I Believe – Part 3

# More Than a Feeling

# (Jeremiah 29:13-14)

We are in part three of a four-part message series that’s called “I Believe” and we’ve been looking at some of the challenges that people have in their faith. This is important because there are a lot of people that want to believe in God but then something’s happened, there’s some obstacle, some reason, that keeps them from completely believing. And one of the themes for this series is that there are many people who are not rejecting God, but what they’re doing is rejecting a distorted view of who they think God is. They simply have the wrong view of God.

And so, in week number one we talked about the God who does everything that we want. You know like a great genie in the sky, or an on-demand type of God, but one that doesn’t exist. And then last week, we looked at religion versus Christianity and what we discovered was really the bad news versus the good news. And now, today, I want to talk to you about believing in God when you don’t feel him. You know, maybe once you did, but now you’ve lost that feeling and it’s been hard trusting a God that you can’t see, hear, or feel. And so today I want to share with you a message entitled “More Than a Feeling”.

Some of you may remember that title. It’s familiar, because it was 1976 when the band Boston broke out on the music scene with that song. The lyrics went like this:

“I looked out this morning and the sun was gone

Turned on some music to start my day

I lost myself in a familiar song

I closed my eyes and I slipped away

It's more than a feeling…”

(Boston, More than a feeling)

Well, this morning, I want you to know, that believing in God is more than a feeling. When you’ve tried reading the Bible and you don’t understand it. When you’re standing, singing worship songs, and everyone else seems to feel something. When you pray and is just like you’re talking to yourself and no one is listening. And yet, you’ve got to understand that it’s more than a feeling. When you’re getting up on Sunday morning and you’re coming in to church because you want to believe even though you’re not feeling it. And I guarantee that there are those of you either right now or at some point in your life when you wanted to believe in God but you didn’t feel him.

And so, if you’ve ever wondered, “Where is God?” we’re going to talk about that today, you know, when you’re just not feeling it. Now, how many of you would say you felt God’s presence in church today? Maybe for you it a warm feeling, maybe tingling all over, maybe goosebumps, maybe you were crying, you had a supernatural sense of peace, or you had an overwhelming sense of his love? Whatever it was for you, if you didn’t feel God in church today, whose fault was it? Was it God’s fault, or was it your fault? Maybe it was Dawn’s fault because the worship team didn’t sing your favorite song? You know, whose fault is it when you don’t feel God? And what you do?

Well, today my intention is to show you that the presence of God is so much bigger than our feelings. And one of my favorite places to go in the Word of God, when I’m looking to get real is the Psalms, because they’re just so honest, so transparent, and so unbelievably blunt. You know, whether it’s Moses, King David, Asaph, Korah or whoever as they wrote these prayers, these songs of praise, they poured out their hearts with blatant honesty. A good example is found in Psalm chapter 88. This psalm was written by Ethan the Ezrahite and he says,

“I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me” (Psalms 88:13-14)?

Why? And this is so significant, because here’s a man who’s reached the end of his rope, he has nothing left in life, darkness is his closest friend, and yet he continues to reach out to God. His world has fallen apart, his friends have abandoned him, his health has failed him, but he hasn’t given up on God. And so, today I want to encourage you, affirming that the most important decision you can make during or after a crisis is the decision to hang on to God. When your world is falling apart, when you’re experiencing difficult times, it doesn’t mean that God has abandoned you. It just means you are part of the human race. You see, Ethan the Ezrahite had reached this point. He had nothing left but God and he kept hanging on.

Corrie ten Boom once said,

“You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have.”

And this is the story of countless millions of people down through the centuries. It’s what happened to Howard Rutledge. On November 27, 1965, his plane was shot down over North Vietnam and he became a prisoner of war at the infamous Hanoi Hilton. At the time he was captured, he had grown up in church but was far from being devout in his faith, however during his captivity he called out to God and God was there for him. It was during this time that he learned to depend on God and experienced the presence of God more profoundly than he’d ever thought imaginable.

Last week, we talked about David, a man after God’s own heart, and yet there were times when he cried out to God, “Why are you allowing this? Why aren’t you answering my prayers?” But then with an expression of the intimacy that he experienced with God he said,

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalms 23:4).

