

# Taking Jesus at His Word

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 04 December 2022

Preacher: Archie Winnington-Ingram

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning. My name's Archie, if that wasn't obvious. I'm the pastor in training here, and it's my privilege to be opening God's Word for us this morning. Do keep that passage open in front of you if you can. If you don't have it open in front of you, do get it open.

I was watching the news earlier this week, and there was this guy on the news who had been there at the Manchester Arena terror attack. I don't know if you remember that happening. It was a and his partner had died in the attack, and he himself had been badly injured, so badly that it was going to affect him for the rest of his life. And he was on the news to talk about his experience of that, and especially his experience of the help that he had received since that had happened. And as he reflected on that, he said something really revealing, because his experiences of that, of the help that he had received, had not been positive at all. As a result, and wanting to ensure that other people didn't face the same sorts of things that he had faced, he'd got involved in various charities, he'd been lobbying the government to try and get things changed from the top. But, and I guess this was why he was on the news, lots of people had made him all sorts of promises, promises of change, and nothing, as far as he could tell, seemed to have happened. And so here's what he said, I've given up believing in people's words. It's their actions that matter. I've given up believing in people's words. It's their actions that matter. Isn't that revealing? I have a huge amount of sympathy for this guy. Everything that he's been through, he's obviously been let down. And so isn't that just such a sad position that he's in, when you can no longer take someone at their word? It's a point of great respect, isn't it, to be able to take someone at their word. It says something about their character. But we are naturally skeptical, I think, aren't we? We probably think what he's saying is actually quite a sensible thing to say, because we don't like to take people at their word. We want to see evidence that they're trustworthy. We want to see their word in action. And I guess the bigger the promise, the more important that is. If you gave me your word that you were going to give me a pound, I'd probably take you at your word and believe you.

But if you told me that you were going to give me a thousand pounds, I'd have a pretty hard time believing that that was going to happen. And in our passage this morning, Jesus makes an absolutely humongous promise. Come to chapter four with me. We're actually going to spend the next few minutes jumping around this section that we've been in for the last few months, from chapter two to chapter four. Some of the key verses will come on the screen, but it will be unusually helpful to have it. It's always helpful, but even more so just now to have it open in front of you. Even easier probably in a paper Bible. Nothing wrong with having it on your phone ordinarily, but I really think that you'll benefit from having it in paper and before you this morning. But to set the scene in chapter four, have a look at verse 43. In verse 43, Jesus has left Samaria, where we saw in verse 40 that he had been for two days, and he's come to Galilee. And see what happens at the end of verse 46. This guy comes to him, a royal official, and this guy's son is dying. He desperately wants Jesus to do something about it. And the promise that Jesus then makes is massive. It's there in verse 50, this massive promise, go, your son will live.

He doesn't go with the man like the man has asked him to. He just makes this humongous promise. He says, I have power over death. Take my word for it. He will live. Do you see how the man responds in the rest of the verse? The man took Jesus at his word and departed. That is an incredible act of belief, isn't it? Just incredible belief. And we'll see it is precisely the sort of belief that Jesus is looking for. That we would take him at his word. And the promise couldn't be any bigger. The promise is that he is who he says he is. That he isn't just a miracle worker or a prophet, but that he is the son of God. That he is powerful over death. And that by believing in him, we might experience that power and live eternally with him. That's the sort of belief that Jesus is looking for. And friends, nothing is more important in life than this. There is no bigger promise. It might be very

difficult to see just now, but when we die, nothing will have been more important than how we believed in Jesus in this life. It is the single most important thing, for it has eternal consequences. So as we tackle this passage together, we're going to begin by thinking about how the passage that Sabina's just read for us fits into the big picture of John's gospel. And this being our last week in John for a little while, we're also going to think about why we're pausing here at the end of chapter four, how this section that we've been in for the last few months actually fits together.

