

(2) A new focus

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[0 : 00] The reading is John chapter 4, starting at verse 43 to the end of the chapter. After the two days Jesus departed for Galilee, the Jews himself had testified that a prophet had no honour in his own hometown.

So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the feast. So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine.

Look, Hermian, there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

So Jesus said to him, unless you see the signs and wonders, you will not believe. The official said to him, Sir, come down before my child dies.

Jesus said to him, Go, your son will live. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.

[1 : 17] So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. The father knew that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, Your son will live.

And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he came from Judea to Galilee. Thanks Ruth very much indeed for reading for us.

Why don't we pray before we look at John 4 together. Heavenly Father, thank you very much that your words are indeed words of life.

And as we've been reminded already, they are your words. As the spirit enabled the apostles to record what Jesus did and said. And therefore we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would enable us to understand your words this morning.

And more than that, that you would transform us by what we hear. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Well, for the last two weeks we have been looking at John chapter 4.

[2 : 32] And the issue for us this morning, I think, as we come to the end of John chapter 4, is the issue of how we are responding to Jesus Christ and to the claims he makes, as well as to who he is.

Whether we're looking in on the claims of Jesus or whether we've been Christians for years, or whether we're kind of somewhere in between, so to speak. That is where the spotlight lies as we look at this final section of John chapter 4 this morning.

As we're asked the question, are we responding to Jesus as we ought to? And the reason that is the issue is because we have reached, at the end of John chapter 4, the end of the first section of John's Gospel.

And we see in it two contrasting responses to Jesus. One right response and one wrong response. And in a sense, John, as he writes, is asking us which of those two responses best describes our response to Jesus.

You see, I think one of the misconceptions which we can often have about the writers of the Gospels, indeed perhaps all of the Bible, is that they are a bunch of ignorant first century peasants. But actually, John, as he writes, is writing a very carefully constructed account, a very carefully constructed book.

[3 : 53] We've seen that, many of us, I guess, in our study groups. We've seen the seven signs throughout John's Gospel which act as the hinges, which the whole Gospel hang on.

The first, back in chapter 2, verse 11, back in chapter 2, verses 1 to 11 rather, and John tells us at the end of that sign, in chapter 2, verse 11, this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee and manifested his glory.

And now in today's passage, John chapter 4, verse 54, John writes, this is now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. And in fact, by the very end of the Gospel, when we've had all seven signs recorded for us, what does John write?

Well, I put it there on the outline, on the back of the service sheet. Jesus did many other 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 is writing a carefully arranged, well-ordered, intelligent account of Jesus and his teaching. He is not some sort of ignorant peasant putting together a random collection of memories and thoughts which just happen to pop into his mind.

[5 : 18] I don't know if you ever made a holiday scrapbook when you were young, I still got a couple of mine. And they're just random memories. They're just the things which happen to grasp an 11-year-old or a 15-year-old as we went off on our family holiday for that year.

Things that thrilled me and caught my attention at the time. Well, the Gospel writers, they don't just stick in a healing there and a bit of teaching here at random, rather they are carefully assembled and carefully researched documents.

And so at the end of this first section of John's Gospel, John wants us to ask the question, what do we make of Jesus' claims and his teaching?

Because obviously Christianity is not simply a creed to recite or a set of ideas to be debated or a collection of values to share, but it is supremely a person to respond to.

I don't know about you, I think it's easy to forget that. It's easy to forget that even as Christians. We can sort of reduce the Christian life simply to what we do. But actually at its heart, it is about Jesus Christ and it's easy, I think, to lose sight of that and to stop asking the question, am I responding to Jesus as I ought to?

[6 : 39] So first of all, on the outline, Jesus Christ, the life giver, and then after that, we'll think about our responses to Jesus. First of all then, Jesus, the life giver. Now have a look again at verses 46 to 54 and I wonder if you can begin to feel the crisis which threatens to envelop this family.

Here is an important man, verse 46, he's a royal official and his son is ill. It's far worse than that, isn't it?

Because of what we're told in verse 47. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son. For he was at the point of death.

Here is a man then for whom wealth and privilege have failed, as they always do fail, to protect his home from the ravages of disease and ultimately from death.

