

THE SECOND SIGN

John 4:43-54

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“The official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’ The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way” (Jn. 4:49-50).

Scholars believe that John wrote his Gospel in part to record events from early in Jesus’ ministry that were left out of the other Gospels. As we conclude John 4, we continue John’s chronicle of those early days. We can follow the events in a clear progression, starting with John the Baptist’s testimony about Christ, which took place after Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (see Mt. 4:1-11). John’s testimony brought Jesus his first disciples (Jn. 1:19-42), after which he went north to Galilee, where he found Philip and Nathanael (1:43-51). There, Jesus attended the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2:1-12), after which he went for a stay at Capernaum and then to observe the Passover in Jerusalem. There, Jesus violently cleansed the temple, performed a number of miracles (2:13-22) and had his meeting with the Pharisee Nicodemus (3:1-21). From there, Jesus went back to the Judean countryside where more of John the Baptist’s followers transferred to him (3:22-36). When this attracted official notice, Jesus decided to go back north to his native Galilee, and on the way he passed through Samaria, where he met the Samaritan woman and brought the gospel to her town (4:1-42).

After this, Jesus “came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine” (Jn. 4:43). This return to Cana wraps up John’s presentation of Jesus’ early ministry, a period in which Jesus revealed himself to Israel as witnesses bore testimony to him. By showing two miracles that both happened in Cana, John invites a comparison

between them. The first miracle produced wine at a wedding feast; this second miracle occurred in the midst of sorrow and death. Our lives are filled with both joy and sorrow, gain and loss. John wants us to realize, as one writer observed: “Jesus is more than equal to either occasion. He has a place in all circumstances. If we invite him to our times of innocent happiness, he will increase our joy. If we call on him in our times of sorrow, anxiety, or bereavement, he can bring consolation, comfort, and a joy that is not of this world.”¹

THE PEOPLE JESUS SAVES

The narrative begins in Samaria, where Jesus stayed teaching the people for two days. John tells us of Jesus’ reluctance to continue his journey to Galilee: “For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown” (Jn. 4:44). This fits one of the themes in John’s Gospel, one that runs all the way to the cross: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (Jn. 1:11).

There are three kinds of people in this last section of John 4, two of whom do not savingly receive Jesus. The first are the ones he lamented from his hometown – those who do not honor him but reject him outright. It is clear that Jesus expected such people in his native region of Galilee, and he probably refers specifically to his hometown of Nazareth. Luke reports that when Jesus got to Nazareth, news of his miraculous powers had already reached there (Lk. 4:14). Nonetheless, Jesus was rejected by his hometown when he publicly announced his ministry there (Lk. 4:16-21). “They said, ‘Is not this Joseph's son?’” (Lk. 4:23), so Jesus was not accepted by them. Jesus left Nazareth – apparently for good – and his hometown never benefited from his miracles or teaching. Whereas the despised Samaritans received Jesus with a joyful faith, his own people rejected him. Likewise, many people today reject Jesus outright, as he does not meet their approval or fulfill their worldly expectations.

On the way to Nazareth, Jesus stopped by Cana, where he was warmly received. John writes, “When he came to Galilee, the

¹ Archibald Campbell, *The Seven Great 'I Am's* (Ft. Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968), 57.

Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast” (Jn. 4:45).

Here, we see a second class of people, those who do not reject Jesus, but receive him only for what he can do. The Galileans liked having someone who could work wonders – especially like the one at the wedding – so they welcomed Jesus. Among them was a royal official from Capernaum whose son was gravely ill. Apparently, he heard that Jesus could help, so he made the twenty-mile journey to Cana to find Jesus and bring him back to his home (Jn. 4:47).

Jesus’ reaction to this may be startling, but it is also revealing: “So Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe’” (Jn. 4:48). It is helpful to know that Jesus addressed this in the plural; he was commenting about the people in general more than simply this bereaved father. His complaint was that the people did not worship him as Savior and Lord, but merely sought to employ him as a useful wonder-worker. They were consumers, not worshipers; admirers, not followers. John says the miracles were signs (Jn. 4:54) – that is, their true value was in revealing Jesus as Son of God and Savior – but the consumers did not believe in what they signified, only in what the signs themselves offered. Alexander Maclaren explains Jesus’ distress:

Christ had just come from Samaria, the scorn of the Jews, and there He had found people who needed no miracles, whose conception of the Messiah was not that of a mere wonder-worker... and who believed on Him... because they heard Him themselves, and His words touched their consciences and stirred strange longings in their hearts. On the other hand... such recognition as Christ had thus far received ‘in His own country’ had been entirely owing to His miracles, and had been therefore regarded by Christ Himself as quite unreliable (2:23-25).”²

How little has changed since then. There are those who express no interest in Jesus, rejecting him with hardened hearts. But there are others who come to church and get involved in religious activities, not because their hearts have been awed by the glory of God and Christ’s saving majesty, but strictly for self-gratifying, worldly reasons. They have little interest in learning about God and the doctrines of the Bible, but seek mainly the lifestyle benefits of the

² Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), I0:226.

