John 4:43-54 *The Grave Robber: Long Distance Miracle*

***There Must Be a Faster Way***Samuel Morse was a painter. He grew up in New England and studied in the Royal Academy of London. He preferred “romantic” paintings of sweeping landscapes and epic events. People liked his work, and he was commissioned to paint *House of Representatives*, a then-famous depiction of a night session of Congress.

He found, however, that as much as people liked looking at his pictures, they didn’t particularly want to pay for them. He discovered that the real money to be made as an artist was painting portraits. And so, he became an itinerant artist, traveling from New England to the Carolinas painting the images of famous and well-to-do men such as our first president, George Washington.

And so it happened that in February, 1825, Morse was in Washington, D.C. painting a portrait of the Marquis De Lafeyette, the leading French supporter of the American Revolution. While he was there, his beloved wife Lucretia gave birth to their third child; but complications during childbirth made her gravely ill. Morse’s father sent a message by horseback, and as soon as he received it Morse dropped everything and rushed back to New Haven, Conn. By the time he arrived, though, not only had Lucretia died, they’d already held her funeral.

Morse was heartbroken. If only there had been a faster way to communicate over long distances, perhaps he could at least have said good-bye to his dear wife. Morse left painting and turned to the study of electricity to see if he could solve the problem.

Eventually, Morse returned to the Capitol building and strung wire between the chambers of the House and the Senate. When he sent messages between the two rooms, many lawmakers remained skeptical. But he managed to secure a $30,000 congressional grant to build a thirty-eight mile long line between Baltimore and Washington.

Then, on May 24, 1844 a large crowd gathered inside the Capitol to witness Morse tap a series of dots and dashes into his machine using a language he crated called Morse Code. The message itself was chosen by the daughter of the US Patent Commissioner. It came from the Bible. Numbers 23:23. “What hath God wrought?” Moments later, the same message was returned from Baltimore, and the telegraph had been invented.

For most of human history, great distance has meant huge delays in communication. If you were not side-by-side with someone, getting information to them took as long as it took to travel by foot, horseback, or ship. Back in the days of the wild, wild west, the Pony Express was considered the gold standard of communication: riders could cover 75 miles a day which meant that a letter from Saint Joseph, Missouri could travel the 2,000 miles to Sacramento, California in 10 days flat! When George Washington died on December 14, 1799 it took a week for word to travel from Virginia to New York. Many Americans didn’t receive the news until the new millennium had begun.

And, of course, international news traveled even slower. It may be an urban legend, but the claim exists that King George wrote in his journal on July 4, 1776: “Not much happened today.” It would be several more weeks before he received word that the American Colonies had declared themselves independent from him.

Morse’s invention closed that communication gap considerably. And, of course, it paved the way for telephones which eventually evolved into radio signals and satellite communication and the world wide web of interconnectedness that means we think nothing, today, of speaking face-to-face with someone halfway across the globe.

But we must put ourselves back in that pre-telegraph world in order to fully appreciate the second miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of John. Without benefit of landline or cell phone, without even a walkie-talkie or smoke signals, Jesus cancels a gap of 20 miles to instantaneously heal a boy of a life-threatening fever. (this introduction is adapted from Mark Batterson, *The Grave Robber*, p. 81-83)

***A Strange Combination of Sentences***We are in a series called *The Grave Robber*, based on a book and Bible Study by Mark Batterson. It’s a series that is going to take us through the 7 miracles described in the book of John. John isn’t claiming that these are the only miracles Jesus did. But in the unique way he has structured his book he has chosen to report on these 7 miracles for particular reasons. He calls them “signs”. And each miracle story he includes tells us something about Jesus.

The second “sign” story is told in John 4, verses 43-54. You can turn there now if you like. We’ll also be putting the verses up on the screen. We’ll go through the story a few verses at a time. Let’s begin with **verses 43-45:**

**43**After the two days he left for Galilee. **44**(Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.) **45**When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there.

We’ve skipped ahead a couple chapters from the wedding feast in Cana. Earlier in chapter 4, Jesus has been travelling back from Jerusalem and stopped off in Samaria, where He had a lengthy conversation with the woman at the well, and then stayed two days and led many Samaritans to believe in Him (John 4:40-41). That’s what verse 43 is referring to when it says He returned to His home area of Galilee. We need to keep in mind that he found a receptive audience in Samaria without, apparently, doing any miracles. That’s an important backdrop for this story.

Verses 44 and 45 appear to be a strange combination of sentence. On the one hand, verse 44 says that a prophet has no honor in his own country. This is something that Jesus says in each of the other gospels (Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24), and each time He says it when the people of His hometown doubt Him because they know Him only as the carpenter’s son. In those accounts, He does very few miracles because the people do not believe.

Thus, when that phrase appears here, you expect Jesus to encounter further doubt. But, instead, you get verse 45 where it says the Galileans welcomed Him. What’s going on?

