

“The Man Believed the Word”

The Fifteenth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

John 4:43-54; Isaiah 35:1-10

It was not all that long ago (the 1980-90's) when many Christian leaders told us that in order for Christianity to survive in the modern world, it must be presented as a religion of signs and wonders. In an age of science and skepticism, these Christians argued, the best way to overcome secularism and unbelief is to do what the early church did, perform signs and wonders to prove that Christianity is worthy of consideration. In fact, we worship not far from the church (the Anaheim Vineyard) where the modern signs and wonders movement was launched (the “third wave”). Why mention this? At the end of John 4 (vv. 43-54) we discover that Jesus performed signs and wonders to confirm his messianic mission and to demonstrate that he was the Son of God who was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. But, as we will see, Jesus did not perform miracles to attract followers and large crowds. He did not perform signs and wonders to create faith. Whenever people flock to Jesus because they think he is a miracle-worker who can help them, his miracles actually become an obstacle to genuine faith in God’s word of promise spoken by Jesus.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John we come to the final section of John 4, and the account of Jesus returning to Galilee when he heals an unnamed Galilean official’s son. Before we turn to the details of the passage and the healing which took place, there is one matter we need to address. Since this account sounds very much like the healing of the centurion’s servant as recounted in Matthew 8:5-13, critical scholars claim that what follows in John 4 is a reference to the same event. Critical scholars assume that John’s Gospel was not written by John (the disciple) and therefore does not contain eyewitness testimony. So, in their view, the author of John read or was familiar with the healing of the centurion in Matthew’s account, took it as his own and modified it (garbling it in the process), and then sticks it here in John’s Gospel to make a theological point.

When I speak of critical scholars I am referring to those who assume that miracles are impossible, and that the gospels do not describe factual events and really do not need to. The Gospels are essentially a group of “Jesus stories,” which reflect more of what the author of John thought and believed about Jesus, than what actually happened in Galilee when Jesus arrived there after returning from Jerusalem. To the critical mind what matters is the point of the story and the experience we derive from retelling it, not whether the events described therein actually happened. So, if you have two miracle stories in the New Testament which sound alike, critical scholars jump to the conclusion that you have two versions of the same story—the version in John’s Gospel may get the details wrong, but is inserted at this point in the Gospel to beef up the narrative and create drama as the story takes Jesus back into the Galilee region.

What critical scholars refuse to consider is that everything we have read in John so far has the ring of truth about it (the places John mentions are real places which can be located on both ancient and modern maps, the historical events fit at the right time and place as John recounts them, etc.). John himself tells us in the last two verses of his Gospel that *“this is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”* Critical scholars act as though such declarations are not important, or even that someone else (who was not an eyewitness) can write this gospel in John’s name and falsely make the claims we have just read, and supposedly such practice was commonplace.

But the author of John tells us in no uncertain terms that he is an eyewitness to these events and he is “bearing witness” (giving legal testimony as in a court, in other words “testifying”) that Jesus performed so many miracles that no one could record them all. The answer, therefore, to any questions raised by similarities between this miracle and the healing of the centurion’s servant are easily answered in light of John’s concluding statement. John is Jesus’ disciple. He is an eyewitness whose testimony is to be believed and accepted as factually true unless and until his testimony is impeached. Jesus performed two different miracles about the same time which have some similarities, but are not the same event. The account of one of these miracles (the healing of the centurion’s servant) appears in Matthew 8. The other (the account of the healing of a Galilean official’s son) occurs here in John 4. Simple as that.

The scene for the miraculous healing of the official’s son is set forth in verses 43-45. “*After the two days he departed for Galilee. (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast.*” The two days is a reference to the time Jesus spent in Samaria before completing the journey from Jerusalem to Galilee (ordinarily a three day walk) after celebrating the Passover (the “feast”). At some point before arriving in the Galilee (a geographic region in the northern part of Israel, like Orange County or “the IE”), Jesus told his disciples that a prophet is without honor in his hometown. This comment sets the stage for what follows when Jesus returns to Galilee and is welcomed by the Galileans—but for all the wrong reasons.

The issue raised by these verses is how can Jesus say that he is without honor (i.e., not honored) in his hometown (Nazareth), yet be welcomed by the Galileans (the region where his ministry is centered, and in which his hometown, Nazareth, is located)? The term which the ESV translates as “hometown” (*patris*) can mean either one’s homeland (more broadly) or one’s hometown (more narrowly). I can say that my *patris* is Orange County (the county in which I was born and raised) or Buena Park (the city in which I’ve lived my whole life). The word *patris* then can be understood in a broader sense than “hometown,” and this is the sense which I think it has in John 4.

