

LIFE IN HIS NAME

SIGNS

John 4:43-54

We will be in John Chapter 4:43 going to the end of the chapter. I would like to pray and then share God's word. Father, we come to this passage of scripture and I ask for the help of your Holy Spirit to preach it, for all of us to receive it, to understand it, that we would be able to respond in faith. Lord, teach us today from your word, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

John Chapter 4, verses 43-54:

After the two days he departed for Galilee. (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor 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. And at Capernaum 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 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. 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." And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

I have a friend who is a Division I college baseball coach. Many years ago he had an assistant coach who had a little girl named Anna. Anna was less than two years old when she began to have seizures in her crib. She had these violent seizures and would draw up into a fetal position. These seizures became frequent and virtually unbroken. They took Anna to the doctor and after a number of tests they diagnosed that she had a very serious syndrome that could not be healed and was fatal. It was devastating, as you can imagine, for this young assistant baseball coach.

So my friend, who was a leader at his local church, said, “Hey, would you and your wife feel comfortable bringing Anna over to our church and letting us pray for her?” As you can imagine, they were desperate and said, “That would be great. Thank you for your care.” They brought little Anna to the church and went up into one of the upstairs rooms. Some of the elders were there and they did something that’s described in a book of the bible – James, Chapter 5. They took some oil and anointed this little girl. They placed their hands on her and they prayed for her.

The mother of Anna would later testify that she had never seen anything like this. She had grown up in a denomination where that was completely unheard of, even though it was in the bible. She was not very comfortable with the practice, but again, she just was desperate for the health of her little girl. Nothing dramatic in the moment happened. There was no evidence that God had done anything, and they left.

Now remember, this is an assistant coach. His head coach had invited him to bring Anna to be prayed for. The head coach, my friend, went out shortly thereafter on a date with his wife. It was her birthday - December 4. He remembers the date exactly, as he recalls the story to me. He took his wife out on a date, and as he remembers it, it was not a very happy occasion because they were so concerned for little Anna. As was his practice on his wife’s birthday, December 4, he gave her a CD of Christmas songs to celebrate her birthday. It was their little tradition. He gave her the CD, they enjoyed dinner and then they went from there to the hospital to visit Anna.

When they arrived at the hospital they were told by the staff that Anna was no longer there, and that the family had left. Of course, they wanted to know the details. Was Anna okay? Had she passed away? What had taken place? The hospital said they weren’t allowed to give them any details, but if they hurried they might catch them -- they just left.

So, down they go to the parking lot and they find little Anna with her parents and they hear this story. For no explainable reason, the seizures had completely stopped. The monitor, which was recording the activity, was now recording normal brain function. The doctors had no way of explaining what was taking place. One nurse said to Anna’s parents, “This is a miracle. God has touched your little girl. Accept this and go forward.” A doctor said to her parents, “Don’t leave. You are just going to take her home. The seizures will continue. They will not stop. This doesn’t happen. You are wasting your time. Stay here.” They checked out and left with Anna. Today, Anna is a college-age young woman and she has never had another seizure.

Yeah - it's a wonderful, true account. We have a similar account in today's passage of a desperate father and a son who is about to die. He comes to Jesus. He travels some 20 or 25 miles from Capernaum to Cana, seeking Jesus' help for his son. This passage teaches us about faith. Remember, John calls miracles "signs" because they direct us to something more significant, something greater. They direct us to Jesus. He tells us later in the book of John that their purpose is that we might believe in Jesus and live -- that we might believe in Jesus Christ and be saved and have eternal life.

In this particular case, John takes this occasion and explains the details because he wants to teach us about faith and about a specific aspect of faith - how faith connects and relates to the topic of miracles. We are going to look today at three types of faith that are displayed in this passage and how properly understood, supernatural events in our lives should lead us to a deeper and greater faith in Christ. Those three types of faith are Frantic Faith, Faulty Faith, and Full Faith. We are going to look at those three types of faith. Let's start with the first.

I. Frantic Faith.

This is the obvious first type of faith exhibited here through the example of the father. He comes to Jesus. His son is ill. He is about to die, and he asks Jesus to come down and heal him. In verse 48, after the request there is a strange occurrence. Jesus' response to him is: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

Imagine the scene. The father comes and says, "Will you come down and heal my son?" Jesus says, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." It appears to be some form of rebuke, which we will come back to in a later point. But look at the father's response in verse 49. He is a Roman official. If you have been with us through the study of John, we have seen a Jewish leader, we have seen a Samaritan woman -- we have seen these individuals coming to faith in Christ -- and now we see what is probably a Gentile official.