Well, I think John gives us a clue in verse 45 when he says that the Galileans “had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there.” Here, John is taking us back to another part of the gospel that we skipped over. At the end of chapter 2, John describes Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem like this, **John 2:23-25:**

**23**Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. **24**But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. **25**He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

Jesus is not looking for faith that is based only on signs and wonders. Jesus is cautious about spending too much time with people who are attracted only to the flash and fancy of healing miracles and water transformation.

**So when John** tells us that the Galileans who had seen the miracles at Passover welcomed Jesus, it’s actually confirming what Jesus says about a prophet receiving no honor in His home country. In other words, they are giving Jesus the wrong kind of welcome. They are excited to have Him around as long as He functions as their wish-granting Genie, but they are not honoring Him with true faith. They are not giving Him the same sort of welcome as He received in Samaria.

***A Father’s Desperation***Now, let’s look at **verses 46-47:**

**46**Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. **47**When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

Cana is a little less than 10 miles from Nazareth. It’s very much a part of Jesus’ home territory. Which fits the theory that when He attended the wedding, it was the wedding of a relative or a close family friend.

And now there is this royal official approaching him. John isn’t very specific about this man’s identity, but it is likely that this is someone associated with Herod Antipas. That’s the Herod who ruled over the region of Galilee, and the same Herod who John the Baptist criticized for his shady marriage and the man who eventually ordered the Baptist’s death.

We don’t know what this official’s role was in Herod’s court, or whether he was Jewish or a Gentile, but it is possible that John is obscuring his identity because if it were known that he associated with Jesus it would have been bad for him and his family.

At any rate, this man has been hearing the rumors about Jesus’ power. It probably meant little to him until his son became sick. But now that his son is near death, he’s desperate. Maybe, Jesus could come and maybe do something about it? It’s interesting that this man appears to be in a position of power, but he does not try to command Jesus’ cooperation. Rather, he comes humbly. Literally begging Jesus to heal.

Jesus’ answer in **verse 48** seems harsh:

**48**“Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.”

This seems to confirm the angle we took on verses 44 and 45. Jesus is bothered that the people of Galilee are so hung up on miracles. They are wonder worshippers. Sign seekers. But their belief is not genuine. They are not coming to Jesus for who He is, but only for what they believe He can do for them.

This statement also appears to be a test of the royal official. Is he a wonder worshipper? Is he just looking for a show?

The man doesn’t even respond to Jesus, however. I don’t think he is concerned about questions of Jesus’ identity or sign seeking. He’s simply a father who is desperately seeking help for his sick son. **Verses 49-50:**

**49**The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

**50**“Go,” Jesus replied, “your son will live.”

The man took Jesus at his word and departed.

Here, though nobody knows it yet, is where the miracle takes place. Batterson writes:

Most of the miracles Jesus performed were in-person encounters—toe-to-toe, hand-to-hand, and face-to-face. But the second miracle redefined reality by defying the four dimensions of space and time. It was a long-distance miracle in real time. A miracle by proxy. Jesus…sent healing virtue via sound waves that instantaneously healed the royal official’s son who was twenty miles out of earshot. (p. 83)

***Confirmation***To the father’s credit, he takes Jesus at his word. He doesn’t stay around and insist that Jesus come with him. Though, you have to wonder if he went away a little disappointed. He wanted to take Jesus at his word, but a part of him must have figured the whole thing was a fool’s errand. Jesus was just a charlatan who refused to go with him because He didn’t want to be exposed as a fake.

It was 20 miles from Cana to Capernaum, over hilly terrain without good roads. We are about to find out that this man’s conversation with Jesus took place at about 1:00 in the afternoon. So the journey back, on foot, was going to take him into the next morning. It would have been a long, anxious journey. **Verse 51:**

**51**While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living.

This is good news! The news he was hoping to hear.

But, now, the question: was it all just a coincidence? He’s been gone for about three days, making the 40 mile round trip journey. Maybe the boy just got better. Does it really have anything to do with Jesus? He has to know, when did the boy improve? **Verses 52-53:**

**52**When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, “Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him.”

**53**Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he and his whole household believed.

The timing makes the connection irrefutable. It was just as he and Jesus were talking that His son’s life was being saved. It’s enough for this man and his entire family to put their faith in Jesus. **Verse 54:**

**54**This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

Here John uses that word “sign” again. It makes you think that maybe he’s going to number all of the miracles in his book. But, in fact, this is the last time he specifically uses this language. Still, the pattern has been set. The miracles that John chooses to record aren’t just random wonders that Jesus does, they are also signs that teach us about Him.

***Boundless Authority***So, what does this sign teach us? What do we learn about Jesus from this long-distance miracle? I have two things.

First, **This is a miracle about the boundless authority of Jesus.**

This miracle is a demonstration of Jesus’ power. He doesn’t need to touch the person to heal, doesn’t need to be in the same room, doesn’t even need to be in the same town; He merely has to say the word and healing takes place. He created the human body, He designed the immune system that runs a fever when it fights off viruses and infections, and He can command it to do His will.

