

## An Important Man, A Simple Faith

John 4:43-54

Children are a blessing from God, but they can be a source of parental anguish as well. One distressed father of a teen-age son shared with his friend, "I finally talked my son into cutting his hair and I'm sorry I did. Now I can see his earrings." Want to hear a phenomenon of metabolism one can only learn with an adult son still living at home: Eating actually makes them hungry.

... And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. – John 4:46b

In John 4, Jesus encounters another father, but this one suffers from a more profound anguish. His son – the original language indicates a small child – lays dying in another town. John calls the man a "royal official." The single word translated "royal official" is from a root for "king." This man was in some way connected to a king. The only characters that John's readers would understand to be "kings" were local kings in various provinces (wherever Rome allowed them to exist) or Caesar himself. But, had this been a Roman official of Caesar, John would have identified him by his office - governor, proconsul, magistrate, *etc.* as is his practice throughout the book.

Almost certainly, this man worked for Herod Antipas, ruler over Galilee. Rome allowed Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, to call himself a king, so long as he understood that he sat in power only at the pleasure of Rome. This was the same man who would order the beheading of John the Baptist and later preside over Jesus in a trial of sorts when Pontius Pilate attempted to avoid the headache of trying Him. At that trial, Herod was delighted to see Jesus. Because of things Herod had heard, he hoped to see Jesus perform some miracles. Certainly, testimony from one of his own officials would have further piqued Herod's curiosity. But, Antipas was a vile character. Not only did Jesus refuse his request for a dog-and-pony show. He would not even speak to him.

This royal official bears little resemblance to his likely boss. Herod was a lecherous fool who desired to be amused. This man's story is a story of faith. He would come to Jesus seeking a miracle in the midst of a crowd of others also seeking miracles, but this official stood out from the crowd. What did Jesus notice in this man that captured His divine attention and commendation?

### I. The Demanding Faith of the Masses (43-47)

<sup>43</sup>After the two days he left for Galilee. <sup>44</sup>(Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.) <sup>45</sup>When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there.

<sup>46</sup>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. <sup>47</sup>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.

Jesus was traveling from Judea to Galilee to avoid a confrontation with the Pharisees even though His fellow Galileans had previously been reluctant to accept Him as a prophet. On this return trip to Galilee, His familiar encounter with a woman from Samaria occurred. He stayed two days in her village at the request of the people there, many of whom embraced Him as the "Savior of the world." When He arrived in Galilee, He was now "welcomed," a word meaning more than just an extended greeting. It was a deliberate reception. The people were now eagerly waiting for Him. What excited them now after they had earlier dismissed Him as a prophet? What had changed?

## A. Some May Have Been Impressed by the Authority He Wielded

These Galileans had seen Jesus at work in Jerusalem during the Passover feast. The priests and the Pharisees were the most powerful Jews in the land, but Jesus had an authority and a force of presence that made these characters edgy. That and the chatter among some that He was *Messiah* heightened their interest. Perhaps, they had heard from His disciples about Jesus' conversation with the powerful Pharisee Nicodemus, who had come to Jesus by night. Why would an important man risk his own standing by seeking out Jesus? Did this learned Pharisee suspect something?

Everyone had heard how Jesus brazenly took it upon Himself to purge the temple of livestock, peddlers and the money changers who were there to rip-off the worshippers with the blessing of a corrupt priesthood. Jesus had done this and, somehow, He had walked away in one piece. (He actually did this twice, now, at the outset of his ministry and again in the final week of His life.)

These same people would be quite impressed by Jesus' exchange with one of Herod's officials. An important man had hiked 25 miles, to Cana from Capernaum, to ask a favor of a Carpenter's son. "Begged" (verse 47) is an adequate translation, but a more archaic word like "*beseched*" would be better. This word described a request by an equal; dignitary to dignitary, noble to noble. The official made his request repeatedly, so, while we may or may not call it "*begging*", the main emphasis is that he was not tossing his weight around. He humbly recognized Jesus' prerogative to refuse his request. Jesus had the man at His mercy. That surely excited some of these spectators.

## B. Many Were Impressed by the Miracle Power He Wielded

Jesus returned to Cana, the site of his first miracle, where He had changed water into wine at a wedding feast. Originally, only a few people were privy to that miracle: His disciples, His mother, the wedding organizers and the servants. The master of the feast, the groom, and most of the guests probably didn't know a miracle had occurred until after the festivities. They were just amazed that the good wine had been rat-holed until so late in the feast. The normal procedure was to use the best stuff first. But, eventually news would travel. These people were now expecting miracles.

