

John 4b The Nobleman at Cana

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Overview

Chapter 4 is punctuated with references to the Lord's departure from Judaea into Galilee (vv 3, 43-45, 54). The first and third of these explicitly mention Judaea as the place from which he was coming, and we will see that the second alludes to it as well.

The focus of this chapter is the Lord's interaction with yet another person. John's favorite way to present the Lord and his claims is through these vignettes: compare

- Individuals: Mary (2), Nicodemus (3), Samaritan woman (4), Nobleman (4), Lame man (5), ...
- Groups: disciples (1), temple hierarchy (2, 5, 8), Samaritans (4), ...

All of these interactions exhibit people confronted with the need to believe on Jesus. John uses "believe" more than any other book in the Bible, both absolutely (98x) and in proportion to its size (0.63%).

A key contrast between this encounter and those earlier in the chapter is the relative role of Christ's words and of "signs and wonders" in stimulating belief. The Samaritans "believed because of his own word" (41) and that of the woman, while the people of Galilee "received him, having seen all things that he did at Jerusalem" (45). Both have a role to play (20:29-31), and in this encounter we see them both at work.

43-45, Finishing the Journey

John depicts Samaria as a stop along the way to Galilee, even though he devotes most of the chapter to describing the Lord's encounter with the woman. These three verses are devoted to reminding us of the original objective of the journey (4:3), and describing the reception he received.

43-44, His Motive

43 After two days.—Better, "the two days," the period of residency indicated in v.40.

He ... went into Galilee.—This picks up the direction of movement from 4:3. He was heading to Galilee, stopped in Samaria, but now resumes the journey.

44 a prophet hath no honour in his own country.—This clause has led to much confusion and discussion. It is quoted in all three of the synoptics (Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24), and in each case it refers to the rejection he experienced in Nazareth, which is in Galilee. So readers naturally ask, "If he faces rejection in Galilee, why is he returning there?" Many ingenious solutions have been offered:

- This is why he went to Cana, rather than Nazareth (Matthew Henry—but 43 says he went to Galilee, not to Cana)
- He went to a rejecting region to keep his popularity from growing too fast (but this fairly obtuse)

- The reason given is not for going there, but for the reluctance indicated by the two day wait (but that's not where it's connected grammatically).

I prefer another interpretation, which some have also suggested. John is using the phrase differently than do the Synoptics. For them, "his country" is Nazareth. But for John, "his country" is probably the same as "his own [place]" in 1:12, "chez lui," the place where he is rejected each time he visits, Jerusalem. Together, vv. 43-44 serve the same function as 4:3 (which emphasizes that he abandoned Judaea for Galilee), 4:47, and 4:54 (which says not only that he came into Galilee, but that he came *out of Judaea* into Galilee). All of these emphasize the contrast between the King's rejection in his capital and the welcome that people afforded him elsewhere. A Jew leaving Samaria could have only two destinations: Judaea or Galilee. Jesus went into Galilee (43) because he had no honor in Judaea (44).

45, His Reception

The parallel between 4:44 and 1:12 is reinforced by the parallel between 4:45 and 1:13.

45 the Galilaeans received him.—Here, unlike in Jerusalem, he finds a cordial welcome. (The Greek word "receive" here, *dexomai*, appears only here in John. It is not the same as *lambanw* in 1:12. Its emphasis is on receiving someone hospitably, while the word in 1:12 refers to accepting their authority. But the justification for connecting them is twofold.

1. both terms fall into the same general semantic field of favorable response to someone.
2. John changes between *paralambanw* in 1:11 and *lambanw* in 1:12, showing that his point is not captured in a single technical term.

Having seen all things that he did at the feast.—John has already told us that Jesus did miracles in Jerusalem (2:23). (The specific miracles have not been recorded for us, and John will later explicitly remind us of the selectivity of his record in 20:30; 21:25.) These miracles led not only to Nicodemus' visit (3:2), but also to a belief on the part of many (2:23), a belief that Jesus recognized as superficial (2:24). That raised the question about what kind of belief is sufficient to claim the promise of 1:12. That verse set "believe" alongside "receive" as the condition for becoming children of God.

