

Saving Faith as Treasuring Christ

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the essence of saving faith as a receiving act, emphasizing the treasuring of Christ as Savior, Lord, Shepherd, and Friend. It explores the affectional dimension of faith, highlighting the importance of treasuring Christ above all else, not just for His benefits but for who He is. The sermon draws insights from biblical texts in 2 Corinthians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and the Gospel of John to illustrate how saving faith involves a compelling preference, desire, hunger, and thirst for Christ as the ultimate treasure.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:3, 2 Thessalonians 2:9, Hebrews 11:24, John 3:18, 1 Peter 2:2

Topics: "Saving Faith", "Treasuring Christ"

Description

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Transcript

Father, I ask for your help, and I ask for all of us that we would be given ears to hear, and I would speak the truth in accord with your word, and in a way that honors Christ and advances your mission. May I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So let me start with an assumption that I hope we all share, namely that saving faith is a receiving of Christ. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, comma, who believed in his name, comma, he gave the right to become the children of God.

So saving faith is a receiving act, not a giving act, not a performing act. When God justifies the one who has saving faith, he does not have respect to faith as giving him anything or performing anything for him to show our merit. God justifies through saving faith because faith receives Christ as the sole ground of God being 100% for us.

That's my assumption, my starting point. My question is, more fully, what do we receive Christ as? More specifically, what's the actual experience in the soul of receiving Christ? What's happening in the heart, in the soul, when we experience saving faith? My answer to the first question is that whether we are

receiving Christ as Savior, Lord, Shepherd, Friend, saving faith receives Christ as treasured Savior, treasured Lord, treasured Friend, treasured Shepherd, treasured Righteousness, and the list could go on. Saving faith receives a treasured Christ, and thus the answer to my second question is that what's happening in the soul when we experience saving faith is that we are treasuring Christ.

It's not all we're doing, but we're doing that, or we're not believing. We are experiencing spiritual affection that corresponds to the greatness and the beauty and the value of Christ. Thus, the thesis of this talk and the book is, quote, saving faith has in it the affectional dimension of treasuring Christ.

Historically, saving faith, as Joe said, has been spoken of as including knowledge, assent, trust. I agree with that, and what I want to do is draw out of this great tradition that knowing includes spiritual sight of the glory of Christ, assenting includes the consent of the soul to the value of that glory, and trusting includes treasuring of the value as eternally satisfied. That's my aim, to draw out of the tradition what I think is really there, by showing that it is biblical.

I regard the affectional dimension of saving faith as essential for salvation. Where it is absent, there is no saving faith. Where Christ is not received as treasured Savior, treasured Lord, he's being used, not trusted, in a saving way.

Or to say it another way, saving faith does not see Christ as useful to obtain something treasured more than Christ. To be sure, Christ is useful. He's the means of escaping from hell.

He's the means of forgiveness of sins. He's the means of a resurrected, pain-free body. He's the means of a new creation, and for these, you, between sessions, should be doing handsprings and backflips for joy.

I said to the guys on the plane coming down, of all the conferences on the planet, this is the conference where people should do backflips between sessions. It's called good news, right? It's really good news, what we're about here. But if we receive Christ because no hell, no guilt, no pain, new creation are our treasure, while Christ himself is not the supreme treasure, that's not saving faith.

It is impossible, it is possible that a surgeon be trusted to operate on your brain, and you have zero desire to spend time with this surgeon. He's simply useful. You trust him because he's competent, and your health is valuable.

And when the cancer is removed, or hell is escaped, we have no interest in him anymore. A pain-free heaven without Jesus would be perfectly acceptable to thousands of professing Christians, I fear, which is why I wrote the book. The spiritual affection of treasuring Christ is essential, not only because it leads to human salvation, but even more importantly, because it leads to God's glorification.

And the reason this is so is that saving faith embraces Christ both as useful in his saving gifts, and as precious for his saving fellowship, and friendship, and glory. The affectional dimension of saving faith is essential, both for the salvation of sinners and the glorification of the Savior. Without it, the all-satisfying worth of Jesus would not be magnified in salvation as God intends.

Now, my defense of this claim, that saving faith has an affectional dimension, is not mainly by showing how widespread that conviction is in historical theology, but rather to draw it out of biblical texts. It's mainly exegesis, this book. But it is important to me that I not say anything without substantial precedent in the history of God's people.