[ 5 : 15 ] And then once we've done that, we'll dive into this passage in particular and see how it all fits. Two questions that I'd like us to be asking just to keep bubbling away in the background as we do that. Firstly, do you believe that Jesus is who he says he is? Do you believe that his signs and the wonders that he does in John's gospel point to something bigger about him? That he came to die in your place so that you might be forgiven and that he rose again so that you might rise and live forever with him? Do you believe that that's true? And secondly, if you do believe that, what difference is that going to make to your life today? Just two questions to keep in the back of your head as we go through these verses together. Let's begin with the big picture. We're in John's gospel. What is John's gospel? Well, John, he was a disciple of Jesus, a friend of Jesus, a follower of Jesus. He writes this firsthand account of Jesus's life. But why is John writing? Well, at the end of his book in chapter 20, you don't need to turn there. It's on the screen. This is his purpose statement.

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. So John is writing a selective account. He's choosing specific signs or miracles so that his readers might believe that Jesus really is who he says he is.

At its core, this book is all about signs and about belief. And there are six signs explicitly described by John in this book. They're sort of organized into pairs. We have two of them in the section that we've been in over the last few months. But they all, all six of them, really point to a seventh. The seventh sign is the thing that Jesus came to do. It's his death and resurrection. The seventh sign, we've seen elsewhere in this section that seven is a biblical number of completeness. It's completeness. It's the thing that all the other signs point to, because that's just what signs do. When I was a kid, we used to come to Edinburgh to visit my grandparents for Christmas, and my parents would hear the familiar, are we there yet, ring out from the back of the car from me and my siblings. And the response was always the same from my parents. No matter how far we had traveled, they would always say, we've got an hour to go. That was the promise. And I never believed it, because I knew unless we'd seen the sign, the Edinburgh 50 miles sign, when I saw that sign, I knew that we had an hour to go. The sign, it pointed to the thing itself. And that's just what Jesus' signs in John's gospel do. He records six of them specifically to make the point that they point to a seventh sign. So this section that we've been in for the last few months, it begins and ends with sign one and sign two. The first sign, water into wine. If you come to chapter two with me, this is worth turning to the beginning of chapter two. It begins with this wedding, if you remember. [ 8 : 33 ] Notice where the wedding is in chapter two, verse one. The wedding is at Cana in Galilee. Jesus turns water into wine. It's a picture of the eternal resurrection banquet, the thing that Jesus came to do.

And notice how John describes it in verse 11. Chapter two, verse 11. This is the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him.

This section begins then with John describing this first sign and it ends in our passage this morning. If you turn back over to chapter four with me, like I say, much easier if you've got paper in front of you.

In chapter four, where is the action taking place? Verse 43, we're back in Galilee. And then in verse 46, John explicitly tells us it's not just Galilee, but Cana in Galilee where Jesus had turned water into wine.

And if that wasn't obvious enough to link these two signs, in verse 54, it's on the screen. This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

[ 9 : 45 ] So this section is bookended by these two signs. They're a pair and they're designed to point to a seventh sign, Jesus's glory, which is his death and resurrection. And remember John chapter 20, his purpose, therefore, to lead to belief in Jesus, that he really is who he says he is.

So that's sort of how signs are supposed to function in this gospel. But you might have noticed as we've gone through it over the last few months, that these aren't the only signs in this section. There are signs that John doesn't really explain or describe completely, not part of the six. So come back to chapter two with me. We get the sign in Cana, water into wine.

And then in verse 13, Jesus heads to Jerusalem. And when he gets to Jerusalem, he finds money changers and merchants in the temple courts. He doesn't like what they're doing in the temple. And so he drives them out.

But notice in verse 18, what the people want from him. Chapter two, verse 18. What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do this?

[10:51] They're looking for signs, for miracles, for wonders. And instead, in verse 19 and following, Jesus points them to what? His death and his resurrection.

They want signs to believe in now. And he gives them a word to trust for the future. The people are desperate for Jesus to perform signs as a sort of proof, not because they would point to a perfect seventh sign, but because they want to believe in a miracle worker for today.