This theme now is getting larger and larger -- that Jesus is the savior of the world. All types of people are welcomed into Jesus to believe and to receive life. When this Roman official hears "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe," he responds how you would probably respond if you were desperate in the moment: "Sir, come down before my child dies." He is a desperate man. He needs God to move in this particular situation. Then we see a key, key truth in

verse 50. Jesus says, “Go; your son will live,” and we are told that the man believed the word of Jesus. That’s faith. That’s faith in his desperate moment of need.

This is interesting, because sometimes I meet individuals who will tell me, “You know, when I am in a crisis, I don’t want to turn to God, because it’s hypocritical.” I say, “Why is it hypocritical?” “Well, because I haven’t been serving God all along and it doesn’t feel right. Like, if I haven’t done what God wants in the past, then I get in trouble, then I go to God.” I understand that. There appears to be, in a certain way, a kind of integrity in that. But what it really reveals is that when we speak like that, we don’t understand what faith really is, and we don’t understand our need. What happens to us in a moment of crisis is that we get in touch with our real spiritual condition.

You see, there are these moments that come along: sickness, death, tragedy, financial problems. It comes to us in all sorts of forms, right? And in that moment, we do everything we know to do. We exhaust all of our possibilities and we are confronting in that moment our desperate need. Well, that in reality is just our normal condition. We just aren’t in touch with it all the time. The message of the bible is not, “If you have your act together God will give you a miracle.” If you had your act together, you wouldn’t need a miracle, really, probably, right? No, the message of the bible is: “You can’t work your way to the miracle you need. You have to receive it by mercy. You have to receive it by grace.”

John Newton married the love of his life. He saw her for the first time when she was 13, and he waited until they could get married. When they got married, her brother, his brother-in-law, was an unbeliever. He had the joy of having John Newton as a brother-in-law -- former slave trader, dramatically saved, author of Amazing Grace. And John Newton wrote him letters to persuade him to come to Christ.

Some of you, if you are here and you are not a Christian, maybe a family member dragged you here this morning. You know what it’s like to have a Christian friend or family member who just doesn’t stop telling you about Jesus. Imagine having John Newton as that brother-in-law.

On one specific occasion, John Catlett, the brother-in-law, had a near death experience. Newton wrote him and said, “Listen, it would just be foolish for you on this particular occasion to not turn to God and seek God.” He said, “You have had a reprieve, and as surely as you got up from your sick bed, one day you are going to be on a death bed, and you are going to face God. It would be completely foolish for you to ignore this occasion. Furthermore, it’s going to be worse for you

because I am giving you all these warnings, and one day God is going to hold you accountable for them.”

It really is unwise for us in the frantic moments of desperation to not turn to the Lord in belief. If we took time, many individuals here would say, “That’s how I came to the Lord initially.” We should notice here before we leave the first point, that it’s not just a simple, “I’m desperate. I don’t know if anyone but God can help me. I’m turning to him. And -- boom - I get the answer.”

It wasn’t that simple for this man. You remember what he asks, right? He asks for Jesus to come with him. It’s a long journey back to Capernaum. Jesus tells him, “Go, your son is healed.” Now, he is faced with leaving the one person that he had hope in, whom he will probably never see again, to go back on this journey, to take Jesus at his word.

God never works in the way we expect him to. It’s almost a rule, isn’t it? He stretches us in this way where we are put in a place of faith, trust, and acting on that faith and trust. We are told the man believed, and he left. He went away trusting Christ. So number one: Frantic Faith.

II. Faulty Faith.

Let’s go back for a moment to verse 48, where the man comes and makes this request of Jesus, and he receives what appears to be a rebuke. “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” In the English we don’t really catch the impact of what’s going on here, because the “you” here is a plural “you.”

My roots are South Georgia. My parents were both born in South Georgia. I wasn’t born there, but I am a Southerner by family association. In the South, if we had been translating the Greek New Testament, we would have said, “y’all.” We would have said, “Unless y’all see signs and wonders y’all will not believe,” because we knew that the English language was deficient in this manner and we have improved on it, y’all meaning “you all.” “You” can be singular or plural, and in this case it’s plural.

Jesus is not really addressing the man. There is a sense in which the truth applies to the man, but he is addressing the crowd. To understand that context, we go back to the beginning of our

passage. We go back to verse 43. These two or three verses transition for us what happened in Samaria.

Remember what happened in Samaria? He meets a woman. She has been married five times. She is living with a man that she is not married to. She has been in this cycle of relationships. Jesus supernaturally tells her her own story without her telling him, and she gets saved. She becomes a follower of Jesus, then she goes back and gets the whole town to come out and follow Jesus.

