

Whoever Believes in Him

The True Meaning of Christmas Series, December 17 & 18, 2022 | John 3:16

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Does our picture of believing keep us from finding the true meaning of Christmas?

Around Christmastime, we are inundated with messages to “believe.”

Christmas cards, Christmas decorations, and holiday ads all talk about believing.

Here's one example. This picture implies that we should all believe in snow, in enjoying snow, and in snowmen that come to life.

We are encouraged to believe in magic, believe in the season, and simply to believe.

That's a fairy-tale approach to belief. That's not the true meaning of believing.

Lidl, an international grocery chain, runs commercials about “a Christmas you can believe in.”

Their ads imply that there's something unbelievable about Christmas.

Sometimes, they seem to suggest, the whole notion of Christmas magic is what's so unbelievable. So, we need “a Christmas you can believe in.”

Sometimes it's our expectations that are unbelievable. We can expect Christmas meals, decorations, and gatherings that are perfect. So, we need “a Christmas you can believe in.”

Are they suggesting that no one buys the idea of God taking human flesh in Jesus? Instead, we need simple, uncomplicated food and gatherings, “a Christmas you can believe in.”

That's a cynical approach to belief. That's not the true meaning of believing.

John 3:18 makes clear that the stakes surrounding believing are high.

John 3:18 says, ***“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”***

John 3:18 makes the possibility clear: Whoever believes in the Son of God is not condemned. The balance of John 3 tells us that they get new life and eternal life.

However, John 3:18 also makes it clear that whoever does not believe in the Son of God (Jesus) is condemned already. They perish eternally.

Believing or not is an incredibly consequential decision.

John 3:16 draws our attention to the true meaning of believing.

In **John 3:16** Jesus says, ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”***

So far, we have looked at what John means when he says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.”

In the process, John 3:16 is helping us to find the true meaning of Christmas.

Notice that next John 3:16 raises the question of belief, “that whoever believes in him ...”
What is John 3:16 saying? What does it mean to believe?

We can't find the true meaning of Christmas until we find the true meaning of believing.

Believing is more involved and specific than Christmas ads and signs might lead us to think.

So, today, we're going to explore more fully the true meaning of believing.

As we do, we will find our role in the true meaning of Christmas.

Believing involves agreement.

When Jesus healed a man born blind in John 9, there was a question of fact.

Jesus was in Jerusalem.

As he passed near the Temple, there was a man the Bible tells us was blind from birth.

Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and anointed the man's eyes with the mud. Then he told the man to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam.

The man did so and came back able to see. That caused quite a stir! Many people knew this man, and they knew that he had always been blind. Now he could see.

This apparent miracle led to an investigation by the religious leaders. The miracle happened on a Sabbath day, complicating the question because of the prohibition of work.

There were questions about what happened, how, by whose hand, and what it all meant.

At the heart, though, was a question of fact. Had this man really been born blind? Had he really been given sight? Was there really a miracle? These were all questions of fact.

John 9:18 says that the Jewish religious leaders did not believe at first that a healing had happened. It says,

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ...

It was a question of agreeing with the facts as presented.

Romans 10:9-10 makes clear that cognitive agreement with or assent to certain facts is important.

Romans 10:9-10 reads:

... because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

In Romans 10, Paul is addressing where salvation comes from.

In Romans 10:9 Paul gives us two key concepts. If we confess with our mouths (speak it out loud) AND believe (that is, agree) in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, then we will be saved. Paul is listing the components we need at the beginning of salvation.

Then in Romans 10:10, Paul puts them in order. First one believes in the heart and then confesses with the mouth.

Salvation starts with agreeing to a proposition. How do we know that Paul is writing about the place of agreement with a proposition?

The heart was the place of reason in Hebrew anthropology.

The heart, of course, is part of the body that pumps oxygenated blood to the other organs.

We think of it as the seat of our emotions. We think of love as coming from the heart.

The ancient Hebrews thought of the heart as the seat of our reason, among other things.¹

So, when Paul tells us that we must believe in our hearts to be saved, he means that we must be convinced intellectually and give rational assent to the proposition that God raised Jesus from the dead. Believing involves agreement.

The end of Jesus' encounter with the man born blind shows us that belief starts with agreement but becomes something more.

Having questioned the man born blind's parents, the Jewish religious leaders turned their questioning back on the man himself. They wanted him to call Jesus a sinner for healing, and thereby doing work, on the Sabbath.

The man declined to comment on Jesus' sinfulness but affirmed the fact that he was blind before but now was able to see.

He went on to imply that he was now a disciple of Jesus!

The Jewish religious leaders cast the man out of the synagogue as a punishment.

John 9:35-36 tells us what happened next:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"

The fact had already been established. Both Jesus and the man born blind agreed on what had happened. Here Jesus is asking something deeper. Not, "Do you believe the Son of Man" but "do you believe IN the Son of Man?" There is agreement or assent. Then there is something more, something personal.

In **John 9:38** we read:

He said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

Believing starts with agreement but becomes something more.

Believing requires trust.

Trust is at the root of the origins of the Greek word "to believe."

The verb "to believe" started as an adjective in Greek.

It meant "trusting" or "worthy of trust."

When the verb forms of "to trust" emerged, they occurred most frequently in oaths or contracts. From one side it meant "to trust" or "to rely upon." From the other side it meant "to be trustworthy" or "to obey." Belief came later. This word was first about trust.²

¹ Cowen, G. P. (2003). [Heart](#). In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (pp. 731-732). Holman Bible Publishers.

² Kittel: Volume VI, pp. 175-179.

Believing frequently has an object.

To believe doesn't always mean that I believe "that."