Yes, we can take out house insurance and car insurance, we can try to control our lives in so many ways, can't we? But the one thing we cannot control is death. And I wonder if you can begin to imagine the wretched future that this man faces.

[7 : 59] What a dreadful thing to witness the death of a son. An American called Nicholas Waltersdorf lost his son, Eric, in a crime accident a number of years ago and he went on to describe his feelings in a book called Lament for a Son.

And this is an extract from it. Gone from the face of the earth. I wait for a group of students across the street and suddenly think he's not there.

I go to a ball game and find myself singling out the 25-year-olds. None of them is he. In all the crowds and streets and rooms and churches and schools and libraries and gatherings of friends in the world.

On all the mountains I will not find him. Only his absence and silence. Was there a letter from Eric today? When did Eric say he would call?

Now only silence, absence and silence. When we gather now there is always someone missing. When we're all together we are not together.

[9 : 07] It is the neverness that is so painful. Never again to be here with us. Never to sit with us at table. Never to travel with us. Never to laugh with us. Never to cry with us.

Never to embrace us as he leaves for school. Never to see his brothers or sisters marry. All the rest of our lives we must live without him.

And it is the prospect of that imminent experience which drives this royal official to Jesus. As he says in verse 49, Sir, come down before my child dies.

And here is the astonishing thing and it is astonishing, isn't it? As Jesus replies, verse 50, Go, your son will live. Now, is that not an extraordinary thing to say?

To say that you either have to have the pastoral sensitivity of a rampaging elephant or you have to be totally confident that what you say is going to happen.

[10:14] And it does happen. Verse 50, The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. And as he was going down his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.

So he asked them the hour when he began to get better and they said to him, Yesterday, at the seventh hour the fever left him. The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, Your son will live.

Is that not extraordinary that Jesus Christ can heal the dying at a distance of a day's travel, say, 30 miles or whatever it would have been.

But while this sign is here partly to make us sit up and think and ask the question, well, who could do something like this but God alone? It's primarily here to show us that Jesus can do everything he's been promising he can do in the last couple of chapters of John's Gospel.

Because as we've looked at John chapters 2 and 4 over the last couple of months, we've seen they are at their heart about the life that Jesus brings. Remember how back in chapter 2 he cleared the temple making the point that he was the one with authority to judge the world.

[11:31] But then in chapter 3 how he commanded Nicodemus, that upright religious establishment man to be born again so that he might not face the judgments, so that he might have eternal life.

Indeed, how Jesus said so that he would die so that we will have eternal life if we believe in him.

Chapter 3 verse 14 he said as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

And then more recently in John chapter 4 we've seen, haven't we, again the theme of life continues as Jesus says in chapter 4 verse 14 to the woman at the well. Whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never be thirsty again.

The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. But that raises the question, doesn't it?

How do I know that Jesus has the power to do what he says he will do? It's a question we can ask as a sceptic but it's also a question which we can ask as a believer. as we become more aware of our own mortality and more aware of our own frailness when death looks so very final can I really trust Jesus when he speaks of eternal life?

[13:01] Well perhaps we can begin to see why John ends this first section of his gospel with Jesus giving life to someone who without him would die.

because surely it is to demonstrate that just as people can give just as Jesus can give people physical life in this world so also he can give life in the next world just as he has promised he will do.

Yes Jesus says the judgment is coming that's what we face when we die and the way Jesus describes hell makes the language of Nicholas Walderstorff's lament for a son look very timid but the life that Jesus offers eternal life life in God's kingdom makes the life that he gives to this young boy pale into insignificance as well.

And remember that all this happens in Jesus' absence he is a days travelling away but because the words of Jesus are powerful and effective why they are powerful and effective wherever he speaks to them.

Now I take it that is a particular encouragement to us isn't it living in 2007 without the physical presence of Jesus because if Jesus hasn't yet returned we will also die without the physical presence of Jesus.

[14:34] But Jesus does not have to be physically present to raise the dead. And I take it it's why Christians can have such confidence it's why we can have such confidence in the face of death because Jesus is the life giver.

