

Staring Death in the Face

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, this morning, with the Lord's help for a short while, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read in the Gospel according to John. John chapter 4, and if we read again at verse 46.

John chapter 4, at verse 46. It says, He was at the point of death.

You know, this year has been a year in which we have all been staring death in the face, because we've been repeatedly reminded about the frailty and the fragility of life.

We won't remember it, but it was on the 5th of March this year that the first person in the United Kingdom died of COVID-19. It was a woman in her 70s from Reading.

And since then, many, many people have fallen victim to this invisible enemy, and they have been added to the coronavirus death toll. And you know, what's remarkable is that throughout this year, death has been staring us in the face.

[1 : 29] Because, you know, every 24 hours, we've been given an update on how many people have tested positive for COVID-19, and how many people have been hospitalised by COVID-19, and also how many people have died because of COVID-19.

Of course, at first, it was a bit of a shock and a worry hearing this death toll rising. But, you know, as the weeks and months have gone by, I don't know about you, but I've sadly become accustomed to this daily briefing on the news.

It's just part of the news at 6 o'clock every evening, where we hear about the cases and casualties of COVID-19. But, you know, the danger is that as time goes on with things getting gradually worse again, and the restrictions increasing again, you know, the danger is that we become complacent and even casual about the coronavirus.

But the truth is, death is still staring us in the face. And our daily briefing of the cases and casualties of COVID-19, they're there to remind us all about the risk and the reality of this virus.

Yes, the cases and casualties of COVID-19, they may just be numbers on a counter or statistics on a chart. But, you know, when we actually stop and think about it, we all know that included in these numbers and statistics are names and people and lives and relatives of loved ones.

[3 : 03] And, you know, in this life prior to COVID-19, these numbers that we see every single day, they were once parents and grandparents. They were brothers and sisters.

They were children and grandchildren. They were friends and neighbours and work colleagues. Some of them were frontline doctors and nurses. Some were NHS workers. Some were key workers.

You know, they're not just numbers on a counter or statistics on a chart. They were the cases and casualties of this virus. They were the cases and casualties of COVID-19.

And they ought to make us never forget that 2020 has been the year in which we have all, as a nation, been staring death in the face.

And, you know, the same was true for this royal official. Because, you know, as he looked at the bed of his dying son, death was staring him in the face.

- [4 : 01] Death was staring him in the face. But, you know, what's remarkable is that as death stared him in the face, death was the means for the meeting and the miracle with Jesus.
- Death was the means for the meeting and the miracle with Jesus. And that's what I want us to think about this morning. They're out headings this morning.
- The means, the meeting and the miracle. The means, the meeting and the miracle. So, first of all, the means. Look at verse 43.
- It says, He's a evangelist.
- He introduces this section by informing us that after Jesus had stayed in Samaria for two days, he returned to Galilee. Because you remember that it was when Jesus was in Samaria that a woman with a past met Jesus at a well with a past.
- [5 : 23] The woman of Samaria had half an hour with Jesus at Jacob's well. And that half an hour with Jesus, it changed her life. Because she became one of the first gospel missionaries.
- And she went to her hometown. And she spoke to the people of her town. And she said to them, Come, see a man who told me all the things that I ever did. Is not this the Christ?
- And as we saw earlier in the chapter, this missionary endeavor of the Samaritan woman, it led to a Samaritan revival with many people coming out to meet Jesus.
- But now John tells us that after two days of being in Samaria, Jesus, he traveled north towards Cana in Galilee. And John, he also gives us this little note that Jesus bypassed his hometown of Nazareth, which was on the way to Samaria.
- From Samaria to Galilee, you had to pass through Nazareth. So Jesus went round Nazareth towards Cana in Galilee. And John says the reason for this was, in verse 44, For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.
- [6 : 37] But then John, he goes on to remind us who this Jesus really is. Because he says in verse 45, So John says that the Galileans, they welcomed Jesus because they witnessed what Jesus did at the Passover.
- And they watched what Jesus did at the wedding. Because if you remember back in chapter 2, it was at the feast of the Passover in Jerusalem, that Jesus was cleaning church.
- Jesus cleansed the temple by chasing out the merchants and the money changers. And then the Galileans, they welcomed Jesus because they had witnessed what Jesus did at the Passover.
- But they also welcomed Jesus because they watched what Jesus did at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Because you remember, it was at the wedding in Cana of Galilee that Jesus revealed his identity as the bridegroom of the church when he turned water into wine.
- But of course, by now, it's a year later. The happy couple at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, they've been married for a year. They've celebrated their first anniversary.
- [8 : 00] And here is Jesus. He's returning to Cana. But what John is doing here by saying that the Galileans welcomed Jesus because they had witnessed what he did at the Passover and watched what he did at the wedding, John is reminding us.
- He's reminding us once again who this Jesus really is. Because you remember, that's why John wrote his gospel. John wrote his gospel in order to make sure that we get the identity of Jesus right.
- Because if we get the identity of Jesus wrong, we'll misunderstand the gospel and we'll fail to see that Jesus is the only way of salvation.
- And one way in which John ensures that we get the identity of Jesus right is by drawing our attention to seven signs and seven sayings throughout his gospel.

