

18. YOUR SON WILL LIVE (4:43-56)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Describe your journey of faith from when you first heard the Gospel until the day you wholeheartedly responded to it.

This section opens in verse 43 where we see Jesus leave Samaria after a two day stay and continue his journey to Galilee that began in verse 3. His time in Sychar seems to have been quite successful as the whole town recognises Him as the “*Saviour of the world*” (v42). The focus there is not on any signs, but purely on His words. John now contrasts the Samaritans’ response to that of the Jews.

Before we unpack what this text is teaching us, it will be helpful to first consider one of the criticisms brought against this passage.

SIMILARITIES TO THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Some critical scholarship claims that because there are some similarities in this account to accounts in the other gospels (cp. Mat. 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10) that John uses them as his source material. In general, there are three ways to view such accounts:

1. That Jesus only performed one such healing which has only one interpretation, some writers just handle the facts rather loosely.
2. That Jesus only performed one such healing but independent traditions shape and interpret them differently
3. That Jesus performed two or more healings in somewhat similar circumstances and the writers choose whichever account best suits the purpose of their writing.

Based on John’s comments in 20:30 and 21:25 that Jesus performed many other signs, and that there are several distinct differences between the accounts (see comparison below), we have no reason to doubt that Jesus performed multiple similar miracles during His three years of ministry.

John 4:45-54	Mat. 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10
Official’s son	Centurion’s slave
Official probably a Jew in Herod’s service	Centurion is a Roman serving Caesar
Jesus declares the healing in Cana	Jesus declares the healing in Capernaum
Jesus does not speak to or of the official afterwards	Jesus praises the Centurion’s faith
Official begs Jesus to come to his home	Centurion asks Jesus not to come to his home
Illness is fever	Illness is paralysis
Official pleads in person	In Luke’s account, the elders plead on Centurion’s behalf
Occurs after returning from Jerusalem	No mention of going to Jerusalem before this

FIVE STAGES OF TRUE FAITH

Jesus grew up in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. About 14,5 kilometres north of Nazareth is Cana, where he turns water into wine (cf. 2:1-12), and about 36 kilometres east of Cana is Capernaum where

the official with the sick son in this account lives. However, despite Jesus now returning to His homeland, He “*has no honour in His own hometown*” (v44; cf. Mat. 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24).

Superficial Faith (vv43-45)

Verse 44 begins with the word “*for*”. This little word is a causal clause in that it expresses the reason for the action of the verb it develops. In this case, it is developing the verb “*departed*” in verse 43 and gives the reason why Jesus leaves Samaria to go to Galilee. John is pointing out that Jesus is intentionally going where he is less honoured than in Samaria. He is returning to His own people knowing that they do not understand or honour Him for who He is. But why go to a place where they will misunderstand and reject Him? It is all part of the plan from the beginning (cp. 1:11) to continue offering himself to His own who will not receive Him and will eventually lead to His crucifixion, which is why He came.

NOTE: If you consult commentaries on verse 44 you will notice that there are wide and varied comments on the word “*hometown*”. Because the Greek word (*patris*) can also translate as “*homeland*”, they are trying to determine whether John is referring to the region of Galilee or Israel as a whole, or Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown, since Nazareth is not mentioned in this account but is in the other gospels (Mat. 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24). As interesting as those discussions are, we will not consider them in our study as they distract from the heart of the message. All we need to remember is that irrespective of the location of the people John is referring to, their response is contrasted to that of the Samaritans who honour Him.

Jesus goes to Galilee because He does not expect any honour there, yet verse 45 tells us that the “*Galileans welcomed Him*”. At first glance this seems to contradict verse 44 – however, welcome does not necessarily mean honour. It is possible to simply play the part of welcome without giving the honour due to a person. The “*welcome*” (i.e. the reception) is, therefore, not what it looks like on the outside. They welcome Him without honouring Him, because all they are really after is what they can receive from Him – signs and wonders like what they saw previously in Cana (cf. 2:1-12) and in Jerusalem (cf. 2:23, 4:45). They “*believe*”, John says, but this is not the belief in Jesus as Messiah, but their curiosity is merely piqued by His signs. They are not interesting in what the signs point to – that which the Samaritans believe in (cf. 4:48). This is similar to what we saw previously in 2:23–25 and will see again later with His own brothers in 7:3–5 (there is even an attempt to kill Him in Luke 4:18-30). In writing this way, John sets up a contrast and with deep irony.