He does not have to be physically present to deal with the problem of death. So Jesus Christ the life giver.

But secondly let's consider our responses to that because John records for us two responses to Jesus in this passage which I take it are meant to be sort of typical responses if you like typical of people's general responses to Jesus.

And as such they help us to understand both how others may respond to Jesus but also they help us to ask the question am I responding to Jesus as I ought to be.

Let's look at them. First of all the first one I label false belief the second one true belief. First of all then false belief. Because the most surprising thing is what John tells us here about unbelief.

[15 : 44] I wonder if you noticed back in verses 43 to 44 there's something not quite right as Jesus returns home to Galilee. Have a look at verse 43. After the two days Jesus departed for Galilee but Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in his own town.

In other words when Jesus goes back home he is not going to be honoured. But then in verse 45 it's rather odd isn't it because in verse 45 we're told that people seem to welcome Jesus which shows doesn't it that it's one thing to welcome Jesus but it's another thing to honour Jesus and to truly recognise Jesus.

for who he really is. In fact this is not the first time it happens. Turn back a page to the end of John chapter 2 and have a look at verses 23 and 24.

Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man for he himself knew what was in man.

Again it's rather odd isn't it that at one level they seem to believe in Jesus but as far as Jesus is concerned it's clearly not the right sort of belief and so Jesus we are told will not entrust himself to them.

[17 : 22] You see the point is this that twice in this first section of John's Gospel we are shown there is such a thing as spurious belief a belief that superficially may look like the real thing but actually in reality is unbelief.

And we get Jesus' own diagnosis of that in chapter 4 verse 48 as he says unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe. Now it's important to see that verse 48 is in the plural Jesus is not being sort of callous to the particular plight of this man who's come to him whose son is dying rather he's referring to the Galileans to the Galilean people en masse as a whole group.

It seems that perhaps Jesus required a bit of a reputation as a showman perhaps as a sort of miracle worker doing some great tricks tricks. But Jesus is never interested specifically in doing tricks like that of that kind because in the New Testament the miracles of Jesus always point to something else.

It's why you'll see here in John's Gospel they are called signs. And like any sign they point away from themselves to something else. Imagine the next Saturday you decide to drive up to Cambridge for the day.

In fact you feel like a day out. The weather forecast is promising. So you jump in the car you pack a picnic and you drive up the M11. Now it'd be rather odd wouldn't it if halfway up the M11 you saw one of those big blue motorway signposts saying Cambridge 25 miles and you thought hooray we've arrived.

[19 : 08] So you just park on the hard shoulder you all get out of the car and you sort of set up your picnic and you start having your picnic on the side of the motorway. I imagine you'd have a fairly grisly day. Because of course signs, the whole point of a sign is they point away from themselves to something else.

And that's exactly what the signs, the miracles, do in John's Gospel. They point us to something about Jesus and his teaching. But it's in this kind of rather limited and very inadequate sense of kind of stopping at the signposts, so to speak, having your picnic there, that these Galileans seem to welcome Jesus in verse 45.

life. And I think, in a funny kind of way, it's possible for us to do the same thing. Perhaps to think, or perhaps we know people who think, well, you know, I believe in Jesus, if only he showed himself to me in some dramatic way, in some obvious way, like a miracle, for example.

But it's just worth asking what that would be. And perhaps, for the sake of arguing all the stars lining up in the sky in the shape of a cross, or something like that, would that really persuade us?

Besides, if everyone got a miracle every time they asked for one, I take it they would cease to be miraculous, they'd be very everyday. Or perhaps we can echo this kind of sentiment by asking questions like, well, if God really exists, why doesn't he heal my illness?

[20 : 41] Or why is my friend going through such a difficult time? And it's possible to be so focused on our problems, that actually we never really see the point of Jesus' miracles and signs, and what it is they point to, in this case, the fact that Jesus has power and can give eternal life.

Or it's possible to be caught up in Jesus' signs in other ways, perhaps by asking how the miracles happened in the first place, rather than actually thinking, well, what is it that the miracles point to? Because, of course, if Jesus really is God, then we shouldn't be surprised by the miracles. And I guess many of us, again, will know people like that. But I think even as Christians, we're not necessarily immune from this kind of thinking.

