



RETELLING THE STORY SERIES

★ ★ ★
RUSS RAMSEY



THE PASSION
OF THE
KING OF GLORY

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1

LIFE FOR THE DYING

John 4:43-54

NO FATHER SHOULD HAVE TO WATCH his own son die. The road from Capernaum to Cana ran uphill the entire way, pulling at the already burdened nobleman's steps. He concluded there was only one option that might save his dying son, and that solitary hope had him moving away from the boy as quickly as he could go. It was all he knew to do.

If he hurried, he could cover the twelve miles between Galilee's shores westward to Cana before evening. Though his culture considered it unbecoming of a grown man to run, time was against him. Regardless of what anyone thought, he needed to keep moving, and in this moment neither his wealth, nor his age, nor his position mattered. He was desperate.

From humble beginnings, the nobleman had risen to a position of midlevel importance in Galilee as a servant of Herod Antipas, son

of Herod the Great. It was Herod Antipas's world. The nobleman was only living in it. Back before Herod the Great died, he had divided oversight of his part of the Roman Empire between three of his sons: Philip, who oversaw the northeastern lands of the Golan Heights; Archelaus, who became king over Judea, Idumea, and Samaria; and Antipas, who assumed the lesser title of tetrarch over the regions of Galilee and Perea.

Though Archelaus was older and presumed to have the greatest leadership potential of the three brothers, Antipas was driven to command respect. Knowing it would not simply be given, he was determined to earn it. The Galilee he inherited had become politically unstable, a haven for dissidents and outlaws. To Antipas, this was as much an opportunity as it was a problem. He wouldn't just rule Galilee. He would transform it.

Following in his father's footsteps, Antipas did the only thing he knew would gain notice: he built. Early on he rebuilt the war-ravaged Sepphoris into his capital city, which became home to over fifty thousand people. Not too long after that he moved his capital to the glimmering shores of the Sea of Galilee, establishing the great city of Tiberius, with its stadium, hot-springs bathhouse, temple, and royal palace. Under Antipas's leadership the entire region was reborn.

This was the nobleman's Galilee. Though his title was modest, it conveyed that he was a man of influence and affluence—a royal by right of his service to his king. But even if he could call upon all the resources of Rome—all its wealth, its intellectual potency, its political power—the one thing he wanted most, Rome could not provide.

He wanted his son to live.

His mission carried a sad irony. The same Rome that had given him his esteemed position in the world had also been responsible for the deaths of many sons whom fathers just like him would have

given anything to save. Only a few decades earlier, Antipas's father ordered the execution of all Israelite boys under the age of two in the hope of killing the one many whispered would be Israel's promised, coming Deliverer—the one they called the King of glory.

Though Herod had no way to know if he had succeeded, his cruelty heaped sorrow upon countless mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters across the land. How many prayers went up in those days for the sons Rome took? How many fathers searched for a reason to hope and found none?

The world was a hard and broken place. The allure of wealth and power, which always seemed to cost men far more than it gave, didn't matter to the nobleman anymore. Now he was just a father throwing up prayers to whomever occupied the heavens above as he made his way to the little village of Cana, hoping to find the only man on earth he imagined could help—Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus had made a name for himself at a wedding in Cana not too long before the nobleman's son took ill. Jesus was there with his family when, to the host's great embarrassment, the wine ran out. Knowing her son, Jesus' mother asked him if there was anything he might be able to do to rescue the feast. Jesus gathered the servants and told them to fill the ceremonial washing jars with water. Somehow, though no one could explain it, the water became wine—good wine.

News of this miracle spread quickly. But the miracle itself wasn't what set the nobleman off on his quest to find Jesus. It was how people said he did it: quietly. Had he been a charlatan out to make his living by tricking people, Jesus would have made the miracle primarily about himself and maybe even charged people to see it. Instead, the story went, he sought to deflect attention from himself.

Jesus had been away from the region for some time now. But reports steadily made their way back to Capernaum that Jesus was performing other signs and wonders in and around Jerusalem. It was hard to know which of the stories were true and which were inflated composites of third-party anecdotes. Taken on their own, some seemed more credible than others. But taken together, they presented Jesus as a man who loved the hurting, healed the sick, and welcomed the destitute. This stirred in the nobleman the courage to hope since he himself was hurting, his son was sick, and the entire world around him was a fractured mess.

The nobleman thought that if anyone could save his son, it would be Jesus. As soon as the village came into view he began asking everyone he met if they knew where he could find the man from Nazareth. It didn't take long. When he finally saw Jesus, he realized that the course of his life seldom put him in the position where he now found himself. He was in need. There was nothing he could offer Jesus in exchange for what he was about to ask from him. All he had were his words and a little bit of hope.

The nobleman spoke to Jesus with concise humility: "Sir, my son is dying. Will you help us?"

Jesus looked at the man and then at the people gathered around whose interests were now suddenly piqued. He said, "Unless you all see me perform signs and wonders, you refuse to believe in me. Is this what you want from me? A sign?"

The nobleman hadn't expected Jesus' rebuke. He wasn't asking for a show. Still, Jesus raised the crucial question: What did he want, really? Did he want Jesus to do a trick for him? No doubt many of those gathered hoped for just that. They had heard about the water becoming wine, and they wished they had been there to see it. They would love an encore.

But who did the nobleman think Jesus was? Did Jesus need to come to his son's bedside, put his hands on the boy's head, or speak a blessing? What did he want from him?

The nobleman said, "I want my son to live. That's what I want. I want him to live. I want him not to die. But I can't stop the death that is coming. So please, help me. Come to Capernaum. Please. Save him."

Seeing the sincerity of his hurt, Jesus said, "Yes. Go on home. Your son will live."

Jesus' words alone would have to suffice because his answer made it apparent that he would not be making the trip to the boy's home in Capernaum. There would be no bedside visit, no incantation, no trick. Just these few words. The nobleman would have to accept that Jesus' word was as good as his presence.

So he departed robed in the logic that if Jesus actually possessed the supernatural ability to heal his son, then surely he could bring that healing with nothing but a word.

As the nobleman hurried back, one of his servants met him on the road. Breathless, the servant said, "He's getting better. He's getting better!"

The nobleman's eyes lit up. "What? When?"

The servant said, "Yesterday, about an hour past noon." It was the same moment when Jesus had promised that the boy would live.

For all his nobility and the wealth that came with it, the most valuable title the nobleman held in that moment was "father." His son was alive and recovering, and Jesus of Nazareth had saved him. There was no question in the father's mind about that. When he got home, he told his entire household the story of how he had asked Jesus for this miracle and the way in which it was granted. They all marveled at this Nazarene who had given them such a precious gift. He had given life to the dying.

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