

John 4:43–54

Introduction

At least initially, the first two verses we're going to look at this morning are difficult to make sense of. The commentaries I consulted argued for four very different interpretations, and all of them with equal confidence. It was tempting for me at some points to just read the verses this morning without any comment (other than to say that I had no comment) and move on to what comes next – especially since these verses aren't really “doctrinal” or “theological.” But yet these verses are a part of the word of God and therefore I believe that in a series through the Gospel of John they deserve our time and consideration. The explanation I'm going to offer is really an attempt to *combine* the strengths of three of the views in the commentaries and it's the view that I believe fits best with the context before and the context after. So we begin with verses 43-44.

I. John 4:43–44 — After the two days [in Samaria] he departed for Galilee. [See map on p. 7] (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.)

Apparently, Jesus departs for Galilee in some sense because of the fact—or as a result of the fact—that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown. In this context, then, what is Jesus' “hometown”? In Matthew and Luke, Jesus' hometown is Nazareth and it's with respect to His reception in Nazareth that Jesus quotes this proverb.

➤ Matthew 13:57 (cf. Mat. 13:53-58; Lk. 4:16-24) — They took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.”

But John never says anything about Jesus visiting Nazareth (we hear only of Cana and Capernaum). So, is John making the more general point that Jesus departs for his home “country” of *Galilee because* there He will have no honor, and therefore because there He'll stir up less opposition? Remember, He left Judea at least partly because the Pharisees had heard that He was making and baptizing more disciples than John (Jn. 4:1). But it seems strange to say that Jesus went to Galilee because there He would have no honor. And as we're about to see, it would seem that Jesus receives just as much attention in Galilee as He does in Judea. So then, in the context of John is Jesus' “hometown” Jerusalem, or Judea more generally? Is John making the point that Jesus departed for Galilee (after spending the two days in Samaria) in some sense *because* of the opposition he had faced in Judea, his “hometown”? But it's very hard to see how Judea, specifically, could be Jesus' “hometown” as *opposed* to Galilee where He grew up. Remember what we read at the beginning of the chapter:

➤ John 4:1–3 (cf. 2:18-20) — Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John... *he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.*

And now after the stop in Samaria, it's as though John picks up again where he left off: “After the two days he departed for Galilee.” But why, *this time*, does John add: “For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown”? Jesus is just now leaving a village in

Samaria where a great number of people from that village have believed in Jesus and confessed Him to be the Savior of the world. So Jesus' "hometown" has to be seen in light of the contrast with Samaria which is *not* His "hometown." Remember what the Samaritan woman said to Jesus:

- John 4:9 (cf. 4:20) — "How is it that you, **a Jew**, ask for a drink from me, **a woman of Samaria**?"

And remember what Jesus said later to the Samaritan woman:

- John 4:22 — "**You** worship what you do not know; **we** worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."

The proverbial "hometown" of Jesus in this context is the whole country of the Jews in general, whether Judea in the south *or* Galilee in the north. So we can read this proverb in the light of what John said back in chapter one:

- John 1:11 — He came to his *own*, and his own [the Jewish people] did not receive him.

Here in chapter four, John is thinking mainly of Jerusalem and Judea and the opposition from the Pharisees (which is partly why Jesus left for Galilee), but he's not suggesting that Jesus moves from Judea (where He had no honor) to Galilee because there He expects to be more honored! Instead, since Galilee is just as much Jesus' "hometown" as Judea, this proverb warns us not to set our hopes too high. In light of the believing response of the Samaritans, how are we to make sense of the opposition Jesus has just experienced in Jerusalem? John answers that even "Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown." As Jesus leaves this village of the Samaritans, then, we wonder what reception He'll be given in Galilee. We read in verse forty-five:

II. John 4:45 — 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.

On the surface, this sounds encouraging and hopeful. When Jesus arrived in Galilee, the Galileans *received* Him [*dechomai*]; they enthusiastically welcomed Him. Why did they welcome Him? Because they had recently gone to the Passover Feast in Jerusalem and seen the things Jesus had done there. Apparently, these Galileans are the very people of whom John wrote in chapter two:

- John 2:23–25 — Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name *when they saw the signs that he was doing*. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

On the one hand, these Galileans aren't hostile to Jesus like the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and yet on the other hand, even their welcome may be a form of rejection. It's possible to think that

one is receiving Jesus even while in the very act of rejecting Him. It's in this sobering light that we're meant to read what happens next.

III. John 4:46–47 — So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was a royal official [*basilikos*] whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and was imploring him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

The last time we were in Galilee Jesus travelled from Cana (in the hill country) “down” to Capernaum (below sea level), a distance of about twenty miles, before leaving Capernaum to travel to Jerusalem for the Passover. Now here we are again in Cana (the same Cana where Jesus made the water wine), but this time there's no trip to Capernaum. This time a “royal official” in Capernaum makes the trip “up” to Cana to find Jesus.

