

Encounter “Secondhand or Firsthand?”

John 18:28-34

Delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic via Livestream and to two under 50 gatherings
at Central Baptist Church on June 27, 2021

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 01)** I’m really excited to begin a new six-part sermon series today, which I am calling “Encounter.” This series is about encountering God.
 - Here is what we must grasp right away: true Christianity is about encountering God, meeting with God, and enjoying God.
 - At its heart, true Christianity is not a theory about life that we debate and discuss like other theories.
 - At its heart, true Christianity is not a self-help guide to help you live your best life.
 - At its heart, true Christianity is not a moral system to teach you right and wrong.
- Oh yes, true Christianity most certainly does teach us right and wrong, show us how human life works best, and defines what life is all about.
 - But at its heart, true Christianity is not these things. At its heart, it is about encountering the God of heaven and earth through His Son Jesus Christ.
- From the first page of the Bible, the Creator of the universe reveals that He is a personal being. God is not an impersonal force like in Star Wars. God is personal and—let this blow your mind—our Creator wants us to know him and encounter him.
 - That is why God broke into history when he took on human flesh and walked among us. This is why Jesus died for our sins—that we might be given a relationship with God.
 - True Christianity is about encountering God
- This kind of experiential language is all through the Bible. For instance, the Psalmist says, **“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Ps 34:8).**
 - Rom 8:15 says the Holy Spirit enables every true child of God to cry out to God in prayer saying, **“Father!”**
 - This is why when we gather for worship and encounter God, even an unbeliever who joins in the services will say, **“God is really among you.” (1 Cor 14:25)**
- I am praying that every one of us would encounter God through this series. Some of us have never encountered God. May it be for the first time! Many of us have grown sleepy as Christians. May God wake us from our slumber!
 - As we kick this off today, I want to right to the heart of the matter. Is our knowledge of God secondhand knowledge or firsthand knowledge? Firsthand means you know God through your *own* personal experience. You have encountered him firsthand. Secondhand means you’ve only heard of about such encounters with God in the lives of others, but you have do not have such an encounter.

- I'll unpack this as we go along.

THE PROBLEM OF SECONDHAND RELIGION

- Let's begin by talking about **(SHOW SLIDE 02) the problem of secondhand religion.**
 - To understand all of this, come back with me to that week before Jesus was crucified. A rumour had spread through the city like wildfire. It was on everyone's lips: **"He's finally come! The king is here!"** For centuries the Jews had been looking for God's long promised king who would deliver them from their enemies. If you know your history then you know that the Roman Empire ruled that part of the world. The Jews were not a free people. They lived under Roman rule, under Caesar, and had to pay taxes to fund his government and military campaigns.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 03)** And now the rumour was that God's long promised king had come. A large group of people had even welcomed Jesus into the city as the king shouting "Hosanna!," which means "Please rescue us!" or is an expression of praise that means "God is rescuing us." They laid palm branches down like a kind of red carpet to welcome Jesus as their king.
 - The religious leaders caught wind of it and did what any good church would do. They struck a committee to look into the matter. The committee reported back at a special business meeting. A motion was put forward to have Jesus put to death. There was much debate but the motion passed.
 - And so the religious leaders arrested Jesus and marched him down to the governor's palace. The governor's name was Pilate. He had been appointed by Caesar himself. The religious leaders knew there was one thing that would end up getting Jesus put to death by Rome and that was if he appeared to be a threat to Caesar. Rome could tolerate a lot, but the one thing it would not tolerate was anyone but Caesar claiming to be a king
 - Pilate had also heard the rumours about Jesus. And now Jesus stood in front of him. Now Pilate could find out the answers for himself.
 - And so he took Jesus inside to interrogate him. And then came the big question.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 04) "So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'" (Jn 18:33)**
 - Jesus refused to be trapped, but responded to the question with a question of his own. In doing this, Jesus cut through all the surface level discussion. The question Jesus then asked Pilate went right to the heart of the matter and right to the heart of Pilate's life.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 05) Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" (Jn 18:34)**
 - ***"Pilate, are you genuinely asking because you want to know the truth about me? Or is this all secondhand stuff that others say about me?"***
 - Jesus may be the one on trial, but now it is Pilate who suddenly finds himself on trial.