This episode has strong parallels with 2b-3a. In both cases we have

- a group of people who "believed" (2:23) or "received" (4:45) because of miracles;
- a more detailed interview with an individual (Nicodemus in 3:1ff, the nobleman here), dealing with belief (3:12, 15, 16, 18; 4:48, 50, 53). Nicodemus is challenged to believe, but we do not yet know if he did. The nobleman is said to believe twice, helping us to unfold the complex nature of belief.

46-53, Healing the Nobleman's Son

46, The Setting

Cana of Galilee.—This was the place where his disciples were first said to "believe on him" (2:11). After the unbelief he encountered in Jerusalem, he returns to the place where the principle

of 20:31 was first demonstrated, for another encounter that will highlight yet other principles involved in “believing.”

A certain nobleman.—The word is an adjective, *basilikos*, “royal [person], probably indicating someone attached to the court. After the death of Herod the Great (the king of the Wise Men story, who massacred the babies at Bethlehem), his sons disputed his will, and Caesar Augustus divided his territory among his sons.

- Archelaus ruled Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea, all in the south
- Philip ruled the territories to the NE of the Sea of Galilee
- Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea (transjordan, from the Arnon in the S to somewhere between the Jabbok and the Yarmuk in the N)

This official lived in Capernaum, which was in Galilee, but on the border with the territory of Philip. Recall that Matthew was an administrator in the customs house there. Thus this individual is probably a royal functionary, perhaps also involved in customs administration, attached to the court of Herod Antipas. He may not even have been Jewish—Herod the Great was of Idumaeon descent, and Jewishness for the Herods was always more a matter of political expediency than personal devotion. Some have identified him with Chuza, Herod’s steward (Luke 8:3) or Manaean, who had been brought up with Herod (Acts 13:1).

Whose son was sick.—Whatever his social standing and racial background, this man has a need of which he is aware. His son is ill, “at the point of death” (47). He has heard that Jesus can do miracles, and when he learns that he is in Cana, about 20 miles from Capernaum, he comes to seek his help.

47-50, The Interchange

The main contrast here is between two different bases for belief: miracles (48) and the word of Christ (50). The interaction illustrates the principle of 11:40, “if thou wouldst believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God.”

The episode has some points of similarity with the healing of the centurion’s servant at Capernaum, recorded in Matt 8 and Luke 10. The stories are sufficiently different that we should not try to make them the same episode, but it seems likely that John has Matt and Luke in mind as he writes, and draws on them to fill out his message.

Matt 8:5-13	Luke 7:1-10	John 4:47-50
5 And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum,	Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum.	47 When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judaea into Galilee,
there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him, 6 And saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.	2 And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die. 3 And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant. 4 And when they came to Jesus, they besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this: 5 For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a	he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son: for he was at the point of death.

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	synagogue.	
7 And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him.	6 Then Jesus went with them.	
8 The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only , and my servant shall be healed. 9 For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this <i>man</i> , Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth <i>it</i> .	And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof: 7 Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word , and my servant shall be healed. 8 For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth <i>it</i> . {one: Gr. this man}	
10 When Jesus heard <i>it</i> , he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. 11 And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. 12 But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.	9 When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.	48 Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. 49 The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die.
13 And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.		50 Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth.
	10 And they that were sent, returning to the house,	And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. 51 And as he was now going down,
And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.	found the servant whole that had been sick.	his servants met him, and told <i>him</i> , saying, Thy son liveth. 52 Then enquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. 53 So the father knew that <i>it was</i> at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house.

The common points are:

- a high-ranking person in Capernaum asks Jesus to heal a beloved family member.
- The Lord does not come to the bedside, but speaks a word remotely, and the sick person is healed.