And so, when we’re in that place where we’re feeling all alone, when we question where God is, we’ve got to know that he hasn’t abandoned us, he’s with us, and so you need to stay with him. You may remember in John chapter 6, the miracle of feeding the 5000, which was more likely 20,000 with women and children. It was an amazing miracle, a wondrous sign, but Jesus was never impressed by the great crowds. He knew that their motives were impure, that they were looking to get something for nothing, maybe a show, a miraculous healing, or 20,000 happy meals. But whatever it would be, give them food and entertainment and they’re happy. However no sooner had they been filled, no sooner did the feeling begin to wear off, the excitement of that miraculous sign, did they begin to look for more, at which point John tells us that Jesus withdrew.

And so today, I want to talk to you about, “More Than a Feeling” and four things that we can learn, four possible reasons why you’re still looking for the feeling. You’ve gone to church, you’ve been reading the Bible, you’ve been praying, but you’re still looking for a feeling. And so, wherever you are on that spectrum I want to give you the opportunity to pursue God and find him in a more intimate way. Number one, maybe you’re looking for some kind of sign, some kind of miracle, something that proves that there is a God. You’re looking, but you’re struggling to see beyond the miracles.

## 1. Struggling to See Beyond the Signs

Now of course, miracles were an important part of the ministry of the son of God. John tells us in his gospel, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book” (John 20:30). But the miracles weren’t the most important part. You must believe that he is who his miracles declare him to be, because it is his miracles that demonstrate who he is, but it’s his word that we must believe. The Bible tells us in John chapter 5, Jesus said,

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

And so, this is important, we must hear the word because nobody gets saved by believing in miracles, experiencing miracles, being healed by Jesus, delivered by him, or being fed by him and feeling full. It’s so much more than a feeling.

This morning, if you’re looking for a feeling, you’re doing the same thing that many of the disciples did. They believed in the miracle, they believed he came from God, they believed he had divine power, and just the day before they had gotten a taste of the greatest meal they ever had but they wanted more. Realizing that Jesus had left him the night before, they got into boats and crossed to the other side of the lake. Finding Jesus and his disciples, they asked him “When did you get here?” Jesus answered,

“Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill” (John 6:26).

There are some of you here today, and you want to know God, you want to feel him, and yet you’re looking for something, some kind of sense that God is really with you. Maybe you’re looking for God to speak to you, thundering from the heavens with some kind of audible voice, but God doesn’t always reveal himself that way. Sometimes you may feel him and other times you may not. And here’s what Jesus followers asked him. They caught up with them after getting that free meal and they asked him in verse 30,

“So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat” (John 6:30-31).

They said what will you do, and they demanded a sign, because God did this. They just ate their fill of five small barley loaves and two small fish feeding no less than 5000 people, but they weren’t satisfied. They tracked him down and said, “God gave our fathers manna, bread from heaven, what miraculous sign will you do that we may see it and believe?” Jesus said to them in verse 33,

“The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:32-35).

Jesus promises to fill us, to satisfies, but we need to understand that feelings are not evidence of the presence of God. As a matter of fact, if you always felt God, you would not need to have faith, but the Bible tells us,

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Some of you are looking for miraculous signs, you looking for the feeling, thundering voice, when sometimes it’s just a gentle whisper. There may be some of you here today that are looking for something that’s not there, God is with you always, but he’s more than a feeling. And then the second thing, some of you may have difficulty understanding.

## 2. Difficulty Understanding

Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, the people would still not believe in him, and it’s just as the prophet Isaiah said,

"He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts…" (John 12:40).

Now, that’s entering into some deep theological waters, but I want to make something clear about understanding God. It's not like trying to understand quantum physics or some complex theory that is beyond your intellectual capacities. The ability to understand God is not a function of the intellect, for God has said “the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (1 Corinthians 1:19), but it's a function of the will. It's a choice that you make, because the Bible tells us that,

“God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. He chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28, NLT).

And so, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Do you want to believe? Do you want to understand? If you want to, you can. If you want to understand the ways of God, you can. Jesus spoke very clearly in Matthew chapter 13,

“He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9).

And so, if you have ears it’s an open invitation, but it’s also a matter of choice isn’t it? You could say it’s really a condition of our hearts, because the apostle John tells us that “anyone who hates another brother or sister is still living and walking in darkness… having been blinded” (1 John 2:11, NLT). And so, the Bible tells us that,

“Satan, the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. And they don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4, NLT).

