

## The Healing of the Official's Son

The Gospel of John is special because its main purpose is to introduce us to Jesus and give us a vivid awareness of his character and person. At the close of the first conclusion to this Gospel, Chapter 20, we see this desire and purpose very clearly, *"Jesus performed 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 Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* Jesus has some very interesting interactions with many people as he traveled during his ministry. Here is another sign that will share even more about the one we call Jesus the Christ as the giver of life.

This story is recorded in John's Gospel - Chapter 4:46-54 - following another transitional passage in 4:43-45. Before we discuss this story I would ask you to read it first in a Bible translation that is one that you use and find meaningful.

According to verse 54, the last verse in this story, *"this was the second miracle that Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee"* - referring to the transitional passage prior to the story we are now considering. It followed his interaction with the Samaritan Woman and the many who came from her village to meet and listen to Jesus. The transitional passage (43-45) tells us that he spent 2 days with the people in Samaria and then returned to Galilee. Many of the people welcomed him because they had seen all he did at a recent festival in Jerusalem while they were there too. It was back to Cana in Galilee where he had replenished the wedding feast with wine from water to continue their celebration. It was in this context that *"An officer in the royal service was there, whose son was lying ill at Capernaum"*. When he heard that Jesus was in the neighborhood he sought him out to beg him to go to Capernaum and heal his son who was reported as being sick unto death. (verse 48) *"Jesus said to him, 'Will none of you ever believe without seeing signs and portents?'"* But the officer pleaded with him to take care of this desperate problem before it was too late. With that Jesus simply told him to return home because your son will not die. Hearing this the officer started for home because he believes what Jesus had said to him.

The story continues with the news that, on his way home, his servants met him with the news that his son was going to live. The Officer asked his servants the approximate time they noticed this change in the life status of his son. They reported that it was about one o'clock on the previous afternoon when the fever left his son. The conclusion to this story is given in verse 53, *"The father realized that this was the time at which Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live,' and he and all his household became believers."*

So what do you suppose they believed?

In verse 48 we read that Jesus said, "Will none of you ever believe without seeing signs and portents?" Other translations say, "None of you will ever believe unless you see miracles and wonders". Remember that this "officer in the royal service" or a "government official" is to let us know that he was probably not a Jew but a Gentile, which was a word used to speak of all others who were not Jews. Here was a non Jew making a request of Jesus to enable his child to recover from an illness unto death and that Gentiles, and many people, are impressed by those who can

perform "miracles and wonders". As we noted in the first paragraph, this and other stories have been written to help his disciples, including us, to believe in and follow Jesus. From the opening introduction of the Oxford Study Bible notes we are also reminded that, in John's Gospel, "A 'sign' is an act of power by Jesus which points to a truth inaccessible to sight and touch, but apprehensible by faith." In the verse closing this story, verse 54 of the Oxford Study translation, "This was the second sign which Jesus performed after coming from Judaea into Galilee". The word "sign", in fact, may be especially appropriate for our understanding today.

In our understanding of miracle this may, in fact, not qualify as a miracle. The dictionary defines, "miracle - a marvellous event manifesting a supernatural act of a divine agent - any amazing or wonderful occurrence". The official's son in this story is very sick with a fever and, in the time of Jesus, might have often led to death. They did not have antibiotics or efficient cures for some of life's most common ailments. The official had the right to be very concerned about his son and, knowing what he knew and heard about Jesus, was hopeful that his boy could be prevented from dying. The dictionary defines the word supernatural as, "not existing in nature or subject to explanation according to natural laws - supernatural forces and events and beings collectively" I am reminded here that this Gospel tells us that Jesus said, *"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."* (John 14:12) We are fortunate to live in times when such greater "things" are seen rather often.

### **Signs in Biblical Times:**

In biblical time a variety of "signs" were prevalent. One of the first stories that comes to my mind is the story of Moses and Aaron in Egypt when they appeared before Pharaoh and all his magicians (Exodus 7:10-13), *"So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said."* In so many occasions throughout Biblical times it was not only done necessarily in the name of God, but by many who did not claim that connection. In many people's minds however, like Pharaoh, none of the signs seemed to convince him to change his mind and release the Hebrew people from slavery.

In the Christian Scriptures, the Acts of the Apostles, we read about several people who were Sorcerers. The first one mentioned in chapter 8 was Simon, who was said to have amazed all the people of Samaria. Many who heard Philip preach the good news about the Kingdom of God and of Jesus were baptized and, we are told, even Simon believed and was baptized because he was captivated when witnessing the signs and miracles through the Apostles. When Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed on people by the laying on of their hands he offered money to the Apostles if they would give him the same power to enable people to receive the Holy Spirit. Peter rebuked him for thinking that God's gifts were for sale. Chapter 13 tells us that when Paul and Barnabas went to the Island of Cyprus they ran into a Jewish sorcerer named Barjesus who posed as a prophet. Barjesus opposed them and tried to turn the governor away from faith in God and Jesus. Paul rebuked him as a son of the devil insisting he stop perverting the message of

God. Paul told him he would become blind and not see the sun for days. Darkness did come upon him and he had to be led by someone in order to move about. When the governor saw this he was deeply impressed and was happy to receive what he learned from Paul and Barnabas about Jesus and the Realm of God.

