

Seeking signs or a Saviour?

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[0 : 0 0] This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee. So we're thinking about signs, the signs that Jesus performed, and let's begin by reminding ourselves of the proper use of signs. I imagine when we think about long journeys that seem to last forever, we probably all have one or two in our mind. One that came to my mind was one summer Saturday. That sort of clues you into how bad it's going to be. Trying to drive from Devon through London to the far end of London and traveling on the North Circular Road, which seemed to last forever. So when you get to that point after hours and hours and baking heat of being in the car, seeing the city of London signs, it's a cause for celebration.

But it's not the destination, is it? We don't reach the sign of the city that we're heading to and we pull over, we find the nearest lay-by and we start unpacking. No, we follow the signs so that we get to our true destination. But sadly, when it comes to Jesus, we find, and John's gospel shows this, many people stop short and are content with the signs but never getting to the true destination. It is entirely possible to come to Jesus and to treat him as some kind of vending machine.

Jesus, I paid my dues with a level of religious performance. Now I'd like you to do this for me. Or it's possible to come to Jesus as some kind of spiritual emergency service. Most of the time thinking nothing of him, but when trouble comes, that's when we might think to pray. And when the drama resolves, we're back to life as it was. It's very easy to think about God who meets my needs, like the people just seeking signs and wonders, not seeking God as Savior and worshiping him.

Because that's the true destination that John's gospel wants us to get to. That's where Jesus wants us to get to, that we would use the signs that Jesus performs, that we would see Jesus truly is God's Son and he's the Savior, so that we would worship him, that we would submit to his rule, that we would understand that he is the only way to life with God. And so we wouldn't settle for just seeing something of Jesus, we would want to know him and to know him better. So today's sign is one in which John is going to highlight a contrast. And John, as gospel writer, likes contrasts. And the contrast today is that some people come to Jesus looking for signs, miracles, wonders, while others come to Jesus as Savior. And John wants to remind us that often it's surprising people that come to Jesus as Savior and it shows God's amazing grace. John is going to focus then on one man, this royal official, who comes seeking a sign from Jesus. He wants healing for a son. But by the end, what do we see? We see him following the sign that leads to the true destination he and his household believe. And that's our goal for today, that we would see clearly Jesus as Savior and so that we would worship and believe. So let's begin with a question, seeking a sign or a Savior.

Verse 43 of our text reminds us that

Jesus has returned to Galilee. He's been in Samaria and he's come back to Galilee. And then in verse 44, there's this observation that comes from Jesus himself that a prophet doesn't receive honor in his own country. And then we find in verse 45, when he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him.

[4 : 1 6] So we need to figure out what's going on there. How is it possible for a group of people to welcome Jesus, but at the same time not to honor him? The two seem contradictory. But the clue is there in verse 45, if we keep reading, they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover festival. They had seen Jesus do miracles. They welcome him because they want some signs, some miracles for themselves.

They don't honor him as Lord and as Savior, as the Son of God. Jesus' assessment of the crowd is clear.

Verse 48, unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe. They're coming to Jesus interested simply in what they can get. They are here, as it were, for the show, rather than wanting to know him and to worship him and to submit to him. So John, who likes to show contrast,

is giving us a clear contrast between the Jews of this town in Galilee who welcome for signs versus the welcome that he's just had in Samaria. And it's really striking because what we know of Samaritans and the place of Samaria is that the people that lived there, they weren't Jewish. They were regarded by the Jews as half-breeds, as dogs, unclean, practicing a different form of worship. But we read the whole of chapter 4, almost the whole of chapter 4, to show the welcome that they gave to Jesus. And as we see that, just in the passing, wouldn't this be an amazing culture for us as a church, if we had the same kind of responses that the Samaritans had? So, turn with me to verse 29, to remind ourselves what happens when this woman meets with Jesus. Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. This lady has found hope and she's found life because she's found a Savior in her first instinct. Let me tell the other people, those people who have despised it up until this point, she knows that they need Jesus too. Then verse 41, because of his words, many more became believers. So, they hear from the women, they're drawn to Jesus, they listen, they become believers.