To solve this problem, some commentators have argued that Jesus’ *patris* is Judea (where Jerusalem is located) because this is Jesus’ “spiritual” homeland, where his ministry will come to its culmination, and where the Sanhedrin and Pharisees—who begin to oppose Jesus with more and more animosity—are headquartered. On this interpretation, Jesus is without honor in Jerusalem (and Judea) as evidenced by the conflict with the Jewish religious leadership, even though this is his spiritual home. In contrast, Jesus is honored (welcomed) by the Galileans.¹

Although this interpretation is grammatically possible, it completely ignores the contrast John sets out between how Jesus was received by the Samaritans in the previous section of the Gospel (John 4:1-42), and with how Jesus has been treated by the Jews both in the Galilee and in Judea. Therefore, if we understand Jesus to be speaking of the Galilee region as his *patris* (his homeland), which I think is the correct interpretation, then the contrast is between how Jesus was received by the Samaritans (favorably) and how Jesus is “welcomed” by those in his homeland (Galilee) who see him as a miracle-worker, not as the Messiah who will save them from the guilt and power of sin.

When Jesus encountered the unnamed Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, and revealed to her that he was Israel’s Messiah, she went and told the people of her village about him, many of whom came to faith in

¹ See the discussion in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 234-248.

Jesus, and declared him to be both Messiah and the Savior of the World. Those whom the Jews regarded as heretical half-breeds (the Samaritans) gladly welcomed Jesus and received his word.

But as he returns to his own people (the Jews of the Galilee), the contrast could not be greater. We should not misinterpret the favorable reception Jesus receives when he returns to Galilee as anything more than the “buzz” associated with the fact that a miracle-worker was in their midst. We know from the prologue of John’s Gospel (John 1:11) that Jesus “*came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*” This is a sad and ironic statement which characterizes much of Jesus’ ministry as recounted by John. Those whom Jesus called as his first disciples came to trust in him when he performed the first of his miraculous signs at the wedding in Cana. As we read in John 2:11—“*This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*” Yet, the disciples continue to struggle to fully understand our Lord’s mission. According to John 2:22, it was not until Jesus had died and been raised from the dead that the disciples fully understood what Jesus’ mission actually entailed. “*When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*”

The negative reaction to Jesus on the part of his own people (the Jews in the Galilee and in Judea) is already a fact and major theme of the Gospel narrative. In John 2:18-21, when speaking about the future role of the temple, John tells us of Jewish anger at hearing Jesus’ remarks. “*So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*” Many who “believed” were people who saw his miracles and then began following him—yet without true faith or a proper understanding of the purpose of his mission. In John 2:23-25, John has told us, “*now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*”

And then there is John’s account of Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus—about which we read in John 3. We never do hear a report in John’s Gospel that Nicodemus came to saving faith—even though the well-respected Jewish leader and theologian knew that Jesus was sent by God, and Nicodemus even helps provide for Jesus’ burial. Finally, according to opening verses of John 4 (vv.1-3) when Jesus leaves Jerusalem for the Galilee, John tells us that Jesus has already heard reports that the Pharisees are worried about his growing popularity, setting the stage for the conflict which comes the next few chapters of the gospel. Jesus knows that his time is not yet, and there is much to do before his hour finally comes.

The contrast between the Jewish reaction to Jesus in both Galilee and Judea with that of the Samaritans could not be greater—this is John’s point. This is why I think it makes the most sense to take Jesus to mean that he is without honor (not recognized for who he is and that his people do not understand the nature of his mission) in Galilee, even though the Galileans have seen his miracles and welcome him back to Galilee because he is a miracle-worker. This is precisely why Jesus will rebuke them (v. 48).

One thing we must understand to make sense of the Galilean reaction to Jesus’ return is that the people of Jesus’ day lived a hard and relatively short-life by modern standards. Contaminated food and water, disease, and a life of manual labor, meant that daily life was a struggle. There were no hospitals, no modern sanitation, no modern methods of food production, no infrastructure. The vast majority of people worked from first light until sundown just to eke out their daily existence.

If your child was sick, you had no hope. No doctors, only folk medicine. Literally, you needed a miracle. This is why the Galileans welcomed Jesus. Not because he was the Messiah. Not because they recognized him as the Savior of the World. The Samaritans, on the other hand, believed that Jesus was both. John makes no mention of Jesus performing any miracles among them or while in Samaria. The Samaritans believed that the content of Jesus' teaching was true, not because Jesus gave them miraculous signs. The Galileans, who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, on the other hand, welcomed Jesus back precisely because they saw miraculous signs he had done when he had been in Jerusalem. For the Galileans, Jesus' miracles were everything. Here was someone who would help them.

