

G. Return to Galilee (4:43-54)

When Jesus and His disciples departed from Jacob's well they accompanied the group of Samaritans back to their city where they stayed for two days. Again, this was a crucially important time for the disciples as they observed their rabbi – the man they were convinced was *Israel's* Messiah – fellowshiping with the Samaritan men and women who'd come to believe in Him through the woman's witness, along with others who came to faith during their brief stay in the town. Other lessons concerning the true nature, purpose and scope of Jesus' messianic calling would follow right up until the time He was taken from them, but this one in Samaria was foundational in that it forced the disciples into a radical rethinking and reorientation.

After the two days Jesus and His disciples left this Samaritan town and continued their journey north into Galilee. John treated Jesus' subsequent ministry in Galilee only very briefly in terms of a general summary (vv. 43-45) followed by his account of a specific episode (vv. 46-54).

1. Regarding verses 43-45, the first thing of note is that this passage has two distinct parts: a statement expressing a key dynamic of Jesus' interaction with His countrymen and John's summary of this particular period of His Galilean ministry. The two parts are clearly related to one another; what is not so evident is how they are related.

- a. The statement in verse 44 is a saying which John had heard Jesus apply to Himself and His ministry in Galilee (cf. Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; also Luke 4:16-30; John 6:41-42). Jesus employed it with respect to His own experiences, but it may have been a common saying in Israel as it spoke to the relationship which all-too-often existed between the nation and her prophets right up to the coming of *the* Prophet (ref. Matthew 23:29-39). But this saying also has universal significance; specifically, *it identifies the effect that familiarity has on perception and credibility*. When persons have a history together, that history cannot help but color the way they perceive and understand one another. This dynamic is exactly the reason Joseph Stalin orchestrated the murder of those who knew him well: He'd carefully crafted his image as an indomitable man (hence his adopted name *Stalin*: "man of steel") and people who knew his weaknesses and failings (even as a child growing up) were a threat to that myth.

Jesus' maxim is universally applicable, and so it applied to His relationships with those close to Him. But, in His case, the maxim also had *prophetic* and *salvation-historical* significance. Jesus had come to His own, but His own did not receive Him (1:11). Moreover, this rejection was a matter of fulfillment (ref. 15:18-25; cf. Psalm 22:11-18, 41:7-9 with John 13:18; Isaiah 53:1-4; etc.) and a critical aspect of God's redemptive design (cf. Acts 1:1-8 and 7:1-8:4 with Romans 9-11). This maxim spoke first to Jesus' interaction with his own family and the people of His community (Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:6-30; John 7:1-9); but more broadly, it applied to His relationship with the nation of Israel to whom He came as one of their own. Indeed, the saying's truth fills the gospel accounts and is central to the conflict between Jesus and the people of Israel (cf. Matthew 21:33-46, 22:1-14; Luke 11:14-32, 13:22-30, 19:28-44; John 8:31ff, 9:1-41, 10:22-39).

- b. John's second statement summarizes this part of Jesus' Galilean ministry after His arrival from Samaria (4:45). The statement recounts His welcomed reception in Galilee, and that is what creates the difficulty between it and verse 44:
- Verse 44 explains Jesus' return to Galilee, which is itself problematic. For John seems to be saying that the reason Jesus returned to His home country was that He had no honor there among His fellow Galileans.
 - But then John went on to explain that the Galileans believed in Him and embraced Him (v. 45), providing an example in the subsequent passage detailing Jesus' healing of a royal official's son (4:46-54).

Scholars and churchmen since the time of the early church fathers have noted the difficulty posed by these three verses and proposed various solutions. One that goes back at least to Origen is that John's noun rendered "own country" refers to one's *fatherland*, or place of origin. In Jesus' case, this was Bethlehem in *Judea*, so that the meaning of verse 44 is that Jesus had no honor in Judea and therefore left to return to Galilee. The obvious problem with this view is that every occurrence of this maxim in the gospel accounts has this noun (*fatherland*) referring to Galilee or, more specifically, to Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, not Judea (ref. again Matthew 13:54-57; Mark 6:1-4; Luke 4:16-24).

Another view that has a certain appeal is grounded in a particular understanding of *honor*. John recorded that Jesus had determined to leave Judea and return to Galilee because He knew the Pharisees were taking note of His disciples' baptizing activity (4:1-3). He was drawing large crowds and accumulating many followers and this was a concern to the religious establishment who increasingly viewed Him as a threat. But in Galilee Jesus was known as the carpenter son of Joseph; He didn't have the "honor" – the recognition and fame – He'd acquired in Judea and so could go about His work without attracting a lot of attention, especially from the ruling class in Jerusalem. So Hendrickson: "*Jesus went to Galilee because here he did not need to fear such honor as would bring him into immediate collision with the Pharisees, creating a premature crisis.*"

This interpretation seems to do justice to the context, but it has a significant weakness, which is that Jesus' Galilean ministry wasn't at all "low profile." It is true that Galilee was a long way from Jerusalem and this allowed for some defusing of the tensions between Him and the Jewish authorities (7:1). But the crowds followed Him in Galilee just as they did in Judea (cf. Matthew 4:23-5:2, 15:29-39; Mark 1:14-2:13; Luke 4:14-37; John 6:1-59; etc.) and the Galilean synagogues had officials who were in contact with Jerusalem and its rulers.

