

Bible Studies for Life Series for February 25: Sometimes it takes faith to find the proof

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Sometimes it takes faith to find the proof

- John 6:30-31,35-36,41-47,66-69

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Several years ago, a popular movie about the business relationship between a down-on-his-luck sports agent and an aging football star brought the phrase “show me the money” into the popular culture. When people wanted to express their desire for sound, sure, reasoned proof of the facts, they would say “Show me the money!” The lesson for this week demonstrates that this familiar desire for absolute proof also infiltrates our religious sensibilities. Many in society and in church say, “Show me the proof” of God’s existence, of miracles, of Jesus’ death and resurrection.



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People want proof. While fewer and fewer skeptics choose to engage the faith claims of the church with meaningful dialogue, those who do often seek objective proof of the existence God and the facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Ironically, in recent history, the demand for absolute incontrovertible proof comes less often from skeptics and more often from committed Christians seeking to bolster their faith claims with hard scientific and historical facts. Seminars and centers abound that seek to provide scientific proof of the biblical accounts of creation, the flood, plagues and miracles. The faithful need not take issue with these efforts except to recognize that "Show me the proof" often falls on the lips of church folk and skeptic alike.

The Gospel of John originally spoke to an audience not too different from our contemporary setting. John's first century church was made up of people from a different time and place than the people and events recorded in the Gospel. Writing to Christians and interested non-Christians in the late first century, John tells the story of Jesus to people who had not seen Jesus in person or heard his teachings directly.

John's Gospel message moves the reader steadily toward a decision about the veracity of the claims made about Jesus. At the conclusion of the narrative, John bluntly states: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written 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 20:30-31).

At a primary level, John understands people need “proof” in the form of signs in order that they may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John carefully records seven “signs” that point to and confirm Jesus’ identity.

The ironic twist in John’s presentation of the story of Jesus is evident when we recognize that whenever proof is offered, it almost always is ignored or misunderstood. John explicitly demonstrates this interplay between “seeing and believing” “seeing and not believing,” and “not seeing and yet believing” in the account of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to Thomas.

After hearing about Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas states, quite rationally, that he will not believe in the resurrection unless he sees Jesus stand before him. “Doubting” Thomas gets his wish, and a word from Jesus praising belief that does not come from direct experience: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). The hard, surprising truth of John’s gospel message is that faith trumps sight or experience. The gospel offers proof, but ultimately following Jesus is a matter of faith.

Such is the case in the focal passages for this lesson. As expected, the action of chapter 6 centers on another Jewish festival. John continues to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord over the Jewish institutions, and here the focus is on Passover (v. 4).

When we read this account with our Old Testament ears, echoes of the exodus ring clearly. In the opening verses (vv. 1-15), Jesus feeds a great multitude of people, and we remember God’s provision of food for the wandering tribes (Exodus 16:4-12). As Jesus’ strides out onto the water of the Sea of Galilee (vv. 16-24) we recognize God’s control over water, as at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:13-30). In the manner that God

speaks to Moses from a burning bush—"I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14), Jesus speaks to disciples in a storm-tossed boat—"It is I" (v. 20). The second "I am" statement of the chapter comes in verse 35 and makes the identification of Jesus with God explicit, "I am the bread of life."

Jesus is the manna from heaven. Jesus is God who controls the wind and the waves. Jesus speaks correctly when he self-identifies as "I AM." The signs are there for all to see. There is no lack of proof offered, but tragically, ironically, the people gathered around Jesus desire more proof: "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" (v. 30). Jesus engages their intellectual curiosity, arguing that proof does not yield faith (vv. 35-36; 41-42), and that faith comes as a gift from God (vv. 43-47). Jesus' effort to "reason" with those who demand proof meets with murmuring, grumbling (v. 41, 61) and ultimately rejection—even by some of Jesus' followers (v. 66).

The question remains: What proof is necessary or possible? Even in the face of exacting proof, some willfully reject God's gracious initiative of relationship. Others receive the nourishment of manna from heaven without yielding the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Still others recognize the gift of God in Jesus Christ—a recognition that comes by faith and not by sight. An experience of Jesus, a seeing of Jesus, a belief in Jesus that comes as a gift from God.

Discussion question

- How do you understand the relationship between proof and faith? Between "seeing and believing" and "not seeing and believing?"
- Respond to the claim that in John's Gospel "faith trumps sight or experience."

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