

Life Giving

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[0 : 00] The text of Scripture before us today is John chapter 4, verses 43 to 54. Now, in this text, the Apostle John rounds off his description of the first full year of Jesus' public ministry.

And one scholar has characterized that year as from Cana to Cana. From Cana to Cana. From Cana in Galilee, where he turned water into wine, to Cana in Galilee, where he speaks a young boy back from the brink of death.

I have heretofore never taught on this text in John 4. I've always jumped right from the woman at the well to John 5, where this man is healed by the pool of Bethsaida.

And I've not taught this text in John 4 because I have not known what to make of Jesus' initial response to the father of this boy.

To be more frank, I have not liked Jesus' initial response. I know that's an arrogant thing to say, but I've resisted it. I've been put off by the way Jesus initially treats this man who comes on the behalf of his son.

[1 : 15] But I think I now understand what Jesus was doing that day. And I have discovered that it was a profoundly loving thing. And I hope now to show you what I see.

If you are able, will you stand for the reading of God's word? And after the two days, the two days is a reference to Jesus staying in Samaria.

And after the two days, he went forth from there into Galilee. For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country.

Don't like that line. So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans received him, having seen all the things that he did in Jerusalem at the feast. For they themselves also went to the feast.

He came therefore again to Cana of Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum.

[2 : 16] When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to him and was requesting him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. Jesus therefore said to him, Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.

The royal official said to him, Sir, come down before my child dies. Jesus said to him, Go your way, your son lives. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he started off.

And as he was going down, his slaves met him, saying that his son was living. So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. They said therefore to him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.

So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, Your son lives. And he himself believed and his whole household. This is again a second sign that Jesus performed when he had come out of Judea into Galilee.

Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago you grabbed hold of John and you worked with him, you inspired him to write down these words in the form that we have them.

[3 : 24] And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you will take these words off the page and cause them to come alive in our minds, in our hearts, in our wills, in our experience as never before, for we pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen. You may be seated. Now, John calls this man a basilichos, which translated means a man of the king, a member of the king's royal leadership team.

This man is likely an officer in the service of Herod the Tetrarch of Galilee. John says that the officer lived in Capernaum, but that day he was in Cana.

The officer says to Jesus, Come down and heal my son. Come down. Now, as I've been trying to show you in this series of the Gospel of John, John is very careful with the words he uses.

This officer wants Jesus to come down. Not merely come, but come down. Come down. That's because in order to get from Cana to Capernaum, in order to get from where Jesus and the officer are to where the boy is, you have to come down.

[4 : 44] Cana, which is roughly 20 miles from Capernaum, is located significantly high above sea level. Capernaum is well below sea level. Come down. Three times John uses this word.

In verse 47, the officer is requesting Jesus to come down. Verse 49, the officer says to Jesus, Sir, come down. And in verse 51, and as the officer was going down, down.

That little word gives me great confidence in the historical reliability of this story. And as I will show you when we go on in the rest of the Gospel of John, John is always doing this.

There are always these telltale eyewitness signs in his storytelling. To get from Cana to Capernaum, you have to go down. You just don't go. You go down.

Are you with me? John very much wants us to see this second event in Cana in connection with the first event where Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding feast.

[5 : 46] Both of these stories are told in the same form. Both of them begin with a simple request born out of a very real human need. In each story, the expression of the need is immediately rebuffed by Jesus.

Jesus says to his mother in the first story, Woman, what do I have to do with you? In this story, unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe. In each of the story, Jesus ends up giving a command that speaks to the need.

In each of the story, a sign happens, a miracle happens, and in each of the story, faith is born and nurtured. John tells these two stories in the same way, I think, as a way to remind us that both of these stories are revealing the same truth about Jesus Christ.

Namely, that he has come into our broken world to bring us into his wholeness. You will remember that John calls the turning of water into wine the first of Jesus' signs.

The first. The actual word he uses is the word archay, which comes into the English language in the word archetype or archetypal. Yes, this word means first in the sense of first in a sequence with other things to follow, but it primarily means first as representative of the sequence, descriptive of what everything else will involve that is to follow.

[7 : 08] Turning water into wine points to the whole of Jesus' ministry in the world. It tells us that Jesus is always grabbing hold of what is old and making it new.

He is always grabbing hold of what is decaying and dying and bringing it to life again. So in the second sign, we see what the first sign was really all about.

A young boy is brought back from the brink of death. In the last sign that John records, in John chapter 11, a man, Lazarus, is actually brought out of the grave.