Upon his return to Galilee, Jesus returns to the place where he performed his first miraculous sign, the turning of water into wine. As we read in verse 46, "*so he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine.*" John is not giving us a travelog, so much as pointing out that Jesus is now moving and acting with a distinct purpose—obeying the will of his Father (that heavenly bread by which he is sustained) so as to fulfill all righteousness. When Jesus turned water into wine, we are given our first hint that the new wine of the messianic age was flowing freely, pointing ahead to the messianic feast. Now Jesus returns to Cana continue his work—specifically demonstrating that he is the Messiah and the Son of God by healing the sick and turning back the power of death—all signs of the resurrection yet to come when Jesus' glory will reach its zenith.

As we are also coming to learn as we get more and more familiar with John's Gospel, all of these things are predicated of Israel's coming Messiah in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 35:3-5 (part of our Old Testament lesson), the prophet speaks of the messianic age in the following images. "*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*" In light of the expectation of Israel's prophets such as Isaiah, Jesus' miracles confirm him to be the Messiah. But these miracles are not an end in themselves—"look what Jesus can do!" The miracles are the proof that Jesus is the one predicted and foretold throughout the Old Testament. When the Messiah arrives, the effects of the curse will begin to be undone.

It was while he was in Cana that Jesus gets word that "*at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill.*" An official (a *basilikos*) is someone who is associated with royalty—in this case Herod Antipas the current ruler of Israel. The man is probably a counselor to Herod of some sort, and is likely close to the royal family. But his son was seriously ill and the official is desperate. According to verse 47, "*when this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.*"

Obviously, even though Jesus had been in Jerusalem just a few days (at least five) earlier, word about his many miracles had already preceded him. Some of the Galileans who had gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when Jesus did, either saw for themselves or heard about what Jesus had done while in the city. Perhaps too, word of what Jesus did at Cana has likewise spread throughout Galilee. This unnamed aide to Herod has heard of Jesus, knows that he is a miracle worker, and that Jesus had returned to Galilee. He tracks down Jesus to appeal to him personally to come and heal his son. At this point, the official shows no interest in who Jesus is, only that Jesus can help his son. Unless Jesus' acts and acts soon, the boy will die.

In verse 48, Jesus replies to the official's request, in effect, rebuking him and all the Galileans for seeking Jesus for all the wrong reasons. This situation is quite similar to the accounts in Matthew and Mark of people flocking to Peter's house in Capernaum (where Jesus was staying) seeking Jesus to cast out demons or heal the sick. There were so many people and so many requests that even though Jesus had

compassion on them and healed countless people, he was soon brought to the point of complete physical exhaustion by these requests. In the synoptic Gospels we read that Jesus repeatedly seeks to be alone and pray so as to gather strength. The sad fact is that Jesus' own people (the Jews) did not seem to care that his messianic mission aimed to deal with the root cause of all human sickness and demonic oppression—the curse and the guilt of human sin. Rather, they sought Jesus out because they desperately needed his help. *“So Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.’”*

There can be no doubt that Jesus is contrasting the Samaritans—among whom he stayed for two days and whom he had just left—with his own people. The Samaritans believed his word, came to faith, were given living water, and did so without the need for miraculous signs. But his own people do not care about him or his mission. The Galileans are glad Jesus has returned because of what he can do for them in the midst of their desperation. By seeking Jesus to perform signs and wonders for their benefit, they are only demonstrating their own sin and selfishness. They increase their guilt and stand condemned before God because of what they have seen, and how they have failed to look beyond the symptoms they are experiencing (sickness and demon possession) to the root cause (the fallen and sinful human heart). What the Galileans truly need is a Savior from sin. What they want is a miracle worker.

As we see in verse 49, the desperate official finds Jesus. He pleads with Jesus to help him. *“The official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’”* Having compassion on the man, *“Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’”* But at this point in the story, the man's determination to get help for his son suddenly turns into something else. As we read in the last part of verse 50, *“the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.”* Jesus speaks to him, promises to heal his boy, and the man believes him—i.e., he trusts that Jesus will do as he said he would do—heal his son.

The thing which separates this man from the rest the Galileans just rebuked by Jesus is that the official did not wait to see the miracle *before* he believed Jesus' word. John reports that this man believed Jesus' word and *then* departed for home to check on his sick child. Unlike his countrymen who saw Jesus as a walking emergency room, but could have cared less that he was the Messiah, this man believed the word which Jesus spoke to him, before his son was healed. In this, he is like the Samaritans, not the rest of the Galileans who do not honor Jesus by seeking to understand his messianic mission.

