

## 5. The Struggle to be Real

**Texts:** John 4:43-54.

### Quotes:

- We have not lost faith, but we have transferred it from God to the medical profession. *George Bernard Shaw*
- A faith that cannot survive collision with the truth is not worth many regrets. *Arthur C. Clarke*
- Unthinking faith is a curious offering to be made to the creator of the human mind. *John A Hutchinson*
- Faith is no irresponsible shot in the dark. It is a responsible trust in God. *Robert Schuller*
- Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope or confidence. *Helen Keller*
- Faith is the strength by which a shattered world shall emerge into the light. *Helen Keller*
- Faith is not belief. Belief is passive. Faith is active. *Edith Hamilton*
- “You say you believe,” said Count de X., an extreme Catholic, to the good Protestant minister. “You people *believe*, but we *know*.” *André Gide*

### Introductory questions

If a prophet has no honor in his own country as Jesus said, why does John record the Galileans as welcoming him? What were they expecting? What reason did the nobleman have to ask Jesus to come and heal his son? Why did Jesus reply by talking about how people wanted signs before they would believe? Was the man looking for a sign, or for his son to live?

### Discussion ideas

This passage is often cited as a great example of “blind faith,” the nobleman simply accepting what Jesus says and going on his way. The first question then must be ‘what did he know about Jesus?’ For why would he approach Jesus in the first place, if he had no evidence? Was his faith ‘blind’? John makes the telling point that this miracle was the second sign in Jesus’ ministry, and following the miracle of the water into wine, also occurred in Cana—though its effect was distant!

Clearly the nobleman knew something of Jesus to want to make the journey from Capernaum to Cana. He must have heard or seen in Jesus enough to persuade him to trust in Jesus’ abilities. Jesus’ comment about those looking for signs was surely more directed at the crowd than the nobleman, for the man simply says “Please come before he dies.” His primary concern is not over the question of who people think Jesus is—only that his son will not die.

Why did John select this miracle? Perhaps because it shows Jesus healing at a distance. The man wanted Jesus to go with him to heal his son, but Jesus, Almighty God, demonstrates that his physical presence there is not necessary. He simply tells the man to go, and that his son will live. He does not ask about the man’s faith, or in fact question him in any way. He simply gives the assurance that the boy will not die. The man leaves, taking Jesus at his word.

Was that easy? Did he perhaps think that Jesus had to lay on hands, or be physically present? Why didn’t Jesus go, and comfort him on the way? In the end, John through this story is telling us that Jesus is able to do whatever is necessary, that he can save and heal wherever.

## **Ellen White Comments**

God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His Word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration. *Steps to Christ*, 105.

There are many who fail to distinguish between the rashness of presumption and the intelligent confidence of faith. . . . *Review and Herald*, April 1, 1875.

Believers are not to rest in suppositions and ill-defined ideas of what constitutes truth. Their faith must be firmly founded upon the word of God so that when the testing time shall come and they are brought before councils to answer for their faith they may be able to give a reason for the hope that is in them. *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 708.

Faith in a lie will not have a sanctifying influence upon the life or character. No error is truth, or can be made truth by repetition, or by faith in it. Sincerity will never save a soul from the consequences of believing an error. . . . The Lord does not want us to have a blind credulity, and call that the faith that sanctifies. *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 56

The man who makes the working of miracles the test of his faith will find that Satan can, through a species of deceptions, perform wonders that will appear to be genuine miracles. . . . If we accept not the truth in the love of it, we may be among the number who will see the miracles wrought by Satan in these last days, and believe them. *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, pp. 52-53.

Let God's people act so that the world will see that Seventh-day Adventists are an intelligent, thinking people, whose faith is based on a surer foundation than the bedlam of confusion. The people are hungry for the bread of life. Do not offer them a stone. *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 24

## **Extra material**

Light brings insight, illumination, visibility. Similarly enlightened faith in God is not a blind darkness of unknowing, but a conviction based on evidence that brings enlightenment. It is truly seeing, for it is trusting someone you know.