- ***“Pilate, are you asking this because you want a firsthand encounter with me? Or, are you merely doing your job and relying on the secondhand accounts of others?”***
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 06)** Firsthand or secondhand? It makes all the difference in the world. I don't need to take any more time explaining this discussion between Pilate and Jesus. It's clear. But we do need to take a lot more time to look at this in our own lives.
- This morning we sang a song written by Stuart Townsend entitled “In Christ alone.” We sang the words “For I am His and He is mine/Bought with the precious blood of Christ.”
 - Did you sing this of your own accord, or is it just Stuart Townsend that said this about Jesus?
- We recited the apostle's creed, which was written by the early church in the first century. You said you believe ***“the third day he rose again from the dead”*** that ***“he will come to judge the living and the dead,”*** and that you believe ***“in the forgiveness of sins.”***
 - Do you say this of your own accord, or are they just beliefs that others have said about Jesus?
- This morning pastor Phil prayed to God our Father asking him to do things for us.
 - Did you pray along in your own heart, or did pastor Phil merely say the words for you?
- Have all of these words, songs, creeds, and beliefs been worked out in fires of your own experience? Is there personal discovery behind each one? Can we say ***“This has become my own experience as well?”***
 - Or are we just repeating what others have said?
 - To each of us Jesus says, ***“Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”*** Firsthand or secondhand?
- My heart is greatly burdened for each one of you. There is nothing more dangerous than thinking you are a Christian because you attend church, serve on a committee, or give generously. This may all just be secondhand religion. And no one will enter heaven on the faith of someone else. It must be your own.
 - Let me speak particularly to those of you who come from Christian homes. Being raised like this is one of the greatest gifts that God has given you. But it is also one of the most dangerous things in the world because you will not enter into Jesus kingdom on your parent's faith. It must be your own. You are in a dangerous place because you may look like a true Christian. You know all the right words. You know the right answers.
 - But Jesus is looking at your right now and asking. ***“Is this your own personal faith in me, or is this what others like your parents have said about me?”***
- So this is the problem of secondhand religion. It looks like true faith. It says the right words and gives the right answers like Pilate referring to Jesus as the king of the Jews. But is it our own?

WHY WE LOVE SECONDHAND RELIGION

- Let's continue to work this out. In the second place let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 07) why we love secondhand religion.**
 - First, **(SHOW SLIDE 08) we love secondhand religion because it's safe.**
 - We can control how much is in our lives. It doesn't demand too much from us. It never makes a person leave all to become a missionary. It never makes a person give too much money away.
 - I've talked with people who became Christians and their parents were appalled: ***"It's all fine and good to have a bit of that in your life, but we're worried by how seriously you are taking this. It's affecting everything."*** The parents want a safe religion that just helps their son or daughter live a good life. But when a person has truly met Jesus firsthand, a fire begins to burn in them. They start living very differently and it changes every area of their life.
- Another reason why **(SHOW SLIDE 09) we love secondhand religion because it's easy.**
 - This makes me think about a man who was speaking to the famous Evangelist Henry Drummond. The man said, **(SHOW SLIDE 10) "I used to be concerned about religion, but religion is a great subject, and I was busy and there was little time to settle it for myself: so I became a Catholic, and instead of dabbling any longer in religion myself, just left it to the Church to do everything for me. Once a year I go to Mass."**
 - It is so much easier to have a secondhand religion because Jesus never gets close enough to affect your money, your sexuality, or your thought life.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 11)** Yet, we never see this kind of safe and easy second religion with Jesus. Jesus was always calling for a firsthand encounter with himself.
 - It's like the day the famous poet and journalist Walt Whitman was attending a lecture by an astronomer about the stars. The room was hot and stuffy and the lecturer was boring the audience with charts and diagrams. Whitman couldn't stand it anymore. He stood up, left the room, and went outside to look up at the stars themselves.
 - So you see we love secondhand religion because it is safe and easy but it's also very boring. Maybe some of us need to stop engaging in endless debates about religion on Facebook and open our Bibles to encounter Christ. Maybe some of us need to stop watching endless YouTube videos about the controversies in Christianity that we feel passionate about and seek Christ himself.
 - Get out of those stuffy boring rooms and look up at Christ, the bright and morning star.

WHY WE HATE SECONDHAND RELIGION

- Right here we are led to the third thing we need to talk about. On the one hand people love secondhand religion because it is safe and easy, but on the other hand we also need to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 12) Why we actually hate secondhand religion.**

- We actually can't stand it for it for a few reasons.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) We hate secondhand religion because it's not secure.**
 - Secondhand religion won't help you when your life starts falling apart.
 - The famous evangelist John Wesley's story is so helpful here. He grew up with Christianity. He studied it in college. But it was all quite academic for him. One day he was on a ship that got caught in a terrible storm. Everyone on board was terrified, except for a little group of missionaries called The Moravians. Later Wesley asked them why they were not afraid and one answered, *"Why should I be afraid? I know Christ!"* And then looking at Wesley he said, *"Do you know Christ?"* For the first time Wesley realized that his religion was all secondhand. It was debates and ideas, but none of this helped him in the storm. He realized he had not personally encountered Christ. A short while later he did and he became one of the greatest evangelists in history.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) We hate secondhand religion because it's not real.**
 - One of the great things about this generation is we want authenticity. We can't stand it when something is fake. This is true of Christianity as well. It used to be that people went to church and said they were Christian because it was the good and upstanding thing to do and could help your career. That is no longer the case. People don't want to sing songs they don't really believe in.
 - In some ways this is good. Far too many people only had secondhand religion. But what happens when someone encounters God? What happens when they suddenly realize that God is real? It's kind of like in the original Jurassic Park movie where the main characters have studied dinosaurs their whole lives. They can talk forever about them, but then there is the scene where they first see them. All those facts and studies fall away. They are overcome with awe, joy, and excitement.
- We love secondhand religion because it is safe and easy but we actually hate it because it's not real and we know it. Oh, but what a difference when a person truly encounters Christ. What joy! What excitement happens when all reading and discussions about God suddenly turn into an encounter with God himself.
 - We say with Job, **(SHOW SLIDE 15) "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." (Job 42:5)** We cry out with the psalmist not to some vague Supreme being we read about in books, but we say, **(SHOW SLIDE 16) "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you." (Ps 63:1)**
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 17)** Is that not the firsthand kind of encounter with Christ that we truly want?
 - Away with dry and dusty religion! We want to drink from the Fountain of living water.
 - Away with vague ideas and philosophies about God! We want to see God in the face of Christ.
 - Away with worship services that just go through religious motions! We want to encounter the living God.