To those who do not believe Jesus' word but witness his miracles, the miracles become a form of judgment. As we read in John 10:38, Jesus said to the Jews who were accusing him of blasphemy for making himself out to be God, *“but if I do [the works of the Father], even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”* In John 12:37 ff., we read *“though [Jesus] had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.’”*

Miracles performed in the presence of unbelievers are a form of judgment because witnessing the miracles without faith only serves to harden the sinful human heart. As Jesus puts it in Matthew 12:38, *“an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”* Jesus was, of course, referring to his own resurrection from the dead—the greatest of his miracles and the chief proof of the truth of the Christian faith.

But when Jesus performs miracles in the presence of believers, as in John 14:11, they confirm faith

when, for example, when Jesus tells his disciples, “*believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.*” Throughout the Gospel of John, the purpose of miraculous signs associated with the messianic mission of Jesus is to prove that he is the one promised throughout the Old Testament. Miracles are “signs” which confirm that faith already given by the Holy Spirit through Jesus’ word (his teaching and preaching). Jesus’ miracles also may serve to stop the mouths of those oppose the Gospel and leave them speechless under the judgment of God. Those who witnessed the miracles and use them as evidence that Jesus is of Satan will not be forgiven—this is the unpardonable sin. As for those who witness the miracles but do not see the Messiah as the one who performs them, they will find these miracles used as evidence against them on the day of judgment. This is what the Galileans did not understand, but the Samaritans, apparently, did.

As for the official who believed Jesus’ word, we learn in verse 51, that “*as he was going down,*” that is, as he was going down from the foothills in Cana to the Sea of Galilee (which is below sea level) “*his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.*” That which Jesus had promised was indeed true—the man’s son was miraculously healed. Understandably, the man’s curiosity is piqued. “*So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, ‘Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.’*” The seventh hour is 1:00 p.m. “*The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, ‘Your son will live.’*” The official’s son was healed precisely at the moment when Jesus said he would be healed. We can only imagine the man’s joy at hearing this wonderful news, and how he must have thought to himself that Jesus’ word was not only true, but that Jesus was supremely gracious in delivering his child from certain death.

Upon hearing the news that the child was healed, we read “*he himself believed, and all his household.*” Not only did the miraculous healing strengthen the man’s faith already created by Jesus’ word, the miracle in combination with the word from Jesus brought the man’s entire household to faith. The salvation of entire households becomes an important pattern throughout the New Testament with salvation coming to five households as mentioned in the Book of Acts and a number more in 1 Corinthians.² Those of us who grew up in American revivalism often tend to think in terms of individuals being saved—as was the case with many of us. But the New Testament is replete with entire households coming to faith through the preaching of the word, confirmed by signs and wonders, and sealed by the sacrament of baptism. This is because salvation is often tied to membership in the covenant community and to families (Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New Covenant).

John ends this section with a brief summary in verse 54. “*This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.*” Although this is the second sign that Jesus performed in Galilee (the first being the miracle at Cana) this is the third of seven signs mentioned in the gospel. The other sign was Jesus cleansing the temple. There were many more miracles done in Jerusalem (and elsewhere) which John does not record—but he does include seven symbolic “signs” as the whole of Jesus’ messianic ministry.

Well, what then are we to take from this passage? Are we to start a signs and wonders ministry to evangelize the secular unbelievers around us? There is a reason why we now speak of the “signs and wonders” movement in the past tense. It was a fad. The third wave did not convert modern secularists in droves as promised, and in fact, you can argue that efforts such as the signs and wonders movement, church growth through marketing, and the dumbing down of the faith so as to make it more palatable to

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 239.

others (Rick Warren) have done more to unchurch church people than they have in bringing new people (converts) to the faith. If we learn anything from John 4, it is that Jesus saves people through the preached word. Miracles prove Jesus to be who he says he is (they confirm faith already granted), but he does not use them to attract crowds or reach out to the “unchurched.” In fact, apart from saving faith as created by the Holy Spirit, miracles only harden the sinful human heart.

John’s point is that it is Jesus’ preached word which creates faith. This is why John says of the Galilean official, “*the man believed the word.*” His miracles prove who Jesus is—Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. They also confirm that faith which God creates through his word. But as we see with the Samaritans and with the Galilean official, faith came when Jesus spoke to the people, not because they saw miracles. And because we have heard John’s testimony, so too we have heard what Jesus both said and did. And so beloved, may John’s testimony to Jesus’ words and deeds create faith in the hearts of those who do not yet believe, and confirm that faith in the hearts of those of us who already do.