To believe frequently means that I believe "in" something or someone.

I trust that thing or that person.

That's the case with believing in the Bible.

This happened in John chapter 2, with Jesus' first public miracle.

At a wedding feast, the family ran out of wine. Jesus' mother, Mary, approached him and asked him to do something about it.

Reluctantly, Jesus turned a great quantity of water into wine.

His disciples saw this. Clearly, they believed in that they agreed about the facts. However, their believing went further. In **John 2:11** we read,

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

They believe in Jesus. Jesus is the object of their belief. They trust Jesus.

The disciples' experience with the Resurrection reminds us that even trust leads to something more.

On the morning Jesus rose from the dead, there was a question of facts.

Mary Magdalene came back from the empty tomb with news that the tomb was empty. This was a question of fact, and there was not agreement. There was lack of clarity and **there was disbelief.**

There was no substantive belief on the part of the disciples.

Then Peter and John went into the tomb and found it empty. In **John 20:8** we read that they believed in that they agreed that the tomb was empty,

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed ...

Eventually, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and to some of the disciples. However, Thomas was not there. Later, when they shared the news with Thomas, he did not believe. He was not in agreement with the facts AND he did not trust either his fellow disciples or Jesus. In **John 20:25** we read:

So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

However, Jesus subsequently appeared to Thomas. Then the facts were not in dispute, Thomas declared his trust in Jesus. In **John 20:28-29** we pick up something more:

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Agreement with the facts leads to trust, which leads to worship of Jesus!

John makes sure we don't miss it all when he shares with us the purpose of his book. In **John 20:31** he declares about what he has written:

... 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.

Believing involves agreement, and it requires trust. However, it leads to something more.

Believing demands faith.

19th Century Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard is associated with a “leap of faith.”

Kierkegaard’s position gets mischaracterized.

He is lampooned as an enemy of reason.

Kierkegaard is accused of saying that faith in God is an irrational leap that a person takes to trust God without facts or even despite the facts. That’s not what he’s saying.

Kierkegaard was fighting in his day to say that Christian faith is more than the stale recitation of a set of propositions.

Faith must result in a decision of the will, a decision to trust, an act of obedience.

That’s the leap of faith.³

Believing faith involves a change of address.

As the Gospel of John begins, we learn that Jesus, the light of the world, is coming into a world that is characterized as darkness.

The world, the place we live in, is a place of darkness.

The darkness is not just ignorance of God but active resistance to God. That is our address.

To believe demands faith that changes our address. In **John 12:46** Jesus says,

“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

We were in the dark, but when we believe in Jesus, we do not remain there.

When we have faith in Jesus, we change our home address from the darkness and the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of God and to the light.

Faith involves a change of address.

Believing faith opens the door to a love relationship.

When we believe in and have faith in Jesus, we obey him. That’s the essence of loving him.

When we love and obey him, we remain in him.

Believing faith, obedience, and love then become like a cycle with each reinforcing the other.

1 John 4:16 describes it:

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Believing faith, then, opens the door to a love relationship with God the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Believing faith leads to salvation.

Back to our core passage this season, **John 3:16**. There Jesus makes what he means abundantly clear:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

³ <https://www.logos.com/grow/kierkegaards-leap-of-faith/>

“Believe” means everything we’ve said today.

Believing faith leads to never perishing, life in the kingdom of God, eternal life.

Believing demands faith. The two are intimately linked.

Will we believe?

The true meaning of faith comes to life in an experience Jesus references in John 3:14-15.

In **John 3:14-15** as he is explaining being born again, access to the Kingdom of God, and eternal life to Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader, Jesus said:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

What does that mean?

It’s a reference back to the Old Testament (Numbers 21:4-9). As Moses was leading the people through the wilderness after their flight from slavery in Egypt, food and water were scarce.

God provided consistently and miraculously. Still, people grumbled against God and Moses.

The Lord disciplined Israel. He sent serpents into the camp. The serpents bit the people, and the people would frequently die from the bites. It was a terrible plague.

The people repented, and Moses prayed for their deliverance.

Rather than causing the serpents to leave, God sent deliverance from the serpent bites.

He told Moses to make a bronze serpent and to put it on a pole. He said that whenever a person in the camp was bitten, if they would look at the serpent, they would not die. Moses did what the Lord commanded, and everyone who looked to the serpent on the pole lived.

It’s an odd way for God to deliver his people, and it’s odd that Jesus refers to it here.

Except that it helps us to understand belief.

The people in the camp of Israel had to believe, to agree that the serpent could heal them.

They had to believe, to trust in the Lord that he was willing to heal them.

They had to believe, to have faith that turned into the obedient action of looking up at the bronze serpent on the pole.

Jesus was saying that people would need to come to him the same way.

He would be lifted up on the cross.

People would need to believe in him, to agree that he is the Son God sent into the world, that he had died to pay the price for their sin, and that he had risen from the dead and was Lord.

People would need to believe in him, to trust in him that he really could and would save them.

People would need to believe in him, to have faith in him and to repent, come to him, change their address from the darkness to the light, love God, obey him, and receive salvation.

Believing is the only action John 3:16 leaves with us.

God loved the world. That’s God.

God gave his only Son. That’s God again.

Eternal life can only come from God.

The only thing Jesus asks of us in John 3:16 is to believe, and it’s a step open to us all.

We have a decision to make about Jesus. WILL WE BELIEVE?

Will we believe that Jesus is the Son of God who came, lived, died, and rose again for us?

Will we trust him?

Will we have faith in Jesus?

Eternity hangs in the balance.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever **believes** in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

That’s the true meaning of Christmas.