We'll see this time and time again as we go through the gospel of John. John recorded seven signs which Jesus performed and seven sayings which Jesus pronounced.

[9 : 06] And John uses these seven signs and seven sayings in order to reveal and represent the identity of Jesus as the eternal Son of God.

John used these seven signs and seven sayings in order to remind and reaffirm to us that Jesus is the sinless Savior and sacrifice of sinners.

Jesus is the sinless Savior and sacrifice for sinners. And so when Jesus came to Cana in Galilee, he was returning there.

The first time he came to Cana in Galilee was when he did his first sign, when he turned water into wine. And now as Jesus returns to Cana of Galilee, he performs a second sign.

He resurrects the son of the king's official. Where we're told in verse 54, we're told there that this was the second sign that Jesus performed.

[10 : 06] But you know, as we said earlier, as this royal official looked at the bed of his dying son, death was staring him in the face. But you know, it was as death stared him in the face that death was the means to bring him to Jesus.

Because you know, for this royal official, the truth is, were it not for the helpless situation that he found himself in, he would never have come to Jesus.

As a royal official, he was a servant of King Herod. Not the same King Herod who tried to kill Jesus as a baby. That was Herod the Great. This was Herod Antipas, his son.

And Herod Antipas was the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. He was the Herod who allied himself with Pilate at the crucifixion of Jesus. And that was the company that this royal official kept.

It was a company against the Christ. It was a company against the Christ. And they were against the Christ not only because of his message and his miracles, but also because the people wanted to make Jesus king instead of Herod Antipas.

[11 : 20] And so this royal official was in a company against the Christ. But more than that, he was not only a man under authority, he was also a man with authority.

Because in many ways you could say that this royal official, he was like a prime minister. He was a Jewish governor. He was a direct servant of the king.

Therefore, this royal official, he was a man with position. He was a man with power. He was a man with prosperity. He was a man with prestige. He was a man who had riches.

He had reason. He had reputation. He had respect. He was a man who thought that he had authority over his own life and also authority over the lives of others.

But, you know, when his son became ill and when his son lay dying at the point of death, when he was staring death in the face, this royal official came to discover that his position, his power, his prosperity, and his prestige, it was all pointless.

[12 : 23] And as death stared him in the face, he saw that his riches, his reason, his reputation, and his respect, it was now rubbish. They were of no use to him as he was challenged and confronted by the reality of death.

And no doubt, as a Jew, this royal official would have tried to see if his religion would help his dying son. More so, he would have tried using his riches to help his dying son.

He would have paid for every physician, I'm sure, to prescribe every drug in order to deal with his son's illness. And out of love and desperation for his beloved son, the royal official, he would have spent all that he had in an attempt to make his son better, but it was only making him worse.