The events that follow chapter 4 will further justify this interpretation. In chapter 5 Jesus is back in Jerusalem, where opposition grows. Then in chapter 6 He is back in Galilee and the crowds misunderstand his messiahship (v15) and many of his disciples abandon him (v66). The drama builds until John gives the final verdict in chapter 12 that the majority of the Jews (both in Judea and Galilee) fail to believe in Jesus (vv36–43). Then when John quotes Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53, he has the rejection of Messiah by all Israel in mind. Taking all this into account, the placing of comments in 4:43-54 becomes clear. In fact, everything from 2:1 through to 4:54 is placed here to set up to draw attention to this. Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, His time in Samaria, and the faith of the official, remind us of who Jesus really is – the Messiah – and the fact that except for a few of His own people – the chosen nation of Israel does not receive

Him (1:11). Writing this way, the Gospel of John makes some Jews envious of the salvation of the Gentiles and the less desirable (cf. Rom. 11:13–14 and points out that they urgently need to come to Jesus on His terms, and not theirs.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. In what ways is the faith of the Jews superficial? What other examples are there in the Gospel of John that highlights this superficiality?
2. Jesus goes into an area to minister to people He knows will reject Him. How does this motivate you to share the Gospel in areas where people will more than likely reject you too?

The Jews who previously witnessed Jesus' signs in Jerusalem (2:23) welcome Him but do not truly honour or receive Him. Their curiosity is piqued and so when He is in their area they welcome Him like a celebrity, hoping that He will perform more. This is typical of many who are happy to say that they believe in Jesus but do not welcome Him into all areas of their lives. He has a place when it comes to church and possibly family, but when at work, it is business as usual where God's Word has little to no influence.

Now all of us started our journey of faith this way. No-one will give himself fully to Jesus at the mere first mention of His name. Rather people hear or read something about Him and so are drawn to Him. But this initial interest is superficial – it is shallow and not yet rooted. What we have to realise is that it is possible to welcome Jesus without truly believing in Him. It is easy to attend church and go through all the motions – sing the songs, hear the readings and sermon, recite the prayers, all without a single shred of belief. This is where we all start, but we should not remain here.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. In what ways do people in the modern church exhibit superficial faith? In what ways have you exhibited similar superficial faith?

Searching Faith (vv46-49)

In verse 46 we see that Jesus and His disciples return to Cana. Meanwhile, thirty-six kilometres away in the city of Capernaum, there is young boy who is very ill. So ill that he is close to death. His parents have probably consulted every doctor, tried every medicine, perhaps even offered every sacrifice, yet their son remains deathly ill. Then one day, the father hears that Jesus is in Cana. Having heard reports of the signs that He is performing, the father takes a step of faith and walks to Cana. But this is not an easy journey, for it is uphill all the way and takes on average, nine hours to get there on foot, or six hours on horseback. And so this father, leaves his sick son at home, and goes to Cana to search for Jesus.

The word "*official*" in verses 46 and 49 (Gk *basilikos*) is literally "royal one" and refers to one "connected to a king" in some way. The Roman-appointed "king" over Galilee is Herod Antipas who serves as tetrarch from 4 BC to AD 39. He is not properly a "king", but is popularly considered one (cf. Mark 6:14).

This is the same Herod who John the Baptist confronts about marrying his brother's wife, who later has John the Baptist arrested and executed (Mat. 14:1-12), and plays a significant role in Jesus' trial (Luke 23:6-16). He is feared and hated by many Jews. There is no evidence to suggest that this official is a Gentile, but he is probably a Jew. By referring to him as a "royal one", John contrasts the faith of a Jew – with allegiances to a foreign power – to those who consider themselves as true Jews. His identity and position serve as a judgement of the sign-seeking Jews. This further stresses the point of verse 44 – Jesus is not honoured by His own, but is honoured by someone who is aligned with their enemies, someone whom the Jews consider an enemy too.

Upon finding Jesus at the seventh hour, which is one o' clock in the afternoon, he begs Jesus to return with him to Capernaum to heal his son. Now consider the official's desperation here. To reach Cana and find Jesus by one o' clock means that he had to leave Capernaum by no later than four o' clock that morning. A time when it is still dark and the possibility of attack en-route is high. If he travelled on a donkey or horse, he would have left no later than seven o' clock. Either way, do you sense the desperation of this father that he is willing to leave the house early in the morning and travel for hours on a dangerous road to find Jesus? Nothing is going to prevent him from finding a cure for his son, and that cure, he believes, is Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Many people are drawn to Christ when they face a difficulty in their lives (e.g. the death of a loved one, illness, financial difficulties, etc.), but many fall away later. However, all who come to saving faith experience difficulties later in their journey. What difficulties in your life brought you closer to Jesus and how long did the feelings of such experiences keep you close to Him? What does this tell us about feelings when it comes to true faith?

However, when he makes his request of Jesus, Jesus responds in a rather strange manner. He says in verse 48, "*Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe*". Two things of importance to note here.

Firstly, Jesus uses the phrase "*signs and wonders*". This is the only occurrence of this phrase in the Gospels and is understood slightly differently to the word "*sign*" used throughout the rest of the Gospel of John. Used this way it places the emphasis on the miraculous nature of the sign. In other words, He is saying that they seek the miracle itself and not the One to whom the sign is pointing. They want the blessing and not the One who gives it.

