The Gospel of John: Believing is Seeing  
John 4:43-54  

As we resume our journey through John’s Gospel, we return to John 4 where Jesus has been ministering in the region of Samaria. Please stand and let us read what comes next in John 4:43-54.

43 After the two days he departed for Galilee. 44 (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) 45 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.

46 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. 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. 48 So Jesus said to him, “Unless you[1] see signs and wonders you will not believe.” 49 The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” 50 Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.

51 As he was going down, his servants[2] met him and told him that his son was recovering. 52 So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, “Ye[3]sterday at the seventh hour[4] the fever left him.” 53 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. 54 This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

My message this morning is entitled, Believing is Seeing, and it falls under three subheadings: 1) Low Expectations; 2) A Request and a Test; and 3) Believing is Seeing.

I. Low Expectations

Our text begins with some transitional information in vss. 43-45, 43 After the two days he departed for Galilee. 44 (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.) 45 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.

If you recall, back at the end of chapter 3, Jesus and His disciples were formerly in the Judean countryside not far from Jerusalem baptizing people. However, when Jesus discovers that His ministry is being interpreted as competition against John the Baptist, He decides to relocate north, to the region of Galilee. However, on His journey north, He has an amazing encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in the region of Samaria. The woman is transformed by her encounter with Jesus, and we learned last week that “many Samaritans from that town believed due to the woman’s testimony.” The new believers invite Jesus to stay with them for two days, and John reports, “many more believed because of his word.”

So, as we pick up the story this morning, John reports that after the two days spent in Samaria, Jesus resumes his trip to Galilee.

Church, I have to comment on this for one moment. If you recall from last week, many of the Samaritans in Sychar loved Jesus! They concluded He was the Savior of the World. Oodles of people were becoming believers. In other words, the ministry was flourishing. Now…if I encountered that kind of ministry success, I would be inclined to settle down right there, build a house, build a church, and retire a hero. But that’s not what Jesus does. Jesus models for all Christian workers the kind of obedience that is required of us all: we go where we are sent by the Father. Sometimes that means we must be willing to leave a successful context of ministry in order to go someplace where we anticipate no honor and little response to our message.
Sometimes it means remaining in a ministry context that is painful and slow-going. Where we minister is not driven by results—it is determined by the call of our Lord, amen?

Now, the fact that Jesus is leaving behind a prospering environment to dutifully enter a hostile environment is confirmed by John’s parenthetical note in vs. 44, stating, “For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.” I think the point here is that Jesus has very low expectations as they make their way up to Galilee…and for good reason. We learn in the other gospel accounts that Jesus was previously disrespected and even harassed when He visited his hometown of Nazareth. For example, in Mark 6 we read: He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. 4 And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” 5 And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And he marveled because of their unbelief.

In Luke 4 we learn that not only did the people dishonor Jesus in Nazareth, they became so indignant that they tried to push Him off a cliff!

Church, ministry is full of this kind of irony. The people we think would be the most open to the Gospel, perhaps those who are most familiar with Jesus to some degree, are often those who are the most resistant to His Lordship; while those we think might be outright hostile to Jesus and the Gospel are often the most eager to receive Him! The Samaritans were a perfect example of this irony…they were remarkably open to receiving Jesus, even though the disciples would have considered the Samaritans the least likely people in the whole world to accept Jesus.

So, just as Jesus and the disciples began their journey into Samaria with low expectations, they once again journey north into Galilee with low expectations. However, once again, God has a surprise awaiting them as they cross into Galilee. In vs. 45 John reports, “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.”

Apparently, a prophet has no honor in his hometown UNLESS the hometown people see the prophet at work in Jerusalem! Though Jesus receives a celebrity-like welcome by the Galileans, He quickly perceives that these people are not so much interested in getting to know Him as they are fascinated to see Him perform more signs and wonders. More on that in a minute.

Let me conclude this part of my message with a reminder: we really never know what lies around the next bend when it comes to our mission of being the light of Christ in a hurting culture. You might look at your calendar tomorrow morning and have very low expectations that your day will amount to much in terms of reaching people for Christ. However, learn from Jesus: the places we go and the people we approach with the lowest expectations are often the places where God accomplishes His perfect will! Our job is to pray and to go where God leads us…our Father will work out the rest, amen?

Speaking of going on mission, we are all on mission every day where we live, work, play, and learn, but some of you will be called by God to go on a short-term mission trip outside of our
normal context this year. We have trips to multiple locations, and the time is now to pray and make a commitment to join a mission team. If you go, I promise the experience will change your life forever. So, pray and then jump on our website to register for a 2020 mission trip (show slide with website link).