There, Jesus grabs hold of what is really dead and brings it to life. Now, clearly, the major point of this story, the second story in Cana, is the performative power of Jesus' word.

The performative power of Jesus' word. Jesus simply speaks and something happens. No fanfare, no hype, no magical incantation, no appeal to a higher authority.

[8 : 09] He simply speaks. Is this not an echo of Genesis 1, where in the beginning God spoke the universe into being? Let there be light, and there was light.

Let there be affirmament, and there was affirmament. Jesus, the word, who was there in the beginning, simply speaks and something happens. And as John's gospel unfolds, we see this again and again.

Rise, take up your pallet, and walk, and the crippled man does. Lazarus, you come out of the grave, and he does. Jesus, the eternal word made flesh, need only speak, and what he speaks comes into being.

And what John wants us to realize from this story is that Jesus' speech works long distance, if you will. He is in Cana.

The boy is in Capernaum, about 20 miles away. At the seventh hour in Cana, 1 p.m. in the afternoon in Cana, Jesus says, your son lives. At the seventh hour in Capernaum, 20 miles away, the boy lives.

[9 : 13] Our youngest daughter, Marissa, and I were reading this story at breakfast last Monday morning. And after observing this long-distance power of the word of Jesus, I said to her, isn't that cool?

She said, yeah. And then she asked me, does this mean that Jesus can do it from heaven? I said, yes. And then she says to me, does it mean that Jesus can do it from the farthest corner of heaven? And I said, yes. And she said, wow. Wow, indeed. Distance is no obstacle to the word of the word made flesh.

Jesus need not show up at the hospital room himself. He can speak from where he is. And when he speaks, whatever he speaks happens where he intends it to happen.

Oh, Lord, speak your performative word to us today. Now, there are a number of ways we could proceed at this point. The way that seems best to me today is to grapple with this story by asking of it five questions.

[10:23] Five questions. Question one. It's more of a background question. Why does John preface this story with Jesus' reference to the fact that a prophet does not have honor in his own country?

Jesus comes into Galilee with that mindset. A prophet has no honor in his own country. Why does John put this right before telling us about the officer coming on behalf of his son?

Well, first of all, we need to settle the matter of what Jesus means by his own country. No honor in his own country. What is his own country? Is it Judea?

John says that just a few days ago he left Judea. And he left Judea amidst a lot of controversy. Is Judea his own country? That is the place where he was born.

Bethlehem of Judea. It is in Judea that Jerusalem lies. Jerusalem is the center of all the great action. But is not Galilee also his own country?

[11:29] Galilee was where he was raised, in Nazareth of Galilee. It's in Galilee that he established his first important headquarters in Capernaum of Galilee.

So is Jesus not referring to both, to both Judea and Galilee as his own? Clearly, it is already happening in Judea.

He is already not having honor as a prophet in Judea, especially after he cleansed the temple. But it's also happening in Galilee. Because by this time, Jesus has preached his famous Nazareth sermon.

His Nazareth sermon recorded in Luke 4 where Jesus says, The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me to bring good news to the poor. Jesus preached that sermon and he was driven out of town, out of Galilee.

I think then Jesus is referring to both parts of Israel, to both Judea and Galilee. In both, he is becoming the prophet without honor in his own country. The irony is that it is in Samaria, between Judea and Galilee, that Jesus is honored.

[12:31] And he is honored without doing any miraculous sign. Why no honor? Some honor him, Nicodemus did, but as a whole he was not honored.

Why no honor for Jesus in those places of his own country? Because, get this, he did not meet the expectations shaped by the institutional religion of his day.

Indeed, he not only did not meet them, he challenged them.

Not only does Jesus not fit the institutional religion mold, he is always breaking the institutional religion mold.

Now, that poses a warning to us. It poses a great warning to me. It says that it is so easy to slip into the mode of expecting Jesus to act and speak in ways that fit our expectations.

[13:44] It is so easy to slip into the mode of subtly demanding that Jesus be Savior and Lord in ways that maintains the status quo of our comfort zone.

Am I right? I submit to you, that's the danger we have right now. The church in America is not going to seize the moment that I articulated last Sunday.

Unless we recognize that we are trying to expect him to work in the mode of whatever makes for the status quo being comfortable.

A prophet without honor in his own land. In Judea, his own land par excellence, no honor.

Do you know that no apostle comes from Judea? None of his apostles come from that land. And in Galilee, his own land since infancy, there's no honor.

[14:47] Why then does John say in verse 45 that when Jesus came to Galilee, the Galileans received him? Well, there are two nuances to that word, receive.

