

Message #16

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John

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TRUE WORSHIPERS

AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

JOHN 4:43-52

I.

Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day had a rare intersection earlier this month. The last time when those two holidays happened on the same day was 1945. Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday have special significance to Jeremy Levin. He was the CNN bureau chief in Lebanon in the early 1980s. On Ash Wednesday morning in 1984 he left his apartment in Beirut to walk to his nearby office. Ash Wednesday did not have a great deal of significance to him at the time. He was Jewish. He was the grandson of a rabbi, but he had no particular religious convictions. In fact, he described himself as an atheist.

During his walk to work, a car stopped beside him and a couple of men jumped out, one of whom stuck a gun in his stomach. He was pushed into the car and whisked off to an apartment somewhere in Beirut. There he was beaten and interrogated and accused of working for the CIA and Israeli intelligence. He was threatened with death. Then he was blindfolded and hauled off somewhere into the Bekaa Valley. He became one of the 18 Americans kidnapped in Lebanon in the 1980s, mostly by Hezbollah. Thus began a period of intense soul searching for Jeremy Levin.

Often it is desperate situations that provoke times of soul searching. God uses difficult circumstances to get our attention. Such is the case in the story that we will consider this morning. We will see what lessons there are here for us.

We have been studying the Gospel According to John. We have seen in our Sunday morning messages that Jesus made His first public appearance in Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. He cleaned money changers and merchants out of the temple, which did not endear him to the religious establishment. He apparently performed some miracles of healing. That led to a private interview with the chief rabbi Nicodemus. Then Jesus went out into the countryside where His disciples performed baptisms, in a way similar to what John the Baptist was doing. Then they stopped in Samaria on their way north, where Jesus received a warm reception from one of the communities there, after His meeting with the woman at the well. Now Jesus is heading to His home territory in Galilee, further to the north.

II.

So in vv. 43-45 of #4, p. 889 in the black Bibles under the chairs, we find that JESUS SEEKS OUT FAITHFUL WORSHIPERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JESUS SEEKS OUT...) Back in v. 23 Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that God is looking for people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth.

In Jerusalem Jesus did some miracles, apparently healing miracles. That attracted attention and created a certain "buzz." But it seemingly motivated only one religious leader to seek Jesus out. He was Nicodemus. Nicodemus was interested but cautious. Other religious leaders were skeptical, even hostile.

In Samaria Jesus encountered the woman at the well. The Samaritans were treated by the Jews as Gentiles. They were regarded as inherently unclean. Yet Jesus got a warm reception from them. They embraced Him. He stayed in their village for two days.

We read in v. 43 of our passage, "**After the two days he departed for Galilee.**" (SYCHAR GALILEE MAP) Jesus started His public ministry in Jerusalem in the south. He and His disciples stopped in Sychar in Samaria on their way to the north, after having done baptisms, probably near the Jordan River. Now they were headed north into Galilee.

According to vv. 44 & 45, "**(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.**"

Verse 44 is a bit puzzling. "Hometown" could be translated from the Greek as either "hometown" or "home country." But it doesn't really explain why Jesus was leaving Samaria. Certainly Samaria was not his own country, plus He was honored there. Some say that the negative reference is to southern Judea and Jerusalem. Bethlehem, just to the south of Jerusalem, was the birthplace of Jesus. Jerusalem perhaps could be regarded as the hometown of every good, religious Jew. Jesus did not receive the warmest reception there.

Still, it seems difficult to understand how Galilee was any less the hometown or home country of Jesus than Jerusalem and southern Judea were. Jesus grew up in Galilee. Back in #1 Nazareth was described as the hometown of Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It seems more likely to me and to many commentators that this is an introductory explanation for what happens next in Galilee. Jesus is welcomed in Galilee. Many of the Galileans were in Jerusalem for the

Passover. Some of these Galileans had seen healing miracles that Jesus did. If they did not witness them personally, they surely heard about them from other Galileans. If they did not see it themselves, they heard about how Jesus kicked moneychangers and merchants out of the temple. They were probably glad about that. They knew that this was a corrupt system that charged too much for what they offered. They wanted to see the swamp drained in Jerusalem.

The Talmud has stories about people who were supposedly healed by the prayers of famous rabbis. The Galileans had probably heard of these stories. So they were thrilled by the possibility that they might have their own Galilean rabbi who could do such things. The way that Jesus stiffed the religious establishment in Jerusalem also gave them hope that Jesus might be a political force for good. Maybe there were already some who were trying to figure out how to get Him to run for office.

But, you see, Jesus was not looking for a fan base. He was not courting voters who might put Him in office. He was looking for worshipers who would recognize Him as the Son of God, as the Savior of the world. The Samaritans had just done that, and they did not require any healing miracles. It is going to be tough to find that kind of honor and recognition for Jesus among His fellow Galileans.