In addition to numerous minor differences (Roman centurion vs. royal courtier apparently attached to the Jewish king Herod, Jesus in Cana vs. Capernaum), there are two important major ones, that appear to be correlated.

- The courtier in John 4 insists that Jesus come to the house to heal. The centurion in Matt and Luke insists that he need not come, but simply speak the word.
- The courtier's request elicits a criticism from the Lord about the faith of the Jews. The centurion's request elicits praise from the Lord about his faith (while still criticizing the faith of the Jews).

Courtier: He went ... and besought.—This courtier is not without faith. He believes that Jesus is able to cure his son, and on the strength of that faith comes to ask the Lord to do so. However, unlike the centurion, he does not ask only for healing, but also that the Lord would “come down.” In his mind the two are inextricably linked with one another.

48 Jesus: “Except ye see ... ye will not believe”.—At first glance, the Lord's words seem disconnected from the request to which they respond. What is the connection of this with the request for healing? The courtier is not confronting an issue of belief or not. He already believes enough to call on the name of the Lord. He is simply making a request for his son's healing, and it seems to him that the most natural way for the Lord to heal him is to come. This is not a request for a sign in order to believe (as in Matt 12:38; 16:1), but a request for a need to be met.

To disentangle this, note two things.

1. He makes two requests, not one: a) come down and b) heal my son. The contrast with the synoptic story (where the request is only to heal, not to come) suggests that the Lord's rebuke focuses on the first rather than the second.
2. Note that the Lord issues his rebuke in the plural rather than the singular: “ye,” not “thou.” He is looking beyond the man to a larger group.

I suspect that the group in question is the population of the town to which he is being asked to come, Capernaum. Though many of his disciples were from there, and Matt 9:1 calls it “his city,” there is evidence that it ranks low in its openness to his teaching.

- Matt 11:21-24 lists it with Chorazin and Bethsaida as one of the the towns most resistant to his message.
- The previous mention of Capernaum is in 2:12, which notes that he “continued there not many days.” If lengthening his stay in Samaria reflects their faith, shortening itin Capernaum may reflect their unbelief.
- It is the place where many will turn away from him in connection with the bread of life discourse (6:59, 66).

So perhaps the rebuke is to be understood along these lines: “You people of Capernaum are always asking for signs, but never following through on belief.” This tendency of the Jews to seek after signs is another instance of a Pauline theme (1 Cor 1:22) that John roots in the Lord's earthly teaching. The challenge to the courtier is to decide whether he is more interested in the public miracle or the healing of his son.

49 Courtier: “Come down ere my child die”.—This time, the two requests are not parallel. Coming is subordinated to the purpose of saving the child. Whatever may be the priorities of the people of Capernaum at large, this man’s focus is on his need, not his curiosity.

50 Jesus: “Go thy way; thy son liveth”.—In Matt 8:7, when the Lord learned of the centurion’s need, he offered to come. Here, he refuses to come. But in both cases, he finally sends the petitioner home with the assurance that his request has been granted. “Go thy way” here is *poreuomai* “proceed, continue,” but *upagw* “go away, go home” in Matt 8:13; the Lord’s word here seems a bit gentler, urging the man to a higher level of faith.

We should not soften the Lord’s words into a prediction, “Thy son will live,” as in NIV. They are an act of sovereign creation. “By my fiat, your son hereby lives.” In fact, by using the word “son,” the Lord goes beyond the father’s reference to his “child” (also the servants, in 51). This lad will be the father’s son, his heir and successor. He will not just survive this incident, but grow to maturity.

The promise Christ offers for faith (“thy son liveth”) is coupled with a command he offers for obedience (“go thy way”). This is the usual case. God does not reveal his word to us simply for our intellectual amusement, but in order to direct our lives in keeping with his will.

The man believed ... and went.—The man responds in chiasmic order to the two clauses in the Lord’s response.