That's why two people can sit in a church pew all of their lives, hearing the same sermons, reading the same scripture, taking part in the same Sunday School discussions, and one person can be radically transformed into the image of Christ, and the other doesn't experience the slightest change of character. One person is seeking to understand the Word of God, but the other person isn't. However, Jesus didn’t come to hide the truth from people, he came to reveal the truth, and he often spoke in parables to give us insight into the truth. God said that if you seek me, you will find me, and yet there are people who hear it, but they don't understand it. The Bible says,

“In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes” (Matthew 13:14).

They’ve closed their eyes. You see maybe once they were close to God but over time their hearts became calloused. And so, now they don’t see like they used to see, they don’t hear like they used to hear, and the number one cause of a hardened and calloused heart is what? We think the number one causes? It’s sin in our lives that separates us from God. It breaks our intimacy with God. It’s like when Jesus was on the cross, when he took upon himself your sin and my sin, the Bible says that he cried out to God, because the first time there was a break, a fracture in his intimacy with the father. He cried out and said,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

You see, sin breaks that fellowship, that intimacy with God, and when we continue to live in it, not repenting of it and turning back to God, over time it becomes like plaque on your heart and it grows hard. Suddenly you can’t sense that God is there, he hasn’t gone anywhere but suddenly something is separating you from what’s always been there. Something is blocking you from feeling the intimacy and the goodness of God that’s still there, but you just don’t feel him. Like “The Righteous Brothers” said, “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” and it doesn’t have to be a situation like murder or adultery, it doesn’t have to be one of the big ones, but it can be envy, jealousy, gossip, lust, gluttony, laziness, and so every now and then you have to do it check up on your heart. And I can tell you this, I know this, because there are so many times in my life where I discovered that something unrighteous lives in my heart. And so, I’ve had to search my heart, to confess my sin, and ask God to forgive me and cleanse me. You know, just like David cried out to God when he fell into sin, he said,

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence” (Psalms 51:10-11).

And so, just trying to be real, not trying to cause guilt, but maybe you don’t feel the presence of God because you’ve got sin that’s blocking the intimacy with you that he desires. The goodness of God is still there, you just don’t feel him. And so, some of us may have grown hardened to the things of God, and then number three, maybe God wants you to seek him, reaching out for him like you never have before.

## 3. Reaching Out Like Never Before

You see, this is so important because we were made to know God. This is what we were created for, and so not to know God is not to know what we were made for, not to know the meaning of our existence, and to be totally disconnected from purpose and significance in life. And so, there may be some of you here today, you tried a lot of substitutes, little deities, and you may exalt them, but there will never be any satisfaction, because as Augustine said, you’ve got a God shaped vacuum that only he can fill. And so, we are in a world today where there are all of these little god’s, idols, little substitutes, little distractions, that have failed to satisfy.

So many in our culture today are frustrated, seeking a euphoria through drugs, getting stoned, in a stupor blinded by alcohol, and killing themselves at a rate like never before in history. And the reason why is because they’ve been looking for God in all the wrong places, they can’t cope with the fact that they have all these multiple things they bow down before and yet can’t find any satisfaction. You know back in the day the Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger, sang about his deviant lifestyle that was all in vain. He said, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” And it’s no wonder, it’s been that way since the beginning of time.

In fact, this was exactly the problem in Athens as we look in chapter 17. They had gods all over the place, but in desperation they had made one last altar, one last object of worship. The apostle Paul said, as he walked around and looked at the objects of their worship,

“As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

You see, with all of their gods, all of their objects of worship, all of the distractions they’ve had in their lives, they still had no satisfaction. And so, they knew that somewhere out there, there’s a God we haven’t yet tapped into, we haven’t connected with who is going to satisfy us. And that is what the prophet Jeremiah addresses because man was created to know the true God, and until he knows the one true God, he will know no peace and have no satisfaction in the truest sense. God said through the prophet Jeremiah,

“This is what the Lord says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth…" (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

And so, a person who doesn’t know God has no reason to exist other than the vanity of this very moment and whatever glory they may attain in that moment. In this life you might be smart, you might be strong, and you might be rich, but you’re nothing unless you know God, that’s what he says. That’s the meaning of your existence. That is the purpose of life. You see, you were made to know God and to have fellowship with him. You were made for him, as well as by him, and your purpose is to know God and to spend eternity enjoying his presence.