There is another view which suits, not only the immediate context, but also John's larger emphasis on the dynamic of *believing unbelief*. In this case, John inserted the maxim of verse 44, not in contradiction of verse 45, but to highlight the inauthenticity of the Galileans' faith. Note two important points of support:

- 1) The first is the correlation between 4:45 and 2:23-25. John explicitly stated that the Galileans who welcomed Jesus were those who'd witnessed His signs when He was in Jerusalem during the Passover. But in the passage where John recounted that Passover episode, he indicated the spurious nature of the faith that followed from Jesus' miracles (2:24-25). John's point, then, was that Jesus' reception in Galilee (v. 45) reflected a faith tied to His miraculous power, not the truth of *Himself* as the Messiah.
- 2) The second is John's account of the healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54) which follows immediately upon the present context. There John has Jesus using the father's plea as the occasion for rebuking the kind of faith that is grounded in miraculous signs (vv. 47-48).

Again, pseudo-faith is a predominant theme in John's gospel and he, like his three counterparts, recognized the belief which results from observing miraculous signs as a primary form of false faith among the Jews (cf. Matthew 12:38-45, 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 4:16ff; also John 2:13-21, 3:1-3, 6:1-31, 7:1-43, 12:1-38).

2. As noted, the second part of this context contains John's account of a particular miraculous sign which Jesus performed in Galilee. Interestingly, this sign was performed in Cana, thus forming a kind of bookend with the former miracle at the wedding (cf. 4:54 with 2:11). In this way John purposefully connected Jesus' Galilean ministry with miraculous signs, and this is important in view of the dynamic of unbelief among Jesus' Galilean countrymen – unbelief in the face of numerous attesting signs and miracles (cf. Matthew 11:20-24; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30; John 6).

This particular miracle involved the healing of the son of a royal official from the town of Capernaum. John didn't elaborate on this official or his position, but the fact that Herod Antipas was ruler in Galilee at this time suggests that this man was an official in Herod's court (and so another person despised by the Jews; cf. 4:1ff). He may have been a Jew, but it's also possible he was an Idumean (descendent of Esau) like Herod himself. If this was the case, this episode shows further widening of Jesus' ministry, reaching beyond the covenant house of Israel to Abraham's larger family. Moreover, a healing work within Esau's family would itself be a matter of messianic fulfillment. For Yahweh had promised that the restoration of David's house and kingdom would see the ingathering of a remnant of Edom (Esau's heritage) along with the nations (cf. Amos 9:11-15 with Acts 15:13-18). And so, while the official's genealogy is uncertain, what *is* certain is that Jesus granting life out of death to an Edomite (Idumean) would make an important contribution to His self-disclosure and self-authentication as Yahweh's Messiah.

- a. John recorded that this official, who lived in Capernaum, learned that Jesus was in Cana and immediately went to find Him and plead with Him to heal his son who was at the point of death (vv. 46-47). This scenario highlights three things:
 - 1) The first is that the news of Jesus' presence had spread throughout Galilee; this official lived in Capernaum and yet knew that Jesus was in Cana.

- 2) Secondly, this man believed that Jesus was able to heal his child, which means he was aware of the miraculous signs Jesus had been performing.
- 3) Finally, he had some degree of confidence that Jesus would grant his request. This is especially significant if this official was not a Jew.

Together, these observations show that Jesus was well known throughout Galilee as a man who possessed extraordinary powers. John noted that He had performed many miraculous signs in Jerusalem (2:23), but gives no indication that healing disease was among them. Yet somehow this official had come to the conclusion that Jesus had the ability to heal his son – and not simply the ability, but also the willingness to do this for him. If he didn't believe this with some conviction, there would be no reason for him to make the trip to Cana.

- b. John's account of the man's meeting with Jesus is also telling; whatever the length and particulars of their conversation, John reduced it to three statements: one by the royal official and two by Jesus (4:48-50). The most important one – and the one which frames the whole context – was Jesus' indictment that people were embracing Him only on the basis of miraculous signs (v. 48). John here used the plural *you*, and it seems that Jesus was speaking broadly of all who were characterized by the belief pattern He was denouncing. Whether or not the official had already stated his reason for coming, Jesus discerned the true nature of his faith; He'd witnessed it in Jerusalem and now in Galilee. The Lord knew that this man's interest in Him was limited to His power to work miracles, yet He felt compassion for him and his plight and restored his son. Jesus healed him, and He did so at a distance: The two men were in Cana; the official's son was in Capernaum about 17 miles away (cf. Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30). Thus the official came to believe that Jesus was able to heal even at a distance (cf. vv. 49 and 50) and his confidence was justified when he returned home to learn that the fever had left his son at the exact time Jesus pronounced him healed (4:50-53).

John ended this passage on the happy note that this man and his household came to believe in Jesus. But this affirmation is framed by the larger context: *The faith John was addressing was grounded in witnessing miraculous signs – a faith which Jesus indicted* (cf. again 5:43-48 with 2:23-25). In this context John was highlighting the dynamic of believing unbelief by way of contrasting it with authentic faith – faith which yields life (20:30-31). This, then, raises the critical question: *Was this official's faith an example of the spurious or authentic sort?* Scholars and commentators aren't agreed and there are valid arguments on all sides. But it seems that John regarded him as an example of *both*: He came to Jesus as a man who believed that He was a miracle worker. This was the sort of faith Jesus indicted; the sort of faith which dishonored Him though embracing Him with a sincere welcome (vv. 43-45). But through the process of interacting with Jesus, the man had come to believe in *Him*, embracing His word in faith without seeing His work (v. 50). He had come to Jesus believing that He could save his son; it never occurred to him that Jesus could heal him from afar (v. 49). Yet, when Jesus proclaimed his son healed, he believed Him and went home rejoicing. He'd become a man who, though not seeing, yet believed, and so was filled with joy inexpressible (1 Peter 1:1-9; cf. also John 20:24-31).