Secondly, the "*you*" here is plural, implying that Jesus is associating this official with the rest of the Jews who seek signs and wonders. Grouping the official with the rest of the Jews further supports the idea that he is a Jew and not a Gentile (cp. 1 Cor. 1:22). Jesus is grouping him with those who have superficial faith, calling them wonder-worshippers or sign-seekers. Although they may call it belief, it is not the kind that honours Jesus as the Son of God full of grace and truth. Instead it dishonours Him.

Jesus' answer, though sharp, is necessary. A faith built only on miraculous signs is not true faith (cf. 2:23-25). What is happening here is that Jesus is testing this man. He is causing him to think about why he has come to Jesus – is he merely chasing signs and wonders, or is he genuinely seeking the Lord's help, knowing that Jesus is the only one who can indeed help?

Does he pass the test? He most certainly does as seen in verse 49 where he continues to implore Jesus to accompany him to Capernaum and heal His son.

Now it appears that he thinks that Jesus can only heal if He is in his son's presence, and perhaps doubts that He can raise him from the dead if he dies. What we have here is not a lack of faith, but a lack of knowledge, because he obviously does not know much about Jesus yet and only knows what he's heard about the signs. Yet that does not stop him from appealing to Jesus. This further highlights the father's determination.

But now, consider this man's determination from a spiritual perspective. All mankind is suffering from a condition worse than physical death, but leads to eternity under the wrath of God. That condition is sin. And the only solution to that condition is Jesus. The problem is, many people in the world are not seeking the solution to their problem. Instead they are chasing after any other blessings He may provide (e.g. healing, wealth, etc.). If they have any faith at all, it is still superficial.

What is also important to see here, like the official who does not know everything about Jesus yet still searches for Him, people need to search for Him despite not having all the information. We live in a scientific world where people want all the answers before they will choose to follow Jesus. They attack Christians with questions on the authenticity of the Bible and even ask for proof of God's existence. But not knowing everything should not be an excuse not to search for Christ. Nor is it an excuse not to take the next step.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. When the official persists, Jesus offers him a kind of dilemma (see vv4-50). How might the official have responded differently?
2. How does the official's response challenge you?

Simple Faith (vv50-52)

Now this may sound like a strange term to use, because as anyone will tell you, to believe in Jesus is not as simple as it sounds. With life's many temptations, the technicalities of some of the things we are to believe, obedience to God's Word, and our own sinful natures, believing in Jesus is something that takes hard work and dedication. Why then simple faith?

In verses 47 and 49 the official wants Jesus to go with him, but instead, in verse 49, Jesus tells him to go home by himself, because his son will live. This answer may have been totally unexpected by the father, but then here comes the simple faith, "*The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on*

his way” (v50). He came begging for Jesus’ personal presence in Capernaum to heal the son, Jesus declines, yet now the father accepts Jesus’ simple statement and promise that his son will live. The official has nothing but Jesus’ word to go on. It is not until he meets his servants en-route, that he has any evidence of the miracle (v51). For this official, Jesus’ words are enough and he goes his way.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How is it possible for someone to have a simple faith like this official who simply believes Jesus’ words? Read Acts 3:16; 5:31; 11:18; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 2:25; and 2 Peter 1:1. What do these verses teach about faith and repentance?

The only reason why anyone can have a simple faith like this official is because it has been given to them by God Himself. Faith is not a force that one can muster up for oneself, or a work to perform.

NOTE: The word for “*child*” in verse 49 is different to the one used in verses 46 and 47. There it is simply as “*son*” in general reference of their relationship, but in verse 49 it is a term of affection that Barclay translates as, “*my little lad*”. Again highlighting his concern for his son over the signs and wonders.

Verses 51 and 52 have prompted some debate regarding timing. As the official travels home, his servants meet him with the good news that his son is recovering. On inquiring when the boy “*began to get better*”, the servants give him an exact time: “*yesterday at the seventh hour*”. Typically the seventh hour is understood as 1 PM, but since the downhill journey to Capernaum is quicker than the uphill – only about 5 hours – commentators feel that it is unlikely that the official would delay his return or still be on his way the day after his discussion with Jesus. Therefore, some claim that John uses the Roman timing which makes the seventh hour as 7 PM, meaning that it would be too late to return home if he reached Jesus at such a late hour.

However, there is no evidence to suggest that John ever uses the Roman timing in any of his writings, therefore, it is generally understood that this official delayed his return. The suggested reasons for this delay are varies, but the one that fits the context, though not provable, is that he delays his return because of his simple faith – he takes Jesus’ words at face value, chooses to believe Him and so feels no anxiety to rush home. Unlike the rest of Israel, he is not simply interested in signs and wonders, but the well-being of his son.

