

An Executive Decision

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[0 : 00] David Rutten, would you... This passage is from John chapter 4.

It continues on after the story of last week, which was from John chapter 4 as well, which was the story of the woman at the well. And the title I've given to it is an executive decision.

The reason for that will, I guess, become apparent a little later on. If you're looking at the text, the sort of setting of this is that this is the second of the seven signs from which the Gospel of John is called the Book of Signs.

And this is the second. The first sign was the changing of the water into wine. And this becomes the second.

The first sign led to the disciples believing in Jesus. This, again, leads to a household coming to believe in Jesus. And the function of Wednesday at noon is, if you believe in Jesus, to encourage you in that belief, and if you don't, to introduce you to that belief in the hope that you will come to believe.

[1 : 46] So that's what we're about. The text reads that after two days he departed into Galilee, that he was going to believe in the Bible, that he was going to believe in the Bible, that he was going to believe in the Bible.

And that's simply because as we get to know one another a little better, we come to despise one another a little more.

And so that most of the people we know are shot, because we know so much about them we can't stand them any longer. And we have to move on to a constant supply of new friends about whom we know nothing in order to be, in a sense, anyway, socially with it.

Because once you get to know people, they're dead. And so that's the problem that Jesus puts before them as he goes into Galilee, particularly to Nazareth, where, as you know, on one occasion after he had been invited to preach in the local synagogue on a Sabbath morning, they took him out and tried to put him to death, which doesn't happen to visiting preachers, but I guess most of them don't deserve that, unfortunately.

But that's... So Jesus is going to the place where there is opposition to...

[3 : 14] Because, you see, one of the things that happens in our world is that it's hard to know something without despising it. I don't know how many of you saw that CBC documentary on the Jesus seminar last night on the journal.

I would be grateful if you'd put up your hand, because otherwise it's going to be totally irrelevant to most of you. Well, there it was. I'll tell you about it. There's a seminar that meets down in California someplace, and it's made up entirely of what I would call reputable biblical scholars who are examining the words of Jesus and trying to use their considerable academic and intelligent prowess to determine whether, in fact, Jesus ever said those words.

And they come to some shocking conclusions, so that I almost phoned Tom at 11 o'clock last night to tell him I wouldn't be speaking today. But as the night went on and I contemplated it through the long lonely hours of the night, I find it very exciting to speak to you today, simply because of thinking that through, how it happens.

We happen to live in a society which if anybody believes in something, the officials have to come along and tell you it's not true.

Have you ever tried to persuade your doctor how valuable vitamin C is? And what does he do? You know. Because he's the expert.

[4 : 51] He knows. You just happened to have recovered from a cold. But he knows that it doesn't work. So that all the experts in our society tend to be the people who, if they find you believing in something, they will demonstrate to you that it's not true.

If you find that you trust in something, they will tell you with assurance that it will let you down. They will tell you that we in our generation and at this moment, and standing as we are at the pinnacle of culture and education for the whole of the universe, we can tell you that everything that everybody's ever believed is probably wrong.

I read the Vancouver magazine yesterday, and I found that the enlightened members of the community who deal with the aboriginal people are saying to them, back to your peace pipes, back to your prayer sticks, back to your long houses, back to your dancing, back to your drumming, back to those things which make you move spiritually.

Because that's who you are as a people, and that's what it derives from. And then they turn around and they say to the culture they belong to, it's a bunch of... So, you know, there's a strange contradiction there.

That we are, in a sense, a kind of society that tries to destroy all that we are based on. And that goes on happening.

[6 : 22] We tend to... The truth of the matter is, and I have talked to people who are in the business of New Testament scholarship, and the fact is that there is such a peculiar reality now that New Testament scholarship is almost entirely in the hands of people who don't believe the New Testament.

And that's not an accident. That's because you lose any kind of scientific objectivity if you happen to believe in it. You would only destroy yourself by studying it and having to believe in it at the same time.

