

Believe: Why Jesus Came

Children of God by Belief

John 1:12-13

Mark Vroegop

*“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”
(John 1:12–13)*

When our twins were toddlers, I remember fondly the Christmas when we gave them a gift called “Pound a Peg.” Do you know what this gift is like? It is a small wooden bench with a series of multi-colored wooden pegs and a hammer. The design is fairly simple. And what you do with it—even more so.

A child basically takes the hammer and hits the pegs—one at a time—until they are flush with the little bench. Then you flip the toy over and repeat.

Now if you are a parent of boys, you know two things happen next. First, as soon as a little boy realizes that he can move the peg by hitting it with a hammer, something triggers in his little brain. This thought races through his mind: “I need to hit it harder.” But then a second thought is triggered: “What else can I hit with this hammer?”

Unfortunately, I don’t believe the game provides parenting instructions to help you teach a child that the hammer should not be used on the coffee table, the glass door, your brother’s hand, or the dog. Once a boy figures out the effectiveness of a hammer, it’s hard to contain his enthusiasm.

You may have heard this saying before: “When you are a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

Centrality of Belief

In the Gospel of John, there is one word that emerges as the theme: **believe**. It is the thread that is woven through the entire book. “Believe” is why John wrote this gospel. It is what he is driving toward with every story and every element of Jesus’s teaching. It is the singular concept that John will come back to over and over again.

John knows that believing is the turning point for a person as they hear the truths about Jesus. He experienced it personally as he came to believe that Jesus really was the Son of God. John watched people turn from the darkness of their unbelief to the light of receiving Jesus. He saw the transformation.

But he also knows what is on the line. The difference between “perishing” and “eternal life” is belief. John knows that no one comes to the Father unless they believe. It is not only central, but it is eternally important. The dividing line between Christian and non-Christian, saved and unsaved, forgiven and condemned, heaven and hell, is belief.

Belief is the one truth that John keeps coming back to again and again. It is central and essential.

Our text today, John 1:12-13, is the second time in these first eighteen verses that the word “believe” is used, but it is the first full explanation of the concept. These two verses are incredibly important. They tell us a lot about belief.

I’m going to do something a bit unconventional in my sermon today. Normally I try to condense the sermon outline to two or three or maybe four points. But today I have nine points. The reason is that I want you to see the comprehensive nature of belief. I want you to understand how important it is. I want you to see the potential transformation related to belief.

Now as I walk through these nine points, I would not suggest that you try to remember each of them. I want you to allow the comprehensive nature of this sermon to wash over your soul, but I hope that you’ll remember at least two meaningful points.

And the ultimate aim of this message is very simple. I hope that you believe.

Nine Aspects of Belief

In looking at these two verses, I am going to highlight nine words that are thematically connected to the concept of belief. I want you to see the beauty, depth, and implications of what it means to believe in Jesus.

My hope is that if you are a believer, this will serve to embolden your confidence in belief. And if you are not yet a Christian, my aim is for you to become a follower of Jesus.

1. “But”: The Contrast of Belief

We start our examination of belief with an important word in understanding the message of the Bible: “but.” It highlights the contrast between what we looked at last week and the message this week.

Just to remind you, last week’s message was a little dark and depressing. We learned that even though Jesus was the true light, and even though he entered the mess our world, he was not embraced. Even though he was the creator, he was ignored. Even though he came to his own people, he was rejected.

It is a sad but all too common reality. Jesus is rejected. Despite what he claims and despite what he did, people do not affirm him as Lord and Savior. Being on the fence isn’t safe either. If someone refuses to decide about Jesus, they’ve decided.

So that’s the dark side. But there’s good news and there’s hope. And the Gospel of John is written to help you find the path of God’s grace, forgiveness, and mercy. Every single believer in Jesus has a before

and an after story. That's the beauty of the gospel. It sounds like this: "I was a mess. I was stuck in my sin, but Jesus . . ." That's the glorious contrast of belief.

2. "Receive": The Meaning of Belief

The second word I want to look at is "receive." We're skipping over the word "all," but I will come back to it. In order to understand the message of these verses, you must know what the word "receive" means.

First, you need to know that "receive" and "believe" are nearly identical words in their meaning. If you look at the sentence, you'll note that "who believe in his name" more fully describes those who received him.