So we're on the lookout for signs to bolster our faith. Which is not to say, of course, that God cannot do signs, but such a dependence upon signs can be purely self-serving.

So it says, don't ask for more signs, but believe the ones we have here, in the Gospels, in these eyewitness accounts of Jesus, and believe what it is they point to.

[22 : 00] This sign is wonderful, isn't it? It points, this sign of the healing of the boy, it shows that Jesus is the life giver. He's claimed that he is the one who give eternal life, and the physical giving of life, shows that that claim is true.

It points to the reality that he is the one who can give life in the next world. So, false belief.

So let's think about true belief. Because as well as painting for us a portrait of false belief, John also paints a portrait, a wonderful portrait of what true belief, of what genuine belief in Jesus looks like. Now, if you were here last week, we saw, didn't we, the crowds flocking to Jesus. Verse 39, they believe first of all because of this woman's testimony, and then they believe on the evidence of Jesus' own teaching.

Have a look at verse 40. So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believe because of his word. They said to the woman, it's no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the saviour of the world.

[23 : 17] And the evidence of their belief there is they want to hear more of the words of Jesus as they declare that he is indeed the saviour of the world. Now, I imagine that many of us here today have come to believe in Jesus in a very similar way to that.

In fact, my own first recollection of real Christianity from coming onto my own radar, so to speak, was through a Christian friend who rather liked this woman, explained what Jesus had done for them, and later invited me to come and hear the teaching of Jesus for myself.

And then in today's passage, John gives us another portrait of genuine belief. You see, what does this man do when he hears the word of Jesus? Why?

verse 50, what are we told? The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him. And then again, verse 53, what are we told?

The father knew that that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, your son will live. And he himself believed, and in all his household. It's a wonderful climax, isn't it?

[24 : 25] His whole household, I wonder if you can imagine that, his whole household, putting their belief in Jesus. Yes, the son has been healed of his sickness, but actually more importantly, the man and his family have been healed of their unbelief.

And as such, he is an example for us of what true belief really looks like. What does the man do? He takes Jesus at his words.

True belief believes the words of Jesus and takes Jesus at his word and holds on to his teaching. It's not blind faith, but it does believe the words of Jesus, even when as for this man, life is about as bad as it gets.

Let me ask, is your faith like that? Or do you give up when life gets tough? True faith believes in Jesus and holds on to his teaching.

it does so when it's inconvenient, when it makes life complicated. And again, is our faith like that? Or do we simply opt for a comfortable life?

[25 : 44] And true faith will hold on to the words of Jesus, even when the result is that our lives will have to change. Perhaps long-established ambitions will have to go.

All lifestyles and habits will have to change. Well, again, is your faith like that? Or do you simply ignore Jesus' teaching at that point?

And true faith holds on to Jesus' words regardless of what others think. Again, is your faith like that? Or are you quick to sort of retreat in that situation?

Yes, there is such a thing as false belief. belief. And I guess it's fair to say that in our culture where there is at one level a sort of increase in spirituality, then we can expect to see more and more people claiming to have a belief in Jesus.

But the issue will always be, is it genuine? And if it's not, then we'll need to know how to address it and to help people to come to genuine belief.

[26 : 52] But there is also such a thing as genuine belief in the first place. belief in Jesus which not only believes the signs, but then goes on to grasp the significance of the signs, the significance of Jesus' teaching.

Belief which takes Jesus at his word, which grows in understanding, which is shaped by Jesus and his teaching.

Belief which doesn't simply believe and that's it, but which goes on to believe and keep on believing and holding on to Jesus' teaching and being shaped by it.

Why don't I pray and then we'll take questions if people have any questions. Let's pray together.

Jesus said to him, go, your son will live.

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for this wonderful demonstration that just as the Lord Jesus can give physical life in this world, so he can give eternal life, life with you in the next.

[28 : 12] Thank you very much that this sign has been recorded for us who live 2,000 years after the event. And we pray heavenly Father that for ourselves and our own response to Jesus would be like this man, that we would take Jesus at his word and that our lives would be shaped by it.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.