All miracles are a demonstration of Jesus’ power and authority, of course. That’s what makes them miracles. It’s the ability of Jesus to step outside of the normal laws of nature and science and do things we would not expect: turn water into wine, heal the sick, multiply fish and bread, bring people back from the dead. But this miracle in particular seems to increase the degree of difficulty by having Jesus heal someone who’s not even in the same place.

Distance is not a hindrance to Jesus. The boy was 20 miles away in Capernaum. He could have been 20,000 miles away. It would not have mattered. When Jesus speaks with authority, there are no spatial limitations to his power.

Neither is time a limiting factor to what Jesus does. John draws special attention to the fact that this healing was immediate. Instantaneous. The boy didn’t start to recover when Jesus sent the father home. No. His fever left him at precisely the moment Jesus was declaring his healing from 20 miles away. At the very moment Jesus spoke, it was done.

I do not think it is a coincidence that John is describing such power in Jesus’ words. John’s theological name for Jesus, after all, is *logos*, which means “the Word.” (John 1:1) John sees a connection between Jesus and the powerful, spoken words of God.

How powerful is God’s word? Well, keep in mind that it was with mere words that God created the universe. **Genesis 1:3** says:

**3**And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

The entire week of creation went like that. God speaks, and reality results. We are meant to see the connection between Jesus, who can speak a fever away, with the God of creation, who can speak a world into existence.

**The prophet Isaiah** says this about God’s word:

**10**As the rain and the snow  
    come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
    without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
    so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
**11**so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
    It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
    and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

The Word of God is powerful. It accomplishes what God desires and achieves his purposes. It does not return empty. And the words of Jesus carry the same sort of power.

The gospel of Matthew tells a story that is very similar to this one in John 4. In Matthew’s story, it is not a royal official who approaches Jesus, but a Roman Centurion. It is not the Centurion’s son who is sick, but his servant. It is possible that these are two versions of the same event. But it is also possible that these are two separate encounters. After all, someone like Jesus would have been approached for healing almost constantly.

But Matthew’s story is interesting because when the Centurion asks for help, Jesus offers to go with Him to the sick man’s side. Instead, the Centurion suggests that Jesus’ presence will not be necessary. **Matthew 8:8-9:**

**8**The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. **9**For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

A Roman solider understands authority. He knows the chain of command. And in Jesus, He recognizes true authority. He understands that Jesus does not need to be present. He merely needs to say the word and the servant will be healed.

Jesus is duly impressed with this man. After declaring that he has not found anyone in Israel with such great faith, He does as the soldier suggests. **Verse 13:**

**13**Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

Jesus has boundless authority. Jesus is the Word of God whose words will not return empty. He speaks reality into existence.

***Don’t Seek Miracles***

Then, second: **This is a miracle about the pitfalls of seeking miracles**.

This seems kind of odd, that I would say this. Why would John tell a miracle story as an argument against interest in miracles? And yet, that’s what he is doing.

That’s what the first couple of verses are about. Why Jesus felt like a prophet without honor in his home country. That’s why He says what He says about people seeking signs and wonders in order to believe. Jesus knows that faith that is based entirely on the premise that all your problems will be fixed is no faith at all.

Jesus does miracles because of who He is. They are proof that He truly is the Son of God. He is the creator of the cosmos, so He can manipulate it however He likes.

But, at the same time, He is very cautious about doing miracles because He knows that the desire to see a miracle, or even to be the recipient of a miracle, is no guarantee of a trusting relationship in Him. And make no mistake, Jesus is much more interested in our devotion and trust than He is in seeing us experience perfect health.

There’s a lot of mystery here. God is sovereign, and He governs the universe in a way He sees fit. In some cases, He grants miraculous healing so that people can praise His name. But in other cases (the vast majority of cases) He allows nature to follow its course; and He asks us to trust Him in the midst of pain, illness, and sorrow.

Either way, whether Jesus grants you a miracle or not, His goal is that you will trust in Him. What He wants is a relationship with you.

Mark Batterson puts it like this, in the introduction to the book that we are using for study:

The seven miracles are seven signs, and each sign points straight to Jesus. You may be reading this book because you need a miracle. Don’t we all at some point in our lives?...But this is more than a course in miracles. It’s a book about the only One who can perform them. So let me offer a word of caution at the outset:

Don’t seek miracles.

Follow Jesus.

And if you follow Jesus long enough and far enough, you’ll eventually find yourself in the middle of some miracles. (p. 14)

Do that’s my final thought for us this morning: **Don’t seek miracles. Seek the One who has the power to do miracles.** Don’t be like the people of Jesus’ home country, who couldn’t see past the signs and wonders. Don’t be like the scribes and Pharisees who were constantly trying to test Jesus and make Him prove Himself. Instead, get to know Jesus. Get to know the One who is the Word of God. Follow Him.

And then watch the wonderful things that He will do.