The truth is that reason cannot be denied, for there is no other tool we can use except our minds. Faith cannot be blind or reckless in denying the use of the mind. In the words of Ash Ghinn, "True faith never circumvents the mind. . . . reckless faith is dangerous and blind."

The call is to an intelligent faith. Not something of the intellect, a mental acceptance, but a belief that is based on examination of the available evidence, a faith that is able to define what it is and give reasons. Such intelligent faith is light years apart from blind credulity.

B.B. Warfield said it well: "Faith is the gift of God: but it does not in the least follow that the faith God gives is an irrational faith, that is, a faith without grounds in right reason. . . . The Holy Spirit does not work a blind, an ungrounded faith in the heart. . . . We believe in Christ because it is rational to believe in Him, not though it be irrational. . . . We are arguing that faith is, in all its exercises alike [religious or secular], a form of conviction, and is, therefore, necessarily grounded in evidence. And we are arguing that evidence accordingly has its part to play in the conversion of the soul."

Faith makes sense. It engages the mind rather than dismisses it. The God who makes sense is looking for faith that makes sense. Belief in God does not mean checking your brain at the door, and entering in like some mindless zombie. In fact, this God want thought more than anything—thought that leads to the understanding of what the evidence.

## 6. Putting the Past Behind You

**Texts:** John 5

### **Quotes:**

- God never saves a spectator. *Robert Brown*
- God gets more out of your salvation than you ever will. *David Shepherd*
- If words are to enter men's minds and bear fruit, they must be the right words shaped cunningly to pass men's defenses and explode silently and effectually within their minds. *J. B. Phillips, Bible translator and author of **Making Men Whole**.*

### **Introductory questions**

Why didn't the paralytic ask Jesus to help him? Can God help us even if we don't ask? What is really troubling about the "angel stirs the waters" tradition? Why did Jesus single this one man out for special attention—what about the rest? Why did Jesus choose to heal the man on the Sabbath? Why did Jesus tell the man to pick up his mat? What does "stop sinning" comment mean? What is so important in Jesus long explanation about the Father?

### **Discussion ideas**

LLU's motto is "To make man whole." That's the theme of this chapter, and it also sums up John's gospel. In addition to the whole story of the paralytic, we must not miss Jesus' long explanation about the Father, claiming to be equal to him. This is at the heart of the Jewish rejection—that Jesus claimed to be God the Father. Yet this is the very reason why Jesus came—to reveal the Father to us. So instead of skipping over these essential verses, we must take them into account, for they explain the heart of Jesus' mission.

The essential thought from Jesus is that if you hear his word and believe, you *have* eternal life. This is the security that comes from God, both for the present, and for the future. In the same way as Jesus healed the paralytic who could do *nothing* for himself, and whose attempts at self-healing through a superstitious myth were never going to succeed, so we can experience the salvation healing that makes us completely whole.

Of course, there will always be some who are offended—who complain about Sabbath-breaking and cheap grace and easy salvation. Jesus' answer to those complainers points to the fact that God is always working, along with Jesus, and that this work is for the benefit of all creation, including our salvation. His response only infuriates his opponents, who want to kill him—a sure sign that you are not on the right path, and do not have the right picture of God!

The whole story is about the great controversy and the wrong picture of God. The blind, lame and paralyzed who waited for the waters of the pool of Bethesda (house of mercy!) to move had a very poor picture of an arbitrary God, who only healed the first in the water. By definition, that had to be the less needy! The paralyzed man does not answer Jesus' question "Do you want to get well?" with a "Yes!"—instead he complains about the unfair situation, and indirectly blames God. He doesn't see his cure and salvation standing right in front of him

The Jewish leaders are far less concerned about the miraculous healing than that this man is carrying his mat on the Sabbath. For them, God is a picky, legalistic Being who only looks at formal compliance. Instead of celebrating God with them, they want him dead! Jesus bemoans the fact that his hearers search the scriptures for God's eternal life, and yet fail to recognize that they testify of him—eternal life incarnate. How easily people miss the true God!

