

FAITH'S ENCOURAGEMENT

by Ray C. Stedman

We last saw the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of John in Samaria, where he had that amazing encounter with the woman at the well which eventuated in a great spiritual awakening in that area. The Lord and the disciples were excited and rejoicing over what must have been, even for them, an unexpected spiritual harvest.

I believe that even Jesus did not know for sure that something like that was going to happen because this is the way God works with us, and Jesus is our model. The Christian life is one of adventure and anticipation of what an innovative God will do with situations where we do not know and cannot possibly guess what will happen. That is what gives a tinge of excitement to almost any activity, for the Christian is expecting God to be at work. Our Lord came to model that kind of life, thus I do not think he always knew exactly what God was going to do in any given situation -- but he knew he would do something. In this instance he is obviously pleased and delighted with the response of the Samaritans who heard the testimony of the woman at the well and came flooding out to beg him to stay so that they might hear his teaching.

John picks this up in Chapter 4, beginning with Verse 43:

After the two days he departed to Galilee. For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. 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. {John 4:43-45 RSV}

In this paragraph John is explaining why Jesus went down to Jerusalem in the first place. He had been in Galilee where he had changed the water to wine, and there was a reaction of sorts to that. Yet he left there and went down to Jerusalem to minister for perhaps several weeks. Here John is telling us why: It is because, as Jesus himself said, "A prophet is without honor in his own country."

He is suggesting what many people have discovered: It is hard to gain acceptance and recognition in one's own home town, but if you make a hit somewhere else and then come back home, people see you in an entirely different light. That may possibly be true of some individuals who are here this morning. I have no doubt whatsoever that there are young people sitting here who 20 years from now are going to be names to reckon with in this country, people whom God is going to use in wonderful ways. When that happens, many of us who are still alive and tottering around at that time will say, "I knew that person when he was at Peninsula Bible Church and I never thought he would turn out this way." That is simply human nature. Our Lord understood that, and that is why he went to Jerusalem. He did not go there to gain fame or status in the eyes of people. He never pursued such things. He went to gain a wider hearing and acceptance for the message of the truth, knowing that the people of Galilee would pay much more attention to him if he came back with a certain degree of repute.

According to Verse 45, his plan worked: "So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him." They never had before. Luke records in the fourth chapter of his gospel that when Jesus identified himself as the Messiah in the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth, "all in the synagogue ... led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong," {cf, Luke 4:28-29}. But now they welcome him, "having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the feast."

John goes on to record what followed:

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 he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he

was at the point of death. {John 4:46-47 RSV}

Before we look at this sad story of an anguished father's heart, it is important to note the exact geographic locations recorded here. Jesus did not go back to Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, he went back to Cana (which is located near the city of Nazareth, about 20 miles from Capernaum), where he had earlier performed the miracle of changing water into wine.

Jesus returned to Cana, I believe, because that was the last place he had caught the attention of the Galileans. We saw that the miracle of the wine was a revelation of something unique about our Lord -- that he is the King of nature, God's Man put in dominion over God's world as God intended at the very beginning, with authority to command the forces of nature. That is what he manifested in the changing of water into wine. But more than that, it was a revelation of the way God works -- a combination of human and divine activity. He told the servants to fill the great water jars with water; that was something they could do, and they obeyed. Then, without a word, without a gesture, he changed the water into wine. That was something they could not do. That is the way God works in human life -- he tells us to do what we can do, then he adds an ingredient that we cannot add, and thus accomplishes a result that we could never hope for. That is the lesson of the changing of water into wine.

At that very precise geographical point, at Cana, Jesus now takes up his ministry again. And 20 miles away, at Capernaum, is an anguished father whose young son is tossing with a fever and about to die. Every parent has experienced the helpless feeling, the cold clutch of fear that grips the heart as he or she watches a little child tossing in fever. Hearing of Jesus at Cana, this man rode horseback (very likely), 20 miles up to Cana, driven by the image of his little boy lying at the point of death, to beg Jesus to come down and heal his son.

