

## AN ESSENTIAL CONDITION

JOHN 3:16

What is faith? What does the word “faith” mean to you? I recall a story about a group of people touring the Holy Land. At one of the stops in the town of Bethlehem – the Church of the Nativity - the group listened to an accomplished professor explain what they were seeing. “Now this is supposed to be the place where Jesus was born,” the professor said. “But the archaeology clearly shows that we’re standing in an 18<sup>th</sup> century building constructed on the sight of a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman structure.” He went on to explain how it was extremely doubtful that this very spot was the actual birthplace of Jesus. He wasn’t denying the birth of Jesus just doubting the accuracy of this location. At that moment another tour group wandered into the church led by a different guide. He knelt down and then said to the group in a hushed tone, “On this very spot our Lord came into this world with angels singing, shepherds kneeling and cattle lowing. Right on this exact spot.” One member of the first tour group – the professor’s tour – observed all of this and then said wistfully, “I wish I was with them!”

Sadly, that’s what faith means to many people. Meaning what? Faith is so much wishful thinking. Faith is kissing your brains good-bye. Faith doesn’t care about history or facts. Faith is so much pie-in-the-sky-bye-and-bye that just makes you feel good. Or, faith is some kind of spiritual energy out there that you can access to improve your life. This Advent season we’re looking at one verse in the Bible: John 3:16. I like to call it the Christmas verse because its message is the message of Christmas. Let’s read it together just now. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (NIV) “For God so loved the world....” That was all about a measureless love – God’s love. “...That he gave his one and only Son....” That was about an indescribable gift – God have us His Son. The phrase we want to think together about today is underlined and it says, “... that whoever believes in him...” That phrase is about belief or faith. It’s also about an essential condition. What does the Bible mean by faith? When you see that word “faith” or “believe” what does it mean? I suggest to you that, first of all, having faith or believing is...

## EXPERIENCING GOD’S TRANSFORMATION.

Now, transformation can be thought of in at least two ways. There is, first of all, immediate transformation. You might call that the act of faith. This happens when a person comes to a moment in time when he or she wants to be forgiven, wants to be clean, wants to be made whole or wants to be better spiritually. You hit bottom. Or, you look in the mirror and realize that you must change. You’re shocked and saddened by what you find in yourself and yet you realize that you need outside help to change and move in a new direction.

The Holy Spirit is the One who awakens you to your spiritual need. Even though that realization can be very painful, it’s a precious gift when you receive it. Don’t

ignore it! Have you heard of Robert Wadlow? Before he died, he was the tallest man in the world. Unfortunately, Wadlow had no nerves in the heels of his feet so he was unable to feel pain there. Somewhere along the way he developed a blister on one of his heels and it got seriously infected. But Robert Wadlow was unaware of the blister because he had no feeling in that part of his body. Sadly, he lived before the discovery of antibiotic drugs and his body was unable to fight off the infection. As a result, he died because of his lack of sensitivity. You and I have a deadly spiritual infection called sin. One of the Holy Spirit's tasks is to make you aware of that infection so you can bring it to Jesus for cleansing and healing. But many people die spiritually for the same reason Robert Wadlow died literally. You lose sensitivity to infection – that is, spiritual infection. You think rarely about God. You never admit your spiritual sickness. When the Holy Spirit convicts you, you sidestep His influence. You never ask for help. You never long to be transformed. Keep it up and you will die spiritually.

You know faith is working in you when you begin to sense how much you need a Savior. Immediate transformation starts when you admit your need for a Savior. You realize you can't get better spiritually on your own. Some people get offended when you suggest to them that they aren't good enough to stand before God. They forget that God is absolute moral perfection personified. Actually, this is what the Bible calls "unbelief." Unbelief is settling for your own "goodness" – limited, inadequate, unacceptable - when you could have God's complete, abundant and sufficient goodness. The fact is that just the smallest amount of sin in you or me ruins our relationship with Him.

Some years ago now in our country a bit of deadly botulism poison was found in a particular brand of canned soup. This is one of the most deadly poisons out there. One person had died and another was paralyzed before the source of the poison was discovered and all the contaminated soup was recalled and destroyed. How much botulism poison was needed to make the soup unsuitable for human consumption? A whole can full? How about several milligrams? No! The smallest amount of poison ruins the entire batch of soup. In the same way, God asks you to take His word that you're a sinner. No, you may not be as bad as the person sitting next to you this morning, but no one here is good enough to stand before God and say, "Thanks, but I don't really need a Savior. I should be acceptable to You on my own merits."