## Ellen White Comments

Let us turn to the story of the paralytic at Bethesda. The poor sufferer was helpless; he had not used his limbs for thirty-eight years. Yet Jesus bade him, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." The sick man might have said, "Lord, if Thou wilt make me whole, I will obey Thy word." But, no, he believed Christ's word, believed that he was made whole, and he made the effort at once; he willed to walk, and he did walk. He acted on the word of Christ, and God gave the power. He was made whole. {SC 50}

As the paralytic lay beside the pool, helpless and well-nigh hopeless, Jesus drew near and asked, in tones of pity, "Wilt thou be made whole?" Be made whole!--this had been the burden of his desire and prayers for long, weary years. With trembling eagerness he told the story of his efforts and disappointments. No friend was at hand to bear him with sturdy arm into the healing fountain. His agonizing appeals for help fell unheeded; all around him were those who sought for their own loved ones the coveted boon. When at the troubling of the waters he painfully sought to reach the pool, another would be hurried down before him.

Jesus looked upon the sufferer, and said, "Arise, take up thy bed, and walk." There was no assurance of divine help, no manifestation of miraculous power. What marvel, had the man made answer, "It is impossible! How can I be expected now to use my limbs, that have not obeyed my will for thirty-eight years?" From a merely human stand-point, such reasoning would appear consistent. The sufferer might have given place to doubt, and thus have permitted that God-given opportunity to pass unimproved. But no; without a question, he seized his only chance. As he attempted to do what Christ had commanded, strength and vigor came; he was made whole....

The miracle at Bethesda should have convinced all beholders that Jesus is the Son of God. But the Jews desired only a pretext for unbelief, and it was not hard to find what they sought. At Christ's command, the paralytic had borne away the simple mat on which he had lain; and now Satan, ever ready with his insinuations, suggested that this act might be construed into a violation of the Sabbath.... There was no rejoicing at the deliverance of that long-imprisoned captive, no grateful praise that One was among them who could heal all manner of disease. Their traditions had been disregarded, and this closed their eyes to all the evidence of divine power. Bigoted and self-righteous, they would not admit that they could have misapprehended the true design of the Sabbath. Instead of criticising themselves, they chose to condemn Christ. {ST, June 8, 1882}

## Extra Material

Near to where we used to live in Cambridge, England, stood a long row of short, stumpy trees. They were old pollarded willows, grey with years of experience; and they guarded the edge of the field like a line of clenched fists pointed angrily against the sky.

I found them in winter, and they seemed defiant, but dead. No sign of life, just old stumps of trees that had died still shaking their fists at the world. But then came the spring, and they came to life. No longer looking like fists, they sent out shoots and leaves, green and fresh, and showed a strange beauty where once there was only ugly, twisted bark. A transformation. A re-creation.

But not all became green and bright. Some stayed just as they had been, grey and dead. A peculiar sight amongst all the summer beauty—an ugly, twisted fist clenched in death. They had died forever, and the miracle of spring's re-creation left them untouched.

Some have physical paralysis. Some spiritual. All need God's transformation. But not all choose to be changed. A parable, perhaps. A story to think on. A tale that means something, a pointer to the ways of God.

## 7. The Sacred in the Common

**Texts:** John 6

### **Quotes:**

- People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle. *Thich Nhat Hanh*
- To see a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wildflower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour. *William Blake*
- I still say a church steeple with a lightning rod on top shows a lack of confidence. *Doug McLeod*

### **Introductory questions**

Why does Jesus decide to feed the 5,000? What is he trying to prove? What does this whole chapter tell us about Jesus, the God he portrays, and the answers to the great controversy? Why does Jesus walk to the boat? Again, what is the point of his action and comments? Is it simplistic to think that all God wants is belief in Jesus? How is Jesus the bread of life?

### **Discussion ideas**

Perhaps the most significant verse in this chapter is the question of the disciples: “What must we do to do the works God requires?” John 6:28 NIV. That is at the heart of all the debate over Jesus, and our relationship to God. Even the feeding miracles, the walking on the water, and the spiritual debate reflect this basic question—how to relate to God. What does he want? Jesus' answer is very simple, and very different to the answer of the Jewish rabbis: “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” John 6:29 NIV.