And you know, fearful about his son's future, this royal official, he came to realise that there are things in life that religion can't prevent, and there are things in life that riches can't buy.

There are things in life that riches can't buy, and religion can't prevent. And you know, my friends, so many people today, so many people today still think that the problems in our lives can either be solved by having enough religion, or by having enough riches.

[13 : 48] But the truth is, there are some problems that religion can't go near, and there are some problems that riches can't even touch. And that's because the sins, sicknesses, sufferings, and sorrows of this life, they are too big for religion and riches to deal with.

But they're not too big for Jesus. They're not too big for Jesus. Because what we see in the life of this father, who was bound up in the care and compassion of his own son, what we see is that his son's illness was the means of bringing him to Jesus.

His son's illness was the means of bringing this man to Jesus. Because had it not been for all these circumstances, we have to question whether he would have come to Jesus at all.

Had the royal official's son not lay dying in his family home, would he have ever come out to meet Jesus? Would the king's governor have ever left his company against the Christ and put his royal position in jeopardy if his son was well?

Would this man have ever come to Jesus and thrown himself down at the feet of Jesus, crying as a father bound up in the interests of his own beloved son? Would he have ever come begging him, begging Jesus to come to his house and heal his son?

[15 : 17] I don't think so. I don't think he would have ever come near Jesus if it wasn't for his son being ill. But you know, when he was emptied of his own resources and emptied of his own efforts and emptied of the authority over his own life and the life of his own son and hitting absolute rock bottom, this man came to Jesus.

He came to Jesus. My friend, at the moment of his extremity, he came to the only one who could help him. He realized that his need had become so great and that to whom else could he go but to Jesus.

His son's illness, my friend, it was the means of bringing this man to Jesus. And you know, my friend, maybe when you look at the situations of sin, sickness, suffering or sorrow in your life, maybe you can say that that was the means.

Yes, that was the means of bringing me to Jesus. Because had the Lord not brought these things into your life, had the Lord not brought that sin or sickness or suffering or sorrow into your life, maybe you would say to yourself, well, I would never have cried to the Lord for help.

I would never have opened the Bible for answers. I would never have come to church. But the Lord brought these things into your life and this was your path and these were your tears and this was your circumstances, which he appointed for you in order to bring you to himself.

[16 : 57] They were the means of bringing you to Jesus. You know, my friends, sometimes the situations of sin, sickness, suffering and sorrow, they are the means of bringing us to Jesus.

They are the means of bringing us to Jesus. You know, it was my good friend J.C. Ryle. I can never get away from quoting him.

He said, Affliction is one of God's medicines. By it, he often teaches lessons which would be learned in no other way. By it, he often draws souls away from sin and the world which would otherwise have perished.

Health is a great blessing, he says, but sanctified disease is greater. Prosperity and worldly comfort are what all naturally desire. But losses and crosses are far better for us if they lead us to Christ.

My friends, sometimes the situations of sin, sickness, suffering or sorrow, they are the means of bringing us to Jesus. And that's what we see here because as death stared this royal official in the face, death was the means for the meeting with Jesus.

[18 : 14] And that's what we see secondly. We see the meeting, the means and the meeting. The meeting, look at verse 47. It says, When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

So Jesus said to him, Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe. The official said to him, Sir, come down before my child dies. So when this royal official realised that King Herod could do nothing for his dying son, he came to King Jesus.

And what's remarkable is that the royal official, he left the bedside of his dying son, not sure that he would ever see him alive again. And he travels 15 miles from Capernaum to Cana.

And he goes to where Jesus is. You know, his desperation and his determination was such that he left everything to find Jesus.

He left everything to find Jesus. And you know, my friend, I look at this man, and all I see is a father who thought he was in control of his family, his finances, and his fitness.