It's as though we're on our way to an Edinburgh Christmas. We've reached the 50 mile sign and we stop and get the picnic blanket out. Granny and granddad's is great for Christmas, but we'll just stay here and have our Christmas dinner by this sign instead.

It's ridiculous. It's a ridiculous idea. The whole purpose of a sign is that it would point to something greater. And that's precisely what the people are doing in this section then.

It's the signs that they care about. I see again at the end of chapter 2 in verse 23, second half of verse 23, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name, which looks pretty good, doesn't it?

[12:02] These people, they believe in Jesus' name. But then in verse 24, if you look at verse 24, Jesus would not entrust himself to them for he knew all people.

There is in this section a sort of belief that isn't exactly what Jesus wants. Why? Well, because in chapter 2, verse 25, he knew what was in each person.

In other words, Jesus knew that there was a problem deep in the heart of every human being, that though they might see signs and wonders, and whatever it might look like on the surface, their apparent belief, every human being desperately needs their hearts transformed.

And the signs that he performed were not to transform people's hearts, but to point to the moment that he would make that transformation possible. But instead, the people just believed in him as a miracle worker sent from God.

In chapter 3, Nicodemus, the Pharisee, seems to have believed in exactly that sort of way. See in chapter 3, at the end of verse 2, what does Nicodemus say to Jesus?

[13:11] No one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him. Nicodemus appears to be one of those who, in chapter 2, has seen Jesus' signs and he's believed in him in this way.

But Jesus' response in verse 3 of chapter 3 is really interesting. Isn't it? In chapter 3, verse 3, he says, you need to be born again. You can see all the signs and wonders and believe in me in that way as much as you like, but what you need is to be transformed.

And in the rest of chapter 3, Jesus explains how that is going to be made possible. Essentially, he explains the thing that all the signs point to. This is what makes the transformation possible.

The seventh sign that the Son of Man must be lifted up. That Jesus must die so that those who believe in him might have eternal life. That is Jesus' promise. This is Jesus' word to Nicodemus.

They want a sign for now. He gives them a word to trust for the future. We get the same sort of thing in chapter 4. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman and she trusts Jesus because of his word to her.

[14:18] The promise of living water, of eternal satisfaction. And then she goes down into the town and she says, come and look and see this man. And all the people come and see what Jesus, what John says, what Jesus says, no, what John says in verse 41.

And because of his words, Jesus' words, many more became believers. And into verse 42, Jesus has told them what he's come to do.

To be the savior of the world. To die in their place and to pave the way to resurrection life. He's given them a word to trust. And here in chapter 4, they believe. And so as we reflect on that whole section that we've just raced through, this is a key question for us this morning, isn't it?

Can we really take Jesus at his word today? The man in our passage, as we saw in verse 50, he takes Jesus at his word. Will we do the same?

Not because of any signs and wonders that we might have seen. Not even because of any experiences or feelings that we might have had. But because of what it all points to.

[ 15 : 37 ] Jesus' promise to us of eternal life. Does this promise that we read in John's gospel about who he is and what he came to do, can we trust his word?

Is Jesus really the savior of the world? 2000 odd years later, does that promise still hold true for us today? Well, let's walk through the rest of our passage together as we drive towards that question. See the sort of belief that Jesus is after. It's right there at the start of our passage at the end of chapter four. Come to verse 44 with me. Notice the contradiction between chapter four, verse 44 and 45.

We're going to stop jumping around now so you can just get chapter four open. Notice the contradiction. So Jesus points out in verse 44, the proverb, a prophet has no honor in his own country.

But then in verse 45, arriving in his own country in Galilee, the Galileans welcome him. How does that work? Well, in the rest of verse 45, these Galileans welcome him because they have seen all that he had done in Jerusalem.