Jesus is saying that the focus on doing things to please God is completely wrong. What God is looking for is that personal relationship that is based on accepting him as he is—which is what Jesus came to reveal. In the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, God shows his care and concern for all of his children. In the arrival of Jesus at the boat, he immediately speaks to their fear by telling them “It is I; don't be afraid.” Time and again God reassures us that we do not need to be afraid of him, for he is our friend and has our very best interests at heart.

For this reason we can live our humble, even menial lives, as dedicated friends of God, discovering the sacred in the commonplace. The spiritual ministry that Jesus performed focused on helping others, healing the sick, feeding the hungry. For some this seems to mundane—but in doing this work for others, Jesus most clearly revealed God. That is why the commonplace things become sacred—because they are done for the highest possible reasons of love and grace.

Jesus takes the most commonplace food—bread—and makes it the center of his presentation on God. Even his disciples are confused when he stresses the point about eating his flesh etc. But this is the intimate and interconnected relationship God wants—to be an integral part of who we actually are. The Jewish leaders are offended, because Jesus identifies himself as the bread from heaven, and all they see is Joseph's son.

The important conclusion is to see how everything is part of God's plan to answer the questions of the great controversy, and in this nothing is unimportant.

## Ellen White Comments

Jesus made the lowly paths of human life sacred by His example. . . . His life was one of diligent industry. He, the Majesty of heaven, walked the streets, clad in the simple garb of the common laborer. He toiled up and down the mountain steeps, going to and from His humble work. Angels were not sent to bear Him on their pinions up the tiresome ascent, or to lend their strength in performing His lowly task. Yet when He went forth to contribute to the support of the family by His daily toil, He possessed the same power as when He wrought the miracle of feeding the five thousand hungry souls on the shore of Galilee. But He did not employ His divine power to lessen His burdens or lighten His toil. He had taken upon Himself the form of humanity with all its attendant ills, and He flinched not from its severest trials. He lived in a peasant's home, He was clothed in coarse garments, He mingled with the lowly, He toiled daily with patient hands. His example shows us that it is man's duty to be industrious, that labor is honorable. {CG 346}

Jesus did not seek to attract the people to Him by gratifying the desire for luxury. To that great throng, weary and hungry after the long, exciting day, the simple fare was an assurance not only of His power, but of His tender care for them in the common needs of life. . . . In feeding the five thousand, Jesus lifts the veil from the world of nature, and reveals the power that is constantly exercised for our good. In the production of earth's harvests God is working a miracle every day. {DA 367}

## Extra material

“I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [Jesus Christ]: “I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God,; or else a madman or something worse .... You can shut him up for fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.” *C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity*

“Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes, The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.” *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. We need to understand the sacred in the common, the holy in the ordinary, the glorious in the mundane. We need:

- to see every common bush afire with God
- to recognize that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerald Manley Hopkins)
- to *truly* see
- to catch a vision of God among all the insignificant bits of our lives

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 NIV. “It is precisely where there is no substance, that we find the usefulness of clay pots. . . . Friendship is one of the most effective and precious of those containers. *Tao Te Ching*.

## 8. The Good Shepherd

**Texts:** John 7:1-10:21 (!)

### Quotes:

- I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity. *C. S. Lewis*
- Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important. *C. S. Lewis*
- Men rarely (if ever) manage to dream up a god superior to themselves. Most gods have the manners and morals of a spoiled child. *Robert Heinlein*

### Introductory questions

What does this long passage tell us about Jesus, and the questions he is answering? How does Jesus reveal God? Why do the religious leaders react so negatively? Does Jesus compromise law in dealing with the adulterous woman? What does the healing of the blind man illustrate? How is Jesus the good shepherd? How do we have that life to the full?