Jesus' response to this man's request is almost unbelievable:

**Jesus therefore said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."
{John 4:48 RSV}**

That almost harsh word to the grieving father does not sound at all like Jesus. It seems to be turning a cold shoulder to the man's request: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." But we need to note carefully exactly what the original text says. You cannot see it in the English, but it is very evident in the original language that Jesus is not addressing his words to the father: He spoke in the plural, not in the singular. What he said was, "Unless 'ye', or, 'you all' (to use the Southerner's expression) see signs and wonders 'you all' will not believe." He is obviously not addressing this to the anguished father, but to the class of people to whom the father belongs, a special, privileged class who were, for the most part, in opposition to the work of Jesus. According to the King James Version, this man was a "nobleman." (The version I am reading describes him as an official.) Literally, he was a "king's man." He was a member of Herod's retinue and thus a part of the governing class of Galilee. To this class Jesus addresses this word, "Unless you all, your type of people, see wonders and signs you will not believe."

We all know people like that. Perhaps even some of us are like that. We really want to see miracles, exciting signs, supernatural events, before we are prepared to believe who Jesus is. Tens of thousands of people haunt the meetings of faith healers, so-called, because they want to see whether these men or women can actually achieve the transformation of a cripple, or open the eyes of the blind. Those kind of people are the legitimate prey of religious racketeers who oftentimes extract from them thousands, sometimes even millions of dollars, for which they give no accounting but utilize for their own selfish purposes.

But this father is too desperate to discuss anything like that with Jesus:

The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." {John 4:49 RSV}

He uses a very plaintive word for child, "my little boy" -- "Come down before my little boy dies." We can sense the agony in the father's words as he pleads with Jesus. He has a certain kind of faith, a belief that Jesus is some type of a miracle worker; that he is in touch with powers that ordinary people do not have; that perhaps he can come down, and in a last, desperate measure, do something for his little lad whose suffering image is

so clearly engraved on his mind's eye as he makes his plea. But it is a low level of faith. Obviously he feels that everything is going to be lost if Jesus will not come; that he has to come and touch the boy before anything can happen.

Now mark what the Lord says to him:

Jesus said to him, "Go; your son lives." {John 4:50a}

(My version says, "Your son will live" {RSV}, but that is not what the Greek says. It says, "Your son is living; he lives.") In these words our Lord is both answering and denying the father at the same time. The man was begging him to come down to Capernaum but Jesus refuses to go down, saying to him instead, "go." Then he granted him his desire in the words, "Your son is living," and thus acceded to his request.

The thing to note about this, however, is that Jesus gave this father an opportunity to believe at a higher level of faith -- no longer to believe on what Jesus could do, but to believe on who he was. We could summarize this entire conversation in contemporary language by saying that Jesus, in effect, had said to him, "Are you one of those 'seeing is believing' kind of people?" There are many people like that today. The father, in a sense, had replied, "Sir, I'm just a desperate father. I don't want to argue with you or talk about what class I belong to. My little boy is dying and I need your help." Then Jesus had said to him, in effect, "Then believe and you will see." That is a higher level of faith. That is true faith, and the ground of it is not what Jesus can do or what he has done, but who he is. Is he the kind of man who keeps his word? That is what this father has to face.

According to the account, John says "he went his way."

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way. {John 4:50b RSV}

He stopped pleading with and begging Jesus to act according to what he thought was the right way to handle the situation, but accepted our Lord's own way of acting. I think he went, still troubled with doubts. He probably said to himself as he journeyed back home, "Why did I leave him? If I had just pressed him a little he would have come down." But he went; that is the point. Though he was uncertain, nevertheless he went; he obeyed the word of Jesus, though his mind was still troubled with doubt. Faith is not what you feel, it is what you do!

Have you ever come to Jesus with a request, perhaps out of desperation, like this man? Have you had a need that was burning in your heart, for which you had no answer, and you had in your mind's eye a way for him to act to work it out? We all do this, I'm afraid. Out of the anguish of our hearts we can think of no other way for Jesus to respond than the way we have in mind, thus we pray, "Come down, Lord." But he does not come. Those situations oftentimes raise doubtful questions in our minds.

In a church where I spoke on a recent Sunday morning there was a basket of flowers up front. It was announced that they were in memory of a little girl who would have been seven years old that morning, but two years ago she had had an accident in which her life was taken. I met the parents of that little child afterwards. I was told what had happened, and as they spoke the agony was still in their eyes. They had taken their beautiful five-year-old daughter down to a public swimming pool. She was playing in what looked like a normal, harmless setting and, without she or anyone else realizing that there was any danger, she sat down on the outlet where the suction apparatus that cleaned the pool was running. After a while she began to cry out, and her parents went to see what was wrong. When they lifted her up they found the suction was so strong it had sucked her intestines out of her body. They went through terrible anguish for a week or so before that little girl died and went to be with the Lord. Those kinds of circumstances come, and when they do so we go to God in anguish, probably having already determined what God must do to help us.