The apostle Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus, some translation say Mars Hill and he said: "Men of Athens. What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.” He proceeded to tell them how they can know God, that there’s three things involved, one is to recognize that God is, two is to recognize who God is, and three is to recognize what God is saying to you. That’s what the Bible tells us in Hebrews chapter 11,

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

And so, Paul says, “You don’t know God, you’ve admitted it, and so let me introduce you to him. And he tells them that it is, “God who made the world and everything in it” quoting God himself in Isaiah chapter 45,

“It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens…” (Isaiah 45:12).

He continues saying, “It is the Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24) again quoting God in Jeremiah chapter 23,

"Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:24).

And it is he, God himself, who gives all men life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:25). It is he to whom Moses cried out, "O God, God of the spirits of all mankind…” (Numbers 16:22). This God, this unknown God, is the one whom Job proclaimed, “In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10). He said, it is “The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4).

And so, here is Paul standing on the Areopagus, in the city of Athens, surrounded by the intellectuals of the city, proclaiming to them the unknown God, and he declares to them that their time of ignorance is over. He said in Acts chapter 17,

“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27).

“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that” what? All of you help me out. He said, “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27).

God did this, God created, God showed the glory of who he was. And he did this so that people would reach out to him and say, “I want to know that God. I want him and I’m going to pursue him.” And yet there may be times, there may be those times when you may not feel God, because number four, God wants to bring you to a place where you have a greater desire for him.

## 4. Creating Greater Desire

You see, what does a lack do, a deficiency, or scarcity? It draws out our desire, just like if we don’t eat we get hungry, if we don’t drink we get thirsty. In the same way, if I don’t sense the presence of God, I might start seeking him more passionately, reaching out for him, hungering and thirsting for God. You see, when you don’t have that feeling, when you don’t have that intimacy, you begin to crave it even more. And so, what if God was bringing you to a place where you recognize, “I’m missing that feeling, I want more of him, I need more of him.” That’s exactly where God wants you to be, he wants to be number one, he wants to be the greatest object of your desire, he wants you to pursue him, and to just because you don’t feel him, just because you don’t hear him, doesn’t mean that he’s absent. We need to pursue him, because the good news is, God said through the prophet Jeremiah,

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord…" (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

Listen, the Bible tells us, “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (Psalms 145:18). Some of you are here today for this moment, some of you are hearing this because God is drawing you to himself and Jesus said,

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

And so, you need to call upon him in truth saying, “Jesus I want to experience you today. I want to know that you’re with me.” And so, you press into him, you seek him, his kingdom, his righteousness, and when you sense that God is with you, you embrace it because he is. When you get that feeling, like Moses you take off your shoes because your standing on holy ground. You get down on your face and worship him, you give him glory, you embrace it, because it’s real and he’s with you.

Don’t forget that he’s always with you, don’t forget to acknowledge him, don’t forget to embrace him even in those everyday moments. You know, when you see the sunset like we did Thursday night, when you accomplish something noteworthy, when you’re making a difference in someone’s life, you just tell him, “I see you, I feel you, I know you used me, thank you.”

When you come home, you come inside like I did the other day, and my daughter Olivia came running up and threw her arms around me. I thank God for his goodness and his presence in that moment. Or sitting on the couch watching TV, rubbing Dana’s feet, my best friend for over 33 years, and I feel the presence of God in that moment. When I walked my daughter Megan down the aisle, giving my baby girl to Brandon, watching them get married, I sense the presence of God in that moment. Now, it wasn’t always that feeling of warmth flowing all through my body, it wasn’t lightning from the sky, it was even anything audible, but it was just an ongoing awareness that my God is always with me. And so, I tell you this so that you don’t trust your feelings, because feelings aren’t faith, feelings aren’t the truth, but the fact is that your God will never leave you or forsake you.

Some of you today are seeking God, you’re searching for him, and maybe you’re not feeling anything, but you’re here because you’re looking for something, you need something from God. I promise you if you seek him, if you reach out for him, you will find him, because he’s not far from any of us. As a matter of fact, the Bible says,

"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming…” (Romans 10:6-8).

When you draw near to him, he draws near to you, just like when a child lifts their hands to a parent, their parent responds, reaching out and picking them up. In the same way, any time you lift your hands toward God, when you reach out to him, he responds to you. When you seek him, you will find him, because he loves to reveal himself to those that pursue him.

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