[19 : 30] And yet, in a moment, this father became aware that he was staring death in the face. And as a father, you know, he would have done anything to make his son better.

As a father, he would have moved land and sea to spare his son's life. As a father, he would have travelled to the ends of the earth to find a remedy to his son's ruin.

As a father, he would have even have preferred to die himself than for it to happen to his own son. And yet, as a father, he was made to realise that it's only Christ who can deal with this crisis.

It's only Christ who can deal with this crisis. And you know, sometimes that's the way it is, my friend. It's only Christ who can deal with the crisis. You know, we can sometimes think that we're self-made and self-confident and self-controlled.

We can think that we're in control of our family and our finances and our fitness. And yet, in a moment, in a moment, things can change to the point that we're staring death in the face.

[20 : 35] And we're made to realise how helpless we are. And you know, the thing is about this passage, the royal official's son, he wasn't old, he was young.

He wasn't poor, he was rich. And yet, death was no respecter of family, finance or fitness. In fact, one commentator that I read, he solemnly wrote, he wrote, the first grave that was ever dug on this earth was that of a young man.

The first person who ever died was not a father, but a son. And you know, my friend, when we're left staring death in the face, you know, we feel absolutely crippled.

And we're brought to the end of ourselves, realising that we're in control of nothing. And that without Jesus, we have nothing. But you know, like this father, we want to do the best for our children, don't we?

We want to spare them from the sins and sicknesses and sufferings and sorrows of this life. And we would rather for anything, anything to happen, we would rather for anything to happen to us than for it to happen to them.

[21 : 50] But you know, my friends, sometimes it takes the sins, sicknesses, sufferings and sorrows of our children to bring them to Christ. And sometimes the Lord uses the sins, sicknesses, sufferings and sorrows of our children to bring us to Christ.

And that's what we see here. Because as this royal official stood staring death in the face, his son's sickness, it brought him to his knees. Somewhere he wouldn't have gone otherwise.

And yet it brought him to his knees. And by that point, he didn't care about his riches or his reason or his reputation or his respect. All he cared about was about his dying son and how his dying son needed Jesus.

And you know, as you read this, you can feel the care and the compassion of this father. Because we're told that when he finds Jesus, he runs up to Jesus. He's travelled all this distance and he falls on his knees before Jesus and he just begs Jesus.

He begs him for help. You know, the ESV, it says that the royal official asked Jesus for help. But it's much stronger than that. It's he begged Jesus for help.

[23 : 06] He begged him. More than that, he repeatedly begged Jesus for help. The royal official did as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Ask and it will be given.

Seek and you will find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. And the one who knocks, it will be opened.

And you know, as a father, this man on his knees before Jesus, he was interceding on behalf of his son. He was pleading for the life of his son.

And you know, my friend, if you're a parent or a grandparent, or even if you're pregnant, then you and I have been reminded that we have a great responsibility to intercede on behalf of our children and grandchildren.

You know, that's what this passage reminds me. We have a responsibility to come like this royal official, pleading and praying that Jesus will save our children and our grandchildren.

[24 : 10] Because the truth is, the world wants them. The devil wants them. And we have a responsibility to teach and to train our children, not only about life, but we also have a responsibility to teach and train our children about the Lord.

In fact, that's what many of us have vowed in our baptism, haven't we? We promised that we would endeavor to instruct our children and intercede for our children.

We promised that we would teach and train our children to look and to listen and to love and to live for Jesus. We promised to teach and to train them to follow the Lord.

Do you know, there's a brilliant book that I would encourage all parents to read. It's a book called Parenting by God's Promises by Joel Beakey.

Parenting by God's Promises, and it's by Joel Beakey. And just to give you a tiny snippet of what Joel Beakey writes, he writes, The act of baptism confirms God's promises to our children and places them under obligation to seek his kingdom.

[25 : 24] And the salvation offered to them in Christ. Growing up in the community of the church, they are nurtured by the prayers of believers and by the preaching and teaching of God's word, including its rich invitations and solemn warnings.