I am fallible, and it is good that my reading of the Scripture be chastened by 2,000 years of other people's reading of the Scripture. So I take heart when I hear Calvin describe saving faith as a warm embrace of Christ that consists of pious affection, when I hear Turretin describing faith as the embrace of that inestimable treasure, or when I hear Owen calling it a reception of the Lord Jesus in his comeliness and eminency, or Maastricht saying it denotes desiring and reception with delight, or Shedd saying that evangelical faith involves an affectionate love of Christ, or Birkhoff saying that it is a hearty reliance on the promises of God. To my knowledge, I'm not saying anything that has not been said in many ways by others more gifted than I. I don't like novelty.

I like creativity. Truth is not new. But in the end, we go to our affectional nature of saving faith.

And what I'll try to do is work through these texts, and if you've got your Bibles or your Greek Testaments, please get them out, because it matters that you see, not just hear, what I say. I'm going to try to point to the nub of the issue in each text that we look at, and hope that you look at the more extended exegesis in the book, or maybe ask questions later in this hour. So first, let's go to 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and we'll look at verses 3 to 7. And what you should look for is, what's missing in verse 4 of 2 Corinthians 4? What's missing in verse 4 in the lives of unbelievers? And in verse 6, what does God change to bring that about? What's the experience there? And then what's it called in verse 7? So here's, I'll read it.

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers. So that's underlining, this is our issue here, belief, faith.

Blinding the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light, photismon, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, or from darkness light shall shine, who has shown in our hearts for the light, the photismon, the shining of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And we have this treasure—that was the other flag that was waving as I read this—in jars of clay in order that the surpassing greatness of power might belong to God and not to us. So the gospel is defined in verse 4 as good news of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. And in verse 6, it's described as the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Now I think those are two ways of describing the one divine glory revealed in the gospel. In the gospel is preached, that's what shines if you have eyes to see. The two ways of describing one divine glory.

The glory shines with spiritual photismon through the gospel story of Christ crucified and risen. So on the one hand, according to verse 4, the God of this world, Satan, knows what he must do to prevent saving faith from happening when the gospel is proclaimed. He must prevent the spiritual sight of that glory, and that's what he does in verse 4. He blinds the minds of those without saving faith, keeps them unbelieving.

On the other hand, verse 6, God the creator knows what he must do in order to change that and bring about saving faith. He must cause this divine glory in the gospel, the light of the gospel, the glory of God in the face of Christ, to shine in blinded hearts. That is, he must cause the light of the glory of Christ, the glory of God in Christ's face to be seen with what Paul calls in Ephesians, the eyes of your heart.

So in our unbelief, in your unbelief, once upon a time, you saw Christ, I saw Christ in the gospel as foolish, stumbling block, boring, mythical, legendary, unimportant, and then the creator of the universe caused

Christ to be seen as glorious, true, valuable, all-sufficient, satisfying, and the reason I use those words, affectionately loaded words, is because I think that's what's implied in the glory of Christ, shining off the best news in the world, and to come to faith is to see it for what it is, and in that miracle of spiritual sight, saving faith comes into being. And how does Paul describe this in verse 7? We have this treasure. What treasure? Well, the one he's just been talking about, the glory of Christ seen in the gospel.

We have this treasure in jars of clay in order that the surpassing greatness of the power might be of God and not to us, so Paul sees the experience of the glory of Christ in the gospel as a treasure. Christ in his beauty is a treasure. The gift of seeing him that way is a treasure.

Since those who are blind to this treasure, in verse 4, are called unbelievers, they don't have faith, they don't have saving faith, I infer that those who see him this way in verse 6 are believers. They've come into being. Believers have come into being, and what they now see is glory.

They couldn't see it before. The glory of God in the face of Christ, or as verse 7 says, they see him as a treasure. And I conclude, therefore, that saving faith includes a treasuring sight of the glory of Christ in the gospel.

The very nature—this is a sentence, it's not in my manuscript, let me say it, because it struck me as I thought about this, really important— the nature of the new birth, which is what's being described here in other language, the nature of the new birth, the very nature of the new birth that causes the sight of the treasure of Christ determines the nature of the faith it creates. What happens in the new birth determines the nature of what it creates. A treasuring of the treasure of the glory of Christ.