And verse 42, they say to the women, we no longer believe just because of what you said. Now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world. So, these Samaritans, they get the identity of Jesus. He's the Savior, and they're worshiping him. And this is important.

[7 : 09] They're worshiping, not because they saw signs and wonders. Why are they worshiping Jesus? Why do they honor him as Savior? Because of his words. They have heard his teaching, and they respond in faith.

It's the same opportunity that we have every time we open God's Word, or we come to church. We hear the words of Jesus, the invitation of the gospel. And they trust his identity, and they trust his claims. In other words, they understand who Jesus is, where so many of the Jews, they just don't. John Owen, a theologian from another generation, warned that an imaginary Savior provides an imaginary salvation. His point being that you take Jesus on his terms, or you don't take Jesus at all. Jesus didn't come to be known as a great man. Jesus didn't come to be known as a miracle worker. Rather, those miracles are, as it were, for Jesus, an ID card. You think about when your meter needs to be read at home, and the guy comes from Scottish Gas, or wherever he comes from, and he's got his lanyard, and it tells, here's his company, and here's who he is. It's his calling card. Well, the miracles are Jesus' calling card to say, I am from God. I am operating here with the power of God. I have the life-giving power of God. And we need to recognize that identity and that authority. There's some implications as we think about that. When we come to Jesus, we're not in a position to bargain with him. Jesus, if you'll do this, that, and the next thing, then I will trust you. Now, because God is so merciful and patient, sometimes he'll do that, but that's not the way we should treat our God. Nor should we base our worship of Jesus on our circumstance.

[9 : 20] Jesus, I'll follow you and worship you if my life plan pans out exactly the way I anticipate. But the moment trouble or suffering comes, we're done. It's not the way it goes, because Jesus is God.

And nor should we settle for habits. You know, we can tick the religious box, because we come to church regularly. Tick the box that we've read our Bible today, or we've prayed. We come to church, we come to God's Word, so that we would find Jesus. We read God's Word to hear the gospel, to see more of the greatness of the greatness of the Lord Jesus. And that's why we come to church. We enjoy friendship, and we enjoy spending time together, but we need more than that, don't we? We need to meet with Jesus.

To go back to verse 42, the Samaritan said, now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world. Have you heard the gospel? Do you know who Jesus is as the Son of God?

Do you understand that he came to be our Savior, to die in our place for our sins, to give us eternal life? Have you seen his goodness, and his love, and his mercy? Now let's follow the Samaritans. Let's submit to Jesus as King, to believe in him, and to follow. Are we seeking a sign, or seeking a Savior?

[11 : 04] And now John focuses on this royal official who comes looking for a sign from the Savior. This is verse 46 to 52. So we discovered in verse 46 that once more Jesus visited Cana in Galilee. So our first sign, a wedding in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine. The point, Jesus is the King who gives deeper joy.

Jesus, through his death, brings us to God and gives us true life and lasting joy. The focus shifts from the Galilean crowds to this one man to this royal official. The question is, why does he come? Why does the royal official come? And how does Jesus respond?

Well, I think John shows us really clearly why he came. He comes because of need. Verse 46, there was a certain royal official whose son lay ill at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son who is close today. His son is seriously ill. That's what's driving him, not principally at this stage the identity of Jesus. Rather, he has presumably heard what Jesus did at the wedding, or he's heard, or perhaps saw what he did, at the temple and around the Passover time. And so he comes to Jesus as his only hope to find healing for his son. It's one of the things about God's providence. So when we remember that God controls everything, we recognize that God in his wise design sometimes uses a sense of need or a sense of being helpless to be helpless to awaken us to the fact that we need to look for someone greater and someone higher to be with us and for us, not just in that moment but in all of our lives. Spurgeon, the famous 19th century London preacher, once said that afflictions, trouble, hardships, afflictions may be sent as sacred excavators to make more room in the heart for Christ and his love. So we live really close by the old blind school. And the blind school just now is undergoing a major transformation. They've torn down a lot of the old, well, the modern extensions, and they're redesigning the interior to make some flats, building some townhouses. Just now they're laying pipe work and sewage work. And so it's a building site, and there's diggers everywhere. So let's think about that image of what does a digger do when it's on a building site? It clears room, doesn't it? It clears room for something new, something different. And Spurgeon is saying to us, this is what God does through trouble. He can use that to make room that perhaps we never had before in our hearts for the love of Jesus, to think about who Jesus is. I think it recognizes that by nature we tend towards contentment, we tend towards self-reliance. You think about this royal official as an example, no doubt he would have found his power and his influence and his status were very helpful in most of his day-to-day life. And we, in our comfort and self-reliance, maybe it's hard to make room for Jesus. We have little or no thought of him when life is going well, perhaps. But what do we see from the royal official in his life? This illness that comes to his son, all of a sudden he's realizing, here is a need that I cannot meet by myself. Now, all of a sudden there is space in his heart for Jesus and his love. There is that awakening.