Some of them were expecting miracles of such magnitude that they could be convinced that Jesus was indeed *Messiah*. Many others, especially in Galilee, thronged to Him because He had power to heal their diseases, restore their sight, fill their bellies and rescue them from demons. Unfortunately, such works of kindness were seldom enough to secure the recipients as disciples for life.

This is because the effects of a faith dependent on miracles and experiences typically last no longer than one's next perceived need for a miracle or experience. Even the impact of that miracle of miracle, the feeding of 5000, faded. The very same people Jesus fed deserted Him when His teachings became too demanding. There is a faith that demands regular displays of divine power in order to survive. We must distinguish that kind of faith from a more significant kind of faith, one which trusts Jesus' promises, no matter what, but demands nothing of Him.

## II. The Desperate Faith of the Royal Official (48-51)

<sup>48</sup>"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."

<sup>49</sup>The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

<sup>50</sup>Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live."

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. <sup>51</sup>While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living.

## **A. Initially, Jesus Sounded Very Severe**

Sometimes, Jesus tested people to determine whether their faith was about trusting Him or merely about something He might do for them. On the surface, He may have seemed reluctant to help certain folks, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Matthew 15 records the account of a Canaanite woman, who came to Jesus, pleading that He deliver her daughter from a demon. He told her that He was sent to Israel. It would not be right to toss the children's bread to the dogs. But, the woman was confident of His graciousness. She answered, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She was right about Jesus' grace and mercy. He healed her child.

Similarly, Jesus gave this man an opportunity to set himself apart from the pack mentality: "...Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe."

A sign was a distinguishing token of God's presence. A wonder was a strange event that caused witnesses to marvel. Over and over, the Jews demanded "miraculous signs and wonders" from Jesus. Essentially, Jesus was asking this royal official: "Is that what it's going to take for you to believe in Me? Are you like the others?" The man's response is simple. "Sir, come down now before my child dies." "Sir, I'm here as a father ravaged by grief. I'm no sign-seeker. You don't need to prove to me that You can heal my child. I know You can. My question is, 'Are You willing?'"

Some in that crowd wanted to see more and more compelling miracles, so that they might be convinced that Jesus was the *Messiah* they hoped Him to be. Others in that crowd were there to receive whatever they might receive, and Jesus often poured out His compassion on such crowds. But, this royal official stood out from the others. This man's hurt was a deep hurt that only Jesus could remedy. He had seen enough to know what Jesus could do what no one could do. His faith did not cry, "Show me! Prove yourself to me!" Neither did it quite cry out, "Me too! Me too! Fill my need next!" This was a man who had to publicly humble himself in order to ask this itinerant preacher for help. His faith cried out, "I'm here because You Jesus and You alone CAN help me."

## **B. In the Final Analysis, Faith Trusts and Obeys the Word of Christ**

During a losing baseball game, the restless 12-year-old players were questioning Ritchie, their assistant coach, about his attractive younger sister. Annoyed at the chatter, the head coach hollered, "When you're in the dugout, talk baseball!"

After a brief silence, a young voice began, "So, Ritchie, does your sister play baseball?"

The man obeyed Jesus with similar immediacy, but with fuller understanding and purer obedience:

"Jesus replied, 'You may go. Your son will live.' The man took Jesus at his word and departed."

Jesus put this official in a peculiar situation. "Take off! The boy will be fine. We'll keep his healing between us." Had Jesus gone to Capernaum, the crowd would have followed Him. Jesus stripped this healing of any "sign and wonder" quality. The man was able to simply go home because he trusted Jesus to do as He promised. A lesser faith would have panicked. "Jesus, You have to come with me." But, the measure of this man's faith was not an intense expectation into which he had whipped himself. He believed Jesus, so without any hint of doubt, He did as Jesus said.

As the man approached his house, his slaves met him with news that the boy was well, but how could anyone be sure that Jesus did it - really? This happened differently than he had pictured it in his mind. Jesus had not come with him to touch the boy or to pray over him or to otherwise make it obvious that He had healed the boy. Could there have been some other explanation?

### **III. The Devoted Faith Jesus Requires (52, 53)**

... <sup>52</sup>When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour."

<sup>53</sup>Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and all his household believed.

#### **A. A Devoted Faith Does Not Explain Away God's Activity in Our Lives**

The child got better at the very hour that Jesus promised healing. Does that prove definitively that Jesus healed the boy? Scientifically, no way! A skeptic would scoff at the idea. A sign-seeker might say, "Coincidence. After all, sometimes fever's just break by themselves. We can never know for sure." Were the man simply a sign-seeker, he could easily dismiss this healing.