As the transition out of Samaria takes place, we are told that when Jesus gets ready to depart, John remembers a proverb that Jesus had said. The proverb is that a prophet is without honor in his own hometown. This is strange, but it's setting up for us the context of what takes place in the miracle, and the rebuke in verse 48 that we just read.

What's really curious about it is that Jesus has done no miracles that were obvious and physical, and yet the whole town believes in him. Now he is getting ready to go up north to Galilee and he says, "A prophet has no honor in his own hometown." He is from Galilee. He is going home. And John brings this proverb up.

What's really curious is that the very next verse says that the people from Galilee are happy to see him. They "honor him." Look at verse 45. "So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him..." Doesn't that seem like a contradiction to the proverb? You are saying, "Okay, John, why did you choose this moment -- verse 44 of Chapter 4 -- to tell us that Jesus had said this proverb, and then tell us that the Galileans welcomed him?"

Well, let's read on. "...having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast." Verse 46: "So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine." Two important references here geographically, okay? I know, you are probably not thinking about the Middle East, but you've got Judea in the South where Jerusalem is, Samaria, and Galilee. Jesus is traveling north. He has gone through Samaria and he is going up to Galilee.

Previously in Galilee he performed his first sign, which was some of your favorites - he turned water into wine. That was supposed to be funny. But, many of them had gone to the Passover in Jerusalem. They had been with Jesus at the Passover and had seen the miracles that he did.

Do you see what John is doing? He is saying that Jesus said that a prophet is without honor in his own hometown. They are happy to see him, but they are happy to see him because of the miracles that he does. There is an irony. It's very subtle, but very clear.

Now put it all together. Jesus goes to Samaria, a people hated by the Israelites, and they believed hated by God. Extreme racial tension. Jesus accepts this woman. A man wasn't even supposed to have talked to a Samaritan or a woman. He breaks through all these barriers, receives her, saves her and her whole town, without even having to do a real miracle, as we would say. Then he comes to his own people and he says that a prophet, in this case the prophet, has no honor in his own hometown. There is just this familiar spirit, "Aw, we know you. You grew up here." No honor. A man comes in desperate need: "Would you heal my son?" And the first thing Jesus says is, "Unless you see signs and wonders you don't believe."

Here is what's being portrayed for us. There is a tension when we talk about miracles. On the one hand, miracles are very intentional and purposeful, and they are there to point us to Jesus. They are "signs" - that's the word that John uses. For example, in the very next chapter, Chapter 5, verse 36, we hear these words of Jesus, "For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me." Let me read that again: "For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me." Jesus is saying this: "What I do, what you see me do -- the miracles and everything I do -- is not just random. It's what the Father is telling me to do, showing me to do. It's intentional. It's purposeful. It's to reveal me and to reveal the Father." So, miracles have a very positive function in the economy of God - to lead us to Christ.

In the very next chapter, which will be chapter 6 if you are counting, the very opposite happens. Jesus performs a fantastic miracle, where with very little food he feeds thousands and thousands of people. Do you remember the story of the feeding of the 5000? And do you remember what happens after he does this miracle? The people say to him, "Jesus, give us a sign." Not only do they say, "Give us a sign," they go further and they say, "Moses gave our forefathers manna from heaven. What sign will you give us so that we can believe?"

Here is what Faulty Faith is. There is Frantic Faith - I'm desperate, heal my son. There is Faulty Faith, which says to God, "Give me a miracle and prove that you are God." It wants to make the miracle the object of faith rather than God himself. Did you get that? When you make a miracle

the object of your faith, the problem is that you will then talk yourself out of it later, and it can't be God in your life.

You will say, "Well, little Anna was misdiagnosed to start with." Or, "Some freakish combination of medicine was given to her and the doctors don't even know it, but there's a medical explanation that one day will be discovered." We have an amazing capacity to explain away the very clear activity of God that's going on right in front of us all the time. As soon as we say: "Alright. If God will do 'this,' I believe it." If God will do 'this,' then we will add to 'this' before it's over, because the only object of faith that can really sustain faith is God himself.

This tension of understanding that miracles have a purpose in directing us to Christ, directing us to God, must be counterbalanced by a warning to not make those our main goal or the object of our faith.

Let's go to the third kind of faith, which is Full Faith.

III. Full Faith.

The man receives his miracle for his son. Verse 51: "As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering." Critical moment in his life. He has cried out to God for healing for his son. How will he now respond? As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. In verse 52 he asks them the hour when he began to get better. When did he start to recover? They said at the seventh hour, at about one o'clock in the afternoon yesterday the fever left him. "The father knew that 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..."