And that has not only affected the New Testament, that I think has affected all the study of all the humanities in all the universities. If you are studying some kind of historical texts, and you make the mistake of being enthralled by them or believing in them, or led to some conclusions about life from them, then you have lost your objectivity and your credibility as a scholar is in question, and so you can no longer continue.

Now this happens in our society all the time. And so that what happened on the CBC last night was in fact not very shocking at all.

It's just the way our society is working at the moment. And I think it's a kind of self-devastating society.

[7 : 59] The basis of education in our society is that you have to get people into the position where you can destroy their faith before they can learn anything.

And the cost of having done that for a few generations is becoming increasingly apparent. So it's interesting that Jesus recognized this reality by going to Galilee and to Nazareth, the very place where people didn't believe in him.

Because there was a sense in which it's those people that have to be brought up against the reality of the Gospel. Our society provides great areas within the structure of our society where believing is not required, where you are never confronted with the necessity of believing.

And what churches do is generally preach to the converted. And the result of that is that the converted tend to become jaundiced about the whole thing, and they don't really see the enormous significance of the Gospel.

I'm reading currently a wonderful little biography by a converted Hindu who goes back and tells the whole story of his life and how he came to put his faith in Jesus Christ.

[9 : 31] Well, if you want to find out what your faith is all about as a Christian, go to somebody from another religion, another race, another social or ethnic background, and say, do you mind if I try and explain to you what Christian faith is?

I'm not making any commitment to make you change, but let me try and explain. And you ask me the questions you think Christianity has to answer. You'd find it a wonderful exercise just in establishing your own faith.

It's not an easy thing to do, but it's an important thing to do. Well, when you go back now to Cana in Galilee and look at the setting of this particular event, which is in the story today, you find that this is the place where the town was perhaps still alive, with the remembrance of that wedding party when there was vastly more wine than all the people there could drink.

And I would like, without any authority whatever to suggest, that people were able to drink copious amounts of wine because there was lots there and there was no hangover.

What a delight. There they were. And people were wondering, where did this come from?

[10 : 51] How did this happen? And rumors were going around. Well, somebody said they had seven water pots there and it all turned to one. But nobody knew for sure where it had come from or how it happened.

And so people were contemplating the idea that something quite unusual had happened, which in fact we are told led the disciples to believe in Jesus. Whether it led anybody else to do anything but talk about it, we don't know.

And from the reception Jesus seems to have got there, not very many of them did believe. And so when he got to Cana in Galilee, he was approached by what William Temple in his commentary called one of the king's officers, a man who was a man who was of high military standing, of high social standing.

He was a man who desperately wanted to get in touch with Jesus. Though he didn't live in Cana, he lived up in Capernaum. And he had to travel some distance to get to Cana.

And the reason he went there was because Jesus' reputation in Capernaum had led him to believe that in the desperate plight he was in at the moment, that Jesus was the only man that could make a difference.

[12 : 07] It was a very long shot. But he headed for Cana in order to explain to Jesus what had taken place. Because this was his existential moment.

From his position as an officer in the king's court, from his social and military standing in the community, he now was a beggar.

Because it says in the text, he begged Jesus to come and heal his son. And, you know, I looked at...

The Manchester Guardian doesn't usually produce pictures, but they did last week, I think. Kurdish children fleeing from Iraq and Saddam, Hussein's forces.

And you can see the agony written on the faces of children and his mother. This is what I think of as a kind of existential moment. And the great thing about existential moments is that they come to all of us.

[13 : 09] It doesn't matter how poor you are or how rich you are, how famous you are or how much respected you are. We all come to this kind of existential moment in our lives.

It's there. And it's there for all of us. The New Testament feels sorry for people who are wealthy because they have perhaps fewer existential moments.

But they don't... They don't escape them. We all have them. The moment when you... You know, the day when you're told you're fired.