Their parents are bound to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The congregation to which they belong is also responsible for their evangelization and instruction.

Our children, say speak ye, are our most cherished mission field. Therefore, we must pray for God to do for them what we cannot do.

We must pray to the Lord. We must intercede on their behalf, pleading that the Lord would spare them and save them. My friend, we have a responsibility to come like this royal official, pleading and praying that Jesus will save our children.

But you know, listen how Jesus responds in verse 48. We're told that Jesus said to him, Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.

[26 : 34] But you know, what's interesting about Jesus' response is that Jesus didn't say this to the royal official. Because when he says, Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.

The you is plural. It's not singular. The you is plural, meaning that Jesus is addressing all the Galileans. And he's rebuking them. Because it seems that as Jesus' ministry progressed, they were becoming more obsessed with the sensational and the spectacular, rather than the silent and the simple.

They had seen water being turned into wine, these Galileans. And now they were looking for more signs and wonders as evidence for believing in Jesus Christ for salvation.

But as Jesus said on another occasion, An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign. But no sign shall be given.

My friend, if you want a sign, in order to prove that God exists, or that Jesus is real, or that the Bible is true, Jesus says to you, No sign shall be given.

[27 : 46] Because, you know, the miracle of salvation, what Jesus is saying here is that the miracle of salvation is not about the sensational and the spectacular. It's about the silent and the simple faith in Jesus Christ.

The miracle of salvation is not about the sensational and the spectacular. It's about silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ. It's not about seeing signs and wonders as evidence and proof to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

It's about silently and simply taking Jesus at his word. And that's what we see lastly. The miracle.

The miracle. The means, the meeting, and the miracle. The miracle. Look at verse 49. The official said to Jesus, Sir, or Lord, come down before my child dies.

Jesus said to him, Go, your son will live. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.

[28 : 54] So he asked them the hour when he began to get better. And they said to him, Yesterday at the seventh hour, the fever left him. The father knew that that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, Your son will live.

And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. I don't know if you saw in this past week, I don't know if you saw in the news, that NASA, they made what they call a historic landing on an asteroid in space, nearly 200 million miles away, where there was this robotic spacecraft that travelled through space for three years and landed on an asteroid 200 million miles away.

And it landed only for a few seconds in order to collect some rocks and dirt before blasting off again and returning to Earth. And it'll be back here in 2023.

But you know, you have to ask the question, Well, why did they do it? Why all the energy and the effort and the expense? And the answer they were giving was that they wanted to try and prove how life on Earth began.

They want to find out the origin of life. And you know, as I watched these astronauts celebrating at just picking up some dirt of an asteroid 200 million miles away, do you know, I felt sorry for them.

[30 : 24] Because the answer to their questions, it wasn't to be found 200 million miles away on an asteroid. The answer to their questions, it doesn't require energy, effort, or even expense.

Because the answer to their questions can be found by opening the Bible. The answer to their questions can be found in the Word of God. Where is the origin of life?

Genesis 1 verse 1, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And you know, in many ways, these scientists and astronauts, they're just like these Galileans here in John 4.

Because these Galileans, they're looking for signs and wonders as evidence and proof to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. And yet the Bible teaches us, and this passage is reminding us, that the miracle of salvation is not about the sensational.

It's not about the spectacular. It's just about the silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ. The miracle of salvation is not about the sensational and spectacular.

[31 : 33] It's about silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ. And that's what we can see in the life of this father who was concerned about his dying son. He had been staring death in the face.

But when Jesus gave the order, Jesus gave the order, go, your son will live. And when Jesus gave that order, this royal official took Jesus at his word.

He silently and simply believed that what Jesus said was true. And you know, my friend, that's all that's required of you in order to be saved.

You don't need to see signs. You don't need to witness wonders. You don't need to experience the sensational. You don't need to have this spectacular conversion.

All you need is silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ. All you need is silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ.