Now, how does Jesus respond? So, the official comes in his need. How does Jesus respond? He responds in mercy. Notice he says in verse 48, unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe. Now, flip that round another way. We can hear Jesus say to the royal official, when you see this sign, you will believe, because that's the way it works out. So, many of the crowd doubtless saw the sign and didn't respond in faith, but this man will. How does Jesus respond? [16:17] He responds with that sign. Verse 50, go, Jesus replied, your son will live. The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. And it turns out that the healing came at the exact moment that Jesus spoke. Jesus speaks, and it is done. So, in God's mercy, this boy's illness becomes God's excavator, opening this official's heart up to Jesus' identity and Jesus' love.

How does God awaken people today? Be an interesting thing to reflect on in our own lives, perhaps in our conversations over the lunch table, to think about what was it in my story, in your story, that led us to seriously consider the claims of the Lord Jesus and to trust in him?

I think we'd all find that there are different ways that God awakens people. For some, it's longing. That sense that there must be something more than this. I read an interview last week with Karsten Warholme, who, if you follow the Olympics, he smashed the 400-meter hurdles record. And he was honestly saying, since then, he's been thoroughly demotivated and has no idea what's going to come next. He has had that perfect race in his mid-twenties, and now he's like, now what? And sometimes, God uses that sense of longing to point us to the deep longing, the eternal longing in all of our hearts, that longing to know God through Jesus.

Sometimes, like the royal official, we probably find it's being helpless. It's a time of need. Whenever I think of stories, I always think of the elder in my church back home who was a fisherman, and he came to faith in the middle of a storm, praying to God, God, if you are real, if you are there, may I please save me. God answered and rescued him, and he turned to faith. Maybe that's our story. Maybe that's what brings us here today, a sense of being helpless and looking for God. Sometimes, it's regret that awakens us to a need for God. Maybe we make a mess of our lives. We cause

damage in our relationships. We long to be free from a sense of guilt and shame.

[19 : 13] Again, this makes me think of the politician from a previous generation, Jonathan Aitken, who was found guilty of perjury and sent to prison, and there in prison, he found faith in the Lord Jesus.

Maybe it's the need for love that awakens us to the God who is love. We can think about this Samaritan woman.

She's seeking love and value and security from a whole host of different men, and Jesus, in effect, says to her, come to me for deeper love as your Messiah, as your Savior.

I wonder if you recognize any of this in your own stories. You think about your past or even what brings you here today. And do you recognize that Jesus alone is the one who would fill that God-shaped hole in our hearts and lives? Blaise Pascal, the 17th century mathematician, used to say to skeptical friends, friends who were skeptical of the reality of God. He gave him a challenge. He said, why not pray this? Pray, God, if you are real, make yourself real to me.

And he said to them, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. And so many people can testify to crying out to God, God, if you're real, show yourself. And God, in his mercy, Jesus, in his kindness does that. Because we come to a Savior who is full of mercy and grace and love.

[20 : 59] Jesus understands this royal official will only believe if he sees a sign. And so what does Jesus do? He gives him the sign. Because Jesus wants him to believe and be saved. We need to understand that Jesus is more ready to show love often than we are to believe that. Jesus is more quick to give mercy than we are to receive it. So today, if you're awake to who Jesus is and to your need of him, then give thanks for God's work in your life and believe in him. Submit to him, worship him, trust him.

