



We're continuing our study today of the Gospel of John. We last saw our Lord in Samaria, where he had an amazing encounter with the woman at the well which led to a great spiritual awakening in that area. The Lord and the disciples had to be excited and rejoicing over what must have been an unexpected spiritual harvest.

Today we're looking at another encounter Jesus had. It seems the Apostle John loves to tell of these very personal meetings between Jesus and a variety of individuals. We've seen the encounter between his own mother and him at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. We've seen the encounter he had at night with a religious leader named Nicodemus. And, as I mentioned, we've seen the remarkable encounter he had with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Now we come to the end of chapter 4 and we see Jesus approached by a man described as a royal official. The word used indicates he was most likely a man with an important position in Herod's administration. Herod's official title was tetrarch rather than King. Jesus wasn't a big fan of Herod's at all. This royal official was probably Jewish but not a real religious guy. No doubt he was a man of some power and wealth. It would seem he had everything going for him, but as we'll see he had a desperate need and that's what brought him to Jesus.

And what Jesus does is lead this man in the development of his faith. The man begins with what I'd call an immature faith, but by the end of the story his faith has matured and developed to be far more robust. John is using this story to teach us something about the true nature of faith. I think we all know how important faith is. Hebrews says, "*Without faith it is impossible to please God*" (Heb. 11:6a). In the gospels, the thing that most impressed Jesus was great faith, and the thing he most often rebuked his disciples for was a lack of faith. But what is faith? How does our faith grow? That's what this encounter teaches us. We pick up the story in John 4:43–54.

**After the two days he left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there. Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this**

man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

"Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."

The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

"Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live."

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him."

Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and his whole household believed.

This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

### **Jesus Welcomed in Galilee?**

The story begins with John telling us that after two days in Samaria Jesus and his disciples continued to head north into the region of Galilee. For Jesus and several of his disciples this was home; this was familiar territory for them. But John reminds us that things weren't always hunky-dory for Jesus in Galilee. Jesus himself had said a prophet is without honor in his own country. That had been true for Jesus. We know from Luke's gospel that after hearing Jesus preach in the synagogue the citizens of his hometown of Nazareth had led him to the top of a high cliff, intending to throw him over the side to a sure death, but Jesus miraculously slipped away (Luke 4:28-30). Remember, he had just left Samaria where he was called the Savior of the world, but not in Galilee. That's why he said, "*a prophet has no honor in his own country.*"

But the strange thing is in the very next breath John says the folks in Galilee "*welcomed him.*" Many of them had seen for themselves the miracles Jesus performed in Jerusalem at the Passover festival. So it's almost like they're proud of their hometown boy who made a good showing down in the big city. But why does John remind us that Jesus said a prophet is without honor in his own country when his own countrymen seem to be honoring him? This is a bit puzzling, don't you think?

The key to this is what happens in Jesus' encounter with this royal official. Suffice to say for now there was something faulty about their welcome. You might say there was something faulty about their faith; something immature and superficial. So let's look at this man's encounter with Jesus and what it can teach us about genuine faith.

### **Faith Begins with Bringing a Desperate Need to Jesus**

John tells us that Jesus came to Cana where Jesus had performed his first miracle of turning the water into wine. He then introduces us to this man and tells us he was from Capernaum, which was only about 20 miles from Cana. No doubt this man had heard all about the miracles Jesus had performed in Cana, as well as what had happened in Jerusalem at the Passover, and so now he turns to Jesus with his own crisis. This man who had both wealth and power was helpless in the face of his son's sickness. Perhaps the child had contracted a fever, and his father watched as his life slowly drained away. The color faded from his young face; the light in his eyes began to dim; he was in and out of consciousness and right on the brink of death.

Nothing can shatter a father more than seeing a child slip away like this. In that culture, the fact that this was a son, perhaps a first-born son, would make it even more difficult. In the face of something like that, it doesn't matter how much money you have or how many people look to you for orders. You'd gladly give that all away if you could just have your son back, healthy! It's a reminder to us that it doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter how successful you've been, it doesn't matter how many look to you for orders; trouble and sorrow and even death come to all. There are things money or success can't buy or fix.

It's often in those times that we come to Jesus, isn't it? It doesn't matter if we're religious or not. I love that this man came himself. He didn't send a servant. He didn't send his wife. He got on his horse and he went himself. Can't you just see him arriving in Cana, getting off his horse, frantically searching for Jesus? He probably found him at Nathaniel's house because John later tells us Nathaniel was from Cana (John 21:2). What a contrast! The carpenter from Nazareth and the royal official from Herod's palace! It says he begged Jesus to come to his home and heal his son. The word "begged" means he began to beg and he kept on begging. You can look at this as a prayer. Behind this prayer is a desperate need and he's very specific about what he wants: "Come and heal my dying son." It's like he won't let Jesus go. He doesn't care what people think. He's oblivious to them as he pleads for his son's life.