“practical” preaching they demand. But Jesus rebukes and refuses any but a faith that is centered on him as Lord and Savior. Mark Johnson sums it up: “Jesus is not interested in satisfying crowds who want to be entertained. He is interested in sinners who feel their need and are prepared to take him at his word.”³

Who, then, are the people Jesus saves? The answer is seen in the man’s reply: “The official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies’” (Jn. 4:49). The first thing we notice is his humility. Here is a man of authority – the Greek term for *official* (*basilikos*) suggests he was an officer in Herod’s court – coming to a carpenter’s son-turned-rabbi. We might expect him to say, “Listen, you carpenter’s son, my boy has noble blood. You will come as I command.” But instead he came to Jesus humbly. He began by addressing Jesus as “Sir,” a sign of respect for a man much lower in the social order. (In fact, the Greek word is the one normally translated *Lord*). This is the kind of person – almost alone among the people of Galilee – who is saved by Jesus: one who honors him as Lord and seeks not merely to employ Jesus’ services but humbly seeks his grace.

THE GRACE BY WHICH JESUS SAVES

Our focus in this passage is not merely on the humble royal official, but on Jesus and the grace by which he saves. The term *grace* is often defined as “God’s unmerited favor.” That is a good definition, except it doesn’t go quite far enough. Since we are all sinners before God, grace really is God’s favor extended towards those who deserve the opposite. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, “When we deserved nothing but punishment and hell, when we deserved nothing but to reap the fruit of our own sowing, when we were nothing but the children of wrath, God, because of his eternal and everlasting love, and according to his knowledge and wisdom, looked upon us with that eye of favour so that now we are peculiarly under his grace.”⁴ According to the Bible, this is how God saves sinners: not according to their own works or merits – since our works are sinful and merit condemnation – but according to his own grace. Paul

³ Mark Johnson, *Let’s Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 70.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Joy: An Exposition of Philippians 1 and 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 27.

states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8-9).

This is exactly what this passage shows: Jesus saves the official’s son not because any payment was made or because the official was less a sinner than others (being a servant of Herod, he was likely a greater sinner), but because his is a *merciful* grace. This is good news, because Jesus has the same mercy for us. Jesus said, “Go, your son will live” (Jn. 4:50). Likewise, because salvation is by grace – that is, by God’s free gift – Paul writes, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13).

Notice, as well, that Christ’s is a *sovereign* grace. The ruler apparently thought that Jesus had to be physically present to perform a miracle, since he asked him to come to his son. But Jesus merely spoke and the salvation occurred. The next day, when the official returned home, he learned that his son was cured at the very moment Jesus spoke (Jn. 4:52). This shows that Jesus has the authority to save by to his own will, and with a might that is equal to any need. This is why John so often emphasizes Jesus’ divine nature (see Jn. 20:31): if Jesus is God, he has divine power to save us. Jonathan Edwards points out that knowing this ought to strengthen our resolve to trust in Christ: “What are you afraid of, that you dare not venture your soul upon Christ? Are you afraid that He cannot save you, that He is not strong enough to conquer the enemies of your soul? But how can you desire one stronger than the ‘mighty God,’ as Christ is called (Isa. 9:6). Is there need of greater than infinite strength?”⁵

Together, this shows that Jesus is both willing and able to save all who humbly come. He is willing, because his is a merciful grace. He is able, because his is a mighty, sovereign grace.

Moreover, we see what Christ’s grace does: it conquers death and the sin that makes death terrible. Jesus said, “Your son will live,” and his saving grace has the effect of imparting forgiveness and life. Most important is the gift of eternal life to those who are spiritually dead. Paul explains, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins, in which you once walked... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Altogether Lovely* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, ?), 44-45

trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:1, 4-5). This is what Jesus wanted not merely for the official’s son but for the ruler himself. The man should not merely have come, saying, “I am a father whose son needs to be healed,” but he should also have said, “I am a sinner and I need to be saved.”⁶ The greatest need that each of us has is to be born again to spiritual life so that we may believe, be forgiven through Christ’s blood, and enter into eternal life. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

THE FAITH THROUGH WHICH JESUS SAVES

Christ’s gift of eternal life has been the theme of this entire section of John’s Gospel. It was symbolized in the wine Jesus made in this very town of Cana (Jn. 2:1-12). Then, Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7) in order even to see God’s kingdom. Spiritual life is what Jesus offered the woman by the well: “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14). Now, to the desperate father, Jesus says, “Go, your son will live” (Jn. 4:50).

The great question, then, is “How do we receive this life that Jesus gives?” The answer all through John’s Gospel, illustrated here, is through faith in Jesus Christ. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,” John 3:16 said, “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

What can this episode tell us about saving faith? First, it shows us that *faith comes to Jesus* seeking salvation. Faith does not stand afar, but does what this official did, who traveled 20 miles to seek Jesus. Perhaps he had heard of the other miracles, but however he learned it, he came to Jesus begging salvation.