But Jesus sent this father away, apparently unwilling to do all the man asked, and yet answering him in a way that he could not anticipate. John completes the story in the following verses:

As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was living. So he

asked them the hour when he began to mend, 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. {John 4:51-53 RSV}

What an exciting encounter! The servants met this man with the glorious news, "Your son is living" -- the very same words Jesus had used to the father. Immediately he checked the hour when it happened. When it dawned on him that at the precise moment when Jesus had said to him, "Go; your son lives," the fever suddenly left the boy and he began to mend, there broke upon him a new realization, not of what Jesus could do, but of who he was, that he had authority over all illness, that he was not limited by distance or time, that he had power in areas beyond the knowledge and reach of men. When the man understood that, "he believed, and all his household with him." This is the same word for belief that was used of him before, but now it is used at a much higher level -- a trust that God was at work and would work out this matter in ways that he could not anticipate.

There is an interesting footnote to this that scholars point out, one that has considerable possibility of truth in it. Some have felt that this nobleman, this official of the court, is referred to by name in the 13th chapter of the book of Acts. There is the account of the great spiritual awakening that broke out in the city of Antioch. Seeing the tremendous possibilities of the hour, Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him back with him to minister there. That chapter declares there were a number of prophets in the church at Antioch, among them one named "Manaen, the foster-brother of Herod," {cf, Acts 13:1}. That would make him a "king's man," a member of the court. Though it is not certain that it is the same man, it is likely that this was the moment when Manaen came to Christ. He understood who he was, believed in him, and together with all his household committed himself to the remarkable power and authority of Jesus.

John has one further word, given in the closing verse of the chapter:

This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. {John 4:54 RSV}

The first sign was the changing of water into wine. As we have seen, that had a hidden meaning, it brought out something about Jesus that we would not otherwise have known. That is the purpose of signs. This second sign then tells us that Jesus had authority over illness in realms beyond the capacity of men. But I think there is more to it than that. The heart of this story is given to us in a verse in the twelfth chapter of the book of Hebrews. Following the tremendous record of the heroes of faith, recorded in chapter 11, we read the words:

Wherefore seeing we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses [that is a reference to all the names of Chapter 11], ... let us run with patience the race that is set before us [that is the race of life, the time left to us here on earth], looking unto Jesus [the focus of faith is always here; he is waiting at the end of the race, but he is also with us right now. Then it says this of him:] the author and the finisher of faith. {cf, Heb 12:1-2a KJV}

-- the Originator and the Completer of faith. That is what Jesus has come to do -- to bestow faith and make it to grow. One version translates this, "The pioneer and perfecter of faith." This story tells us that we are in the hands of One who does not always answer our prayers the way we expect, but in doing so he lifts us to a higher awareness of who he is, of his authority and power in the world and in life. Our faith, as a result, becomes stronger, cleaner and truer. We are enabled to exercise it at a far higher level. Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. I believe that is what this story is telling us. That is the meaning of the sign that Jesus performed that day.

Recently I was with a friend who is a close companion and friend of Tom Landry, the coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Many of you know that Tom Landry is a Christian. He is also a member of the Board of Trustees of Dallas Theological Seminary. My friend, who is the chairman of that board, told me that at a meeting recently Tom Landry said something that he will never forget. Landry said, "The job of a coach is to make men do what they don't want to do, in order to achieve what they really want." That is what Jesus does: he puts us through circumstances we do not want to go through; he makes us face things we do not like to face, in order

to achieve what we have wanted with all our hearts all along. To do so requires the strengthening of faith. Faith's encouragement: that is what this incident is all about.

I hope you have been encouraged in faith, that you are ready to trust the Lord for the circumstances in which you find yourselves today; knowing that he is responsive, but not always in the way you ask him to be because he sees more clearly than you.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, how grateful we are for this account. How it speaks to us in our situation today. Grant that we may go back to that situation with renewed encouragement, renewed trust, a renewed sense that you know what you are doing in our lives and are strengthening our faith in the process. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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