This man is a Jewish official attached to “King” Herod's court, so he would have been a man of standing with plenty of resources at his disposal. No doubt he's already tried all the physicians and doctors. By the time he hears that Jesus has come to Galilee, his son, John tells us, was at the point of death. So all that's left for this man to hope for is a miracle. The pathos of this account shouldn't be hard for us to imagine. Here's a *father* who *loves* his son, who's son is at the point of *death*, who has traveled twenty miles to find Jesus in Cana (no doubt as fast as he could get there), and who now *pleads* with Jesus to please come down [to Capernaum] and heal his son. At this point, the only thought in this father's mind is his son and faith or no faith he's desperate enough to believe—to even will it to be true—that Jesus can heal his son. How can our hearts not go out to this father in his grief and turmoil? But having said these things, and even as our hearts go out to this distraught father, Jesus' response catches us completely off guard.

IV. John 4:48 — So Jesus said to him, “Unless you [all] see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

That doesn't make sense to us, does it? It doesn't seem “right.” This man isn't asking for a sign from Jesus as a test, is he? This is very different from what we see in chapter six:

➤ John 6:30 — [The Jews] said to [Jesus], “...what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?”

Or we could compare this with Matthew twelve:

➤ Matthew 12:38 — Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

This isn't a self-righteous Pharisee putting Jesus to the test. This is a distressed father pleading with Jesus for his son. Why does Jesus say to this father in distress: “Unless you all [the Greek is plural] see signs and wonders you will not believe”?

It's important to see here that even though Jesus addresses the father (“he said *to him*”), He's speaking not *necessarily* of this royal official (that remains to be seen), but of all the Jews in

general. This is how Jesus interprets and explains His “welcome” by the Galileans. “Unless you [all] see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The point of the signs *is* to produce and strengthen and nourish faith (cf. 2:11; 12:37; 20:30-31), but only in so far as the signs are really *signs* pointing beyond themselves to the true, spiritual realities of Messiah’s kingdom. John refers to “signs” 17 times in his Gospel, but he uses this word for wonders only once. The signs *were* wonders, but that’s not all they were. That’s not even mainly what they were. And yet that’s all the Jews saw. When we read our Bibles, what is it that we see? The Jews saw the signs as works of power that amazed them and proved to them only in a superficial way what this man could do for them. Later, Jesus will say to the Jews in Judea:

➤ John 6:26 (cf. 6:2; 12:18) — “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

So even as the Jews in Galilee received and “welcomed” Jesus, they were, in reality, rejecting *Him*. The Samaritans believed that Jesus was the Savior of the world not because of “signs and wonders” that He performed, but because of His “word” (4:39-42). The Jews were focused on the “signs and wonders” and so they failed to give Jesus that “honor” that belongs to who He truly is.

But what does any of this have to do with this distressed father pleading with Jesus to come down and heal his son? At this point, who Jesus is is secondary for this man; who Jesus is is peripheral to his one desire and longing that his son might be healed. So what if Jesus does heal his son? What sort of faith would that produce? Would this distressed father be like the rest of the Galileans and believe in Jesus only as the miracle-worker who healed his son or would he see in the healing of his son the true messianic glory of Jesus as the one who gives life to the world? “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mk. 9:36) What will it profit this man if he gains his son, but forfeits his soul? What if Jesus heals this man’s son and as a result he’s only confirmed in a superficial and empty “faith”? Jesus’ response may seem at first to be harsh and unfeeling, but it’s really the expression of His perfect wisdom and love.

“Jesus said *to him*, ‘Unless *you all* see signs and wonders you will not believe.’”

V. John 4:49 — The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

Did the official not hear what Jesus just said? Is he ignoring what Jesus said? But how else could or should this father have answered? You’ve just travelled twenty miles in desperation. Your son lies at home at the point of death. You’ve found Jesus. You’ve pleaded with Him to come down and heal your son. And Jesus responds *to you* and to your pleas for your son with these words: “Unless *you all* see signs and wonders you will not believe.” At this moment what sort of “defense” could this man have given? The words of Jesus have hit very near the mark. They’ve exposed something of this man’s own heart. Is it the time, then, for self-examination and deeper conversation with Jesus? If so, is this man supposed to ignore all those feelings that he has for his son, who when he left Capernaum was already at the very point of death? Jesus never faulted this father for loving his son. Neither was Jesus asking this man to defend himself or take time out now for more instruction. Jesus is warning the official of that ultimate danger of seeing Him only as a miracle-worker who can heal his son, but not as the Messiah who has come bringing

God's salvation – the salvation that even this father needs. Jesus is challenging the official and calling him to believe not just that He can give life to his son, but above all else that He is the Messiah who gives life to the world. The official heard both the warning and the challenge in Jesus' words, and rather than being put off, he responds in the only other way we could expect. He said to Jesus, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus never asked this royal official to stop loving and caring for his son. The word that the father uses here for his son is the diminutive form of "child." Especially in this context, it's expressive of the father's affection and anguish: "Sir, come down before my little child dies."