II. A Request and a Test

Now, let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 46:

46 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. 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. 48 So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

John tells us that Jesus arrives once again in Cana, where He had turned water into wine at a family wedding. However, before we hear of anything going on in Cana, Jesus is approached by a man from Capernaum who is asking him to visit his dying son.

Let me first provide some geographical context (show map https://www.jesus-story.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Nazareth-to-Cana-and-Capernaum.jpg). Jesus is in Cana, and this man who now stands before Him travelled 18 miles or so to personally ask Jesus for assistance. That may not seem like a big deal; but, given who this man is…it’s a big deal!

John records that the man from Capernaum was a basilikos…which means it’s time for the Geek with the Greek. The Greek word basilikos is based off the root word basilias, which means “king.” The ESV translates the word to mean “an official,” but that word probably doesn’t capture the weightiness of this man’s position. This is “the king’s man,” which suggests that he is a royal official, likely on the staff of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch, who ruled over Galilee in the first century. Given that Herod was appointed by Rome, it is likely that this “official” is also more Roman than Jewish. Now…this information is important, and I’ll tell you why later. But at the start, we should marvel at this scene as John describes it.

Here we have a man of high station. He is wealthy, he has servants, he has power and position; but, as we all know, such privilege does not spare us or our children from disease and disaster. Cancer has no respect for your age or your net worth; neither does tragedy…as we have all witnessed following the tragic death of Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gigi. All humans and all families are vulnerable to disease and disaster. So, when this wealthy official discerns that his little boy is failing fast, he exhausts every possible option to make his son well. We should assume that every doctor and every cure has been tried in the region of Galilee, and perhaps even doctors from other countries have been shipped in to treat the official’s son…but to no avail. The royal official is at his wit’s end…he is desperate. Like any decent father, he will do whatever it takes to save his son. We can be sure that whatever this man’s faith happened to be, he was crying out to the gods or his god…begging that his son be spared.

But then one day, the desperate father hears about this man Jesus from the village called Nazareth, not so far from Capernaum. He hears stories of how this man has healed people; how he turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana; and how He recently performed signs and wonders while in Jerusalem. All over town, people are whispering about this man Jesus. So,
when word comes that Jesus has returned to the region of Galilee, to the city of Cana, the man
mounts his horse and immediately heads out to see if he can find this miracle worker. Notice
that the wealthy official does not send one of his servants; nor does he send his wife. He ups and
departs with no notice. No doubt his absence would jeopardize his job…and even his life if
Herod discovers where he went. But the official has thrown all caution to the wind. Jesus is his
last and only hope for saving his son.

When the official arrives in town, it doesn’t take long to find Jesus. The huge crowd
surrounding the young man is hard to miss. At once the official discovers that he is just one of
many who are asking for the attention of this man. Dozens of parents have brought their sick
children; others have brought their family members who were blind and crippled; and still others
brought their loved ones bound in chains due to the horrible demonic influence that made them a
danger to themselves and others. The rest of the crowd was comprised of sight-seers…people
who were eager to see a magic trick. Everyone in that crowd wanted something from
Jesus…and the official now discovers that he is no exception. The text tells us that he was
asking Jesus to come down and heal his son. The Greek verb for “asked” is in the imperfect
tense, indicating that the official was repeatedly asking, perhaps shouting, begging for Jesus to
heal his son. We can hear him crying out over and over again, “Sir, please come to my
home…please come with me to Capernaum and heal my son…he is at the very point of death!
Please sir, there is no time to waste! Please come down to Capernaum…please come heal my
son before it is too late! Please sir!”

At some point, over the din of the crowd, Jesus is drawn to the voice and the desperation of this
loving father. The man speaks with a Roman accent…his clothes make him stick out like a sore
thumb…he is clearly a well-educated, wealthy official of the Roman government. Jesus cannot
help but notice that this official has humbled himself and thrown in with the rabble. He has
asked for no special consideration. He is quite willing to beg for help, all for the sake of his
dying son.

Church, there are very few parents and families who have not begged God for a miracle. This
has been going on ever since the fall of creation. Jesus knows that most of the people in this
crowd, and so many more people even to this day, will withhold their allegiance to God pending
the outcome of their requests. In other words, they will only believe if Jesus heals their children.
They will only believe if Jesus casts out their demons. They will only believe if he restores their
sight.

I suspect even now Jesus is thinking, “When will these people learn that God is not beholden to
the orders of men, no matter how noble their motives? As Jesus just taught the Samaritan
woman, God is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. God is looking for
those who will have faith and believe in Him for who He is and what He has done…not pending
on “what He has done for me lately.”

