

the  
difference



John 4:46-54

# Desperate Measures

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
John 4:46-54

January 15, 2017

Can you think of a time when you were desperate: desperate for a job, desperate to find a mate, desperate to get into a certain college, desperate to make a grade or a team or a friend?

How about desperate for a cure? This desperation may be the granddaddy of them all. Serious illness renders us desperate. When we are critically ill, we will try anything and do anything. We will spare no expense at finding a cure.



The father in our story is desperate. His son has a high fever and is close to death. This father has heard reports of a miracle

worker who can heal the sick. Well, desperate times call for desperate measures. This father, an official in the king's service, walks 20 miles from Capernaum, where he lives, to Cana, where Jesus is residing.

I bet he rehearses what he wants to say on the road from Capernaum to Cana. When he arrives, he wastes no time in seeking out Jesus and begging him to come down and heal his son.

What Jesus says to him strikes me as abrupt, almost rude: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" (4:48).

The "you" in Jesus' reply is in the plural tense meaning "you people." His words not only address this desperate father in our story, but the surrounding crowd as well. Jesus calls out this tendency in us to believe based on miracles

alone. Jesus is already softening this man up to believe in something beyond miracles.

The father disregards what Jesus has just said to him. He simply restates his request: “Sir, come down before my little boy dies” (4:49). The



desperate emotions of this man lift right off the page to us as readers.

Jesus tells the man, “Go, your son will live” (4:50). While he ignores the man’s request to come down to Capernaum, Jesus promises healing for his son.

This father believes Jesus. He takes Jesus at his word. Something in what Jesus says to him gives him confidence to believe. He returns home believing. Not a mature faith, but a beginning belief.

While traveling home to Capernaum, the man’s servants intercept him. They deliver the stunning news that his son has made an extraordinary recovery. The father asks about the time his son’s fever broke. One o’clock yesterday afternoon, they tell him, the precise time Jesus spoke his healing words. Now, the man believes. I mean, he *really* believes in Jesus, he and his entire household (4:53).

John closes our story with the words, “This was the second sign Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee” (4:54). The story of Jesus changing water into wine in John 2 was the first sign. This story serves as Jesus’ second sign.



Miracles are *signs* in John's gospel. There are seven miracles or signs in the first half of John's gospel. Jesus miracles are not only signs that

point us to what he does, they reveal something important about who Jesus is. They reveal his identity.

John tells the second sign story in John 4 in obvious parallel to the first sign story in John 2. Consider that John begins this story in chapter 4 with the words, "Jesus came again to Cana where he had changed the water into wine" (4:46). Then, he closes with the words, "This was the second sign Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee" (4:54). John begins and ends this second sign story with a reference back to this first sign story. John wants his readers to see these two stories as interrelated.

Both stories emphasize the importance of believing. When Jesus changes water into wine, John tells us, "His disciples believed him" (2:11). In this second story, John concludes by telling us "The man believed, along with his entire household" (4:53). The disciples believe and this man believes.

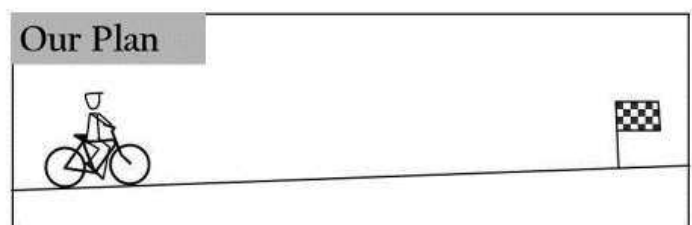
*Believe* is a critical word in John's gospel. It appears 98 times in a span of 21 chapters. I count it seven times in John 3 and another seven times in John 4. *Believe* is a verb expressing action. It is not a noun. We are not giving mere mental assent to a set of beliefs. We believe in Jesus. We trust him and rely on his word.

I want you to fast forward with me to the very end of John's gospel. This is the closest thing to a purpose statement found anywhere in John's gospel: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31). John writes his gospel so we will believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. This believing often links with life in John's gospel. Believing in Jesus results in receiving what Jesus wants to give us.

Pay close attention to the way Jesus answers this man's request. He fulfills his desire to heal his son, yet he declines the invitation to go down with him to Capernaum. "Come down and heal my son," the man requests. "Go, your son will live," is the way Jesus satisfies his request. "You come down" versus "you go."

We come once more to the *so-what* portion of this sermon. So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

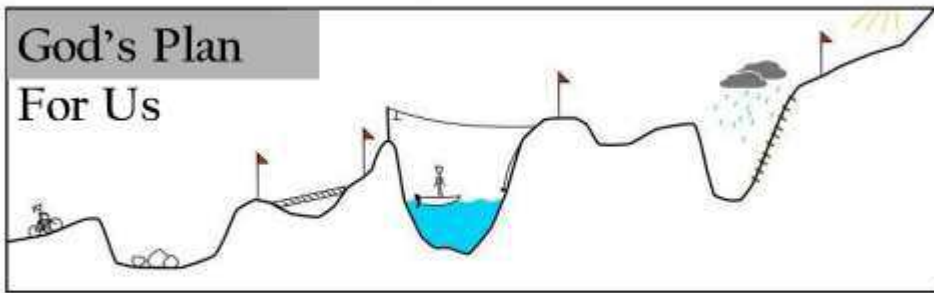
I have shared this simple drawing with you previously in a sermon, but it bears mentioning here.