Second, the word "receive" means "to take to oneself" or "to accept." It has the idea of affirming what is true as true. As it relates to John's gospel, to receive Jesus is to accept that Jesus really is who he claimed to be—to believe what John has previously said is in fact true.

Let me give you three examples of how John uses the same word for receive:

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not **receive** our testimony" (John 3:11).*

*"He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one **receives** his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true" (John 3:32–33).*

*"I have come in my Father's name, and you do not **receive** me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him" (John 5:43).*

Therefore, we can conclude that to receive Jesus is to affirm and accept what he claims to be, what he tells us to be true about ourselves, and what the Word of God tells us about him. In other words, it means to believe. That's why the phrases are so closely tied together.

To receive and believe in Jesus means that you entrust yourself to the truth of what he says about himself and what the Bible says about him. It means that you take God at his word—that you choose to believe what the Bible says, not what the world, the devil, or the flesh tell you is true. To believe means that you respond or act upon the truth that is in front of you. To believe means that you live based upon the narrative of the Scriptures, not upon what you think or even what you feel.

Belief or faith always involves a step away from something else. It is stepping away from wrong beliefs. It is walking away from wrong actions. It is saying goodbye to absolute certainties. It is not waiting for the right feelings. It is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).

Belief means you trust Jesus's works, not yours. You rely on his promises, not on your own hopes. You act on the truth of what the Word says, not on how you feel. You obey what he commands, not what you want. It means you take on his life and give up your own.

To believe means to receive him as he is, for who he is, in all that he is. It is to trust in Christ alone. That is what it means to believe. It is what it means to be a Christian.

3. “All”: The Scope of Belief

Now we can go back to the word we skipped: “all.” What an important word! It is placed in the text just after the contrasting word “but” and before “who did receive him.” Its placement is connected to the hope and the exclusivity of the gospel.

It is hopeful in that it opens the door for any person in the clutches of the world to come to him. It welcomes any rebel who desires to end their treasonous rejection of him. The good news of Jesus is wide open. But there is one exclusive condition: “all who did receive him.”

This text sets in contrast the pervasive rejection of the Son of God against the backdrop of the gracious offering of salvation to every single person who receives Jesus. This is the glorious truth of the good news, if you believe you can be saved. Every single person who receives him is welcome out of the darkness and into the light of God’s saving grace. The scope of belief is as wide as the depth of Christ’s sacrifice that makes forgiveness possible.

4. “Name”: The Authority in Belief

The fourth aspect of belief is what it is based upon. Belief must be in something or upon something. And the qualifying statement, “who believed,” anchors this to “his name.” Now, this means more than just the actual name “Jesus.” It is connected to everything that his name means.

We are talking about Jesus’s authority. It hearkens back to what John told us in the first few verses of this gospel. Jesus was in the beginning. He was with God. He was God. Nothing was made without him. To believe in his name is to affirm that he is the Son of God, that he is the Messiah, and that he is the way the truth and the life.

Since belief must be in something, the authority of Jesus is critical. Christians believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be.

5. “Gave”: The Grace through Belief

Now we turn to what God does in response to this belief. The first part of the verse was more focused on what God calls us to do. But the next aspect of the verse connects us to the gracious activity of God.

Those who believe are the recipients of God’s grace. We’ll see specifically what he gives in the next few words, but it is important for you to see the centrality of giving and grace in God’s plan for salvation.

The most famous verse in John’s Gospel has the word “gave” as a central part of its message: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). However, the book of John is not the only place where we find this kind of perspective. Paul unpacks the idea of a gift throughout the book of Romans.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”
(Rom. 6:23).

“. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” (Rom. 3:23–24).

When a person believes in Jesus, God acts through his grace.

6. “Right”: The Privilege Because of Belief

The next word relates to what God actually gives. We find that he gives the right to become God’s children. We’ll unpack some of these words in a minute. But for now, I just want you to savor the fact that through Christ, God changes our status—our standing, or our “right.”

The word for “right” means power or authority. It is connected to the idea of position or status. Central to the miracle of the gospel is the way that God changes our position, identity, and status. Here’s how Peter describes this reality:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

7. “Become”: The Transformation of Belief

What a beautiful word we have next in this text. “Become” indicates there is a change or a transformation that is a vital part of the gospel message. Believing in Jesus makes you into something that you were not before.