There was no fanfare in this healing. Other "healers," so called, of the day recited mechanical liturgies and performed specific gestures whenever they did their thing. Jesus chose to not even be present. He simply sent the man home. He gave him nothing tangible on which to grasp hold. The royal official's obedience to Jesus' word demonstrated his faith. This servant's news vindicated it. Now, when verse 53 records that the man "and all his household believed," I take that to mean that they all embraced Christ as Messiah, as did the Samaritans, and not merely as a miracle man.

In Jesus' story of *Lazarus and the Rich Man*, the latter is suffering Hell's torment as Lazarus the beggar rests in Abraham's bosom. The rich man asks Abraham that a messenger from beyond the grave be sent to warn his loved ones. Abraham answers, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." No miracle can convince a determined skeptic. Faith demands nothing spectacular from God's hand.

#### **B. A Devoted Faith Does Not Take What It Wants only to Forget**

Of those who encountered and even followed Jesus at any point in His ministry, more walked away than remained with Him to the end. I do not suspect much has changed in the centuries since. Were this royal official simply preoccupied with the immediate need of his family and household and nothing more, he would surely have another crisis at some point in his life later. Would his loyalty to Jesus be contingent on His performing again and again and again?

Five thousand were fed with two fish and five tiny loaves of bread. Most of them did not remain with Jesus. Luke 17 tells the story of ten men with leprosy who were cleansed by Jesus. After verifying their cleansings at the temple, only one of them returned to Jesus to give thanks to God. Are short memories and fickle gratitude to God more often the norm than the exception still?

Someone once said that a patriot, the truly grateful citizen, is a fellow who can get a parking ticket and still rejoice that the system works. I don't know about that, but I know that a truly grateful citizen of God's kingdom can shrug off a lot of inconveniences and bask in perfect peace and contentment because as a grateful man, he will always remember that nothing in all of creation can ever separate him from the love of God because of what Jesus did for him.

### **C. A Devoted Faith Is a Contagious Faith**

The man believed, but so did his household. It's nice that the official himself was not skeptical or ungrateful, but how is it that no one dragged his feet believing his story? No one said, "Whoa! Nice story, Dad, but slow down and be rational for just a minute?" Why would a household believe on the basis of such an intangible healing? Perhaps, the answer lies in how the story was told.

A woman went shopping with her daughter. The crowds were awful. She skipped lunch because her schedule was so tight. She was tired, hungry; her feet were aching; and she was a bit irritable. As they left the last store for the car, she asked her daughter, "Did you see the nasty look that salesman gave me?" Her daughter answered, "He didn't give it to you, Mom. You had it when you went in."

An angry and negative demeanor has a powerful impact on those around us. But, the same is true of a joyful and grateful demeanor. This household placed their faith in Jesus on the weight of the father's testimony. They had seen no miracle. It would have been easy for them to dismiss the healing. However, as members of the household, they had shared the pain of the father. And, they now shared his joy when the child was delivered. The conviction of the head of the home was a more powerful inducement for others to believe than any "sign or wonder" could ever have been.

The greatest proof of the power of the Gospel is changed lives that have encountered Jesus. While our utilitarian spirit searches for more effective methods of church growth and more persuasive evangelistic arguments, we must not forget that our most powerful arguments are lives marked by hope and conviction. William Barclay writes, "No one is likely to attempt the experience unless our own lives show its value." We are the light of the world. Our best argument for Jesus is to live like light and to shine in a dark world as we tell others of the difference He has made.

### **Conclusion (54)**

<sup>54</sup>This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee.

John keeps close track of the miracles he records. He only listed seven big ones, and he carefully linked them to specific divine purposes and teachings that needed to be underscored. I think his point was to present enough signs and wonders to inspire faith, but not to write a book only about signs and wonders. In fact, he says as much as he draws his gospel account to a close:

<sup>30</sup>Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. – John 20:30, 31

Throughout his Gospel presentation, John steers his reader away from a fickle, experiential faith and into a thoughtful kind of faith that trusts the Person and the Words of Jesus. Ultimately, faith must rest in what one believes about the Person of Jesus and whether one trusts His words. His mission was not miracles. It was to reveal God and to bring us back to Him. Do you believe that Jesus died to deliver you from your sins as well as sin's baggage? That is the heart of true faith.