Second, the official shows us that saving faith *believes Christ’s word*. Verse 50 provides one of the most succinct pictures of true, saving faith: “The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.” The man believed, not because he saw Jesus perform a

⁶ Johnson, 69.

miracle, but through faith in Christ's word alone. Martin Luther rightly observes: "In faith one must look to nothing but the Word of God. Whoever permits anything else to be pictured in his eyes is already lost. Faith clings to the naked and pure Word, neither to its works nor to its merits."⁷

It is noteworthy that the official did not even bother to hurry home. When he learned that his son was healed, he inquired for the hour. His servants replied, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him" (Jn. 4:52). The seventh hour is 1:00 p.m., which means the ruler would have had time to hurry home after meeting with Jesus. But his faith was strong enough that his heart was at peace. Can the same be said of us, or does our constant busyness suggest that we are not resting on the Lord with the peaceful faith that he deserves? Many of our lives have no greater need than that we would believe Christ's Word and rest our hearts on it in faith.

We contrast this with Jesus' earlier rebuke of those who believed only when they saw signs and wonders: true faith believes his Word. This makes an important point for us in our ministry for building Christ's church. If we want to encourage false converts, we will impress them with fleshly enticements according to all their own desires. But if we want to inspire true and saving faith, we will simply employ Christ's Word. Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote: "We have spoken of churches that are famed for faith in our day. The reason in every case is that they are centered on the Word of God. The Lord... has promised to bless His Word. If we cleave to the Word there must be blessing."⁸ Nothing more glorifies God than when we believe his Word, and nothing builds faith like the Word of God ministered faithfully.

Third, we need to be reminded that *faith itself does not save*. Faith does not itself possess saving power. It was not the man's belief in Jesus that cured his son; it was Jesus who healed the boy. This is important, because if faith itself saves us then our salvation can be no more secure than our faith allows. Given the weakness of our faith, we would often live in despair. But since we are saved by Christ, whom we receive by faith, then even a weak, though true, faith saves

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Sermons*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 5:256-257.

⁸ Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,), 1:113.

us, for that weak faith receives a strong Savior. We trust, therefore, not in our believing but in him in whom we believe.

Last, we see that *faith grows strong by the experience of grace*. It is true that a weak faith saves us, yet we are always to seek a strong and more fruitful faith. Verse 53 concludes that when the official learned that his son had been healed – and at the very moment Jesus had spoken – “He himself believed.” This may seem odd, since he already believed, until we realize that John means that his faith grew. In the same way, every time we trust Jesus and find that his grace is sufficient to our need, our faith is increased.

This is why it is so important for us to know the promises of God’s Word and to trust them in our daily lives. One Puritan advised, “Every time a godly man reads the Scriptures... and there meets with a promise, he ought to lay his hand upon it and say, This is part of my inheritance, it is mine, and I am to live upon it.”⁹ The story is told of an old man whose Bible was marked on page after page with the initials TNT. When asked about it, he replied that it meant, “Tried and True.” He explained, “Where you see those letters, it means that I tried it and I found that it was true.” That is the way to a strong faith: to know the promises in God’s Word, to try them by faith, and to find that they are true.

And what promises God makes in his Word! He promises mercy to sinners, compassion on the weak, forgiveness through the cross, and power to change our sinful hearts. God promises strength for the performance of our duties, guidance for direction, comfort in sorrow, help in trouble, provision in life, and glory beyond the grave. J. C. Ryle writes, “About all these things there is an abundant supply of promises in the Word. No one can form an idea of its abundance unless he carefully searches the Scriptures, keeping the subject steadily in view. If anyone doubts it, I can only say, ‘Come and see.’ Like the Queen of Sheba at Solomon’s court, you will soon say, ‘The half was not told me’ (1 Ki. 10:7).¹⁰ Just as our muscles increase through exercise, so also our faith will grow as we exercise it in the gymnasium of God’s Word.

⁹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 82-83.

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1979), 261-263.

If Jesus were later to come back to this believing official, and call on him to make some sacrifice for his kingdom, the man's experience of Christ's power would strengthen him to believe and obey. He would reason, "Jesus has shown me the power of his Word by raising my son from near death. Surely, he can provide all my future needs by his same sovereign grace. I need not fear if I trust in his Word."

THE WITNESS OF FAITH

There is one more thing to notice. I pointed out that this whole narrative of Jesus' early ministry focuses on witnesses that are given to him. This passage ends with a witness, which will be the natural result if we live by a growing faith in God's Word. John says, "He himself believed, and all his household" (Jn. 4:53).

If we want people to be persuaded of the truth about Jesus – if wives want to win unbelieving husbands, if children want to evangelize non-Christian parents, if parents want to inspire their children in their faith, and if we want all kinds of people to open their minds and hearts to Jesus – then we must start by living out our faith in their presence and letting them see God's faithfulness and power for themselves. No doubt, the official had told his servants about his faith in Jesus when he left for Cana. But surely it was the effects of his faith – especially seeing the boy alive – that persuaded them about Jesus. Martin Luther writes, "It is the character and nature of faith that it attracts other people, breaks forth and becomes active in love."¹¹ In this way, the very faith that brings us life by Christ's grace will also save others, as we believe and live by trusting Christ's Word.

¹¹ Luther, 5:275.