### Discussion ideas

John 7 continues John's presentation on how people reacted to Jesus. There is much debate over whether Jesus is a good man or a deceiver. Jesus' own brothers encourage him to "go public," but not because they are convinced—on fact John records that they don't believe in Jesus. The crisis is coming—and it is over the kind of God Jesus reveals:

"Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, 'Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.'" John 7:28, 29 NIV.

The response from the temple guards is telling "nobody ever spoke like this man!" Jesus in his very life and actions is revealing God in fullest clarity, and the Enemy is determined to destroy this. Through the religious leaders, he seeks to kill Jesus. The tragedy is that when truth is revealed in its brilliance, we prefer the darkness...

In the moving, amazing, even troubling story of the woman taken in adultery we see Jesus acting in the most gracious way to a trembling sinner. The very one who had inscribed the ten commandments on the stone tablets speaks words of comfort and assurance. And writing sins quietly in the transitory dust, he appeals to those who accuse to see themselves as God does. Sadly they leave—not what Jesus would have wished—looking to save and heal each of his sin-sick and rebellious children.

Time and again in John 8, Jesus points to his heavenly Father, explaining the truth about his nature and character. Consequently, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31, 32 NIV. Again the question of God and his treatment of human beings comes up in connection with the man born blind. For if blindness is punishment for sin, who sinned in the case of a baby? In the long dialogue with the religious leaders who again are offended by a miracle on the Sabbath, Jesus tells them: "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." John 9:41 NIV. Jesus offers life, life to the full.

## Ellen White Comments

When we have a deeper appreciation of the mercy and loving-kindness of God, we shall praise Him, instead of complaining. We shall talk of the loving watchcare of the Lord, of the tender compassion of the Good Shepherd. The language of the heart will not be selfish murmuring and repining. Praise, like a clear, flowing stream, will come from God's truly believing ones. . . . {CC 218}

There are voices that we shall hear all around us to divert us away from the truth, but if we have an eye single to the glory of God and are striving to do His will, we shall hear His voice and know it is the voice of the Good Shepherd. It is very important that we understand the voice that speaks to us. . . . {HP 145}

By His humanity, Christ touched humanity; by His divinity, He lays hold upon the throne of God. As the Son of man, He gave us an example of obedience; as the Son of God, He gives us power to obey. It was Christ who from the bush on Mount Horeb spoke to Moses saying, "I AM THAT I AM. . . . Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." Ex. 3:14. This was the pledge of Israel's deliverance. So when He came "in the likeness of men," He declared Himself the I AM. The Child of Bethlehem, the meek and lowly Saviour, is God "manifest in the flesh." 1 Tim. 3:16. And to us He says: "I AM the Good Shepherd." "I AM the living Bread." "I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life." "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth." John 10:11; 6:51; 14:6; Matt. 28:18. I AM the assurance of every promise. I AM; be not afraid. "God with us" is the surety of our deliverance from sin, the assurance of our power to obey the law of heaven. {DA 24-25}

## Extra material

Ever tried that trick of burning paper using a magnifying glass? One summer at school that was all the rage—around the yard there were groups of boys huddling round as they concentrated the sun's rays to a point of intense heat and light, charring a black circle and sending up a haze of blue-grey smoke.

Then in the physics class we used those same convex lenses to examine the behaviour of light, drawing complex ray diagrams that would converge at that central focus point.

The focus is the single point at which all the beams of light meet, an intensity of brilliance of light intersected and combined. If you really want to see and understand God, then see him in sharpest focus: Jesus Christ.

For without him we only see a vague and distorted picture of God, modified and modulated through the experience of others. For even the greatest of the prophets and the most spiritual Bible writer only catches a faint glimmer of the truth expressed in Jesus himself. As Jesus so clearly stated: "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Matthew 11:27 NIV).

Jesus himself identified this as his mission—for there was no other way in which God could reveal himself as he truly is—without coming himself. The revelation of God to humanity is not in the actual form of Jesus—what he looked like, etc.—but in his actions, the way he lived, the evidence of his teachings and miracles, and most of all the clearest revelation of all—in Gethsemane and on the cross.