Whatever the reason, it does not change the fact that the boy’s fever breaks at exactly the same time that his father talks to Jesus. Had Jesus personally gone with the official, a miracle would have occurred, but by instantly healing the son while still in Cana and while still in conversation with the official, makes the healing even more obvious. This prompts the next stage towards true faith – saving faith.

Saving Faith (v53)

The phrase in verse 53, “*And he himself believed*”, reflects a deeper, more convicted belief in the person of Jesus. It is a progression from just knowing that Jesus can heal, to that of knowing who He is.

Consider the official's spiritual journey so far. First he believes that Jesus is a worker of miracles which prompts him to search for Jesus – he progresses from superficial to searching faith. Finding Jesus he asks Him to heal his son. When Jesus tells him that his son will live, his searching faith becomes simple faith as he takes Jesus at His word. But now, hearing the news that his son is alive as Jesus promised, and that his fever broke at the time he was talking to Jesus, he recognises Jesus for who He truly is. His simple faith helps him to see beyond the physical sign as it becomes saving faith – and he becomes a believer.

Now unfortunately we do not know what happens to this man after this event. History does not tell us. The New Testament does mention two men from the house of Herod who are possible candidates, but neither can be proven – Manaen who was raised with Herod the tetrarch, and who was with the disciples who sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1) and Chuza, Herod's steward, whose wife Joanna contributed to Jesus' support (Luke 8:3). Given that John is able to tell the story of what happens to this man after he leaves Jesus, it is also possible that John spoke to him later, confirming that his faith is sustained.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Someone once said that "Authentic faith is not a single decision but a growing dependence". In light of what we have seen in the official's journey to saving faith, is this statement true? Explain your answer.

Shared Faith (vv53b-54)

There final stage in our text is contained in the last four words of verse 53, "*and all his household*" – this statement is linked to the verb "*believed*" immediately preceding it.

Saving faith here turns into shared faith, as it goes beyond the official to all who live in his home, which includes his wife, children, and all his servants. As with the Samaritans, many people come to saving faith as a result of one person's faith. This pattern is seen throughout the Book of Acts, as several other entire households come to saving faith through one family member being saved (cp. Acts 11:1-18; 16:11-15, 25-34; 18:8).

One very important thing to remember: this official journey from superficial to saving faith is relatively short – less than a day. Although the Samaritan woman's was shorter, we need to remember that this is not always the case, as seen with Nicodemus who seems to take much longer to come to saving faith. This is because everyone's spiritual journey is different. This fact is hinted at in the previous section in verse 37, "*One sows and another reaps*". However, despite how long or slow the journey may be, as with any physical journey, there has to be progression. One cannot stay in one place one's whole life. Even when it comes to shared faith, one continues to share one's faith, and in a sense one enters the stage of sustained faith – not dealt with here but appears elsewhere in Scripture – that takes one through the rest of one's life until one eventually sees Christ face-to-face.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Jesus tells us that we should not hide our light under a basket, but are to let it shine so all may see our good works and praise our Father in heaven. This is the natural outworking of shared faith. Consider your life – can people tell by how you speak or act that you are shining the light? If not, what changes should you make in your life so that your faith may be shared more broadly?
2. Read Hebrews 10:37-39. What do these verses teach us about faith? How do these verses give you hope for your future?

CONNECTED SIGNS (VV46, 54)

John notes in verses 46 and 54 (4:46) that this healing is the second healing that Jesus performs in Cana in Galilee. Why does he make these connections here?

A.W. Pink suggests that John wants us to compare the two miracles. He draws seven comparisons, the most significant of which is that the result of the first sign was that the disciples believed in Jesus (2:11); the result of this second sign was that the royal official and his household believed (4:53).⁷⁷ This is the response that John wants all of his readers to make (cf. 20:31). Other comparisons include:

- In both cases there is divine power at work, but there is a progression.
- In the first a mighty miracle occurs in Jesus' presence, here a healing at a distance.
- In the first there is a transformation in things (water into wine), while here life is given to a boy nearly dead.
- In the first Jesus' mother refuses to take no for an answer, so too the official.

However, as Boice points out, there is also a great contrast between the two accounts – the first is a scene of joy and happiness; while the second is one of sickness, desperation, anxiety, and the shadow of death. Boice says that by comparing the two accounts, we are to see that life is filled with both joyful and sad situations and that Jesus is the One that we need in both cases.⁷⁸

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The encounters from 2:1 to 4:54, beginning and ending with two signs, help to clarify who Jesus is and the life He brings. The focus is all on Him. What stands out to you in the portrait of Jesus from these three chapters? How does 20:31 unfold on these chapters?

⁷⁷ Pink, A.W. *Exposition of John*, on monergism.com

⁷⁸ Boice, James Montgomery. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1-vol. ed., p293.