[ 16 : 43 ] In other words, they're just like all those others that we've read about from chapter two right through to here. They seem to believe in him as a miracle worker because of the signs that he performed in Jerusalem.

They give him this wonderful welcome. The red carpet is out. The paparazzi point their cameras. The crowds jostle to get a sight of him. And yet Jesus says in verse 44, that is not really honoring him.

I will have no honor in my hometown. So as we ask the question, if I do believe in Jesus, if I believe that he is who he says he is, then what difference does that make to my life today?

Well, I think we've got to see that there's a warning here for us just in these first two verses, because it remains true that you can give Jesus a warm welcome and yet fail to really honor him. It is perfectly possible to turn up to church on a Sunday, to sing his praises, to look every bit the committed Christian, to be serving at church on all sorts of teams, and then to live the rest of your life giving him no honor at all.

[ 17 : 47 ] To allow yourself to be swept up in the wonder and the emotion of church, to believe because of your experience of that, and then just to blend into the world around you for the rest of the week.

That isn't really honoring him at all. That is not what it means to trust in his word. So what does it mean? Well, hopefully as we go through the rest of our passage together, come to verse 46.

As we've seen, we get this royal official in verse 46. He's probably part of Herod's court. He could have been a Roman. He might have been a Jew. Either way, you can picture him. He is no ordinary man.

He'd have been uniformed in all the status of the royal court. You can picture the sort of clothes that he'd be wearing. If he's a Roman, probably a deep red cloak, maybe some ceremonial armor.

And just the way he carries himself, you can tell this guy is a cut above the rest. And he comes to Jesus. Notice in verse 46, he comes from Capernaum.

[ 18 : 45 ] That's about 20 miles away. He makes this journey, a full day's journey. This royal official comes to meet this lowly carpenter. Now infamous for his signs and wonders.

And see in verse 47, he literally begs Jesus to heal his dying son. The way that John tells this story with this character, the royal official, I think it makes Jesus' response to him all the more stark.

See the way a carpenter would respond to a royal official. I mean, how would you expect Jesus to respond though? This guy begging that Jesus would heal his son. I guess the Jesus of my imaginings would say, well, of course, of course I'll heal your son.

Lead the way. That's what I'm here to do. But that's not how Jesus responds at all. See how Jesus responds in verse 48? Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe.

It's an almost scathing response, isn't it? And the you in that verse, he's not just talking to the royal official. It's plural. He says, you people. He's speaking to the crowd.

[ 19 : 52 ] Again, it's exactly what we've seen throughout this section from chapter 2. What the people want is signs and wonders. They want some kind of proof. And that just doesn't seem to be

the sort of honor or belief that Jesus is looking for.

Because to him, that would be like staying at the sign to Edinburgh and never actually getting to the great city itself. Nevertheless, the man persists in verse 49. He desperately wants Jesus to come to Capernaum and heal his son.

And as we've seen in verse 50, at the distance of 20 miles, 20 miles from this dying boy, and yet Jesus gives him this word. He promises him in verse 50, go, your son will live.

And we've seen the man's incredible act of belief in the rest of verse 50. The man took Jesus at his word and departed. This man, he hasn't, as far as we know, seen Jesus's signs.

He's obviously heard of Jesus. But he isn't believing in the signs and wonders that he's seen.

Instead, he takes Jesus at his word. He trusts the promise.

[ 20 : 57 ] And we read in the very next verse, verse 51, that as he's on his way home, he's met by his servants with the wonderful news his son lives. Even more incredible in verse 52, that he got better at precisely the time that Jesus's promise was made.

It's miraculous. It's a 20 mile miracle. Jesus isn't physically there at the bedside. And yet he is physically, and yet he is powerful to heal, to restore life.

We began this morning by raising two questions. Do you believe Jesus is who he says he is? Will you take him at his word? And what difference does that make to your life today?

They've hopefully been bubbling away in the background, but let's just tackle each of them for ourselves. Because of course, it remains true. Jesus has the power to restore life. In this passage, he does this 20 mile miracle.