In this text, believers become the children of God. Yet, that is merely one metaphor. There are others in the New Testament, including those of a new man and a new creation. Through the gospel, God makes us into his people and a new temple. By the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are being transformed more and more into the likeness and image of Jesus. God’s aim in saving us is to make us into something more than what we are right now.

Believing in Jesus causes a miraculous transformation.

8. “Children”: The Relationship through Belief

The eighth aspect of belief is where this right and transformation lead. Receiving Jesus sets in motion a fundamentally new relationship with God. Those who believe in Jesus are given the right to become God’s children. Through faith, we are adopted into God’s family with all the rights, privileges, and intimacy that are a part of the new relationship.

This spiritual adoption is one of the most glorious truths in the entire New Testament. Remember the darkness of last week’s message? The world, its system, and its people are a mess. We are children of

wrath—loving the wrong things, pursuing destructive things, and doing whatever we can to express our rebellion against God (Eph. 2:3). And yet God, out of the overflow of love, provides the means of atonement through the death and resurrection of his son. The triune Godhead went the distance in order to rescue us out of our sinful bondage.

God takes rebellious sinners and makes them his beloved children. Here is how John talks about this in another of his books, 1 John: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are . . .” (1 John 3:1).

Our relationship with God has been fundamentally and gloriously changed. In Christ we are loved, forgiven, cleansed, welcomed, honored, satisfied, and secure. Our new relationship with the Father changes our identity, our sense of worth, our future, and how we live every day of our lives. To be God’s children means that everything is new.

9. “Born”: The Miracle behind Belief

The final aspect of belief is the miracle of the new birth. Verse thirteen is entirely about this point, and it is a significant one. John uses the metaphor of “birth” to describe the miracle of conversion—the spiritual movement from death to life, from darkness to light.

This concept will be more fully explained when we make our way through John 3, when Jesus interacts with Nicodemus. But we get some incredible information here.

The main truth in this text is simply that the miracle of conversion is something that God alone can do. Being born is something that is done to you. I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating: no child comes out of the womb and says, “Look what I did.” The same is true when it comes to the new birth spiritually.

Verse thirteen identifies three things that spiritual birth is not. We are not spiritually born again because of 1) family relationships—“not of blood,” 2) human desire—“nor of the will of the flesh,” or 3) someone else’s decision—“nor of the will of man.”

These three categories are how many (if not most) human decisions are made. Family, your will, or someone else’s desire has a direct effect on how things happen in many areas of life. But not when it comes to your spiritual life. You cannot rest on your family background, your ability to clean yourself up, or what other people can do for you. This kind of transformation can only come from God.

You cannot do it. In fact, you might think of this text as saying that you cannot do it with three unique points of emphasis. For example:

You cannot do it.

You **cannot** do it.

You cannot **do it**.

You cannot make yourself a child of God. But Jesus can. You cannot balance the scales of your sinfulness. But Jesus can. You cannot wipe away your sin. But Jesus can. You cannot change your heart. But Jesus can. You cannot create new desires. But Jesus can. You cannot make yourself a different person. But Jesus can.

Becoming a Christian is realizing that reality and putting your full trust and confidence in Jesus. It is coming to a place where you know that your only hope is not in what you have done, should have done, and will do. Your trust is in what Jesus did.

Applications

I realize that I've given you nine points. But I want to remind you there is only one word in this message that is our focal point: **believe**.

Therefore, if you are not a Christian, I want to invite you to believe in Jesus today. I want to call you to come to faith—to put your trust in him. The Bible says “. . . 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” (Rom. 10:9). Why not today?

There aren't many passages in the Bible that are clearer when it comes to how to become a Christian than this one. I don't know if I can make it any more evident why you should trust Jesus today. I invite you—call you—to believe.

And if you are already a Christian, I want to remind you that believing in Jesus is the very foundation of your relationship with him. You were born again. Something so foundational was changed in you that you are never going to be the same. God delivered you from yourself. And it all started because you heard the Word of God and said, “That's true.”

So why not read your Bible like that this week? Don't allow the pace of life, your doubts, temptations, feelings, or disappointments to diminish your walk with Jesus. You believed. It changed you. So keep believing.

You may find yourself discouraged and say “I can't do this” at some point. But remember, that's how you came to Jesus in the first place. You couldn't do it. But Jesus did.

So, take up the singular message of John's gospel and believe!

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