

Once is chance, twice is a coincidence. . .

John 4:43-54

November 2, 2025

Today's story is the latest in a series of interactions that Jesus has in John, each one wrestling with the main question that we have been asking, "What is the truth about Jesus?" First Nicodemus has to decide who Jesus is. Then the Samaritans. Finally, the royal official.

The Samaritans believe just because of Jesus' words (although the ability to speak a person's thoughts like Jesus does to the woman is a mark of a prophet), while the Galileans need signs and wonders to believe. . . Jesus has just finished telling his disciples to get their heads up and on a swivel, as the hockey players might say, because the harvest fields are ripe!

But it isn't the people they expect to be ready for harvest who are ready.

It should be the Jews! They had the Law! And salvation comes from them, that is, Jesus himself is a very Jewish Messiah!

Despite these significant advantages, the Jews cannot believe, or won't believe, unless Jesus shows them signs – signs he willingly gives (or why is John writing about them?), but which are then immediately either misunderstood, rejected as coincidence, or miss-associated with the devil!

It is the Samaritans, of all people, who stood ready to be harvested into life and the kingdom! A whole town of them! And now a royal official, most likely a wealthy patron of Herod's court! Gross!

I often feel sorry for the people that come to Jesus and become a sermon illustration. Jesus' words, "You will not believe unless you see signs!" seems awfully harsh! Even so, Jesus goes around doing signs and wonders. John lists seven signs all together, with the expressed purpose of bringing people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, sent by God for the redemption of the world. Why does Jesus comment on the need for signs negatively, and then go ahead and give them?

Signs and wonders are a little bit dangerous, it seems. They can mislead us or distract us. They can feel unfair when one person is healed, but another dies. John shows us a pattern, where Jesus does signs, and people draw different conclusions about what they mean. Some think he is a prophet, some a miracle worker. Others think he is a dark wizard consorting with demons.

According to the New International Version Application Commentary, “Those who witness these signs and who are captive to the darkness of this world will only see deeds of power, not divine deeds of revelation. John therefore is asking us to reflect on the relation among signs and miracles and faith.”¹

One thing is absolutely consistent, though.

Anyone who sees the signs that Jesus does is forced to reckon with what they reveal about Jesus.

For Jesus, the risk is worth the revelation – signs and wonders are given so that those who witness them believe. The signs are given not as deeds of power, but as revelation. We must understand what they reveal.

All of this makes me question why Jesus does not go with the official? Is it coldness? Justice? Revenge? He has the perfect opportunity to travel to Cana with this official, help him understand the healing of his son as a sign, and to reveal his glory! This man comes in humility, and in need. He makes a full day’s journey (if you look, you will see that the servants find him on the road, and he had spoken to Jesus the day before. . .) when his son was at death’s door. What parent leaves their child at that point in time? A desperate one.

But Jesus doesn’t go with him! So why? I think that Jesus gives the man a gift in this. It is a test for sure, but it is also a lesson. He commands healing from a distance not to save himself the effort, nor for convenience. He doesn’t have pressing engagements elsewhere. Instead, I think it is to give something to the father. In Jesus’ refusal to go to the son, he reveals a little bit more truth about who he is than the father currently understands. It is a sign.

The man has come to find a faith healer. He comes, not to have an encounter with God that changes his life or priorities, but instead to get a powerful miracle that fixes something for him. He wants limited engagement. What Jesus asks of him is to go one step further in his journey – to believe that the one he is begging for the life of his son is the author of all life in the first place, God himself. Only God could do what Jesus has declared. That is what this sign shows – That Jesus is not like the rabbi’s and prophets. He is Messiah, God made flesh and dwelling among his creation. At his word alone, his glory of life fills creation, pushing sickness out.

¹ Wilkins, Michael J.; Garland, David E.; Bock, Darrell L.; Burge, Gary M.; Fernando, Ajith. NIVAC Bundle 6: Gospels, Acts (The NIV Application Commentary) (p. 3791). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

Why, then, does a desperate father take Jesus at his word? I've been in arguments with desperate people before, or simply just belligerent ones, mostly under the age of ten. In those situations, especially if I'm the desperate or belligerent one, I want to get a contract signed in blood for assurance. Or I keep wheedling until Jesus comes with me on my terms.

Not this official. He, like the Samaritans, takes Jesus at his word. Amazing.

Now, on his journey home, what is going through his head? Is he confident? Or is he more like I would be – second-guessing himself every other step? Then his servants find him with amazing news!