Jesus is still looking for faithful worshipers today. He is looking for them among Jews and Gentiles, among Americans and illegal immigrants and politicians and drug addicts and prisoners and wealthy businessmen and even CNN bureau chiefs who might be held in captivity in the Bekaa Valley.

III.

We come then to vv. 46-49, where we find that SITUATIONS OF DESPERATION PROVOKE CHRISTIAN FAITH. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. SITUATIONS OF DESPERATION PROVOKE...) John writes in v. 46, "**So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill.**" Thus we are introduced to the main characters in today's drama. The action takes us back to Cana (CANA CAPERNAUM MAP)

Cana was a small town to the north of Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. It was also the scene of the first miracle recorded by John. Jesus was there at a wedding feast with some of his disciples. When they ran out of wine, His mother asked Him to intervene. He did. He changed the wine in six large stone waterpots into wine. Only the disciples and the servants at the feast knew about what happened. Now Jesus and company are back in Cana. We are not told why. Maybe Jesus had relatives there. In #21 v. 9 we are told that His disciple Nathaniel was from Cana.

The new character in this story is the official from Capernaum, which is now the home base for Jesus and is at the north side of the Sea of Galilee. The original word that is used to describe him literally

means "kingly one." The idea is that he is a royal official. The ruler over Capernaum and Galilee and the eastern side of the Jordan River is Herod Antipas. He is one of the sons of Herod the Great. He is also the one who has had John the Baptist imprisoned.

The position of this official in the administration of Herod Antipas is not stated. The fact that he has servants working for him suggests that it is a position of some significance. The guy has money. But he has a problem that money will not necessarily solve. He has a son who is sick. This official is Jewish, but he is probably not very religious. If he was religious, he probably would not have been working for Herod Antipas.

According to v. 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."** So this guy was desperate. His son was very sick. No doubt he had called in the best medical people that he could find. Perhaps he had called upon rabbis to pray for his son. Perhaps he had called upon other kinds of characters who offered various remedies.

Being from Capernaum, he had perhaps heard of Jesus at some earlier point. Jesus may have recently established his home base there. Andrew and Peter had already signed on as disciples of Jesus. We know that they had a fishing operation based in Capernaum. Having a government connection, the royal official probably would have heard of reports about healings that this Galilean rabbi had allegedly performed during the Passover feast in Jerusalem.

This guy was willing to try anything. He could have sent his servants to bring Jesus to Capernaum. But because of the seriousness of the health situation and because of his love for his son, he went in person to plead for help. How he got to Cana we are not told. But the tense of the verb suggests that this was not a single brief request but rather an earnest, perhaps prolonged, pleading. The content of this man's faith in Jesus is limited, because he has a limited understanding of Jesus. But his situation of desperation provokes a certain level of faith from the official in this miracle worker.

We read in v. 48, **"So Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.'"** This does not strike us as the most friendly and generous response that Jesus could have given. It is important to understand, however, that the "you" that is used is plural. Jesus is not speaking just to this man, but also to his fellow Jews. It is probable that there are other Galileans around when this royal official shows up and makes his request.

It is also evident here that the term "signs" is used to describe miracles. The very use of the term suggests that there is some kind of intended meaning behind these miracles. This is also the only place in John's Gospel where the term "wonders" is used. The idea is that these miracles cause people to

marvel in addition to the fact that they are intended to point them to some kind of deeper significance behind them.

These miracles did have a purpose beyond the immediate relief of pain and suffering. They were intended to be a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah in particular spoke of a coming Messiah who would do miraculous deeds. In #35 of Isaiah's prophecy the prophet spoke of the coming of the glory of the Lord and a time when God would come to save His people. (ISAIAH 35:5) In vv. 5 & 6 he declared, "**Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; (ISAIAH 35:6) then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.**" These were the kinds of deeds that Jesus was doing, which should have pointed His people toward the conclusion that the Lord had arrived on the scene.

But for the most part, the Jews were not making that connection. They were in it for the spectacle. Some were surely looking for help for their loved ones with various maladies. Others were hoping that they could cheer for a Galilean rabbi who might make a mark on the broader Jewish world. Some were hoping that this Jewish rabbi might do something about the Romans and perhaps even drain the swamp in Jerusalem. But few had a clue in their brains that this Jesus was God in the flesh. So Jesus was not truly honored by His own people. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In Samaria the half breeds declared Jesus to be the Savior of the world. Jesus received no such honor from the Galileans. The Galileans wanted and hoped that Jesus would meet their immediate needs and fulfill their agenda. They were not prepared to deal with God in the flesh. Such is the reaction to Jesus that many in our world have today.

