

“Signs” / 2: “A Nobleman’s Son”

July 5, 2015

We’re going to unpack a story today found in the Gospel of John chapter 4. So if you have a Bible app on your phone or tablet, find John chapter 4. The story starts at verse 46. If you’ve still got one of those old-fashioned paper Bibles, I think this story is in there too: John 4, starting with verse 46. We’ll get there in a couple minutes.

Have you ever been annoyed with God? Now some of you probably won’t admit it, but I think most of us Jesus followers have been at least secretly annoyed with God from time to time. Because, sometimes he just doesn’t behave ... the way we think he should. And sometimes his answers to us seem a bit ... rude.

I’ll bet most of you Jesus followers have been praying for someone really hard.

- Maybe someone close to you is battling cancer; and maybe they are losing. And you have been praying for a miracle.
- Or, maybe someone you love is battling an addiction ... alcohol, or drugs, or gambling, or porn, or even food. And you want God to step in somehow.
- Or maybe your marriage is hanging by a thread, and you have been praying for a miracle. “Come on God, do something! Fix him, or fix her, or fix us.”
- Or maybe you are out of money, and the bills just keep coming. Or someone you love has a business that is about to go under. And you’ve been praying for a miracle. God can do that, you know.
- Or maybe you’ve been praying for a prodigal. A kid, or a friend, who is just getting further and further from God. And you are praying hard for that kid.

You know it’s way beyond you. You know it’s going to take a God intervention. So this is way beyond a “thanks for the food” prayer, or a “now I lay me down to sleep” prayer. This is a deep down, from the heart, imploring, pleading, begging kind of prayer. You ever prayed like that? Have you been praying any of those prayers recently? I have.

And sometimes, when we pray those prayers, we get annoyed at God. I'm being nice. Sometimes we get flat-out mad at him. He's supposed to know everything, and he's supposed to have all this power, and he's supposed to be good, and he's supposed to love us. So sometimes when he doesn't cooperate when we pray, it's hard.

So you are going to understand the emotions of this guy who came to Jesus with one of these deep down, from the heart, imploring, pleading, begging kind of prayers, and it sounds like Jesus just blows him off. Since most all of us have felt what he felt, it's probably worth us pondering what Jesus told him.

John 4, from verse 46 to the end of the chapter. I've asked Morgan to read it for us. And as she's reading the story, look for the weird. Whenever Jesus says something that looks kind of weird, it's always smart to slow down and dig a little deeper. There's probably a nugget there worth pondering. Here goes ...

“As he traveled through Galilee, he came to Cana, where he had turned the water into wine. There was a government official in nearby Capernaum whose son was very sick. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged Jesus to come to Capernaum to heal his son, who was about to die. Jesus asked, “Will you never believe in me unless you see miraculous signs and wonders?” The official pleaded, “Lord, please come now before my little boy dies.” Then Jesus told him, “Go back home. Your son will live!” And the man believed what Jesus said and started home. While the man was on his way, some of his servants met him with the news that his son was alive and well. He asked them when the boy had begun to get better, and they replied, “Yesterday afternoon at one o'clock his fever suddenly disappeared!” Then the father realized that that was the very time Jesus had told him, “Your son will live.” And he and his entire household believed in Jesus. This was the second miraculous sign Jesus did in Galilee after coming from Judea.

(Jn 4.46a) Last week we were in John chapter 2, and we studied the first of Jesus' “signs” in John. He changed water into wine at a wedding in this same town -- Cana of Galilee. Then he goes back down south to the area around Jerusalem for a while, and then he goes back north through a region called Samaria – where the Samaritans lived. And some of them

got pretty excited about Jesus. And eventually he makes his way back to Galilee, where he grew up. He comes back to Cana, where he changed the water into wine. He's about 8 miles north of Nazareth, where he grew up. Capernaum, was a little bigger town right on the Sea of Galilee about 20 miles to the East. To give you a sense of scale: Jesus is at Peaks Mill, about 8 miles north of Frankfort, where he grew up, and Lexington is about 20 miles to the East ... and, no cars.

(John 4.46b-47) Anyway, there's a government official in Lexington who hears that Jesus is in Peaks Mill, and he walks a hard 20 miles to find Jesus. 3 things.