And today we're at a distance of 2000 years. But his power, his power in this passage is not bound by space or by time. He is powerful to restore life today.

[ 22 : 08 ] But more fundamentally than that, his promise is that he will restore life eternally to all who will believe. This is a sign that points to why he's really come.

And he may not physically be here today, though he is present with us. But that is his promise to us.

Would we take him at his word? And you might be thinking, well, I would take Jesus at his word.

If only he'd show me that he was real. Have you ever thought like that? If only I could see a miracle.

If only he'd give me some sort of sign. If only I could experience more of his peace or his joy or whatever else when we sing and we worship.

If only I could get a word from him today. Well, the truth is, that's just not the sort of belief that Jesus is after here in John's gospel. Belief in signs and wonders is a superficial belief.

And it's supposed to point to something much better. That we would take him at his word. That he really is who he says he is. That he really has done everything necessary for you to live with him forever.

[ 23 : 10 ] Now, of course, I'm not saying that miracles won't happen today. Our God is kind and compassionate and merciful. And in his wisdom, unfathomable to us.

He is powerful and does occasionally, as he is powerful over affliction and illness and addiction. He does work miracles. But that is not the promise. Even as we read about miracles in the New Testament, they are never the thing to believe in themselves.

They are always there to point to something bigger. And the same is true today. They point to the fact that Jesus is who he says he is. That he really is powerful over death.

And that one day, if we believe in his promises, we will live with him forever. In a place where there will be no need for signs and wonders. Where there is no sickness or suffering or tears or pain.

And so today, would we know this to be true? Friends, no matter what you are facing, absolutely in the midst of it, pray for relief, for healing, for help, for compassion and for comfort.

[ 24 : 19 ] But above all, trust in Jesus. Pray that you would trust in his wonderful promise of eternal life. But I guess that might still leave us asking this question.

How can we trust in him? This guy trusted in him at the distance of 20 miles. But how are we supposed to trust in him at the distance of 2,000 years? It's not always easy, that is it.

When we can't see him. When we don't feel his presence with us. When we can't hear him. How can we trust in his promises? Well, ultimately, we can trust his promises because we can trust his word.

The Bible is the word of God. The book that you have in your hands, it is an incredible book. And there are just so many reasons that we can trust it. If trusting God's word, if trusting that this is the word of God is a problem for you, I'd love to chat to you about that.

I'm sure there's nothing more important for us today as to whether we can trust the Bible or not. But let me just offer one reason maybe especially relevant for this morning why God's word is trustworthy for us.

[ 25 : 30 ] And that is that this book is full of promises. And that through this book, we see those promises fulfilled. If you read through the Old Testament, you just see God make all these incredible promises to the most improbable people.

And he is always good to his word. But even more significantly, as we read through the Old Testament, is this promise of a savior. It's a promise that is just everywhere in virtually every passage of scripture.

The promise that a Messiah, a servant, that God's own son, that he would come and restore a people to their God. So many of those promises are just super specific as well about what this man would do.

And how he would accomplish that. And all of those promises were fulfilled in Jesus. The more questions that you have of the Bible, and the more time that you spend just honestly seeking answers to those questions, reading and chatting to folk and exploring this incredible book, certainly in my experience, the more I've pushed at my questions, the more reason that I've found to trust that this really is God's word.

Do not put your questions in a box. Ask them. Seek answers. How can we trust God when we don't see him? When we don't feel him?

[ 26 : 50 ] When we can't physically hear him? Well, we can trust him. Not because of signs and wonders and miracles like these, but because of his word to us. We can trust him, even at the distance of 2,000 years, because this book is true.

And it's not only true, but it's really good news. So that's the first question. Do you believe Jesus is who he says he is? Will you take him at his word?

The second is, what difference would that make to your life today? If that were true, I guess we've seen, haven't we, that ultimately the Christian faith isn't primarily about what we can get from Jesus today.