I mean, it may have been done much more euphemistically than that. But when you get by yourself, you know that's what's happened. You're through. You're finished. The day when you recognize that your marriage has failed.

And though you might blame the other person, the reality of the failure is there no matter who's to blame. And you recognize that.

[14 : 14] One person was telling me the other day when I said... I spoke to him and said, you're looking a little thin. He says, well, I've come to that time in my life when it has been announced to me what my terminal disease is.

You know, it's a long way off, but I know what it is. And that's an existential moment for all of us. I remember when I was young and vigorous and in my 30s and a...

A life insurance salesman came to see me. Apologies for this, but I... And he went through my life insurance and decided I needed something and told me that what he would really like me to buy into was a 20-year term policy.

Told me all the advantages of it. And grudgingly and obstinately and all those other things that you do, I finally said, okay, go ahead. So we went ahead. And a month later I got a notice from an insurance company saying, you're not eligible for insurance.

Oh. That was a kind of existential moment, you know. I had no idea of that until that happened. And all of us run into those moments.

[15 : 27] Now people say, well, you shouldn't turn to God at a moment like that. Well, if you don't turn to God at a moment like that, when will you turn to God? That's when you really begin to comprehend the nature and the fragility of your own existence.

And that's when you ask the deep questions about the meaning of your own life. And here was this officer from the king's court who, facing his dying son, found the whole of his life was right there in front of him.

And he badly needed some source of power outside of himself. There had to be something beyond himself. And that's what led him from Capernaum. I know of a brilliant young doctor at the children's hospital who, within the last year, watched his son go day after day and almost week after week in the grips of a disease which was beyond anything that he or anybody else in the hospital could do.

Except to wait. Except to wait. And to watch. And to expect any night to get a phone call in the night saying, it's over. And he sat through that for a long time.

Until one day, in fact, the child began to recover. But that experience, that existential moment for him, brought him up against some reality, which I think now are the dominant realities in his life in terms of his faith.

[17 : 11] And so that's what happened to this man. And Jesus, and this is how they understand it, because it sounds strange that when a man comes and make a request like that, Jesus turns and says, unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.

And it's thought that he was talking to the Galileans, who were being very entertained by Christ's presence and what he was doing and the stories that went around about him and the intrigue that built up around him.

They were interested in all of that and they wanted more. And Jesus said, unless you see signs and wonders, you won't believe. And it's then that the whole heart of the man is poured out before Christ as he begs for his help and says to him, come down ere my child die.

And, and I guess, I guess we all need to come to a place like that. And it was then that Jesus made the executive decision.

And that is, he said to him, go, your child lives. Now, the significance of an executive decision is that if you deal with anybody but the boss, so to speak, you get to run around.

[18 : 44] Because nobody else has the authority to make the decision, you know. And even if they were to make the decision, they know that they couldn't implement it. And so most of us live in a world where decisions aren't made simply because we are under somebody else's control and authority and so on.

Parking lot attendants come to mind. They frustrate me. They frustrate me. Oh, and I, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do. And I run into a lot of people like that.

And I, I'd love to tell you more about them. But I, what you need is somebody who has the ability to make a decision and the ability to implement the decision.

And that's a real decision. And Jesus, in response to this man, makes the decision and says, go, your son lives.

And, uh, so the man did a very simple thing. The kind of thing which in all humility, because I think you will think this ridiculous, so I won't.

[20 : 01] The simple thing that he did was to do what Jesus said. He went. And, uh, for many people, I want to tell you, that has begun, has been the beginning of their faith journey.

They simply took Jesus at his word and did it. You know, there may have been, I mean, this fellow was in no mood to argue. He was desperate for some word that he could take hold of and do it in his existential moment.

This is what he did. He believed. He went and did what Jesus told him to do. And that's been the beginning for a lot of people.

Uh, and, uh, and he responded to it. Uh, the next thing that he did, uh, was when he met the servants from his house who came and met him.