1. We don't know much of anything about this guy. We don't even know his name. It looks like he worked for the head guy in that region, a guy named Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was a jerk. And sometimes, when you work for a jerk, people treat you like a jerk too. So this guy was probably feared, but not well liked.
2. And he's got a sick kid – a really sick kid. We don't know what kind of disease the kid had, but it was killing him. This was during a time when a lot of things we can treat now were still killing a lot of people.
3. Somehow this guy hears about Jesus. Now Jesus is just getting started, but apparently he is already creating a stir. And this dad is desperate. Some of you have been there, felt that.

By the way – this is just side note: I don't know who said what about Jesus that made this guy take a chance on him. But that still happens. What you do, and what you say can be exactly what someone needs to take a chance on Jesus. Do not be ashamed of who you are and what you stand for. People out there need God, they need Jesus. And our job is to nudge them towards him. So be proud of who you are and what you stand for.

One more little piece before we move on. I was talking to Tom Troth last week. He's the pastor over at Hillcrest Baptist. They are baptizing an old guy this morning. He's really sick – cancer. His voice box has been removed, he breathes through a hole in neck – and it's hard. The cancer has spread to his lungs. He's got a boatload of radiation ahead of him. But here's what he told Tom. He says, "This cancer has been a blessing to me." He says, "I've lived a pretty rough life. I've not always been good to my neighbors. But when I got cancer, they went out of their way to be good to me." Isn't that cool? He said, "This cancer has brought me closer

to God.” Wow! He said, “It’s brought me closer to my family.” Tom married this guy to the woman he had been living with in the ICU of the Frankfort hospital a few months ago. The guy watched the baptism of his son a few weeks ago. So he said, “Even though it’s hard, even though I’m scared, this cancer’s been a blessing to me.” ... I wonder if eventually this dad would have said the same thing: “My son was sick; he was dying – but because of that we met Jesus.” Have you ever had that thought? That sometimes it’s the rough patches that get our faith going, or deepen it?

Anyway, this dad is desperate. If you have been a dad or a mom, you’ve probably been there, felt that. His boy is dying, so he walks 20 miles from the shore of a lake up into the hill country looking for Jesus. I get that, don’t you? He didn’t send a servant to fetch him – although he probably could have. He went himself. How far would you walk to get help for your kid? Lexington? Louisville? Chicago? New York? How much would you spend to save your kid’s life? All of it? Would you try experimental drugs if nothing else worked? Would you try some faith healer? Would it finally take you to Jesus?

Well, when dad finds Jesus, he begs him to come down to Capernaum to heal his boy. Picture a man dirty from the trail, exhausted, sweaty, stressed out. He’s a man on a mission. Now take that picture and measure it against what Jesus says to him. This is flat out weird. (John 4.48) Jesus says, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe.” Say what?! This dad is desperate, he’s out of options. And Jesus says, “All you guys want from me is a miracle?” And you are thinking, “Well ... is there more?”

Because, to be honest, that’s what most of us want from God. We want a God we can bend to our agenda, rather than surrender to his. We’ll believe in God, as long as he shows up when we tell him to. We’ll believe in him as long as he heals what we want healed, and fixes what we want fixed.

- “God, if you are real, prove it.” We are arrogant little critters, aren’t we?
- “God, if you are real, fix my kid, fix my depression, my broken marriage, my empty check book, my addiction, my cancer, my wife.” We are arrogant little critters, aren’t we?

Even in the church. We shop for a church the way we shop for a house, or a car. What's going to help me, fit me, suit me? What's going to meet my needs best? What's going to work for me? Even in church we tend to pursue a God we can use rather than a God we struggle to obey. Even in the church we tend to pursue a God who will work to meet our needs rather than to whom we surrender our rights and our desires.

So put aside this desperate dad for a moment. It sounds like Jesus is talking to us. We want a "What can you do for me" God. We love stories of the miracle power of God. And those stories are out there. We love it when God reaches into the ordinary and does the extraordinary. And when it happens to us, it builds our ... faith. But guys, sometimes the greatest stories of faith are about a God who does not reach into the ordinary with the miracle we are praying for. Sometimes the greatest stories of faith are about a guy with cancer who says, "This cancer has been a blessing to me." Sometimes the greatest stories of faith are about a man or a woman in a broken marriage who still loves God with a broken-hearted love. Or our prodigal does not come home, but we still love God with a broken-hearted love.