His cry of despair and his trial have now led him to a faith that's growing, a fuller faith, where he is placing his faith in Christ and trusting in him. His faith has moved beyond the moment of need to trust in Jesus himself, and this is really the idea of fuller faith.

Think about it for a moment. You see both Frantic Faith and Full or Fuller Faith in the bible. You see where someone comes to Jesus. They have a need, and Jesus responds to them according to their faith. He provokes, he elicits faith for them to receive the blessing that they need in that moment. Because it's not as mature as full faith, I don't want you to hear me saying it's not important.

But think about this. Some of you have a history of being in other churches. It took you a while to find this great church, right? But some of you have been in churches where faith was measured solely by what you can get from God. And if you don't get it from God, it's because you don't have faith. It's not a very good teaching. It takes an element of truth and it distorts it.

But, some of you have been in a church where it's not what you can get from God, it's how strong you are to accept whatever God does. There are churches that never really pray for a miracle. They never pray for sick people. At least, they never pray for sick people when they are around sick people. They will pray for sick people if they are not there, but they won't go there and say, "God, really touch them in this moment." That stretches your faith, right? You are expecting God to move in that moment. Are you with me? Some of you have been in that kind of church.

Well, I think that that's the fuller, more mature expression, but it's not either/or according to scripture. It's both. I am going to give you three words to help you apply this teaching, and to think about Full Faith. Have I lost you? Are you with me? I don't think you would tell me "no" if that were the case. Three words: Suffering, Separation, and Surrender.

- 1) The first word is suffering. Suffering plays an intrinsic role in one's spiritual journey. You see, when the man comes to Jesus and asks for a miracle and then Jesus gives this rebuke, the man is unfazed. He is staying on task. "I have a son who needs healing." The reason is that because of his suffering, he is not interested in a theological discussion. I don't mean that in a disrespectful way from him toward Jesus. He is desperate. In other words, his suffering has moved his faith from the theoretical to the personal.

That's what happens when you and I suffer. When you and I go through trial and difficulty, now our faith is being tested. Now we see what our faith really is. And there is a pulling away from the material and the temporal toward the eternal. Are you with me?

One of the real weaknesses of a church or a teaching that only believes God to give you what you want is that it doesn't have a legitimate doctrine of suffering. It doesn't understand that God uses suffering, that God ordains it, that it's purposeful in your life, and that apart from it, it's very unlikely that you will grow.

Some of you are like, "No, don't say that! I don't want to suffer! No! Now I am thinking about all the bad things that could happen. Just stop it!" Do you know why you do that?

Would you like to know why you do that? Is it because, like me, you say, “I’m right here, and God has the whole world revolving around me.” So God is doing everything in all of your lives because he is doing one thing in mine. Really? Do you believe you are that important? That 7 billion people are now ordering their lives just so you can suffer? No, of course not. You know that. God calls us to a point where you can hear him saying, “Listen, I have a masterful plan for the whole universe. You are a part of it. And I am working everything together for good in your life.”

I think that the wisdom of this first point will become a little clearer as we move past it, but suffering is the first, and it’s very simple. Without suffering, very few of us will move to a fuller, more mature faith.

- 2) The second word is Separation. When suffering takes place, our only response is desperate faith, frantic faith. But in the moment and after the moment, a separation begins to take place, and we will either move toward a fuller faith or toward faulty faith. We will either respond with an attitude that says, “God, you prove to me that you are God,” or “God, I am going to trust you in this moment. I am going to trust you in desperation.” It really doesn’t matter. This separation will take place regardless of whether or not you get the miracle you are asking God for. On the one hand, if you get the miracle, you can move toward faulty faith by just demanding another one, or explaining away the miracle you just got.

I remember visiting a man 20+ years ago. As a pedestrian he had been hit by a car – it was completely amazing that he was alive. He had never been active or committed in church, but he was associated with the church. He was on what he thought would be his deathbed, and God was doing a miracle. He told me, “I just cried out to God. I said, ‘God, spare my life, I will serve you.’” Six months later I hardly ever saw him again.

There is a place where God meets us in that moment and something critical happens. We either move on to trust in God or we move away from God. We can say, “God, give me another miracle.” Or we can say, “The God who spared me – I want to know him. I want more than just the miracle I got in this moment. I want more than what comes from his hand. I want to hold his hand.”

Or you cannot get the miracle. I know that’s not the option any of us really want. In that, we can say, “Well, I am angry with God. I don’t know why God took this.” Or we can say

that this loss and disappointment shows me the futility of putting all my hope in this world. It shows me the emptiness of trusting even in the most precious things of this world, that I really need something greater to put my hope in, someone greater, and that is God. At the very least, it has the potential to show us that we don't want to go through this world without God.