There was another time when a *synagogue* official named Jairus came to Jesus:

- Mark 5:22–23 — ...and seeing him, he fell at his feet and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. **Come** and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

And what did Jesus do? Mark tells us simply in the next verse:

- Mark 5:24 — And he went with him.

In that instance, while Jesus was delayed with the healing of a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years a messenger came from the ruler's house telling him that his daughter had already died. It was then that Jesus said to the ruler, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mk. 5:36). In that instance, Jesus did "come" with the synagogue official, but only to arrive seemingly too late. In this instance, what does Jesus do? The official was imploring Jesus to "**come down** and heal his son, for he was at the point of *death*" (v. 47). And then in verse forty-nine: "**Come down**," he pleads again, "before my little child *dies*." And what does Jesus say in response to his plea?

VI. John 4:50a — Jesus said to him, "**Go**; your son **lives** [*zao*]."

Of course, what Jesus means by this is that his son has *not died* and *will not die* but has rather at that very moment recovered. And so he emphasizes this with the present tense, "your son *lives*." He doesn't say, "your son is *healed*" (cf. 4:47) but rather, "your son *lives*." He will not die, but live! In response to the official's repeated petition that Jesus "come down" to Capernaum, Jesus says, "Go; your son lives" – which is as much as to say, "Go. As of this moment, there is no longer any need for me to come with you."

Put yourself in the place of this royal official. In the flesh, at least, would you rather hear Jesus say, "I will come with you and heal your son" or "Go [go back home to Capernaum], your son lives"? Why doesn't Jesus "come down" to Capernaum and there heal the royal official's son?

We read in Matthew of a centurion who came to Jesus, appealing to Him:

- Matthew 8:6–10, 13 — "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." And [Jesus] said to him, "**I will come and heal him**." But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but **only say the word**, and my servant will be

healed...” When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, **with no one in Israel have I found such faith**... And to the centurion Jesus said, **“Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.”**

Jesus doesn’t say to the royal official, “I will come and heal him.” Neither does He say, “If you go (believing), your son *will* be healed.” Instead, He commands the royal official based on what has already been done: “Go[!] Your son *lives*.” And so it’s as if in that moment Jesus was commanding faith – faith that’s not based superficially on “signs and wonders,” but rather on His given word as God’s Messiah sent from heaven. No longer is this just about what Jesus can do (and that superficial “faith” that’s concerned only with what He can do); now it’s fundamentally about who He is (and that vital, living faith that lays hold of Him for who He truly is). As one commentator puts it, this royal official “came to Jesus *on account of the miracle he desired*, but Jesus placed *himself* between the father and his child” (Ridderbos). And even today, Jesus would place *Himself* between us and all else that we could ever desire *from Him* because it’s only in this way that we find in Him—and receive from Him—*eternal* life. And so it would seem to be by the very power of Jesus’ word that the faith He commanded was actually effected in the heart of the father. Maybe not yet a mature and full-fledged faith, but still the true and genuine seed of faith that lays hold not just of what Jesus can do, but of Jesus Himself. So John narrates with the utmost simplicity:

VII. John 4:50b — The man believed *the word* that Jesus spoke to him and **went on his way**.

This is the true miracle and triumph of this story—not that this man’s son lived, but that this man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. He hasn’t witnessed any miraculous sign or wonder. Jesus has provided him with no “proof” or “evidence” that his son lives. And yet the man who had begged Jesus to “come down” with him, now “went on his way” *believing*. Believing, yes, that his son lived, but believing more than that – believing, John says, “the *word* that *Jesus spoke to him*”; believing that that word was trustworthy by virtue of the one who spoke that word. And so we read in verses 51-54:

VIII. John 4:51–54 — As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his boy [*pais*] **lived** [*zao*]. 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 **lives** [*zao*].” 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.

What does the “sign” have to do with the faith of this royal official and the faith of all his household? The “sign” calls forth and confirms and nourishes and strengthens *faith* by pointing beyond itself to who Jesus truly is and to the realities of the salvation that He has come to bring. And so that’s the work it’s still intended to do in all of us. The point of the miracle is not to amaze or to convince skeptics and unbelievers. To all such people, Jesus responds:

- Matthew 12:39–40 — “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

For this royal official, the fact that his son *lives* [*zao*] is no longer just a “wonder” that proves Jesus to be a miracle-worker, it’s a “sign” that confirms and “proves” for him—and for all those with eyes to see—that Jesus is the one who gives life to the world. The point of recording this “sign,” then, is not that Jesus always gives us what we want, but that He does always give to those who believe, true life (*zoe*)—eternal life—in Him (cf. Jn. 1:4). The point of recording this sign is to remind us that Jesus, in His infinite love and compassion, would place Himself between us and all else that we could ever desire from Him because it’s only in this way that we find in Him—and receive from Him—eternal life.