So that's argument number one from 2 Corinthians. Let's go to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. We'll read verses 9 to 12, and here what to look for is the relationship between faith in the truth and love for the truth. Starting at verse 9. The coming of the lawless one is by the working of Satan, with all power of signs and wonders, in the service of what is false.

That's my translation. ESV, signs and wonders of falsehood, or false signs and wonders, I think that's misleading, because they really are signs and wonders, and they are in the service of a lie. With all deception of unrighteousness for those who are perishing, because they did not welcome the love of the truth in order to be saved.

On account of this, God sends them a working of deceit so that they might believe what is false. That same word from verse 9. In order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. That's pregnant.

That's an amazing text. First, what's the meaning of this strange phrase in verse 10, they did not welcome or receive the love of the truth. What a strange phrase.

It doesn't say they didn't love the truth, they don't even welcome the love of the truth. What is that? At the end, here's my suggestion, what that means. At the end of verse 12, it says that people had pleasure in unrighteousness, which I think means they loved it.

They loved it. It's their pleasure. Unrighteousness is what they love.

So, in verse 12, they love unrighteousness, and in verse 10, they will not welcome a love for the truth. That juxtaposition of unrighteousness and truth happens several times in Paul. For example, in Romans 1.18,

in their unrighteousness, they suppress the truth.

They love it so much, they carry the truth in. Or 1 Corinthians 13.6, love rejoices in the truth rather than in unrighteousness. So, I take 1 Thessalonians 2.10 to mean that in the deception of unrighteousness, verse 10, these people would not even consider replacing love for unrighteousness, verse 12, for love for the truth.

They wouldn't consider it. My love affair with unrighteousness is so strong, I won't even begin to admit even the gift of love for the truth. Now, with that clarification, Paul connects faith in the truth and love for the truth in two ways.

First, he says in the middle of verse 10, that people are perishing because they did not welcome a love for the truth. They're perishing. Then in verse 12, he says that people are condemned who did not believe in the truth.

So failure to love the truth condemns, and failure to believe the truth condemns. Second, the second way he makes the connection between loving the truth and believing the truth as one piece, I'm going to argue. In the end of verse 12, there's a surprising contrast, was surprising to me anyway.

We would expect him to say something like this, they did not believe the truth, but believed a lie. That's what I'm expecting to come. It's not what he says.

He says, they did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness, which could be stated, they did not believe the truth, they loved unrighteousness. So instead of loving or finding pleasure in the truth of the gospel, I think it's what truth refers to here, the gospel. Instead of loving or finding pleasure in the truth of the gospel, they loved and found pleasure in unrighteousness, which I think implies that believing includes loving what is true in the gospel.

True and right, as it's presented in the gospel. And this loving is the affectional element in saving faith, because it is clarified here as finding pleasure in, verse 12. So I conclude that the new birth miracle of welcoming a love for the truth takes the new birth to change that.

Now I'm welcoming a love for the truth. That new birth miracle is part of the gospel. And this loving is essentially what I mean by treasuring.

A shift of loves is at the root of saving faith. A shift of loves is at the root of saving faith. Third, Hebrews 11.

If you're there with me, I'm going to read verse one and then the instance of Moses' faith from verses 24 to 26. The thing to look for here as we read it is how the writer to the Hebrews describes faith as looking expectantly and confidently for a treasured reward. Looking expectantly and confidently for a treasured reward.

This is faith is at least in Hebrews 11. So let's start with verse one. Now faith is a substance.

I know it's sometimes translated assurance. I think my argument is going to work either way, but I have reasons for thinking it means substance. It is the present substantial experience of a hopeful reality.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Now verse 24, let's take Moses. By faith, and don't let that slip out of your mind because the whole paragraph, I mean the whole two, three verses about Moses are all describing faith.

By faith is what happened here. Faith is being shown in these verses. By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

How did that happen? How does saving faith cut the nerve of the fleeting pleasures of Egyptian sins? That's another book which I wrote called Future Grace. By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, I'm starting over again. When he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated by the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ, the Messiah, he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth, treasure, than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. Faith is the conviction of things not seen. It's out there.

I see it with the eyes of my heart. It is more valuable than all of Egypt. That's faith.

When he says faith is the substance of things hoped for in verse one, does he not imply that there is an affectional element in faith? Because in the biblical understanding of what hope is, we only hope when we feel confident and expectant of some desire to gain what we treasure. That's what hope is. Hope is a hoped for, valued, treasured, I want that.