One of them is to welcome in general. The other is to treat as an honored guest. It is true that the Galileans welcomed him in that general sense.

But did they receive him as an honored guest? Did they then go about rearranging their whole pattern of living so that this honored guest might be the center of things? No, they did not. The Galileans welcomed Jesus only to the degree that they could get something from him. Only to the degree that Jesus fit into their pattern. They had no intention of rearranging their lives. They did not welcome him. You can see this is a concern.

[15:50] I'm going to stop there. I'm not stopping the sermon there. I'm going to delay it here. Folks, we have to rearrange our lives to be about discipleship.

If this is the only time that you open the book during the week, you aren't going to make it. This is the only time you pray. You aren't going to make it.

We are not going to make it unless we rearrange the substance of our lives and honor him as the one who will tell us how we're going to live.

Prophet is without honor in his own land. Question two. Why is the officer from Capernaum initially rebuffed?

Why does Jesus initially respond to this man's crisis saying, unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe? Boy, doesn't that seem harsh? Doesn't it feel harsh to you?

[17:03] I mean, the officer is only doing what any one of us would do. His son is ill. There's a severe fever that is threatening his life. He's heard about the things that Jesus has done in Jerusalem and in Cana.

And so he goes from Capernaum to Cana to go to this man who has the report of being able to do something. And the first thing he hears is, unless you people see signs, you won't believe. Why this apparent rebuff?

Jesus does eventually meet the need. But why does he begin with this apparent note of condemnation on the man? The reason? Because Jesus is bringing this man to authentic faith.

Yes, Jesus is concerned about the condition of this boy, and he is going to speak to that need. But right now, Jesus is concerned about the condition of the boy's father. Jesus is dealing with a need greater than healing.

He is dealing with the need for faith. This is not faith? This man coming from Capernaum to Cana to seek Jesus' help, this is not faith?

[18:10] That's right. It's not faith yet. It is not yet saving faith. Why? Because it is faith built only upon seeing signs and wonders.

So question two becomes, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with faith based on seeing signs and wonders? Why is that not good enough? Why doesn't it impress Jesus?

Answer? Because seeing is not believing. It is only seeing. Say that again. Seeing is not believing. It is only seeing. Many people saw the miraculous deeds that Jesus did during his years of ministry in Galilee and Judea. But they did not come to faith. That's because seeing is not believing.

It is only seeing. Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Some of those 5,000 follow him around the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus turns and says to them, truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me not because you saw signs, but because you have food in your stomach.

[19:13] They saw something, but they did not believe. That's because seeing is not yet believing. It is only seeing. Well, still I ask, what's wrong with that?

What's wrong with coming to Jesus on the basis of seeing what he can do? Why is that not yet faith? Stay with me. We need to press deeper.

The problem is that faith based on signs and wonders becomes dependent upon signs and wonders. Faith that says, I come because I see, soon becomes, I will not come unless I see. Faith that is based on signs and wonders soon begins to demand signs and wonders. And if the signs and wonders do not come, such faith then goes looking for another miracle worker. I've seen it happen many times. So have you. Someone comes in our midst. They see and experience some great wonder that we experience. That person gets all enthused. And then the signs and wonders are not coming fast enough.

[20:25] And soon they are gone, searching for another healer. Faith based on seeing signs does not continue unless it continues to see signs.

Now, the problem goes deeper than that. Faith which requires signs and wonders is a subtle form of playing God. It's a subtle form of creating God in our own image.

Faith which requires signs and wonders lays down in advance the way in which God is to be God. Such faith is not a response to God as God is, but a projection of the God we imagine.

And such faith then demands that God be God on my terms. Now, since God will never respond to that demand to be God on our terms, such faith will ultimately be disappointed.

And such faith will ultimately turn away. In fact, as I read the rest of the Gospels, such faith actually becomes hostile. Do you realize that the very people who wanted to make Jesus king after he fed the 5,000 are the ones who end up crying out, crucify him?

[21 : 41] Now, don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with signs and wonders. Goodness gracious, Jesus does them freely and signs and wonders are part and parcel of the kingdom he is bringing into the world.

It's just that the purpose of Jesus is to point beyond itself to Jesus. If one only sees the signs and not what the sign is pointing to, one never comes to saving faith.

Seeing signs is not yet believing. It is only seeing signs. It's when we see through the signs to Jesus that we believe. Which means then that at Cana, Jesus is not rebuffing the officer.

