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The Nobleman's Son: John 4:46-54

In the Gospel of John, fourth chapter, verses 46-54, Jesus heals the son of a nobleman. The nobleman comes to Jesus asking for His help. Even though Jesus is in a different town than the nobleman's son, Jesus heals him that very hour. The main themes and significance of this story are the nobleman's faith and Jesus' universal healing power – even His gift of eternal life.

Contextual Analysis

Historical Context. Many of the Jews of this time period were anxiously looking for a messiah to free them from Rome's empire. When Jesus came, many did not accept Him as the Messiah because he did not promise them earthly glory and freedom. But through His miracles and signs He showed them that He could give them eternal life and spiritual freedom. Each miracle symbolized His divinity and power, but many of the Jews did not accept Him.¹ A messiah promising eternal life and spiritual triumph, rather than earthly glory and freedom, was surprising and distasteful to many of the Jews who did not accept Him. This specific event occurred while Jesus was in Cana, after he had traveled through Samaria. He had already become somewhat known for His miracles – this is the reason that the nobleman sought Him.

Literary Context. The sign or miracle of the nobleman's son is the second sign referenced in the Gospel of John. Both the first sign (Jesus turning water into wine, 2:1-11) and this second sign (the nobleman's son, 4:46-54) took place in Cana of Galilee. The two signs at Cana frame Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and his conversation with the woman at the well. While the story itself is captivating, its placement in the text seems to suggest that John's

¹ McConkie, Bruce R. *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, Vol. 1: The Gospels*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft. 158-159.

purpose was to show that Jesus came to bring salvation and eternal life to everyone, not just the oppressed people of the Jews. In John 3:1-21, Jesus speaks with Nicodemus, a Jew. Then, in 4:4-42, He speaks with a Samaritan woman at the well. Finally, in these verses (4:46-54), he ministers to a nobleman. In the New American translation of the Bible the nobleman is called a royal official.² Some scholars, tying this story with similar stories in the synoptic gospels (see Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10), think that this would have been a non-Jewish official, which would point out the fact that Jesus ministered to Jews as well as non-Jews. Others simply define him as a member of Herod's household, and say that he was indeed a Jew.³ Whatever the case, it is shown that Jesus came for all kinds of people.

Formal Analysis

The style of this passage is predominantly narrative, and includes dialogue between Jesus and the nobleman. Often the Gospel of John uses generic references to people. For example, "disciples" is written instead of apostles, or "woman" instead of a name. One explanation for this is that by making it more generic, the reader can more easily imagine himself as being one of the followers of Jesus or one of the people in Jesus' day. In this passage, the terminology is likewise: the nobleman is never called by name, nor is the nobleman's son.

Detailed Analysis

In verses 46-48, Jesus enters Cana of Galilee. The phrase "where he made the water wine" refers to His first sign, or miracle, also at Cana. At Cana, a nobleman from Capernaum meets Jesus and asks Him to come and heal his son. The nobleman had heard of other miracles

² Brown, Raymond Edward. *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1988. 39.

³ Morris, Leon. *The Gospel according to John: Revised Edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995. 255.

that Jesus had performed and came hoping for Jesus' help. Jesus then speaks to the multitude⁴ around Him and makes the observation that that they won't believe Him unless they see signs and wonders. He speaks to the people in general; however, there are those who do believe even without seeing.

In verses 49-50, the nobleman again pleads for Jesus' help, and Jesus comforts Him and promises healing to his son. Jesus tells him to continue on his way. Not only is this proof of Jesus' healing power, even at a distance; this is a test of the nobleman's faith: he had come all this way, and should he return without tangible evidence of relief? He expected Jesus to come down to Capernaum with him and heal his son (4:47). Even so, the nobleman shows faith in Jesus and obeys Jesus' instruction. In verses 51-52, the nobleman meets his slaves while on his way to Capernaum, who tell him that his son's fever had gone away at the same time that Jesus had spoken to the nobleman. Not only do they say that he was healed, but they say, "Thy son liveth." This is probably recorded by John to emphasize life – especially the eternal life found through Jesus Christ.⁵ This emphasis on life is contained throughout the Gospel of John.

Verse 53 tells of the nobleman's conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his whole household's conversion. Because of the sign, and because of the nobleman's faith, the son was healed and they all believed. Verse 54 concludes by naming this sign the second miracle that Jesus did. It is important to note that it is not the second miracle he actually performed, only the second miracle recorded in the Gospel of John. Other signs are referenced but not reported (see, for example, John 4:45).⁶

Synthesis

⁴ The plural form of "you" is used in John 4:48. Morris, Leon. (referenced above). 256.

⁵ Morris, Leon. (referenced above). 259.

⁶ Morris, Leon. 259.

This passage of the Gospel of John tells a wonderful story of faith and healing. The nobleman who came to Jesus asked for healing for his son. Jesus mercifully restored his health, as the nobleman showed faith. Jesus showed his power to heal and work miracles, and John, from this story, emphasized the eternal life that Christ offers.

Reflection

The account of the nobleman's son is as much about the Savior and the nobleman himself as it is about the healed son. Christ's divinity, He being the Son of God, is a truth that is especially emphasized in the Gospel of John. Through this miracle of saving the nobleman's son from death, He shows that He has the power to bring all men into eternal life – that is, the state of exaltation and happiness in being with God and enjoying the kind of life that He lives. This is through Christ's atoning sacrifice and through our obedience to His word. Through the atonement, not only does Christ give us eternal life, but he heals us. The nobleman's son was not dead yet; he was suffering with fever and needed healing. So each of us can be healed through Jesus Christ – healed of sorrows, weaknesses, and difficulties. As the nobleman did, we each need to have faith if we are to receive blessings from the Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ. The account of the nobleman's faith is applicable, even today, as a message of faith and life eternal.