So, Jesus looks lovingly at the official, and in the presence of all the people, He tests the official,
saying loudly, “Unless you all see signs and wonders, you all will not believe.” The word “you”
is twice used in the plural, so we know Jesus is speaking to the official as well as the crowds who
surround him. Jesus is speaking the truth. We know that many in Jerusalem “believed in his
name” after they had seen signs and wonders, but that Jesus would not entrust Himself to them.
Why? Because people who “believe” due to signs and wonders inevitably fall away when their
wishes are not met, or when they go long periods without seeing signs and wonders. Any cursory
study of the Israelites in the wilderness will validate this observation. No matter how many
times God provided miraculously for the Israelites, they would withhold their faith once again
when they faced hardships. For the Israelites...as is often true for many people...seeing was
believing. And if they didn’t see some miraculous sign and wonder upon request, they ceased to
believe in God and His goodness.

Friends, here we observe one of the leading causes of atheism. I have lost count of the people
I’ve met, the books I’ve read, and the stories I’ve heard of those who walked away from God
when their request for a miracle was not granted. So many people conclude that God is not
loving, or that God does not exist or that God is not worthy of their allegiance because God did
not grant their wish. Now...these stories subtly suggest that, had God granted their request,
these people would be believers and faithful followers of the one true God. But that is simply
not true. History tells us that these people would only be believers until the occasion of their next
wish...and once again, should God not accommodate their request, their faith would fail.
Atheism is the inevitable result of those who hold God hostage to their requests and desired
outcomes.

Now...how is the official going to respond? Perhaps he will try to bargain with Jesus...just like
all of have done at one time or another, right? “Get me out of this fix, God, and I’ll never miss
another Sunday!” Perhaps the official will sweeten the pot, offer a large, “anonymous” love
offering should Jesus make the trip to Capernaum? Or perhaps he could threaten Jesus with a
bogus lawsuit if Jesus refuses to come?

The man is being tested by Jesus. This gentle rebuke will provide Jesus the opportunity to see
his heart.

Now, we can quickly observe that the man has no inclination to threaten Jesus, or to bribe him.
He is not thinking of his rank or his entitlement. The official is not trying to manipulate Jesus.
He is simply a desperate father who is thinking only of his dying son. So he cries out with all
that is within him in vs. 49, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Note that the desperate
official assumes Jesus must lay hands on his son, or pray over his son, or give his little boy some
kind of special medicine, so his request is, “Come down to Capernaum.” That’s how we pray,
right? We instruct God...we give him our plan...we tell Him what to do...? Listen to how Jesus
responds in vs. 50, “Go; your son will live.” What did you see? Here’s how it looks to me:
Jesus says “no” to the man’s directives; but he says “yes” to the cry of the father’s heart. Jesus
will not do what the man asked; but He will accomplish what needs to be done on His own
terms. The official was telling Jesus what to do; Jesus turns the table and now orders the official
to Go...and to believe the promise that Jesus just made.

Now, again, the man has a choice to make. Jesus is refusing to come to Capernaum, and clearly
this conversation is over. Jesus has no doubt turned His attention to others asking for help, and
the official is left with what to do next.
So what are the man’s options at this point? 1) He can argue with Jesus and complain about false advertising! 2) He can ask for some kind of a sign to assure him that his boy is going to be OK. 3) He can try to negotiate with Jesus or threaten Jesus to get him to Capernaum. 4) He can go look for a good doctor in Cana who might be willing to come down to Capernaum and provide a second opinion; or 5) he can take Jesus at His Word, and make his way home, believing that Jesus will make good on His promise…that somehow his boy will live…just as He said.

So let’s see how the official responds in vs. 50:
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 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.

Church, this is what true, biblical faith looks like. We believe what our Lord has said; and we act on it. We don’t wait to see the anticipated result that we have demanded of God. We don’t wait on the results to determine whether or not we think God is trustworthy. Faith means that we take God at His word because God is God; and then we act as though every word that He has spoken is true…regardless of what we see or do not see.

This man has been deeply affected by Jesus. No doubt there was something about the countenance of Jesus that the official recognized as true Kingship. Jesus didn’t wear a crown; His clothes were that of a peasant; His entourage consisted of the sick, blind, lame and demon possessed…not to mention a few stinky fisherman. Nevertheless, a leader knows a leader…and this official recognizes in Jesus a leader who is not to be trifled with. There is something about the authority of Jesus that settles the matter immediately in the man’s heart: if Jesus said it, I believe it…and I will act as though it is already so.

Once again we see the most unlikely person coming to faith in Jesus because of His Word, just as we saw many come to believe in Jesus as the Savior of the World because of His Word. And not unlike the Samaritan story, this one man’s experience in believing Jesus translates to many others coming to believe in Jesus.

