

Taking Jesus at his word

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[0:00] Before I pass on, I might just point out the last hymn, I didn't choose it, Phil chose this, the last hymn that Phil has chosen is I am not skilled to understand.

I thought when I got this passage, it's full of subtle use of language, is it an ideal passage for what is a family service when the children are staying in? That's why we got the sort of trigger warning at the beginning.

But then I thought, is there a prophet in Israel? That was the question that Elisha was dealing with, wasn't it? And who had the simple answer to that? The little girl, the little maid.

You've got leprosy, you go and talk to the prophet. That was simple for her, it wasn't at all simple for the king, was it? He wondered what another subtle political game was going on. And then when Naaman got his answer from Elisha, does this make sense?

What was complicated for a sophisticated Naaman was simple enough for his more simple-minded servants, wasn't it? You've just got to go and bathe in the river, what's your problem?

[1:08] So there is subtle language in this passage, but perhaps what's complicated for us adults is sometimes simple for the children. I pray that that might be true today.

Anyway, we're back on the sign thing, aren't we? Verse 54, did you notice that? I talked about the first sign, the changing of water into wine a few weeks ago.

And this is, John says, is the second sign. And as I just said, this apparently simple narrative is actually full of all sorts of subtlety and nuance. John employs all his skill with language to make his argument.

Why does John call it the second sign? That's the first question we might ask. Clearly it's not the second miracle chronologically, as you can see from chapter 3, verse 2, for instance.

Where there are reference to other signs that he performed in Jerusalem. Perhaps to see why this is the second sign in John's mind, is that we need to keep in mind his purpose in writing.

[2:21] Which, of course, he tells us in John chapter 20, 30 to 31. I think every speaker who's spoken on this thing has repeated this verse, and I think we need to do it.

John is quite upfront about why he's writing. John 20, 30 and 31 says, Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John doesn't present us with a simple gospel.

This isn't theology for dummies, as it were. It's not a simple truth, as Nicodemus pointed out. Jesus had to say to Nicodemus, you are Israel's teacher, and you do not understand these things.

Jesus aims to make sure his readers do understand. It's almost true for John that the ultimate sin is not to understand.

[3:29] And in reflecting that, isn't he actually only reflecting the teaching of Jesus himself, and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

The Pharisee, with all his knowledge, didn't understand the grace of God. The tax collector did. And as I say to John, it's almost the ultimate sin is to fail to understand.

But people can't understand unless they engage their brains. So perhaps you should think that when John calls this the second sign, think of it as a speaker or a lecturer, perhaps saying, now this is my second point.

Or a lawyer presenting a case might say, secondly, you need to take notice of this. This, if you like, is the second bullet point in his argument.

And it takes us back to what we've already seen about signs. And I think it's worth just pointing out the similarities between the first sign, the water into wine, and this sign, the healing of the official sun.

[4:48] First of all, obviously, there's the numerical reference itself. This is the second sign, says John. In 2 verse 11, he says this was the first sign. Secondly, you notice that the sign is performed on request of somebody else.

The water into wine, it was Jesus' mother. Here it is, this official. Thirdly, you notice that there's actually Jesus, it seems apparently, a little reluctant to answer the request.

You can think about why that is. But on the face of it, Jesus seems, has a certain reluctance. He raises, as it were, an objection. And fourthly, you might notice that the key aspect in both signs is obedience to Jesus' words.

If people don't do what Jesus says, then the miracle will not take place. And fifthly, you might notice the supporting cast, the servants, the waiters, the wine waiters in the water into wine, the attendants who have been looking after the boy at home, the servants that are referred to in this passage, and indeed also the servants in the story of Naaman.

And there are similarities, but parallels there as well. So as we're back on the sign thing, I think I thought we'd better just revise what we said about signs last time.

[6:24] Remember, we looked at this Welcome to Brighton and Hove sign. It changed now. Has it? It was there last time I looked. When did it change? For the euro, it's changed. It's because we're not working.

Oh, okay. Yes. It was there the same last time I looked. Anyway, that's what the sign said. The northern flag and some other flag. Oh, okay. That's interesting.

All right. I'll have to go and take another photograph then. All right. Anyway, the points we raised was that, first of all, that a sign has significance. The sign is not the thing itself.

The sign points to something else. And something, hopefully, is important. Otherwise, why bother to put the sign there? And that's the second thing we saw about signs, is that a sign is there because somebody put it there.

Signs don't grow naturally, as I said last time, like dandelions. Signs are there because somebody thought, I've got something to tell people, and I'm going to put up a sign to tell them.