Once you recognize your need for a Savior, God reveals what He has done for you. He sent Himself into the world in the form of a human child. That child's name is Jesus. Jesus grew up, played, studied, worked and then at the age of 30 began a three year ministry of preaching and healing. Then He was executed on a cross and rose from the dead three days later. The Bible teaches that Jesus paid the penalty for your sin by dying in your place and rising from the dead. On the one hand, the guilt of your sin gets transferred to Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus' moral perfection – He never committed a sin - gets transferred to you so that you can stand before God forgiven, cleansed and right with Him.

How and when does this happen? Immediate transformation happens at the moment you put your trust in what God has done for you. Your mind recognizes and receives what God has done in and through Jesus. You open your heart and say or pray something like this, “Yes, I believe this is true and I want it to be true for me at this very moment. Lord Jesus, please forgive me of my sin. I put my trust in what You have done for me not in anything I could do for myself. Please come into my life and give me the ability to live for You.” This is a very important application of the phrase – “... that whoever believes in him....” Your sins are forgiven at that very moment. The Holy Spirit enters your life spiritually at that very moment. God becomes your Father and you become His child at that very moment. You receive eternal life at that very moment. It’s an instantaneous and very real, spiritual transformation.

This is usually what is meant when we talk about someone “getting saved” or being “born again” or experiencing “conversion.” But, I suggest to you that you need, secondly, continual transformation. This is the lifestyle of faith not just the act of faith. They’re equally important. Continual transformation actually proves the validity of your immediate transformation. A lifestyle of faith actually proves the validity of your act of faith. I’m concerned that we sometimes make so much about that moment of immediate transformation that we neglect the importance of continual transformation that proves you really are a follower of Jesus.

There’s a horrible disconnect going on in our American, church culture around this very issue. Lots of people claim to be Christians or followers of Jesus, but hardly anything in their everyday lives indicates any kind of transformation. They have little love for God’s Word and hardly any desire to learn it. They are sexually impure. They lie, cheat and steal. They are completely dominated by how this world thinks and acts. But because they prayed a little prayer to receive Jesus, or got baptized or had a warm feeling about Jesus, they think they “believe.” That phrase “...that whoever believes in him...” means far more than that! Unless and until your faith results in continual transformation and unless and until your faith becomes a way of life and not just some solitary act in your past, don’t dare identify yourself as Jesus’ follower!

So what are the signs that continual transformation is happening in your life? You have a growing hunger and thirst for God and the things of God. You have a desire to know more of God’s Word and grow in your experience of prayer. You’re bringing your lifestyle into conformity with God’s will more and more in the areas of personal integrity, telling the truth, sexuality, attitudes towards the poor or people of different races and how you use both time and money. You want to share Jesus more with others. The materialistic, godless values of the culture around you are less and less appealing and have less and less control over you. Those are just a few examples. No one’s suggesting perfection. But there’s movement towards God reflected in how you do everyday life. There’s

movement away from what the world values. This is what's meant by the phrase – “that whoever believes in him....”

An American theology professor spent a sabbatical year teaching in Africa. There he met a man with a very unique name – “After.” That's right: A-F-T-E-R. When he asked this man about his unusual name, After explained, “You see, that wasn't the name I was given when I was born. I changed my name. I changed it because everything that has happened in my life to make me feel worthwhile and to give me a sense of real purpose happened after I surrendered to Christ and experienced the power of God in him.” Maybe the African-American slave's prayer from many years ago put it best, “O Lord, I ain't what I ought to be, and I ain't what I'm gonna be, but – thanks be to You – I ain't what I used to be!” That's it - continual transformation. But having faith or believing involves something else. It's, also ...

### **EXPERIENCING GOD'S GREATNESS.**

If faith puts a desire into you to become better spiritually - that's the task of transformation -, faith also plants a desire in your heart to become bigger. If life does anything, it has a way of making you feel very small, very insignificant and very limited.

There are at least three experiences in life that underline or emphasize your smallness. The first life experience is failure. That can start pretty early in life! You didn't make the team. You didn't get chosen for the play. You blew the test. You didn't get the date. You didn't get the promotion. You lost the job. You messed up the relationship. Your marriage blew up. Your kid messed up. Failure underlines your limitations. So does anxiety. You get a scary diagnosis. You can't prevent the long, slow decline of someone you love dearly. You can't cure illness. You can't prevent a major financial reversal in your life. You come face to face with the fact that there's a lot in life you can't control, you can't change or you can't manipulate to turn out in your favor. Anxiety underlines your limitations. The third life experience that can underline your smallness is loneliness. Christmas can be a very lonely time of the year. Some of you are single today and you long to be married. Some of you are widowed and you ache for the one who is gone. Some of you are married but you've learned sadly that you can be lonely in a marriage, too. Loneliness underlines your limitations.