By the way…there’s an interesting note here that we should consider. In Luke 8:3 we meet Joanna, who is the wife of Chuza, one of Herod’s officials. Are you doing the math with me? Think about it. Chuza and Joanna’s son is dying. Chuza risks his reputation, his job, and maybe his life to track down this man Jesus whom they have only heard about. Chuza returns the next day, full of faith in what Jesus said, and finds his wife Joanna, poured out like a puddle on the floor…their boy has been saved by the Word of Jesus, and she is beside herself. Can you imagine the loyalty and the generosity of this grateful mother some time later when she hears Jesus say, “Follow me!”…? Many scholars suspect that this story in John 4 is the Chuza and Joanna story…and isn’t that the way God works? Through Jesus, God grants the plea of a desperate father for his dying son, knowing full well it is His will that the grateful mother would later travel with Jesus and support His itinerant ministry?

Can you see it? Church, can you see it? Ahh…you can only see it if you believe, right?
Friends, do you want to have an intimate, dynamic relationship with Jesus? Then here’s the secret: stop holding Jesus hostage with your requests and your preferred outcomes, and instead—take Him at His Word. Act upon everything He said as true and trustworthy. And here’s what you’ll discover: believing is the perquisite to seeing.

**III. Believing is Seeing**

As children of Enlightenment philosophies and Darwinian evolution, we have all been taught the adage: seeing is believing. Empiricism is our epistemology…in other words, we have been taught that the only reliable means of knowing anything is with our senses, particularly that which we can see with our eyes or touch with our hands. So many in our western culture have bought into this philosophy, particularly our college students. I hear this notion frequently quoted, and I’m sure you do as well. Now…the whole concept of “seeing is believing” crumbles under inspection…you know that, right? We believe in justice, but we can’t see justice. We believe in love, but we can’t see love. We believe in history, but we can’t see history. We believe music is beautiful, and some songs are more beautiful than others…but we can’t qualify empirically how we would know such things. The great irony of empiricism is that we cannot see or sense why empiricism should be trusted. This epistemological assertion of empiricism is nothing more than an abstract principle, and principles cannot be physically seen or sensed any more than the tooth-fairy herself.

Now, let us also consider that there are many things that we can see which we should certainly NOT believe, right? I can observe politicians smiling and shaking hands at a presidential debate, but I should not believe that they are likely to work well together, right? I see all kinds of statistics and claims from all kinds of “authorities” on the internet; but should I believe all that I see on those websites?

How long will it take a well-intended empiricist to become disillusioned that his eyes cannot be trusted? Alas, our post-modern society has become very disillusioned with empiricism. We don’t trust MOST of what we see these days, right? We are living in the age of skepticism. We doubt the news we read in the paper and the news we see on TV. We doubt the leaders of our country and the leaders of our churches just the same. We even doubt whatever science claims to “know,” since those of us who have lived a few decades suspect the scientists will likely contradict themselves 30 years from now. If we can’t trust our eyes, and we can’t trust the authorities, and we can’t even trust science, what can we trust? Our feelings? God forbid! My feelings lie to me all the time! So how can we ever know who to believe and how to move forward if seeing is NOT believing?

Consider what Jesus says in John 8: If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Truth is the liberation from lies. Truth is the key that unlocks more truth. Truth empowers the mind and creates context for understanding in all fields of study. Truth is what we long for…truth will set us free…but now consider what Jesus says in John 14:6: “I am the Truth…”

What if Truth is a person? What if Truth is personal? You see, if truth is a Person, and truth is Personal…then believing is the key to seeing. Let’s take me, for example. If you want me to
reveal truth to you about who I am, what I’m about, what is important to me, and how to operate my old boat…you will have to develop a relationship with me. Our relationship will begin with some general revelation…like my name, my address, my phone number, and my date of birth. I will share some really basic information with you, and it is my expectation that you will believe me. When I ask you to come over, you’ll come to the address I gave you. When I ask you to call me, you’ll dial the number I provided you. You’ll need to believe what I have said before I will reveal deeper levels of truth. You will need to believe what I have said before you’ll see more of who I am and what I am about. You will need to believe what I have said before I’ll ever let you drive my boat! You see, discovering PERSONAL truth can only happen in relationship. Personal truth is revealed at the discretion of the Person. Call that Person a liar, hold that person hostage to your desired outcome, and you shut down the revelation of truth. But believe that Person, act upon what he has already revealed, and you will come to see the Truth of who that person is.

You see where I’m going? God is a personal God. Jesus became flesh so that we could see just how personal God is. And if we are ever going to see the Truth…if we are going to have enough Truth to discern the untruths…we will need to develop a relationship with Truth Himself. And that begins with believing what He has said…taking the Truth at His Word, and acting upon that Truth.

This is exactly what Jesus said: “If you abide in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Church, believe…and you will see. Jesus is Truth, and we come to see that as we abide in His Word. I challenge you to believe Him and to act upon what He has already said. And over time, you will know the truth…and the truth will set you free.

Let’s pray.