[7:30] Somebody wants to tell you something, that's why the sign is there. And the third thing I said, we saw that the sign has an objective message.

The sign has a meaning. There's something that the sign writer is trying to communicate. But fourthly, we noted that the exact meaning, what actually gets communicated, depends to some extent on us who read the sign, who hear the sign, who see the sign.

Because we all relate to it in slightly different ways. We only need to know how the message of the sign affects us personally. And as we said, that could be different for different people.

But now perhaps we need to add one more point. Because of that personal meaning, a sign can be misunderstood. We may not in fact react as the sign writer intended.

We may get, as the saying goes, the wrong end of the stick. And this seems to be the issue that Jesus himself points out in verse 48, in which John has chosen to emphasize.

[8:49] Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, Jesus told him, Jesus told him, you will never believe. So what point is Jesus making here?

It is rather a subtle one. And the basic difficulty is actually rather unexpected. It seems that there is too much emphasis on what you see on the face of the thing.

There is too much emphasis on seeing. Let's think this through a bit, as this seems actually rather surprising. There's an English proverb, isn't there?

That says, a picture is worth a thousand words. But have you ever noticed something slightly strange about this proverb? It's not expressed in pictures, it's expressed in words.

If the picture is better, why use the words? Without the words, the picture is open to misinterpretation, isn't it? Everyone agrees, anyone who looks at the Mona Lisa, notices the smile.

[10:04] Everyone, one thing everybody agrees on, is that that smile has got to be significant. The only thing is, what does it actually mean? Is it a super-sidious sneer, saying, I know something you don't?

Is it a flickering smile, of a shared secret? We both know something, that the rest of the world doesn't know. Or is she just holding her tummy, because she's got tummy ache?

Maybe she's even pregnant, we don't know, do we? Without explanation, our reaction to this painting, says more about us, than what the artist may have actually intended.

Of course, it's possible that what the artist actually intended, was that we'd spend the next 500 years speculating about it. There's another proverb, isn't there, that says, actions speak louder than words.

And yet again, what we get, the proverb, is it's expressed in words, we don't have a video of it.

Actually, words matters. Without words, who knows what the action may mean?

[11:40] Suppose I'm about to go into a bank, and I get a mask out of, I won't do it, I have got one in my bag, I got a mask out of my bag, and put it on. What does that action mean? Does it mean I'm worried, that the people in this bank, might get COVID?

Or does it mean I'm about to, I'm about to hold up the bank? Without the context, without the words, we can't actually understand, what the action means.

Before a surgeon starts an operation, if you've ever had any surgery, you have to fill in a consent form, don't you? Because if you don't, the surgeon is not allowed, to start cutting into you, because that would be common assault.

You have to give assent, in words, that you understand, what the surgeon is about to do, and you give consent to it. Without the words, the action is meaningless.

But of course, the reverse is true also. It is also true, that the word without the action, is meaningless. As James tells us, doesn't he? James 2, 15 to 16 says, suppose a brother or sister, is without clothes, and daily food.

[13:01] If one of you says to him, go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about, his physical needs, what good is it? In fact, action and word have to work together, don't they?

You can't have one without the other. They have to be in harmony. Now, one of the subtleties you get in John's gospel, is his love of verbal contrast, paradox, I think oxymor, and I think is the technical term, for those who are interested in technical terms.

And of course, you've got one right at the start here. verse 44, a prophet has no honour in his own country. And yet, what happens when Jesus comes back to Galilee, which is his home, is his home country, the Galilee, the Galilee has welcomed him.

John doesn't make mistakes like that. He does it intentionally, I'm sure. He has something to tell us, in that. And what is it?

Well, perhaps we could draw out what it is. It's the prophet that the locals have trouble with. They're very happy to welcome a worker of miraculous signs, particularly a healer.

[14:40] Everybody welcomes a healer. Sometimes churches hold healing services, yet there is a real danger in this, because the sign can actually detract from the message.

Miraculous healers are always welcome, and seeing is believing, isn't it? It seems to be what verse 48 says. But the trouble with prophets is that they speak.

They use words. And the message may be unpalatable. And why would you listen to the carpenter's son?

If he can produce miraculous healings, that's great. We're not going to listen to what he says. We're not going to take his words seriously. To put it another way, instead of authenticating the message, the sign can take over and become the message.

Ultimately, as John is trying to convey to us, faith comes by hearing and understanding, faith comes by hearing and understanding, not by seeing. I mean, the Israelites in the desert at the time of the Exodus saw plenty of signs, didn't they?

