

THE HEALING OF THE MAN AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA
(John 5:1-16)

We saw last time the healing of the Nobleman's son. Now we come to the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda. This seems to be still early in the ministry of Jesus. We have seen him in Jerusalem and in Samaria and then in Galilee. And now you will notice that there is another feast and Jesus goes up again to Jerusalem.

After this there was a feast of the Jews: and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
John 5:1

Now we don't know which feast this is. It could be the Feast of Pentecost which would have been in May or June. Or it could have been one of the other feasts in the fall. Or, it could have been the second Passover Feast of Jesus' public ministry. You will notice that John just tells us, "After this there was a feast." That is, after Jesus healed the Nobleman's son in chapter 4, there was a feast. And we don't know how long after this. And I take it that it is not important to know which feast since it is not specified. In other words, the things that happen at this feast bear no particular relationship to the feast itself. The events which take place are of central importance here, not the feast itself. However, we do take note that these events occurred in Jerusalem.

You might remember that when Jesus first came to Jerusalem he performed many miracles and he was at least received with a good deal of curiosity and with some respect due to his miracles. They didn't arrest him for overturning the tables. They believed in him when they saw the miracles which he did. Nicodemus, who was a high-ranking official from the Sanhedrin, admitted that Jesus was a teacher come from God. But even at this first trip to Jerusalem, after a very short time, there was jealousy rising against Jesus and he left Jerusalem this first time because the Pharisees were beginning to become aware of his success. (John 4:1)

Now Jesus comes back to Jerusalem for another feast. And we are going to find that from this point forward in the Gospel of John that the Jews' attitude toward Jesus will move from suspicious reservation to outright opposition. And Jesus will be opposed at every turn from here on out. In fact, you are going to find that the Jews want to kill him from this point forward in the book of John. Let's take a look at a few examples.

The Jews wanted to kill him because of his healing on the Sabbath Day. (John 5:16) Then they were even more determined because Jesus claimed to be equal with God. (John 5:18) They murmured at him because he said he was the bread of life. (John 6:41) Jesus limited himself to Galilee because it was too dangerous to walk in Jerusalem. (John 7:1) They told him he had a devil. (John 7:20) They sought to take him. (John 7:30) The Pharisees sent officers to take him. (John 7:32) Some would have taken him; but no man laid hands on him. (John 7:44) They took up stones to kill him. (John 8:59) They took up stones again. (John 10:31) They counseled together to put him to death. (John 11:53)

So you see that from this point forward the opposition of the Jews will be vehement and determined. And you are going to see that in our present text.

Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.

John 5:2-4

Now this is a very strange passage. Nowhere else in the Bible do we find any other reference to this pool. There is no other reference in the Bible to an angel stirring the water and causing some healing effect. Furthermore, in extra biblical writings, there is no other reference to some pool where an angel

would come down and trouble the water and cause people to be healed. So, I find it strange that this is the only historical reference to these healing pools.

It is also strange in another way. It doesn't seem like this is a divine institution. It doesn't seem quite like God. Here all of these desperate people would be gathered around this pool. Many of them were confined to their beds. Others couldn't see or hear. And then, periodically, an angel would come down and stir the water and the first one in the pool would be healed and all others would be left in their despair. This one account of the healing pool of Bethesda has always seemed a little strange and foggy and John doesn't elaborate or give any other explanation.

Now let me say that this whole reference to the pool of Bethesda is only given to set the stage for this next healing miracle of Jesus. It happened to take place here at the pool and John is interjecting a few lines of explanation for those readers who may not be familiar with the customs of Jerusalem. You might remember that John did this when he was describing the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? (And then John interjects) For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

John 4:9

Now all Jews would have instantly understood the woman's amazement that Jesus spoke to her. However, some of John's readers may have been Gentiles who were not familiar with this animosity between Jews and Samaritans. And so John inserted this clarifying clause to let us all know that Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

And in John 5, John inserts this explanation about the pool of Bethesda for those readers who may not understand why this infirm man was lying there when Jesus approached. It sets the stage for the next scene.

Example: Most of us have been to a live play at a theatre. And after a scene is complete the curtain will close for a few seconds and you will hear shuffling behind the curtain and when the curtain opens again it is a completely different set.

The curtain closes on John's story at the end of chapter four after Jesus heals the Nobleman's son. And when it reopens, you see all of these sick and impotent folk lying around this pool of Bethesda.