I've been wrong. He is not rebuffing him. Jesus is bringing this man through his need to see signs to faith. Yes, Jesus hears the cry of a father for his son.

And momentarily, he's going to respond to that cry. But Jesus first works to bring the father to faith. Because faith is that father's greatest need. He thinks it's the healing of his son.

[22 : 58] It's not. His greatest need at that moment is faith. It's also the son's greatest need. I mean, what ultimate good does it do for this son to be healed, but the son and the father to live the rest of their life without a relationship with the only one who gives life now and beyond the grave?

The greatest need is not to be healed. The greatest need is to have saving faith in the Savior of the world who does heal. Jesus, unless you people see signs, is full of love.

It is intended to bring a desperate man beyond seeking something from Jesus to seeking Jesus himself. Because it is Jesus himself that he and his boy really need.

Seeing isn't believing. It's only seeing. Jesus is bringing the man beyond seeing to believing. Which then leads us to the third question I want to pose of this text.

Question three. What then is faith? What is the faith that pleases Jesus? Look carefully at verse 50. Verse 50.

[24 : 08] Please turn there with your notes. Jesus says to the man, Go your way, your son lives. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. Say that again.

Jesus says to the man, Go your way, your son lives. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. Now note, That this officer does not begin by arguing with Jesus.

And that's significant. Because Jesus does not agree to the specific form of this man's request. The man asked Jesus to come down.

Jesus says, Go your way. I'm not coming down. I'm staying here. The man could have argued, But sir, all the signs I've heard of involved your physical presence.

My son will not be healed unless you are actually there. I need you to come down. I cannot go my way unless you come with me. But he does not argue. Why?

[25 : 13] Because he had come to trust Jesus' word. How? I don't know. Was it the tone in Jesus' voice? Was it something in Jesus' eyes?

Was it something on Jesus' face? Or was it this note of authority? This officer knows all about authority. He receives orders and he obeys them. He gives orders and they are obeyed.

He knows all about inherent authority. Does he hear in Jesus' word this inherent authority? Does this man hear the implicit authority of Genesis 1? Let there be. The point is that Jesus' word was now enough.

And this word is different from the word that he expected. Come down. Go your way. Jesus would not come down. But Jesus speaks the word.

And somehow that word was enough. Note carefully. This word has no sign with it. Nothing happens right there to validate that word.

[26 : 18] Nothing visible. Oh, something happened. He discovers later on that 20 miles away something big happened. But nothing there. Nothing this man can see. The officer came to Jesus because of a sign.

He now leaves Jesus without a sign. Because he now has the word. The word is enough. Jesus' word is enough. And John says, the man started off.

That is, the officer obeys. He does what Jesus tells him to do. He could have argued. He could have argued. It's not going to work unless you come. He does what Jesus tells him to do.

That is faith. Acting on the word that he speaks to us. Why do you call me Lord, Lord? And do not do the things I say. Go.

Come down before my son dies. Go your way. Your son lives. And he started off without a sign. And without Jesus. Because now he has his word.

[27 : 22] And that is enough. He's been brought through from seeing to hearing and doing the word. And then he started his 20 mile journey home.

Leaving with Jesus and his word the right to do whatever he deemed was right. Amazing. Leslie Newbiggin summarizes it this way.

The officer's own insistent and urgent cry for help is stilled by a word which shifts the center. And takes control out of his anxious hands into those of Jesus.

He gets a word that stills him and shifts the center. Which leads to the fourth question I want to ask of this story. Question four. What does Jesus mean by your son lives?

What does Jesus mean by your son lives? Clearly the fever leaves the boy. He is restored to health. He is brought back from the brink of death. And he grows up to be an adult.

[28 : 24] But I ask you. Doesn't this boy die one day? Doesn't he? Whether 20 or 30 or 60 or 80 years old, he dies.

Even those whom Jesus brings back from the grave. Even those who succumb to the fever or succumb to cancer or whatever it is. Even those whom Jesus raises die again.

Lazarus called out of the tomb. Has to go back through the tomb again one day. Right? Your son lives. What does Jesus mean here? Well, do you know what the word for lives is in this text?

It's the word zoe. Ring a bell? I hope so by now. Zoe. Not bios. And there's all the difference in the world.

Bios. Bios is the life that we inherit from our parents. It is the life that decays and dies. Zoe is the life that God lives. It is the life that God is. It is the life that God gives.

[29 : 28] And it does not decay or die. Your son lives. Not your son bios is. But your son zoe is. Jesus is giving more to that boy than the father realized at that moment.