Faith isn't just about transformation. Faith is also the ability to move more and more into God's greatness. True enough, failure, anxiety and loneliness reveal how little we are, but faith pulls us into God's bigness. Here are a few examples of what I mean. You could say, “Oh, I have every right to feel lousy, depressed and discouraged because of all my problems today.” That's unbelief – just settling for my own limitedness. Instead, you should say, “The Holy Spirit of God lives in me today. I am a child of God and an heir to all of God's blessings. Yes, I have trouble and sadness today, I don't deny it. But my past is forgiven, my

present is empowered by God Himself, my future is both bright and secure.” That’s faith – that’s moving into God’s greatness and bigness.

You could say, “Oh, I could never tell someone about Jesus. I don’t know how. I’d mess it all up. I might offend someone.” That’s unbelief – just settling for my own limitedness. You should say, “I can learn how to share my faith. I know God will prepare people for me to befriend and talk with and He’ll create the opportunity to lead someone to Jesus. He’s counting on me to share His grace and love with others.” That’s faith – moving into God’s greatness and bigness. You could say, “Oh, I’m just too busy to find a ministry to do inside the church or out in the community. I’d just mess it up anyway. I really need to watch more TV and spend more time on the internet.” That’s unbelief – settling for my own limitedness. You should say, “Only one life ‘twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” That’s faith – moving into God’s greatness and bigness. You could say, “Tithe – who, me? Are you kidding? I don’t make enough to tithe. I can’t live on 90% of my income.” That’s unbelief – wallowing in my own littleness. You should say, “When I obey God, I invite His blessing. My money needs to be under Jesus’ Lordship just like everything else.” That’s faith – moving into God’s greatness and bigness.

“...That whoever believes in Him....” There’s no lack of positive thinking and discovering your own potential resources in our culture. We’re awash in books, seminars, CDs and DVDs. Don’t get me wrong; there’s some good stuff here and there. Some of it’s actually based on biblical concepts – like human beings being worthwhile because we’re made in God’s image. But there’s a strong tendency to leave Jesus out of the picture. Sometimes you’re invited to have faith in faith as if “faith” is some kind of magical, cosmic energy. Often you’re encouraged to have faith in yourself. “Believe in yourself!” Is that an invitation to a disaster or what? My friend, if your faith is in your intelligence, your work ethic, your potential, your sincerity, your own spirituality, you are destined for a train wreck. Faith is only as good as what or who you put your faith in.

John 3:16 says, “...That whoever believes in Him....” The Bible never encourages me to believe in myself. I’m not urged to have faith in faith. The one and only place where faith and belief ought to be placed is in Jesus, the One and Only. He alone is the proper foundation of your life. He alone can meet your needs and help you achieve your potential. The Bible clearly teaches you to be very pessimistic about your potential without Jesus, but very optimistic about your potential when living for Jesus. Faith is constantly looking for ways to move out of my smallness, littleness and limitedness and to move into God’s greatness, bigness and limitlessness.

Bret Harte wrote a story entitled *The Luck of Roaring Camp*. Roaring Camp was supposed to be the meanest, toughest mining town in the entire West. More murders, more thefts, more evil than anywhere else. It was a terrible place

inhabited entirely by men and one woman who tried to serve them all. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She died while giving birth to a baby.

The men took the baby and put her in a box with some old rags under her. When they looked at her, they decided that didn't look right, so they sent someone eighty miles to buy a rosewood cradle. He brought it back and they put the rags and the baby in the rosewood cradle. But, then, the rags didn't look right. So they sent someone else all the way to Sacramento, and he came back with some beautiful silk and lace blankets. They put the baby, wrapped around with those fancy blankets, in the rosewood cradle.

This looked fine until someone happened to notice that the floor was filthy. So these hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and they scrubbed that floor until it was very clean. Of course, what that did was to make the walls, the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains look absolutely terrible. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows. Now things were beginning to look as they thought they should look. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot and babies can't sleep during a brawl.

The whole look and feel of Roaring Camp changed. The men liked to take the baby out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle so they could see her when they came up. Then somebody noticed what a dirty place that was, so they planted flowers, and they made a very nice garden right there. It looked quite beautiful. They would bring her shiny little stones and things that they would find in the mine. But when they put their hands down next to hers their hands looked so dirty. Soon the general store was all sold out of soap, shaving gear and perfume. The baby changed everything.

And in a much grander, truer way, when Jesus was born it changed everything. "... That whoever believes in Him...." That's the essential condition: faith... belief in Jesus. The baby enters your life. He slips into every crevice of your being. Through Him and in Him, you're invited to experience God's transformation and God's greatness.