1. His faith is grounded in what the Lord said, not in what he did. Like the faith of the Samaritans (4:41), it is a belief based on his words, not his signs, as was the case in Jerusalem (2:23; cf. 4:45).
2. It led to obedience. The Lord said, “Go,” and he went. True belief is always coupled with obedience to the Lord’s authority.

51, The Confirmation

51 As he was now going down.—Cana is at an elevation of about 230m; Capernaum, at the shore of the sea of Galilee, is -210. So he goes down about 440m in 20 miles. It would have been an overnight trip over mountainous terrain.

his servants met him.—They were so excited at the change in the boy’s state that they cannot restrain themselves, and rush to greet their master.

52 the hour.—His interrogation of the servants gives two evidences that the healing is a miracle.

1. The time of the healing corresponded with the time of the Lord’s word to him.
2. He thought that the Lord’s word would only allow the boy to “begin to amend.” In fact, “the fever left him.” It was a sudden, dramatic change, not a gradual one.

himself believed.—This is the same verb in the same tense and mood as in v.50. Yet it is presented as a new event. In fact, given his initial trip to find Jesus, he already had some form of faith at that time. What is the meaning of these repeated instances of “believe”?

Apparently we are to understand these as successive steps in the courtier’s spiritual progress as he grows in faith. John wants us to understand that our initial belief in the Lord Jesus is not the end of the process, but (as ch. 3 in fact states explicitly) more like birth, which is followed by an extended period of growth. And throughout that process, faith is central.

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It may help to distinguish the three instances of faith here on the basis of their *basis*, their *effect* on the man, and their *content*.

Verse	Basis	Effect	Content
47	Report of others (“he heard”)	Came to ask Jesus for help	Jesus can heal my son
50	Word of Jesus	Went home	Jesus has healed my son
52	Report of boy’s healing	Became a follower of Jesus	Jesus is the Messiah

This is not the only place that John deals with multi-stage belief.

- Recall the Samaritans in 4:41-42, where some listened because of the woman’s word, but came to a fuller belief on the basis of the Lord’s own words. (Interestingly, the Samaritans came to the content of the third row in this table after the basis of only the first two.)
- 1 John 5:13 says that the object of John’s epistle is that those who do believe might believe.

And in fact, we are dealing here with another of the many cases in which John is unifying the Lord’s earthly teaching with Paul’s theology. Compare Rom 1:17, “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” The meaning of the expression “from faith to faith” has been extensively debated in the commentators, but the general pattern “from X to X” is common in the Greek Bible, and always indicates progress between two instances or stages of the same thing.

- Most commonly, “from day to day” or (1x) “from generation to generation,” from one period to the next (9/23 instances)
- Then spatially, “from city to city” or “from place to place” (6/23)
- Wine being poured from one vessel into another (2x—might support the notion of “from God’s faithfulness to our faith,” but see metaphors below)
- Metaphorical instances:
 - Psa 84:7, from strength to strength, that is, increasing in strength
 - Jer 9:3, from evil to evil, getting worse and worse
 - 2 Cor 2:16, from life to life, from death to death, successive stages in reprobation or regeneration

Faith is not an on-off switch. It is something that can grow and increase, and the Lord intervenes in our lives to lead us through this growth process.

Cf. 2 Thes 1:3, “your faith groweth exceedingly,” and 1 Thess 3:10, “perfect that which is lacking in your faith.”

and his whole house.—Compare Acts 16:34; 18:8. This involvement of the house indicates that what is involved here is more than just mental acquiescence in the fact of Jesus’ power, but

submission to his claims. There are references in the NT to member of Herod's court being believers (Luke 8:3; Acts 13:1); perhaps this individual is one of them.

54, John's Comment on the Galilee Trip

Finally, John reminds us again of the first miracle at Cana (as at 4:46). This is not the second miracle overall, as 2:23 and 4:45 make clear, but the second one he did after leaving Judaea for Galilee. Thus it emphasizes the relative level of belief outside of "his own place" compared with what he met inside.