But he has to be sure. So he asks, when did this happen?

Why ask that?

He's double checking. If his son recovered before he talked to Jesus, what would that mean? Would it just be coincidence? Or divine intervention even before he asks for it? Was this whole journey and risk even worth it?

But it was the exact hour. This could be a coincidence. Clocks were not finely tuned Swiss watches back then. No atomic clock telling us Greenwich Mean Time to the nth of a second. Maybe it really was just the wonder of a human body recovering.

Wisdom always demands a choice. The signs are there, right in front of him. The challenge is made. What will he determine based on his knowledge?

It would have been so much easier for him if Jesus had just come with him. But by sending him away with nothing more than a promise and a track record of stories, God has given us a story with us as the main character, feeling the tension crackle of felt need and a distant, invisible God.

In Carmen Imes' book, *Being the Image of God*, she says that "Wisdom always involves a choice."

The village of Capernaum was one of the main places of Jesus' ministry, seeing many of the signs and teachings of Jesus. But they rejected him. Jesus knows that a prophet is too often not received in their hometown – familiarity brings with it opportunities to brush off miracles as coincidence when we think we know someone. Brush off enough events as chance, and it becomes impossible to see anything different. Knowledge of Jesus, such as in his hometown, is not enough.

The Jews had a wisdom saying that once is chance, twice is coincidence, but three times is the beginning of a pattern. The official acted on the things he'd heard and maybe even seen – a wedding in Cana with amazing wine, whipping the merchants and animals out of the temple, and signs of power from the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Are these things chance? Or coincidence? Or do they form a pattern that reveals something too exciting to dare hope for? Rather than decide that these were chance or coincidence, his desperation moves him to take a long journey to Cana to beg for healing for his son. Having taken this initial step of faith, he builds on it by accepting Jesus' power to heal because of who he is. He sees more than a deed of power. He sees Jesus revealed, the Creator, the Word of God made flesh, even when he is not physically present.

We are the royal official. We have needs that can be fulfilled through miracles, yet we want power without revelation. We seek Jesus out for a one-off miracle, and Jesus invites us to believe in his word as Creator God, and follow him.

I suspect we are also the Galileans – those who do not receive a hometown prophet. In our desire to understand, we no longer see a demon in every shadow, nor an act of God in every found sock. We may have taken this too far, though. We explain or rationalize away so many acts of God that this becomes our default, and we can no longer see God revealed at all! For all this the signs are there, persistent, quietly demanding that we understand them rightly.

The complexity of the universe operating with a precision that defies any other explanation. This is a sign.

We know the difference between good and evil because it has been defined for us. This is a sign.

We are hungry, and food exists. We are thirsty, and water exists. We die without community, and love exists. These are signs, that we desire what is available, and what is available satisfies our desire.

We are compelled to worship. Does God exist?

The more we practice looking for God around us, the easier God is to see. I've mentioned gratitude journals before. Whatever form it takes – a journal, a list on your phone, a regular phone call with a friend. My son surprised me this summer after returning from camp by asking me, out of the blue, "Where have you seen God in the last couple of days?" Build a habit to answer that question regularly. This resets our default vision to see the signs, and more importantly, the God that gives them.

God may be silent. Or distant. He might not heal you, or banish your grief, pain, or loneliness. These are the things that we want. Even in God's mysterious silence on these needs, John has given not one, not two, and not even three signs. He gives seven signs that reveal Jesus, the living God present with us, dying to rescue us from sin, rising from the dead to fill creation with

his glory. The signs are there that Jesus, God's word made flesh, is powerful even in his physical invisibility. All who confess their need for Jesus, who look to him for forgiveness and for life, are saved by his power.

Is that enough?

As Mark mentioned last week, we often assume that we all have a relationship with Jesus. But assumptions are often mistaken. As with last week, I am going to pray a prayer that you can repeat in your own mind and heart if you feel a nudge to begin a relationship with Jesus this morning.

For those of us who have followed for a long time, I'm going to pray that your vision is refreshed to see the signs of his presence.

Lord Jesus Christ, I believe that you created me with a purpose, to be in relationship with you. I believe your word, that you will give me true life because of your great love for me. Forgive me for any way I have lived against your purpose for me, and for your creation. I believe that once confessed, you remove any guilt or condemnation from me, and I will be with you in life, and after death. Fill me with your Holy Spirit, and show me your ways, your purpose, and your provision for the rest of my days.