So Jesus sees this desperate dad, and he says: "There is way more to me than a few supernatural tricks. These miracles are just signs – they are signs that point to something way bigger, way more important. Don't be so obsessed with what I can do that you miss ... me."

But, this is a dad – a dad who has walked 20 hard miles to find Jesus. He's not just going to back off. (John 4.49) So the NIV puts it like this, this is what he says to Jesus: "Sir, come down before my child dies." Which doesn't quite capture it. "Sir" is a bit proper, and then "come down" is an imperative, a command – "come down, before my child dies." But this is a royal official calling a peasant, "Sir." They didn't do that so easily back then. And sometimes they used the imperative to express the idea of begging, pleading, imploring. And the word for child here is different. It's a sweet, intimate word: "my little one," "my kid." So I like the way the NLT puts it better. It says, "The official pleaded (with Jesus), "Lord, please come now before my little boy dies."

And, for some reason, Jesus doesn't hesitate this time. (Jn 4.50) He says, "No. I don't need to go with you. You go on home. I'll heal your boy

from here.” Now, if that was my kid, I don’t know how I would have taken that. I’ve seen faith healers work. They always want to put their hands on the kid’s forehead, or something. They are always praying these dramatic prayers, or doing something spooky to invoke God’s power. I think I’d have wanted something a bit more dramatic. But Jesus was no faith healer. And there was something about what he said, or how he said it ... It says the guy took him at his word. It says the guy believed him, and he turns around and goes home.

It’s kind of weird. I don’t know why he believed Jesus. Jesus had only just started his miracle stuff. He didn’t have much of a resume yet. And Jesus hadn’t used any of the tactics of other faith healers who were drifting around in that world. I don’t know. Was he just desperate to believe? We get that way, sometimes. Or was there something about Jesus that was just different ... trust-worthy?

Anyway, it says: (Jn 4.52-53) “While the man was on his way (home), some of his servants met him with the news that his son was alive and well. (I guess they are all excited and went running to find him.) He asked them when the boy had begun to get better, and they replied, “Yesterday afternoon at one o’clock his fever suddenly disappeared!” Then the father realized that that was the very time Jesus had told him, “Your son will live.” And he and his entire household believed in Jesus.”

Well, it would be pretty stupid not to. Because how it happened pretty much ruled out the two alternative explanations.

1. Sometimes people are healed by the power of suggestion. Sometimes if a person believes they have been healed, they get better. The mind is powerful. What you believe can determine what you feel like emotionally, and physically. But that didn’t happen here. Jesus was 20 miles away. The kid had no clue what Jesus said, or when he said it.
2. And the immediacy of the healing rules out any natural processes. People get better. People get better even when it looks like they are dying. God gave us these amazing bodies that recover sometimes. But it’s just not rational to think it’s anything other than a miracle when Jesus speaks, and it happens immediately. It’s the timing of the healing, and how fast it happened.

(John 4.54) Well the apostle John tells us that “this was the second miraculous sign Jesus did in Galilee after coming from Judea.” He calls it a sign. It’s more than just a miracle, it’s a pointer. There are lessons we are supposed to learn.

Well, it’s a sign that Jesus is more than just some faith-healer. Jesus just speaks, and it happens. His authority is staggering. And he doesn’t even have to be there. He just speaks, and it happens 20 miles away. Do you know who else does that in the Bible? God. God just speaks, and it happens. And he doesn’t even have to be there. Because he is ... God. Do you know what this miracle tells us about Jesus? He has the power of God, he has the power of God over disease, he has the power of God over time, he has the power of God over space ... because ... he is God. Every once in a while he gives us these peeks. He tells a storm, “Shhh!” And the storm quiets down, immediately. He tells a dead man, “Get up!” And he does, immediately. He tells a demon, “Get out!” And they run, immediately. Because God can do that. Because Jesus is Lord of time and space.

Which is one reason we follow Jesus. He has given us these peeks at his omnipotence. When I speak, I wish it would happen. When you speak, you want it to happen. When he speaks, it just is. And we know he doesn’t have to be here physically to make it so. He showed us that kind of power with this “sign.”

And yet ... Did you know that you can believe in the power of Jesus and still not believe in Jesus? You can believe in Jesus the miracle worker and never bend your knees to Jesus as your Lord. You see, we want a God we can bend to our agenda. We’ll believe in him, as long as he shows up when we tell him to. We’ll believe in him as long as he heals what we want healed, and fixes what we want fixed. Even in the church. Even in the church we tend to pursue a God we can use rather than a God we struggle to obey. Even in church we tend to pursue a God who will work to meet our needs rather than to whom we surrender our rights and our desires.