That's what hope is. And the confidence you're going to get it, and faith is the substance of that. I don't know, I should have just written Hebrews 11, 1 in the book.

And this understanding of faith is made explicit. Now this gets more powerful for me, so powerful. This understanding, what I just stated about verse one, becomes fleshed out in verses 24 to 26.

By faith, Moses turned his back on the fleeting pleasures of Egypt. Verse 25, he turns his back on all that delighting in unrighteousness, pleasure of unrighteousness. And he looked to the Messiah and the hope for reward to come.

Verse 26, his faith was the substance, that is, the experienced present reality and power of that future reward, moving back into the present, cutting the nerve of all those Egyptian pleasures. So I conclude that the writer to the Hebrews understands saving faith as having in it an affectional dimension, which he would call treasuring the reward that God promises. Treasuring the reward that God promises, which happens to be all that God is for us in Christ.

Finally, one more cluster of texts, I'll be done. The Gospel of John. John never uses the noun faith or belief, and he uses the verb pistou 98 times.

That's one of the most amazing facts in the Bible. I mean, staggering. I mean, never once refers to faith.

98 times to the verb believing. What is that? That's amazing. I read and I read and I try to find people explanations for this.

I'm gonna give you mine. And whether mine is right really doesn't affect my conclusion, because the conclusion just points to that, but it's still there. I think the reason he refers to believing 98 times into faith never, it has to do with the affectional nature of saving faith in John as he presents it.

So I'm going to read you three passages, and if you, three passages, and you listen for how faith is presented as drinking water and eating bread and seeing light. Chapter six, verse 35, and this verse 51,

Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me, so the coming so as not to hunger and the believing are parallel, believe in me shall never thirst.

Verse 51, I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. John 7, 37, on the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Whoever believes, so again, the coming and drinking are parallel with believing. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. And finally, John 3, 18, 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.

This is a judgment that light has come into the world and people, and then he shifts categories on us from believing to loving, and people love the darkness. Sound like second Thessalonians? Sound like Hebrews? People love the darkness rather than loving the light. That's the issue, shift of loves, shift of loves.

So from these and other passages in John, I conclude Jesus treats believing as having an essential affectional dimension. That dimension is described as eating the bread of life so as no longer to hunger, as drinking living water so as never to thirst again, as loving the light for the glorious brightness that it is. We have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father.

For this experience to happen, for you to find Jesus as life-giving water, satisfying bread, precious light, for that to happen in you, Jesus said in chapter 3, you must be born again, 3.3, 3.7. When that happens, saving faith comes into being as a compelling preference. Hunger, thirst, desire, longing, a compelling preference for Christ as living water, heavenly bread, light of the world. Or as Peter puts it, and we could spend a good bit of time on this text, 1 Peter 2.2, coming right out of the end of chapter 1 with the new birth, have you tasted that the Lord is good? The life-giving milk of Christ for a little baby, newborn baby, Christian, the life-giving milk of Christ is pleasing.

Christos, it's good. Jesus uses that word for it. Nobody wants the new wine because the old is Christos.

It's good. Tastes good. This tasting that comes into being in the new birth, going to 1 Peter 2.2, is not a neutral act.

Saving faith comes into being as a God-given preference, strong, compelling preference, desire, hunger, thirst for the water, the bread, the light that Christ is, and it exists, faith exists as a satisfied drinking, eating, beholding of Christ. So I suggest that John never uses the noun faith, and uses the verb believe 98 times because he wants to foreground the spiritual act of the soul in receiving and coming and drinking and eating and loving, which faith is, not produces, that's later. Works are produced.

This is what faith is. This is eating, this is drinking, this is seeing, and those are all acts of the soul that John evidently very much wants to foreground in using the verb 98 times as spiritual imbibing, ingesting, embracing, savoring the all-satisfying glories of Christ. Conclusion.

My main point has been that saving faith has in it the affectional dimension of treasuring Christ. That's my thesis. The ultimate reason this matters is that God designed saving faith such that he would be maximally glorified through it in salvation.

That happens because such faith glorifies Christ not only as useful, but as precious. As a treasuring grace, saving faith magnifies Christ's all-satisfying worth, or we might say Christ is most magnified in our faith when our faith is most satisfied in him.

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