himself to them...."* (24). And I'll tell you what I think the difference is.

Look again - very slowly - at **John 2:23** - "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing." The way you receive John's thought process depends on which words you emphasize in your head as you read them.

Usually, when John talks about *belief* in his account he doesn't use the past tense as he does here. He usually describes belief in the *ongoing present tense*.

For example, just take some of the very familiar uses of the word *believe*, or *believes* in the very next famous third chapter. Consider the best known Bible verse in the whole world - **John 3:16** - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Notice, not "whoever *believed*," but "*believes*" - present tense - ongoingly - continuously - persistently.

You would see this same careful use of the present tense repeatedly:

John 3:15 - "...that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

John 3:36 - "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

This is very different from what Jesus saw in these "*believers*" at the Passover Feast in Jerusalem - **John 2:23** - "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing."

Please notice, John isn't merely telling us that the signs of Jesus were the *source* of their belief. That, in itself, would have fitted in with John's purpose in recording those signs in the first place - **John 20:30-31** -

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

But in 2:23 - when John says “....many believed in his name *when* they saw the signs....” - he means to tell us the *limitation* of their belief. *When* did they believe? They believed “*when*” or “*while*” Jesus was doing His miracles. Their faith lasted as long as the wonders lasted. They were *impressed* with the miracles more than they were *committed* to His Person.

So there are believers and there are *believers* in John’s gospel. And Jesus, knowing the *inside heart* of belief, not just its *outward profession and excitement*, encountered the difference all the time. John makes it clear that there was a kind of *professed belief* that would always be *one-sided* because Jesus never joined Himself to it. People couldn’t *self-confess* genuine faith. Jesus had to *respond* to change the heart and the head. *Belief*, to be genuine, had to involve *both* the *believer* and *Jesus*. Genuine belief was always a kind of *exchanging of vows* between *two* parties.

It seemed Jesus never tired of emphasizing this - John 8:28-32 - “So Jesus said to them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. [29] And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.’ [30] As he was saying these things, many *believed* in him. [31] So Jesus said to the Jews who had *believed* in him, ‘If you *abide* [continue] in my word, you are *truly* my disciples, [32] and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

The point, of course, is only *ongoing* belief brings freedom from self and sin. The bondage of our fallen selves can’t be broken by moments of inspiration. Christ commits His freeing redemptive power by grace, to be sure. It’s received by nothing but faith - *belief*. But the belief must be firmly held and abiding. This isn’t works salvation. *Ongoing belief* is the basket into which Jesus pours His *ongoing grace*.

When belief is limited to times of wonder our lives will bear no spiritual fruit or permanence. Jesus stressed this point in one of His most famous parables - the parable of the soils:

Matthew 13:20-22 - “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, [21] yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and *when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away*. [22] As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the *cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful*. ”

In these two soils we stare in the face belief or trust in Christ’s word when there is no miracle. Here is what happens to *sign belief* when it’s not linked to Christ’s Person and word. *Persecution* will come and *temptation* will come. And this belief will wither and die.

3) THOSE TIMES WHEN FAITH JUST HAS TO HANG AROUND WAITING

I know the order of this seems strange, but let me close by going right back to a point I made in my introductory text and remarks:

John 2:22-25 - “*When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*. [23] Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [24] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people [25] and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

Notice those words in **verse 22**. They are the words John places immediately preceding the *sign faith* in **verse 23**. And I think they’re there for a reason. They serve as a powerful contrast. They point to real

disciples and real faith that frequently has to wait through a long interval between **hearing something promised** and **seeing its meaning and fulfillment**.

And what does real belief in Christ do in these silent, foggy times? It hangs around waiting. Or, to use a more Scriptural term, it **abides**. It persists following Jesus when it doesn't **understand** Jesus. It's committed to Jesus when it doesn't **hear** Jesus. It takes its **vow** to Christ seriously, like a husband who is far away from home on a business trip. And it does so knowing full well that Jesus always takes **His** commitment to His faithful followers in a way that never leaves them nor forsakes them. Whether they **feel** that commitment or not.