As we continue, we might pause to inquire about the definition of a "Sign" as we understand it today, [*sign - "structure displaying a board on which advertisements can be posted, or - a perceptible indication of something not immediately apparent (as a visible clue that something has happened), or - any nonverbal action or gesture that encodes a message"*]. These various statements give us an overview of the use of the word sign that provides the obviously broad and general understanding we have today. In this story we can also see that healing need not be a miracle but a sign of the return to good health and wellness. Those with a literal interpretation of scripture consider this story, along with others in the Gospel of John, as one of at least seven miracles. [*literal - limited to the explicit meaning of a word or text (a literal translation), literal - avoiding embellishment or exaggeration (used for emphasis)(it's the literal truth)*]. Words need not be literal in order to convey truth as truth may also be conveyed in a parable or fictional story. After all, Jesus was one who used parables to help those who heard him come to understand the profound message he had from God. This is why literal interpretations of scripture can cause problems, especially in today's understanding of truth, [*truth - "the quality of being near to the true value, conformity to reality or actuality"*]. Signs may also be the best way to share these thoughtful and deep mysteries as we tell our stories today.

### **So what do I see about Jesus in this Sign of Jesus healing the official's son?**

**Integrity:** [*"moral soundness, an undivided or unbroken completeness or totality with nothing wanting"*] Jesus was totally attentive to the creation and humanity, especially to those who were disenfranchised or in need. The author of the Gospel of John introduces Jesus as the Word or Verb that came into the world to speak and act for God in order to announce and establish the Realm of God with special intention to living into that abundance. From the beginning to the end of his ministry, I believe that the integrity of Jesus was seldom in question. It was this characteristic that probably enabled the Official, who wanted Jesus to go home with him to heal his son, to take his word for it that he could return knowing that his son would be healed.

**Concern:** Jesus had a deep concern for all people and this is seen in this story when he comments to the Official, "Will none of you ever believe unless you see signs and wonders". I do not see this as a put down as much as a concern for how and why the official develops his belief. Outward and visible signs are outward manifestations of something that is much deeper. Jesus was sincerely concerned that one's impetus for life comes from the very core and depth of one's being. Signs that may cause wonder and awe seldom cause the kind of effective change that makes for a lasting difference or for a solid foundation on which to build a life. This may be the reason why Jesus did not go home with him to enable the healing. Fortunately, as we are told, "the man believed Jesus' word and went". Jesus' concern was not to impress but to effectively change the way we think and act. Our concern should be to realize that we need to change our minds and hearts to actually change our lives and live with the passion of God's love for us and for all people.

**Compassion:** [*"the humane quality of understanding the suffering of others and wanting to do something about it, a deep awareness of and sympathy for another's suffering"*] Jesus came to emphatically proclaim the compassion of God for all people, in all places, for all time. This was the main theme of God's Realm or Kingdom as it was known in that time when Kings were the primary rulers. Kings, in fact, were not usually concerned with the needs of people in their realms nor did they excel in compassion to many others than themselves. When you consider this was only the second of about seven signs noted in this Gospel it appears that, in Cana at least, Jesus was recognized as being compassionate. Clearly, when the official heard that Jesus was back in town, he went to Jesus to ask for healing for his son who was about to die.

**Available:** Jesus was not only available, obtainable and accessible but ready and willing to serve others. He did not stay in one place but traveled about and around the territory of his homeland to make sure that the message of God's Realm and loving concern for everyone was made known and experienced. This story also tells me that Jesus was efficient in the use of his time regarding his availability in that he did not go with the official to his home in order to accomplish his concern and compassion. The sign of his ministry did not require the drama of his presence because God's presence, through whom such grace was given, was present everywhere. Jesus simply said, "Go", because the healing was already done by the word of Jesus and the power of God which was soon confirmed by one of the official's servants who met him on the way home to tell him the good news.

Like all good stories there are many things we can learn and infer from this second one told to us in John's Gospel. Stories are wonderful ways of conveying truth because they are a short account of a happening, with or without establishing details. Jesus often taught by telling a parable which is a short moral story to convey a truth of his religious message. The author of John's Gospel shares these stories with us by writing down the many incidents in the life of Jesus that remained many decades later. As a follower of Jesus he wanted to encourage future followers to remain faithful by imitating and continuing in this same manner of discipleship. This Gospel, as did earlier Gospels like Mark and Matthew, reminds us that we also are not in this world to be served but to serve others in like manner as did Jesus. We too are to serve with integrity, concern, compassion and availability. We, like the official in this story, are told to "Go" and experience and share the wonders of God's love to make God's Realm a reality today.