Last thing to notice, and it's that the sign points to the Savior. As a culture, as society, as people, we instinctively love happily ever after stories.

Even in a day and age where a lot of books and movies tend to dwell in the darker, bleaker side of life, we do appreciate the happily ever after stories. When we come to this gospel story, when does the happily ever after moment happen? Have a look at the text. When does it happen?

Does it happen in verse 51? While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. Sounds like a happily ever after, doesn't it? We could probably stop the text there and go away feeling glad at what Jesus has done, but that's not where the happily ever after comes.

in this story. It comes in verse 53. When the father realized that his boy was healed at one in the afternoon, the exact time when Jesus said to him, your son will live, he and his whole household believed.

[23 : 02] That's the happily ever after moment because that's where the sign is pointing to. So, all the signs in John's gospel point to, John chapter 20, verse 31. What's the goal of John's gospel in recording these signs so that we might believe that Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing, we might have life in his name? So, when John writes his gospel, he didn't just celebrate the sign and then stop. He showed the final destination. Here's a family that become worshipers because they've seen the true identity of Jesus. They see that he is the Savior of the world. Think about the signposts that they have received to the identity of Jesus. This royal official has discovered Jesus is the greater king. So, he works for a king. But being close to King Herod in this moment, don't give him any help.

Don't give him any hope. Herod doesn't have the power to deal with illness. But, verse 50, when this man takes Jesus at his word, when he trusts him, his family receives this miracle. His family receives salvation. Jesus has more power, more glory, more authority than this king or any king. And beyond that, every miracle, and especially every healing miracle that Jesus performs, serves as a window into the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of Jesus. What will Jesus' eternal future kingdom be like when he returns as he has promised? When he establishes the new heaven and earth as he has promised? What will it be like? There'll be a restored world. We'll have resurrection bodies, and there'll be no sickness, and no pain, and no death. This miracle from King Jesus is a signpost towards what his kingdom is like. And incidentally, we'll be thinking about that from the Old Testament this evening. So, do come back. But there's another signpost for us, and it's that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the life giver. When John was introducing Jesus in chapter 1, Jesus as the Word, he said that through Jesus, the Word, all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. It's John saying, saying Jesus is both creator and sustainer of life. And then as we read the Gospels, we discover Jesus is the one who gives life in all its fullness, not just physical, but spiritual. Life of knowing and enjoying relationship with God. We need to remember that though this boy was healed, he would still die. His parents would still die. We, all of us, unless Jesus comes back, we too will die. Jesus is pointing to true life, which is spiritual. In Jesus, we have a guarantee of resurrection life, of eternal life, because of what he came to do. Jesus came to die on the cross as our substitute, taking the place of sinners, bearing on himself the punishment that our sin deserves. Jesus faces death. And then Jesus rises again with the promise that if we believe in him, we will live even though we die. Jesus is the life giver, because only Jesus forgives. Only Jesus brings us life with God. Only Jesus will bring us to eternal life with God.

[27 : 21] So, as we close, let's be sure to use this sign correctly. There are some iconic signs in the world, aren't there? Perhaps we can think about the Hollywood sign up on the Hollywood Hills, or to make it a bit closer to home, we might think of the new North Coast 500 signs that pop up everywhere in the Northern Highlands. Now, if you were a traveler and you were wanting to experience the North Coast 500, if you show up at the sign, you take your selfie and then head home, you've missed out. You've seen the sign, but you've never gone on the journey.

Now, we need to recognize that Jesus does spectacular signs. He is unlike any other. But he always does those signs so that we would make the journey, that journey towards God through him. So, John's gospel would say to us, don't settle for a sign. Don't settle for Jesus meeting my felt needs as and when. Come to him as Savior and Lord. When we have that sense of him awakening us, respond in faith and in worship. Believe in Jesus as the Savior of the world because of his identity and because of the gospel word and the gospel hope that he brings. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we thank you. Lord Jesus, we thank you.