And this is where faith usually begins for us. It begins with a desperate need that we can't fix. It begins with a sense of our own helplessness. It begins when we turn to God in prayer and

beg him for help. There's nothing wrong with this, but it's only a start.

### **Faith is not Superficially Dependent on Signs**

Jesus' reply to the man is rather startling. *"Unless you people see signs and wonders you will never believe."* That's his response to this man's desperate need? Jesus isn't going to win any awards for compassion here! The guy pours his heart out and Jesus tosses a glass of cold water in his face. I can't help but think of how Jesus had responded to his own mother when she requested he do something about the wine that had run out at the wedding a few weeks before. Remember, Jesus replied to her, *"Woman, why do you involve me. My hour has not yet come"* (2:4). But then Jesus went on and did the miracle. We see the same thing here.

I wonder if this is one of those severe mercies in which Jesus is trying to bring this man to a new level of faith? Jesus puts his finger on the weakness of not just this man's faith but also the people of Galilee in general ("you people"). This is why there was a shadow hanging over their welcome of Jesus back in verse 45. Why did they welcome him? Because they'd seen the miracles he performed in Jerusalem at Passover. Why did this official come to Jesus? Because he'd heard about the signs not only in Jerusalem but in nearby Cana. He came to Jesus not so much because he really wanted to know and follow Jesus but because he'd heard Jesus was the only one who could solve his problem.

Many of us begin a relationship with Jesus in this way. "Lord, if you will answer this prayer, give me this thing, do this miracle for me, then I'll believe in you." You might be asking for a husband, or a job, or a healing, or a raise. The list of our needs is endless. And the Lord is so gracious that sometimes those prayers are answered, but his response here shows that sometimes he doesn't answer immediately because he wants to take us deeper; he wants our faith to grow.

Faith based on signs and wonders isn't mature faith. Faith based on God's willingness to provide a quick fix to our problems isn't either. Instead of honoring and trusting God for who he is, it's really all about us. We're left with the idea that we dictate the terms to God. Jesus wants this man to learn to trust him and follow him as the Son of God, the Word made flesh, apart from anything he might get out of the deal.

Let me give you an illustration. Imagine a city planner designing a new set of road signs to get people around the streets in the quickest and most efficient fashion. The town is old and the new signs end up being quite a sensation. They're so beautiful and such a big deal that people are stopping their cars and getting out just to admire the signs! Instead of the traffic flowing smoothly, which is why the signs were put up in the first place, traffic is getting clogged up worse than before! People are so in love with the signs that they forget about their purpose.

This is what was happening with Jesus in Galilee. People are admiring the signs that Jesus was performing so much they forgot the purpose for which those signs were given—to reveal that he was and is the Son of God and the Savior of the world; to encourage people to put their trust in him and to follow him regardless of whether he fixed all their problems. How about you? Do you want him or do you just want what he can give you? Is your faith deep enough to keep following him regardless of what you get out of the deal, or will you cut and run as soon as he doesn't fix your problem on demand?

### **Faith Believes and Obeys the Word of Jesus Without Signs**

What I love about this man is the way he responded to Jesus. Notice he persisted despite what must have felt like kind of a rebuke from Jesus. He could have argued the point with Jesus, or he could have tried to pull rank, or he could have just left, but instead he persists and says, *“Sir, come down before my child dies.”* It reminds me of something John Bunyan once wrote: “I was driven to such straits that I must of necessity go to Jesus; and if he had met me with a drawn sword in his hand, I would sooner have thrown myself on the edge of his sword than have gone away from him; for I knew him to be my last hope.” This guy just wouldn't go away! Jesus was his last hope.

Jesus responded to him in verse 50, *“Go, your son will live.”* So in one sense Jesus denied his request. He had asked for Jesus to come with him to his house down in Capernaum, and Jesus refused. But then Jesus assured him that his son would live. That's why the man had come in the first place. Notice Jesus didn't give him a sign; all he gave him was his word or promise: “Your son will live.” And with that was a command: “Go!” So this man had to believe and obey the word of Jesus apart from any sign. I can just see this man standing face to face with Jesus; a pregnant silence settles between the two of them and those who watch. What did the man think when he heard these words? What would he do? How would he respond?