Do you see that God uses crisis and trials, and that there is a departure that takes place in those? If you listen to your story and the stories of others, you will hear it over and over. You will find people who are trapped in the past because they can't seem to find an explanation that makes sense of why they went through what they went through. Then you will see other people who have been through a much worse past, but they can't stop praising God for how he has used that and what they have overcome! It's the difference between, at the heart of it, finding the grace to trust God.

There is paradoxical nature to Christianity. Have you heard me say that before? You see it so clearly in the gospel of John. If you are here and saying, "Brian, I don't know Jesus. I am a mess. I would be embarrassed to tell you some of the things I have done." I would say, "Well, yeah, likewise." Jesus welcomes you. He welcomes you. He loves you. There is a paradox. He also challenges you and confronts you to repent of your sin and trust in him and receive forgiveness and follow him as the Lord of your life.

We see that in this man's life. The man comes in desperate need and he welcomes him. He is a Gentile. He is a Roman official at the very least. He is hated by the Jews because of his association with Rome. Jesus welcomes him, helps him, but also challenges him. The man responds to the challenge and moves forward to a Fuller Faith. There is a Separation.

- 3) The third word is Surrender. Full Faith brings us to a place of surrendering to God's will. We believe God for a miracle, but ultimately we are ready to say, "God, whatever you ordain, I have learned to trust you. I can't imagine not receiving what I am asking for. I am believing that I am going to receive it, but I am going to trust you."

Of course, the ultimate example of this is Jesus in the garden, praying that there would be another way, but ultimately saying, "Not my will, but your will be done." There is a place where surrender moves us forward. I don't want you to get the idea that these are just neat

and tidy phases of our journey with the Lord. They are cyclical. We move through life learning to trust God more deeply.

When Beth and I were early in our marriage and really going through some difficult times, there was a point where legitimately it looked like we weren't going to make it. The "D" word came up, the "divorce" word. I know some of you have been through that, and some of you know the heartache of it. It was particularly troubling for me, because I am a pastor. It's not really good for pastors to go through divorce. I remember praying to God saying, "God, if this happens, I am done. All my training, all my preparation, everything I feel like you have called me to do is over."

That reveals a couple of things to you, doesn't it? First of all, here I am - my marriage is falling apart and I am thinking about, "This is really going to be inconvenient. I've got a whole new career shift coming up." But of course, it was more than a career for me. I thought it was a calling. Some of you have heard my testimony before in this area, but I want to tell you that as near as I can explain it, God spoke so clearly to my heart and said, "Brian, your marriage is not your God. I am your God, and no matter what happens to you, if you will serve me, you will know joy and peace."

There is a place where we struggle, we wrestle with it. I don't want to pretend for a moment that it's just a check that we can check off, but we come to a place where we say, "Okay. God is still God no matter what. I am praying for this, but I am surrendering to you. I am going to trust you."

The interesting thing is -- husbands, when you do that you become a much better husband. You are much more attractive than the husband who says, "I can't go on if you leave me." That's the truth. And shortly thereafter my wife found me irresistible. It has only increased to now embarrassing proportions, which is nothing short of the grace of God.

There is a certain logic to faith. The term "blind faith" can be very misleading. There is a way that faith thinks. It goes something like this: God, who is perfect in his wisdom, unlimited in his love and power, has set his love upon me, as a sinner. When I deserved his judgment, he put it upon his Son in my place. And because he is infinite and I am not, because his ways are completely beyond me, I can trust him in all things. So I will ask him

for what seems to be best, seems to be obvious, but I will live my life learning to surrender and yield to what he ultimately chooses.

Palm Sunday is a great illustration of that, isn't it? As was explained earlier in the reading from John Piper, the words were right. They hailed him as King, but they were anticipating someone who would come in and overthrow Rome, someone who would deal with the externals, all of the externals. In a sense, that, on a grander scale, is Frantic Faith. It's not wrong to pray for God to move and to bring liberty in every area of life, but God has a greater agenda for your life. God's agenda for you is eternity. It's the forgiveness of your sin, it's the payment of the judgment that you deserve, that he places upon Christ, in your place. It's a new heart. It's not more money, though that may happen or may not, it's the freedom from the love of money.

My friend the baseball coach, the head coach, was standing there in the parking lot, seeing this little girl. She is not in the fetal position. She is not having seizures. Doctors can't explain it. They say goodbye. He gets in the car with his wife. He has given her a Christmas CD. They put it in and they hear these words: "Go tell it on the mountain." A miracle has taken place. The miracle points to Jesus. Trust in him and then go and tell.

Let's pray.