[32 : 38] All you need, my friend, is to come to Jesus where you are, right here, right now, and ask him to have mercy upon you.

Ask him to forgive you, to cleanse you, to make you his, and live according to that confession. That's all you need.

All you need is silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ. But you know, and with this I'll close, you know what I love about this royal official? We don't really know much about him, but what I love about this man is that when this father took Jesus at his word, when he committed his life to Jesus Christ, it had an impact upon his whole family.

This father's faith impacted his family. This father's faith impacted his family because we're told that his son not only believed, his son not only believed, but he himself believed and his household.

He himself believed and his household. The father's faith impacted his family. And you know, my unconverted friend, you think about the impact that your commitment to Jesus Christ will have upon your home and your family.

[34 : 05] You think about the impact that that will have upon them. Of course, it doesn't mean that you'll be free from sin, sickness, suffering, or sorrow. But it does mean that with death staring us all in the face, through your experience and your example, your family will witness.

What will they witness? They will witness the miracle of salvation. And it's to be found not in the spectacular or the sensational, but in the silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ.

My friend, I'd encourage you this morning to commit your life to Jesus Christ. Not seeking signs and wonders, but to come silently and simply committing your life to Jesus by faith.

My friend, don't put it off any longer because death is staring us in the face. Death is reminding us that life is uncertain. Death is sure.

Sin is the cause. Christ is the cure. You come to this Jesus silently and simply by faith in him and him alone.

[35 : 22] Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us and let us pray together. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for the wonder of the gospel.

A gospel that reminds us that we don't need the spectacular or the sensational. All we need is silent and simple faith in Jesus Christ.

Help us, Lord, we pray, to come, to come to this Jesus, to come to him with our sins, our sicknesses, our sufferings and our sorrows, to come to him knowing that he is the one we need to come to.

He is the one who is able to meet us at our point of need. He is the one who is able to encourage us and to strengthen us and to bless us. And Lord, remember us then, we pray.

Remember, Lord, those in our homes and in our families, those who are struggling, those who are sick, those who are suffering. But Lord, we pray particularly this morning for those who are lost, those who need Jesus, or that thou wouldst bring them, that thou wouldst use means in order to bring them to Jesus, that they would come on bended knee, falling before this wonderful Saviour, acknowledging that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[36 : 44] Lead us and guide us this day and keep us for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we're going to bring our service to a conclusion this morning by singing to God's praise in Psalm 103.

Psalm 103, we're singing in the Sing Psalms version and we're singing from the beginning and we're singing down to the verse marked 11. Psalm 103 and we're singing from the beginning.

This is a psalm that reminds us that our God is a gracious God and he's one who heals our diseases. He's one who forgives our sins. He's one who helps us in our distresses.

He's one who's able to take our sins away from us as far as east is distant from the west. He's our gracious God. And Psalm 103, it encourages us and exhorts us to praise God my soul with all my heart.

Let me exalt his holy name. Forget not all his benefits. His praise my soul in song proclaim. The Lord forgives you all your sins and heals your sickness and distress.

[37 : 54] Your life he rescues from the grave and crowns you in his tenderness. Psalm 103 to God's praise. Praise God my soul with all my heart and he exalts his holy name.

forget not all his benefits. His praise my soul in song proclaim.

The Lord forgives you all your sins and yields your sickness and distress.

your life your life he rescues from the grave and crowns you in his tenderness.

And crowns you in his tenderness. He satisfies eyes your deep desires from his unending source of good so that just like the evil's strength your youthful maker is renewed.

[39 : 21] the Lord is known for righteousness and justice to the God draw upon the Lord's dream in your midst ways his mighty deeds to his self-sons.

his mighty deeds to Israel's sons. The Lord is mercy full and kind to anger slow and full of grace he will not constantly recruit for in his anger height his face he does not punish his feet forgive our sins their just reward and raise his love as high as hand towards all those who fear the Lord towards all those who fear the Lord