Trusting Jesus does mean wonderful blessings today. Not least being free to live for him and for your good. But it is primarily about living a life aimed at eternity.

And when we fix our eyes on things above, on things beyond, on Jesus, when we do that, temporal things, worldly things, worldly goods, worldly behaviors, worldly concerns, they are just nothing compared to the hope that we have if we trust in his promises to us.

[ 28 : 02 ] It doesn't mean they're unimportant or insignificant, but they are just a pale shadow, an imperfect mirror of a perfect world to come. And this is what it means then to live as people of the promise.

Trusting in Jesus's word with our whole lives aimed at eternity. That means that this coming week, whatever decisions that you have to make, whether you're thinking about moving job or house or where your children go to school or whether you should go to that party, how much you should drink, how many drinks you should have at that party, whether you might stay late at work one day or not, whether to go to a small group or not, whether to come to the prayer meeting or not.

Very often when we make these decisions, and it's not as though one option is necessarily explicitly more or less Christian than the next. You might miss a prayer meeting to go to a praise night or something.

Like it doesn't necessarily mean that one is more Christian than the next. But when we make these decisions, are we even asking the question, how can I make this decision with a life aimed at eternity?

Do we let that perspective affect everything that we do? And I guess wrapped up with that, if we believe that Jesus' promise to us is true, that he is good to his word and that his word is good, then wouldn't we want to share that wonderful good news with anyone who would listen?

[ 29 : 32 ] That's going to affect how we make all sorts of decisions like that, isn't it? And in just very ordinary ways, I think, it's going to affect how we interact with parents at the school gate or the teachers at the parents' evening or your colleague at the Christmas party or your family over Christmas.

I'm not saying that all we're ever going to do is talk about Jesus, but it is going to affect how we approach all our conversations, isn't it? If we're seeking to honor him with lives aimed at eternity.

Truth is, if we trust Jesus' word today, it makes the world of difference to everything we do. And so as we finish, come back to John chapter 20 with me.

In John chapter 20, we get the seventh sign, the resurrection, and here it's already happened. But one disciple, Thomas, Thomas hasn't seen the risen Jesus yet.

And then here in this chapter, in John chapter 20, Thomas meets Jesus, the risen Jesus, and he believes because he, well, obviously he's seeing the risen Jesus.

[ 30 : 40 ] But see what Jesus says to him in verse 29. It's on the screen. He says, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

For us this morning, if we remember the words of the guy, that guy on the news, I've given up believing in people's words. Is there actions that matter? Well, the question is this.

Will you stand firm and take Jesus at his word? Do you have this sort of belief that trusts what he has said to us? Or have you given up believing his word?

Are you relying on something else from him, waiting for him to reveal himself to you with some sign or wonder, or looking for an experience or a feeling or a new word from him? Well, friends, this is the sort of belief that Jesus is after, that you would take him at his word.

Why? Well, because this is his purpose in John chapter 20, verse 30 and 31. That we would see that Jesus's signs point to what he came to do, which is to die in our place, that we might believe in him and live forever.

[ 31 : 48 ] To believe that he is the Messiah, the son of God, that he really is who he says he is. So that you might have a life, a life of living for him today and a life with him eternally.

This is his word to us. Would we trust it together? I'm just going to invite the band up now as we respond to God's words. Just a moment of quiet and then I'll pray before we sing.

Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for everything that you have done for us in Jesus.

We thank you for all the promises that you've made to us through your word that are fulfilled in him, that he really is who he says he is.

And so that your promises to us through him are sure. But we confess we don't always trust your word. We don't always find it easy to trust your word.

[ 32 : 56 ] We so often go after experiences, desire that you would do more, show us more, that we would feel more. And so, Lord, would you help us by your Holy Spirit to read about your son in your word and see our salvation.

See all that you've done to transform our hearts today, that we might live forever with you. Lord, would you by your spirit keep us aimed at eternity.

In Jesus' name. Amen.