[16:04] But they didn't seem to learn much from it. They still failed to believe. And in a parable, Jesus made the same point.

It's the parable of Devis and Lazarus. And Devis says, why don't you send my, can I go back to all my brothers about this torment? And what Jesus says, they've got Moses and the prophets. Devis says, Devis says, well, yeah, but if somebody rises from the dead, they'll believe. And Jesus says, no, they won't.

Luke 16, 31, if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead. And of course, that prophecy turned out to be only too true.

And yet at the same time, that doesn't mean to say you can necessarily dispense with the sign.

[17:14] There's always this ambivalence. Because the sign can authenticate the word. I mean, if that were not the case, why is John bothering to tell us about it?

But the sign only authenticates the word if you understand it. And so, you remember the story of the man who's, paralyzed man, who's let down through the roof.

And Jesus said, son, your sins are forgiven. And everybody sort of looks a bit blank and says, well, you know, he's paralyzed.

Shouldn't you be healing him? And Jesus says, which is it easier to say, your sins are forgiven or to say, get up and walk but so that you may know the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

He said to the paralytic, get up, take your mat and go home. The sign is not the healing. The point of the sign really is not the healing.

[18:23] The point is to show the authority that the son of man has. We could say perhaps it's in the interplay between the word and the action that understanding is to be found.

So how does Jesus deal with this issue, this ambivalence in practice?

So he starts by making this official. He's probably a member of Herod's court in Caesarea. He makes him explain clearly what he wants in verse 49.

Sir, come down before my child dies. This man does have a real need. It's not that he's inventing a problem just so that he can see a miracle.

Like it says in the... It's quoted of Herod in the show, isn't it? It's proved to me that you're no fool. Walk across my swimming pool.

[19:35] This man does have a real need and that's significant. That's important. Spectators have to understand that and the man has to be clear about it himself.

And Jesus is this child's only hope. This man really is desperate. Jesus is his only hope and he knows that.

But others have to see that as well. And so he says, Sir, come down before my child dies. And after all, he is an important man.

I mean, he's asking Jesus to make a 16-mile side trip. It's not the next village. It's 16 miles away.

And that does rather remind us, doesn't it, of the way the prophet Elijah dealt with Naaman.

Elijah didn't even come up and speak to Naaman himself. He says, go. Notice the repetition of the word go. Jesus used it. Go. Go and do something. In Naaman's case, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan.

[20:52] Naaman went away angry. He said, I thought he would come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord and so on. Are not Abana and Farfa, the rivers of Diascus, better than any of the waters of Israel?

Yes, they probably are. Jordan's a bit of a muddy stream really, isn't it? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleaned? It's up to the servants.

And again, the servants tend to have an important role in these stories for some reason. What's your problem, Naaman? He doesn't ask you to perform some great task, climb seven mountains or something like that.

What he's asked you to do is go and dip in the river seven times. What have you got to lose, Naaman? Well, nothing except his pride. And so Naaman did it.

And as we read in the story, he was cleared of his leprosy. So we noticed in a similar way, Jesus here does not actually do what the man asks.

[22:04] The man has asked for a home visit, a 16 mile there and back round trip. But he's not going to get one. The man must appreciate who

he's speaking to.

He's not speaking to some quack doctor. Naaman tried to bribe Elisha and it didn't work out well, particularly for the servant, if you'd know the rest of the story.

But Jesus is taking no bribes. He's not even going to make... The official's wealth and importance really has no bearing.

The only relevant fact is that this man has a need. In any case, no magic anointing is required. No, like in Naaman, as Naaman thought, there was no need for Elisha to come and put his hand on the spot.

There was no need for Jesus to make a home visit. Believing must come before the seeing, in this case.

[23:15] Not seeing is believing, but believing becomes first and then the seeing. So instead of this 16-mile diversion, we get this simple instruction.

It's almost Kurt, isn't it? You may go. Your son will live. Even, in fact, the NIV sort of tones it down a bit.

In the original, the word is just one word. Go. Just a single imperative. Go. Your son will live. The first sign, as in the wedding feast, the first sign, there's not even a word of command.

There's no magical... What's the word? Incantation. That's the word I was thinking before. There's no magical incantation.

There's no even appealing to a higher authority. Just go. It's done. No child be healed.

[24:25] No disease depart. Instead, the man himself was told to depart. And actually, to be fair, he does better than Naaman, doesn't he? He gets the point straight away.

He's not going to see the healing. Instead, he's got to take Jesus at his word. So as I said, he passes the test rather better than Naaman did, actually.