(Jn 4.49 MSG) So Jesus challenges you, and he challenges me: “Unless you people are dazzled by a miracle, (will you) you refuse to believe?” He says: “There is way more to me than a few supernatural tricks. These

miracles are just signs – signs that point to something way bigger, way more important. Don't be so obsessed with what I can do that you miss ... me." Jesus won't be a means to your end. He won't be an accessory to your story.

This is a pretty big theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus doesn't want us to become obsessed with his miracles; he wants us to become obsessed with him. Look at these snips.

1. John 7.3-5. This one is so weird. "Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! You can't become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!" (And then it says,) For even his brothers didn't believe in him." Really?! They believed in his miracles! In other words, you can believe that Jesus can do miracles and still not believe in him. Which is still how a lot of people still are with Jesus ... even in church.
2. John 11. 47, 53. Different group this time. This time it's the religious leaders – guys like me. We are there when Jesus raises a dead guy with just a word. "Lazarus, wake up!" After Lazarus has been in a grave 4 days, starting to stink. And Lazarus gets up. So guys like me call a confab. "What are we going to do?" they asked each other. "This man certainly performs many miraculous signs." No one was disputing his miracles. They can't. The evidence is out walking the streets. But just because they believed in Jesus the miracle worker didn't mean they believed in Jesus. It says, "From that time on, the Jewish leaders began to plot Jesus' death." Because you can accept Jesus the miracle worker without accepting Jesus as Lord.
3. One more place. It's near the end of John's story of Jesus. Three days before Jesus died, on a cross. Now ten of the disciples claim that he is alive again – they've seen him. But Thomas was not a gullible man. He says, "Uh uh! No way! Unless I see him myself, unless I touch him myself, unless I put my fingers in his nail holes, I won't buy it!" So a week later Jesus shows up, again. (Jn 20.27) And he gets in Thomas' face and he says, Go ahead, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side." Are you serious? Would you do it? The Jesus said something incredibly important – something we

need to hear. Jesus says to Thomas, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.”

You see ... real faith doesn't demand miracles. Because, you can believe in his miracles and still not believe in him. The real question is, whether or not you get your miracle, will you still trust him?

Sometimes we just want to *use* Jesus, but we don't really want to *follow* him. We love what He can do – because he is incredibly powerful, and occasionally he proves it. So sometimes we want Him to work for us; but we aren't as interested in living for him. Do you get that? Sometimes we get pretty religious when we are sick and need a cure. We pursue him when we are broke and need some money. We show up when we are bored and want a show. But would you follow Jesus if miracles were off the table – for you? Does your faith run deep enough to follow Him if he answers every one of your prayers, “Not now,” or “Not your way”?

You see, Jesus is looking for more than a miracle faith. Some guys think faith is all about believing that Jesus can do miracles; but the greater faith is believing in Jesus even when He doesn't! Here's the question, guys. Here's the question you need to answer for yourself: Will your faith carry you through if God doesn't prove himself to you on your terms?

- If God doesn't answer your prayer, your way, will you remain faithful?
- Does He have to keep demonstrating His power for you to believe it's real?
- Is the cross and the resurrection enough? Because in reality, that's the only miracle that matters.

I am not trying to make light of any of the wondrous things Jesus did. I am only trying to point out that one just miracle stands above all the others. He died for our sins, he was buried, and he rose again on the third day. God raised him from the dead, just like Jesus said he would. And that's enough. That's enough to bet my life on. I don't need anything more. It's cool when he gives us more, but what he has already done is more than enough.

So he challenges our pursuit, our quest, our demand for miracles. And yet, right after he scolds us he speaks, and 20 miles away a kid is healed.

Why does He say to this guy, “There’s more to me than miracles,” and then turn around and heal his kid?

I don’t know. Maybe ... he was just trying to show us who he really is. Maybe ... he has this tender heart and sometimes he can’t help himself. Maybe ... he’s just giving us a peek at what he will do someday for all of us. Someday there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more disease, no more death. I don’t know. What I do know is this: we are not supposed to obsess over what he can do for us; we are supposed to be obsessed with following him. Because he’s worth it.