This drawing perfectly captures the plan we have for our lives. You will notice this plan is a straight-line progression from start to finish. I expect God and Jesus to make my life smooth-sailing and trouble-free. I have clear expectations for how I think my life should go. Isn't God's job to make me happy?

My timetable probably looks pretty much like your timetable. My timetable is immediate. I expect answers to

my prayers on time and on budget. Lord, you know how I hate to wait.



This second drawing is far more accurate and realistic. God's will for my life is not a straight-line progression from one happy event to

the next. God's will is more often circuitous, filled with unexpected turns and surprises. It is not as though God enjoys keeping me guessing. The problem is that my finite brain cannot conceive of anything outside my own self-serving, frame of reference.

Can I let go of my timetable and my agenda to trust Jesus' good purposes for my life? Can I let go of my preconceived notions of how my life ought to play out?

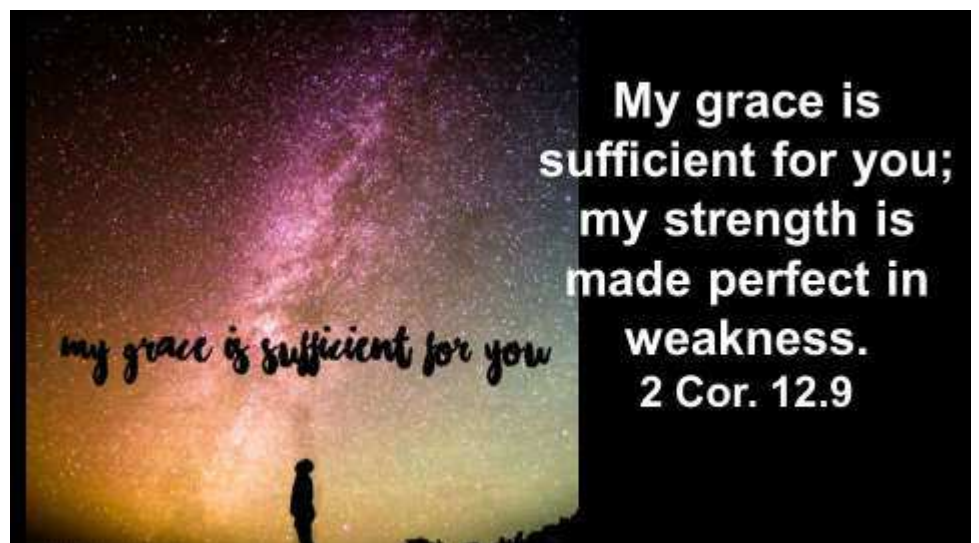
Two examples come to mind. The first goes back many years. I was about to graduate from seminary and begin pastoral ministry. I interviewed for an associate position for a church in Wichita, Kansas. I was confident I would get the job. I knew the other candidates. In all immodesty, I thought I was the best qualified. Guess what? The job went to somebody else. I was devastated. Shortly thereafter, I interviewed for a position at this church. That was 38 years ago. Now, I get it. God wanted me here.

My second example is more recent. My older brother Tom has always been first on my list of people I admire. He has lived his life with uncommon integrity. He was as ethical in business as anyone I have even known. He was the

consummate big brother, so patient with me when I was the punky kid and prodigal teenager.

Last week, I came across a note I wrote to Tom when he attended a Great Banquet weekend ten years ago. I commented at the end of my note that I have come to rely on Tom more than he will ever know. I referenced his rock solid leadership in our family. This is the sentence that hit me right between the eyes, “I have often thought, please, Lord, don’t allow Tom to die.” When it came to my family of origin, I thought, anybody but Tom. He was critically important to me.

Well, as some of you know, Tom died of a rare brain disease last summer. His death hit me hard. I am still learning how to live without Tom. I am learning the truth of what Jesus says to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you; my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).



Can I let go of how I think Jesus ought to work in my life and trust him for whatever happens? I do not mean to imply that whatever happens is his will and intention for my life. Yet, no matter what happens, I can trust Jesus to work in ways that promote my welfare.

I say, in so many words, “Jesus, come down and fix my life.” He says, “Go and live in the strength I supply.” Such a difference!

We are only four chapters into John's gospel and already we are getting a clear picture of Jesus. In John 1, Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). In John 2, Jesus changes water into wine. When the disciples witness this first miracle, they believe and begin to follow him. In John 3, Jesus offers Nicodemus new birth and eternal life. In John 4, the story I skipped over, Jesus offers a Samaritan woman living water. In the story just considered, Jesus brings a little boy back from the brink of death. He is God's eternal Word who demonstrates power over the natural world. He gives new birth, living water and life itself. He is, in John's words the Messiah, the Son of God.

Can we let go of how we think Jesus should work in our lives? Can we do that today? Can we let go and trust God? Maybe you are holding back because you feel as though God has let you down sometime in the past. You asked for something, even pleaded with God for it to happen, yet it failed to materialize in the manner you prayed. Maybe you feel down deep that Jesus has not come through for you.

Nuts to my timetable and my agenda! Can I learn to trust Jesus, whether it be for the first time or all over again?

- 1 – Eternal word made flesh**
- 2 – Water into wine**
- 3 – New birth and eternal life**
- 4 – Living water**
- 4 – New life**

the difference



The Gospel of John