Verse 49: "**The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.'**" The Greek word here for "child" suggests a young child. The man is desperate. He is persistent. He has some kind of faith, or at least hope, that this miracle worker might save his child whom he loves.

He makes two wrong assumptions, however. He assumes that Jesus must be physically present with his child in order to heal him. He also assumes that Jesus could not help his son if he died. Luke tells the story about a time somewhat later when Jesus approaches the nearby Galilean village of Nain and encounters a funeral procession where a mom is about to bury her only son. Jesus raises this son from the dead.

In our story the desperate situation facing this father provokes a certain faith, at least a hope, that this Jesus might provide a deliverance. Jeremy Levin found himself in a desperate situation in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. He was a captive of Hezbollah, kept in a building with four other captives, whom he thought were also Americans. But Jeremy was never allowed to see them. In fact he never saw another

human face. He was kept in a separate room. Most of the time he was chained to the wall. Most of the time he was blindfolded. He was blindfolded when he was taken to the bathroom. He was not allowed to see the face of his captors or the face of his fellow captives.

In this situation of desperation Jeremy Levin began to think about the faith of his Christian wife. He thought about what he had read and heard about Jesus. He thought about the plight of the complicated Middle East. He began to wonder if Jesus might be what was needed for these people. He began to think that perhaps he needed this Jesus. He began to have conversations with the God of the Bible.

Such are the circumstances that have brought some of us to faith in Christ. It was in the desperation of addiction or prison or health circumstances or death or broken relationships that have prompted us to consider the Christian faith, to think about Jesus. Some of us tend to turn to Him in desperate circumstances. Our temptation is to try to handle things on our own the rest of the time. But the Jesus of the Bible wants us to have a regular, ongoing trust in Him.

IV.

Then in v. 50 we discover that GROWING FAITH REQUIRES OBEDIENCE. (IV. GROWING FAITH REQUIRES OBEDIENCE.) **"Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way."**

Here is the test. This royal official had heard stories that Jesus had healed people. He had enough desperation, enough faith, to go to this guy and appeal personally for help. We don't know how much interaction he had with Jesus, or how much he heard Jesus say when he showed up in Cana. In his limited knowledge base this man knew only about healings that had happened when Jesus was physically present. Now this healer was asking the royal official to believe that he could heal his son from a distance of fifteen miles. That was a lot to ask. But our text says that the royal official believed the assurance that Jesus gave.

I wonder what the other observers in this situation thought. Did they think that Jesus was just trying to get rid of this guy? Was his persistence irritating to the Jewish rabbi? Could healing actually be accomplished from a distance?

Notice also that Jesus does not answer the specific request that this man made. The official asked Jesus to go with him back to Capernaum to heal his son. Jesus, in effect, said "no." But in the end, Jesus fulfilled the desire of this man. We need to keep that in mind in our own prayer life. We may ask God for specific things. At times He may meet our needs in ways that we do not anticipate.

A year or so ago we were looking at the life of Elisha. We came across the story of the Syrian general Naaman who had a difficult problem. He had leprosy. His desperate situation prompted him to go to Israel and seek out help from the Jewish prophet Elisha. Elisha didn't meet Naaman's expectations. Naaman expected Elisha to come out and give an appropriate greeting and perhaps pronounce appropriate words and accept a generous gift in exchange for healing. Instead Elisha simply sent word through his servant for Naaman to go to the Jordan River and dip himself in it. Naaman was offended. The answer from God did not meet his expectations. It was only as a result of the pleading of his servants that he did it and was cured.

Growing faith requires obedience. One of the subjects of Jeremy Levin's conversations with God was his situation of captivity. He prayed that he might be freed from captivity. He prayed that he might be reunited with his wife. Late one night he discovered that he was able to slip his hands out of his handcuffs. He removed his blindfold and looked around at his circumstances. He looked outside of his window and found that he was on the third floor of a villa. He found that the window could be opened. Was this opportunity that was the answer to his prayers?

He took three blankets that he found in the room and tied them together and tied one end to a solid object in the room and let himself down to the ground below. It was early in the morning of Valentine's Day, 1985. Jeremy was barefoot. He had enough understanding of the geography of Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley to know that his best opportunity was to head to the east. From the night sky he got some understanding of what direction that was. So he began to walk quietly, and as well as he could in bare feet, toward the east.

When he heard voices a couple of hours later, he hid under a truck. In the dim light he could make out that the voices came from Syrian soldiers. He decided that it might be worth it to give himself up to them. After questioning by a Syrian colonel, he was taken to Damascus and given over to the American ambassador.