HOW TO ENCOUNTER CHRIST FOR YOURSELF

- If you resonate with this then you will be saying, ***“yes! I want that, but how do I have a firsthand encounter?”*** In the final place, let’s talk for our last few minutes about **(SHOW SLIDE 18) how to have a firsthand encounter with Christ.**
 - Before I answer that we need to come back to Pilate. **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 19)** One thing must be made clear and it is this: like Pilate, we all stand alone before Christ and his question: do you ask this of your own accord? The crowds could not answer for Pilate. The guards at the door could not answer for Pilate. His own wife could not answer for him. Jesus deals with Pilate as his own person. In the final analysis, each of us stands before Jesus on our own.
 - On judgement day we cannot point to the faith our parents, to the faith of our spouse, to the fact that we have read the Bible, or been part of a church. All of these people have tried their best to pass on their experience, to described what they have seen and felt of Christ, but at the end of the day it is *their* experience. We cannot live off secondhand experience; we must know Christ ourselves.
- I ask you, ***“Do you now Christ personally?”*** I don’t just mean know *about* him. A smart person may be able to define what honey is: it as a food made by honey bees who take flower nectar, store it in honeycombs where through the process of evaporation a sweet liquid is produced called “honey.”
 - A very smart person may be able to write an entire book on the chemical process that creates the sweetness of honey. But we all know there is a world of difference between knowing honey is sweet because of its chemical makeup, and knowing that honey is sweet because you ate a hot piece of toast with melted honey on top of it.
 - I am asking you if you have tasted Christ like this? Oh, we all want to taste more of the sweetness of who he is and what he is done. In this world, our experience always falls short. But I am asking you this: have you tasted the sweetness of Christ for yourself, or have you only heard from others talk about it? Do you know Christ, or is he a just a historical figure in a book that has fascinated people for 2000 years?
- Well, how do we have a firsthand encounter of Christ?
 - All I can do is to repeat to you what we read all through the New Testament. In John 1, a group of people were interesting in following Jesus. Jesus did not turn them away but said, ***“Come and you will see.”***
 - They went with him to the house he was staying at and spent the entire day with him. This firsthand encounter with Christ was so incredible that one of them named Andrew went and found his brother Simon Peter and told him to come and see Jesus.
- The same thing happened to the woman at the well in John 4. She had a firsthand encounter with Christ. It changed her life. Then we read,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 20) “So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people,²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can**

this be the Christ?" ³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him." (Jn 4:28-30)

- Many of them had their own firsthand encounter with Christ. And so they later said, **(SHOW SLIDE 21)** "They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.'" (Jn 4:42).
 - They moved from secondhand knowledge to firsthand encounter.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 22)** This is what all the Christians of history are saying to each of us as well. Come and see for yourself. It's what your Christian grandparents or parents are saying. It's your Christian spouse or friend is saying, "Come and see for yourself." If you want this encounter then do a few things to come and see Jesus.
 - First, **(SHOW SLIDE 23)** keep reading "the gospels" (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).
 - There you will encounter the risen Christ.
 - Second, **(SHOW SLIDE 24)** keep praying. People say, "*I stopped praying because Jesus isn't real to me.*" But could it be that Jesus is not real to you because you stopped praying. Seek him. Set aside a morning or afternoon. Take nothing but your Bible. Ask him to meet with you. Start reading. Stop and pray whenever something strikes your heart. Christ will make himself real to you. How do I know this? On the authority of his own words. Jesus said,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 25)** "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." (Rev 3:20)
 - One of the most famous paintings in the history of the world is called "The Light of the World" by William Hunt. **(SHOW SLIDE 26)** It's a picture of Jesus knocking at the door. Notice that the door can only be opened from the inside because there is no handle. Notice also that the door is overgrown with weeds and the nails and hinges are rusted implying that the door gets very little use. Christ has not been invited in.
 - You may say you want to encounter him, but have you unlocked the door of your life to him? The door may be rusty from a lack of prayer, but if you will start moving them he will come in. Prayer is opening the door and saying, "*Jesus come in. I want to speak with you and learn about you.*"
 - Finally, **(SHOW SLIDE 27)** keep loving. Christ's way is the way of love. You never know where you will encounter him as you are loving others.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 28)** Listen to Jesus' question to Pilate: "*Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?*"
 - We answer: Lord, we ask of our own accord. We don't want to live on secondhand religion. We want to know you. We want to know what kind of King you are. We want to live as citizens of your kingdom.