He sets off home. Apparently, he needs an overnight stop because the servant's meeting the next day, so he must have stopped overnight somewhere.

You can sympathize with him, can't you? I don't suppose he got much sleep. His mind must have been full of doubt and turmoil. Turmoil.

But he did it. He took Jesus at his word and he went home. We're reading his story 2,000 years on.

[25:43] We have a much fuller picture than this man had access to. All this man knew is that perhaps Jesus was one who might be able to help. So he took Jesus at his word and he went.

And of course, that is a challenge to us, isn't it, in itself? Would we raise objections like Naaman did? Would we say, unless I actually see it, I'm not going to believe it?

Like Thomas did. Would we do the same? But this man did.

He took Jesus at his word and he went home. Meanwhile, of course, back in Caesarea, tempted to say meanwhile back at the ranch, but it wasn't a ranch.

Back in Caesarea, the servants get their bit in the story. And they set out with good news. They were already on the road to meet him, you notice.

[26:53] They were off to tell their master. It's no problem. You don't need to bother the rabbi after all. Against all expectations, the child is recovered. Good news.

Amazing news. What they don't know, of course, is why. But the father does.

The official does. All he needs is a quick time check. Synchronize your watches, guys. Just when he'd been talking to Jesus.

Now, of course, it's easy to dismiss this as coincidence, isn't it? Well, it just so happened that it was around the same time. But this official doesn't think so.

He understood the sign. And so, that reinforced his faith in his household is convinced as well. We could think of it, it's linear in the passage here.

[28:03] You could almost think of it as a circle. Faith in verse 50 leads to action. He went home. And that action reinforces his faith when he finds out what's happened.

And he sees that, actually does see the sign then. Not the actual execution of it, but the results of it. And because of this, not only the man himself, but his whole household is convinced.

We see in verse 53. He sees that his whole household believed. So the man didn't, the official didn't think it was a coincidence and neither does John.

That's why he tells us so in verse 54, isn't it? This isn't something you really need to take notice of. In fact, this is my second bullet point. If you want to understand, you have to take Jesus at his word. John is setting out his case. Of course, you shouldn't trust anybody. This might be some crack doctor. This might be some false fake news.

[29:18] It's not saying you should take anybody at his word. You take the word of the person who knows what he's talking about. Who is this Jesus?

He is the one whose words carry divine power and assurance. In fact, John goes further than that, doesn't he? In his introduction, he says, he is the word. The word of God incarnate.

And of course, as I said, John is no impartial observer. We like to think historians are impartial, aren't we?

But of course, no historian in the history of the world has ever been impartial. We study history because we want to understand how we got where we were.

How we understand how the world works. And of course, every historian is going to have a case to put, a viewpoint to put forward and John is quite upfront as we said about his.

[30:21] He says, I want you to learn from this. I want you to see who Jesus is. I want you to do as the official did, take Jesus at his word.

John said, by believing you may have eternal life. So that's the true meaning of this sign. The sign, in fact, only has any meaning if it's mixed with faith if we meet it with faith.

The sign only has meaning if it's met with faith and understanding and obedience. But on the other hand, to the one who has eyes to see, seeing is indeed believing.

So is there a prophet in Israel? Will we reject the true prophet in our search for a personal miracle worker? Somebody who can sort out our problems and make us happy and have a smooth life?

Or will we acknowledge Jesus as the anointed king? As the prophet after Moses? the one who speaks the very words of God. That's what John is trying to persuade us of.

[31:44] And he's certainly no impartial observer. He passionately sets out his case. These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The official believed and his son was restored to health. But more importantly than that, this servant of Herod became a servant of the true king.

Doesn't mean he betrayed Herod, I'm sure he didn't. I'm sure he carried on his job in the best way he could. In fact, he probably did it better now than he would have done beforehand. Because he would have been less interested in the benefits of the job and more in doing the job properly.

But that was because he'd become a servant of the true king of Israel and the true prophet in Israel. It's because of who he is we are to take Jesus at his word and it's because of his words we understand who he is.

And when we take Jesus at his word it will require action. So that's the final point, isn't it? I'll be up for it, whatever Jesus tells us. It may not be anything spectacular.

[33:02] Maaman wasn't told to do anything spectacular. He said just go and take a dip in this rather muddy stream. It's not far away. You don't have to go miles. Just take a drip in this stream.

But that's what the prophet told him to do and he did it and he was healed. This man had to go a bit further. He had to go 16 miles. But he did it and he was healed and his son was healed.

Will we go where Jesus sends us, whether it's the other side of the world or to our next door neighbour? Jesus says go. Will we take him at his word?

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.