And by now it was the next day on his journey back to Capernaum. And, uh, and they said, uh, they said to him, your son is living.

[21 : 16] And he said, when did it happen? And they said, about the seventh hour. And he knew that that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, go, your son lives.

Now there is something highly confidential about this, I think. Because that wouldn't necessarily prove anything to anybody.

You know, if you went to a hospital and said, the reason recovery started at that moment was because somebody over here was praying. They, I mean, they, they're not allowed to make the connection.

They might say, well, I'm glad you can make the connection, but I can't, you know. Uh, this miracle happened over here because somebody said something over here. How do you make the connection?

You know, well, the connection was very real for the father of that child. He made the connection. And, uh, a lot of other people could sit back and say, well, I, I'm not prepared to make that connection.

[22 : 24] There could have been a whole lot of other circumstances around it. It could have been a coincidence. And we're not, you know, there's no way that you can picture in your mind how Jesus in Cana can say, go, your son lives.

And many miles away in Capernaum, a child lying in a sick bed begins to recover. You can't, nobody can make that connection. And I think that's what, to us pragmatic materialists in our world, that's very hard for us.

How that would happen. How that word of Jesus would have that effect. And yet, uh, it did have the effect then. And, uh, I guess it's, it's the faith of Christians that it still has that effect.

That, that the word of Jesus is, is, is able to accomplish what he says. And that to live as a disciple of Jesus is to accept that, that that's, that's the way the world works.

And that's why it's important not to let anything he says, anything he speaks drop to the ground. Well, the story concludes by saying, uh, that, uh, he believed and his household, they, they all, uh, came to believe because of that.

[23 : 46] And, uh, this was the second sign that Jesus did, uh, when he came from Judea to Galilee. Uh, can I, can I tell you how I think it works?

It's just in a, if you can take your own sort of existential moment, whatever it is, you, you fill in the details, you see.

Now, uh, that's, that's what happens to you. It happens to you in the circumstances of your life.

It may be a prolonged moment. It may be an agonizingly long moment. Or it may be just, in a sense, a moment in time.

But it's, it's the place, it's the kind of mountain top in your experience, from which you see things that you've never seen before, and understood things that you've never understood before, and are able to articulate things that you've never articulated before.

[24 : 51] You know, you can imagine how, what Jesus' reputation was in the court of the king, generally, of King Herod. But there was one man there who wasn't prepared to go along with that, because in his own life there was a tragedy happening before his eyes, and he knew no one to turn to.

And he had to turn to, to the only one that he could ever think would be able to meet that situation, and that person was Christ. And that's, that's why, you know, you have the encounter between God's existential moment, which is, which is Christ on the cross.

You see, this is, this is in a sense, God in our history, God in time. God fully revealing and identifying himself in that existential moment.

So that that is, the transcendent God of all time and of all space, he has his existential moment, while you in the course of your life have your existential moment.

And when it was in this story, what happened is this man, with the desperately ill son, confronts this man, Jesus Christ. And out of that comes faith.

[26 : 24] And it didn't require a church, it didn't require a Bible, it didn't require baptism, it didn't require anything. It was just that happened.

When those two things, the other things help and reinforce and structure and institutionalize the thing. But without this moment, there's, there isn't faith.

And that's, that's the moment we need to live in. That's why, you know, the, the whole of our life should be marked by a continuing confrontation with God's existential moment in Christ, in order that we can understand ourselves and who we are, in order that he might speak to us, and that we might come to believe in him.

Let me pray. God, thank you for the dramatic simplicity of this story. And thank you that it's not hard for any of us to read it and identify very deeply with it.

And, and in that, to find the grace simply to believe and to obey.

[27 : 41] God, thank you for the time we are, in that belief and obedience. And in that belief and obedience, to find ourselves as we find you.

Help each one of us in this. Because this moment, in a sense, belongs to each one of us in the personal dimensions of our own lives. We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.