John tells us clearly and simply: *“The man took Jesus at his word and departed.”* No arguing. No pleading. He didn't say, “Okay, I'll go but just give me one little sign that you'll do it.” He simply believed and obeyed. His faith didn't happen because he saw a miracle, but because he'd heard Jesus' word.

By the way, throughout his gospel, John makes a clear distinction between believing because we've seen something and believing on the strength of Jesus' word. Remember what the risen Jesus said to doubting Thomas after he showed him his wounds? He said, *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”* (John 20:29).

We think seeing is believing, but maybe it's the other way around; maybe believing is seeing. Listen to Hebrews, *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not*

*see”* (11:1). He goes on and gives some examples of people who lived by faith and then he says, *“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth”* (11:13). Notice he says, “they saw” these promises “from a distance.” That means they believed God's word even though they hadn't received what he'd promised and they died that way. And we believe that's when the promises were ultimately fulfilled.

What kind of faith do you have? Is it a seeing-is-believing kind of faith or is it a believing-is-seeing kind of faith? Are you willing to take Jesus at his word and act on it even though you don't immediately see the results? Sometimes, just like the writer of Hebrews says, we don't ever get to see the results in this life. But sometimes, like this man in the story, we do get to see the results.

### **Faith is Strengthened by the Rewards it Receives**

What happened next? He gets on his horse and heads back home. I wonder what his state of mind was as he headed back to Capernaum. One of the interesting things about this is it almost seems like this guy took his time in getting back because it took two days. It wasn't until the next day, while he was still traveling, that he found out about the plight of his son. It's only about 20 miles from Cana to Capernaum and for a man like this who most certainly would have had a horse that's only about a four hour trip. So what does that tell us about his state of mind? Some have said it shows that he was so convinced that what Jesus said would come to fruition that he didn't even rush home. Others think this is a reflection of the fact that he was hesitant and still troubled with doubts. He may have been thinking, “Why did I leave him? If I had just pressed him a little more he would have come down himself.”

We don't really know what he was feeling, and it really doesn't matter because the point is that he went; he obeyed the word of Jesus. Faith isn't what you **feel**, it's what you **do**. The next day, while he was still on the way, his servants met him and told him his son was fine. When he asked what time it was that his son got better, they told him yesterday at one in the afternoon, which is the exact time Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” This strengthened his faith even more.

I love what Lesslie Newbigin says about this: “The signs which are demanded as proof of authenticity are no part of the path to faith. Faith begins with obedience to the words of Jesus... But within a context of obedient discipleship Jesus does graciously grant signs which enable the disciple to go forward on the path of faith.” So signs follow faith decisions. The way to increase faith is to exercise faith. The way you overcome spiritual inertia is by making tough decisions based on faith in God's word. Sometimes the reason we don't see God moving is simply because we aren't

moving in faith. If you want to see God move, you may need to make a move!

Verse 53 even says not only did he believe but his entire household believed. That means his wife and his son and his servants all came to faith in Christ. What a story! The whole family! It all started with a sick boy, but there was more at stake in this story than just this boy's health. In the end, not only was the boy healed, but the whole family was healed of something worse than a physical illness.

The book of Hebrews say that Jesus is *“the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”* In this story we see how he seeks to develop and perfect our own faith. He wants to move us from a faith that feeds on signs and quick fixes to a faith that hears and obeys his word. How is Jesus developing that kind of faith in your life? Have you come to him with a need, a request born out of desperation? That's a good thing. If you have a need today, run to Jesus just like this man did. But also realize that Jesus may want to take you deeper. He may want you trust him and obey him even when you don't get what you ask for. Will you do that? Will you exercise faith in his word even when you don't see the results immediately? If you do, he'll grow your faith, and he may even give you what you asked for in the first place. If he doesn't, he'll give you something better.

I've thought about this a lot as it relates to our brother, Steve Aurell. As you heard earlier, Steve continues to battle cancer, and it's been an up and down fight. We've pleaded with the Lord to heal him. There have been times when it looked like the Lord was healing him, but there have been other times when it seemed like the cancer was getting the better of him, and honestly this is one of those times. But the great thing about Steve is he understands that either way God is faithful and his promises are sure. Steve will continue to trust and obey him because of who he is, not because of what he gives him.

Many years ago Tom Landry was the coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team. He was a Christian and he used to say this about coaching, “The job of a coach is to make men do what they don't want to do, in order to achieve what they really want to achieve.” That's what Jesus does: he puts us through circumstances we don't want to go through; he makes us face things we don't want to face, to achieve what we wanted in our hearts all along, which is a mature faith; a faith that doesn't feed on signs and quick fixes, but trusts and obeys God's word.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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