Faith requires obedience. In Jeremy Levin's case, that meant responding to the opportunity that God had given to him. For the royal official, it meant following the directions of Jesus to return to Capernaum. Obedience for us Christians means, most of all, following God's written word. At times it means resisting temptation. It means trusting the promise of 1 Corinthians #10 v.13 (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13): **"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."**

At other times obedience may mean stepping out to take advantage of ministry opportunities. It may mean breaking away from a relationship or restoring a relationship. It may mean forgiving someone who

has hurt us. It may mean confronting someone who needs to be confronted. The main point is that growing faith requires obedience.

V.

Finally, in vv. 51-54, we find that JESUS' WORKING BRINGS FAITH TO MATURITY. (V. JESUS' WORKING BRINGS FAITH TO MATURITY.) According to v. 51, **"As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering."** Capernaum was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was almost 700 feet below sea level. So going to Capernaum meant going down.

Verse 52 and the first part of v. 53: **"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 father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.'"** Earlier in our study we saw that it is likely that hours were counted from sunrise, making the seventh hour about 1 PM.

We don't know the mode of transportation that was used here. The distance to be travelled was between fifteen and twenty miles. Perhaps the royal official left early in the morning for Cana on some kind of animal. He arrived in the middle of the day and had an assurance by 1 PM that his son would be healed. Perhaps the official had to rest his animal. Apparently he was not able to complete his journey back to Capernaum until the next day.

At the same time the servants of the royal official saw the fever of his son break at 1 PM. After they were certain that he was getting better, a couple of them decided that they should go after their master to tell him the good news. The meeting did not happen until the next day.

The rest of v. 53 tells us, **"And he himself believed, and all his household."** What did the royal official and his family believe? What was the content of their faith? We don't know how much of the teaching of Jesus the man heard during his brief visit to Cana. Whatever he heard, he apparently believed.

This was a miracle without precedent. The man told his family what had happened, and they all embraced what they knew about this Jesus. They were convinced that they could believe whatever He said or promised. The initial tentative faith of this royal official had seen the promise of Jesus fulfilled. He now had the faith that came from experience with the working of Jesus. It is the same kind of faith that we may have experienced when we have seen deliverance provided by Jesus.

Thus faith came to the household of the royal official. In 1 Corinthians #1 v. 26 (1 CORINTHIANS 1:26) the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, **"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of**

you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." Lady Huntington was a member of the British royalty in England in the 1700s. She was a generous supporter of the famous evangelists John Wesley and George Whitefield. She was fond of saying that she was saved by an "m." Paul did not say that there were not "any" who were of noble birth who followed Jesus. He said that there were not "many" who were of noble birth. Lady Huntington claimed that she was one of the "not many." Thus she was saved by an "m." (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 54 of our text the story concludes, **"This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee."** It is clear that Jesus had done other miracles during his visit to Jerusalem during the Passover. But the Apostle John is focusing upon certain miracles to bring to the attention of his readers. This is the second of the seven sign miracles that he is highlighting.

Like the first miracle, this second one was also performed in Galilee, and also in the same town of Cana. Like the first miracle, the realization of what actually happened was apparent only to a few. Only the servants at the wedding and the disciples of Jesus realized that the water had been turned into wine. Only the royal official and his household members realized that his son had been healed from a distance. At some point the Apostle John also learned about it.

There is also a certain progression here in what Jesus has revealed about Himself to those who are tuned in to Him. In His first sign Jesus demonstrated something of His creative power, His ability to change things. In Jerusalem Jesus cleansed the temple of those who were violating its holiness. He thus showed His concern for justice in regard to corruption and misuse of power. He showed His concern for the holiness of God.

Then in His healing miracles done in Jerusalem, Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies that pointed toward His identity as the Messiah of Israel. In His interview with Nicodemus Jesus explained the necessity of spiritual rebirth. At Samaria Jesus showed His omniscience in revealing information about the woman at the well. He also showed His love for non-Jews, who recognized Jesus as the Savior of the world. Now in this story there is an indication of the omnipresence of Jesus, who is able to heal at a distance.

Furthermore, this Jesus gives life. This is a central theme of the Apostle John. His big idea, according to #20 vv. 30-31, is that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, who came to give life to those who believe in His name.

Jeremy Levin's experience of being delivered from captivity brought his faith to maturity. He said, **"If I could have come to faith in any other way, then fine. But I couldn't. In captivity I experienced real**

deprivation. And yet that imprisonment is the one thing I absolutely don't regret. Isn't that ironic?"
(*Christianity Today*, 5/16/1986)

Such is the role that difficult circumstances and desperation often play in our lives. God uses these situations to provoke our faith. Perhaps you are in such a situation right now, and the Lord is using it to motivate you to place your trust in this Jesus. Perhaps others of you are already Christians, but Jesus is using your difficult circumstances to mature your faith, to convince you as the result of experience that you can trust His word in every situation. The God who is really there wants to develop our faith to make us more like Jesus.