Your son lives in a way far beyond what the father requested. Jesus gives life. Bios. Yes. But also, and more importantly, zoe.

That's why right after this story, in John 5, John records the story of this man who had been crippled for 38 years, being healed by the pool. As a result of that healing, there's this intense theological debate and discussion goes on.

In the midst of that, Jesus makes some amazing claims. Listen to just a few of them. John 5, 26. John 5, 21.

John 5, 24 and 25.

[30 : 35] Now, is that not what Jesus is saying to the officer from Capernaum that day?

The son of God spoke, and as a result of his performative word, he gave zoe to a boy 20 miles away. And is it not also implied that in some way that boy heard the voice of the son of God and received zoe?

Your son zoe. He wasn't ready for that. He would have accepted. Your son bios is. Your son zoe. And therefore, Jesus can say outside the tomb where the body of Lazarus was laying, John 11, 25 to 26.

He who believes in me shall zoe even if he dies. Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Lazarus was brought out of the tomb, but he goes through the tomb again, but he does not die. The officer's son one day is going to succumb to a fever or to cancer or to whatever it is when he's 20, 30, 50, 60. But he will not die. Your son lives even if he dies because your son now has zoe.

[32 : 05] The recent memorial service for Elizabeth Little, her son Charlie, a Presbyterian pastor, read a poem which affirms all of this.

It's entitled, Cancer is So Limited. Cancer is so limited. They've sentenced you with tiny cells that secrete themselves deep in body recesses and multiply.

Lymphatic capture of vital functions. But can cancer conquer you? I doubt it. For the strengths I see in you have nothing to do with cells and blood and muscle.

For cancer is so limited. It cannot cripple love. It cannot shatter hope. It cannot corrode faith. It cannot eat away peace. It cannot destroy confidence.

It cannot kill friendship. It cannot shut out memories. It cannot silence courage. It cannot invade the soul. It cannot reduce eternal life. It cannot quench the spirit.

[33 : 04] It cannot lessen the power of the resurrection. Can cancer conquer you? I doubt it. For the strengths I see in you have nothing to do with cells and blood and muscle.

They have nothing to do with bios. They have everything to do with zoe. Nothing kills zoe. Fever doesn't kill zoe. Cancer doesn't kill zoe. Nothing kills zoe. Your son zoe.

My father has Parkinson's disease and has for the last seven years or so. It's very difficult right now for me and my brothers and my mother to witness the deterioration in his body.

My dad used to be so strong. Loves to build. Every time he'd go to his house, he'd put up a new wall somewhere, a new patio. He's just always building with his hands. And now he's at the point where most days he can't lift a fork to feed himself.

But my dad is not being defeated by this Parkinson's. Your dad lives, Jesus told me. And he does. He has a new peace in him that we haven't seen most of his life.

[34 : 12] He's got a joy in him that makes him fun to be around. That's because he's got zoe. And should the Parkinson's take him one day, he's still going to live.

Which brings us to the fifth question I want to put to this text. Question five. How then do we pray? How then do we pray about the great needs in this broken world?

This story says to me the following. It says, first of all, that you run like the dickens to Jesus. You just get up and you run to Jesus. For goodness sake, don't sit there.

Run. Go. Get there as fast as you can. Five miles, 20 miles, 200 miles. You get there. And even if you think of him just as a miracle worker, don't worry about that. Just run to Jesus.

Second, it says to me, ask boldly. Come down. Come down. Keep nothing back.

[35 : 12] Express the full desire of your heart. Third, realize that he's going to change things on you. It's going to change the nature of the request.

He's Lord after all and nobody can tell him how to run the universe. Fourth, listen to what he says to you. He will speak. I promise you that.

He is not the great silent one who sits in rapturous joy, oblivious to the pain of the world. He cares and he will speak a word and that word will shift the center away from you to him.

Fifth, trust that word. Trust that word. Even without a sign. Because he is as good as his good word is.

Sixth, do whatever he tells you to do. Even if it goes contrary to the original request, do it. And seventh, leave it to him.

[36 : 18] Leave it to him to have the right to do what he wants to do with this. Trust his sovereign goodness. Relinquish the control. And give it to the one who gives Zoe.

Your son lives now and more importantly, forever. Jesus Christ is present right now.

How do I know that? Because I see signs? Nope. Because I have his word. He said, wherever two or more are gathered together in my name, there I am in your midst.

He is here. Before I lead us in a prayer exercise, let's just be still. And allow his presence to bathe our anxiety.

And to crystallize our needs.