Now it says this pool was by the sheep market. You will notice that the word "market" is in italics. And this means that this word is not found in the original, but was supplied by translators for clarification. I am not sure why the translators put market here because the phrase "sheep market" is not found in the Scriptures nor in any other Jewish writing. There is however, a biblical reference to a "sheep gate." (Nehemiah 3:1; 12:39)

And so, this pool may have been near the sheep gate. Now the sheep gate was the gate entering the city of Jerusalem and it was the gate where the sheep were brought in. Obviously, there was a steady stream of sheep coming into the city for sacrifice and they ushered them in through this sheep gate. And John tells us that the pool was by this sheep gate. Now there may have been some marketing going on here at this sheep gate as well. The marketers brought their sheep in through this gate and may have engaged in the sale of sheep near this gate and so perhaps the phrase "sheep market" is not too far off.

The name Bethesda means "house of mercy." And this pool was thought of by the people as a house of mercy because of its healing properties. Perhaps this pool of water was supplied by springs and sometimes these springs have minerals in them which are thought to be very therapeutic.

Example: There is a city in Arkansas called Hot Springs. And the city is known for the hot spring waters. And you can go to Hot Springs to the bath houses and take baths in this spring water and it is thought to have therapeutic effects.

And perhaps this was the case at this pool of Bethesda. Many of the sick and lame would come to this pool on a daily basis for the therapeutic effects of the water.

But there was also the hope of a miraculous cure at this pool. Now whether this was a proven fact that an angel would come down and trouble the water, or whether it was a superstition believed by the people, it is not clear. Obviously, we know that God is capable of sending a healing angel. But it seems a little odd, almost cruel, for an angel to come down and stir the water and then watch all of these desperate people scramble to be the one person healed. It seems more logical to me that John is stating the superstition. This is what the people thought. If this pool was fed by an underground stream, it could be that ever so often the water was stirred up by this stream and would bubble up and they perceived it to be an angel troubling the water. And they developed a superstition that the first one in the pool after the stirring of the water would be healed.

At any rate, whether this is a statement of fact or a statement of the current superstition of the people, it sets the stage for the next scene in John's gospel and that is the healing of the man at this pool.

By the way, the location of this pool has been found by archaeological digs and they have discovered that it was actually two pools. These two pools were trapezoidal in shape., That is, they were rectangular with one end being wider than the other end. And there were columns built around the pools which meant that there was a covering over the pools. The pools were huge. They were larger than a football field in length and about three times wider than a football field.

Our text says that the pools had five porches. Now these porches were stone or concrete walkways. And there was a walkway or porch on each side of the pools and one down the middle of the pools. And so, there were five porches. And see what John says,

In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.

John 5:3

This suggests the sad state of affairs in Israel at this time. There was a great multitude of sick and impotent folk. Sin has a progressive way about it. And the sin of the nation was reaching maturity. God had told Israel, if you obey me I will bless you, but if you disobey me I will curse you.

The Lord shall smite thee with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation, and with an extreme burning . . .

Deuteronomy 28:22

The Lord will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed. The Lord shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart

Deuteronomy 28:27, 28

The Lord shall smite thee in the knees, and in the legs, with a sore botch that cannot be healed, from the sole of thy foot unto the top of thy head.

Deuteronomy 28:35

And this is the condition of the nation when the Lord made his appearance in Jerusalem.

The One in Need of Healing

And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.

John 5:5

Now we don't know what the man's disease was. However, we do know that he could not walk because when the waters were troubled, he had no man to put him in. And, we know that it was a long-standing disease. He had been so for 38 years. Because of the length of his illness, I am sure that his condition was considered incurable.

Note: How we should thank God for what health we have. And we should take care to use our health for Him. This man was grievously impaired every day for 38 years. This was longer than most men lived in those days. This man was afflicted every day of his life with a debilitating disease. It seems that he was made for suffering and he must have thought that his life was in vain.

The One in Charge of Healing

When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?

John 5:6

It is interesting to me that Jesus saw this man. Now, I am sure that many, many people had walked right by this crippled man and never paid him any attention. They walked by him without ever seeing him at all. He was just one of the multitude of impotent folk laying around this pool in despair. He wasn't worth one moment of time. He was just a lonely outcast from society. He had nothing to offer anyone. He was barely worth notice at all. But it says, Jesus "saw him lie."

For some reason, Jesus did not simply pass him by. But Jesus saw him lying there. As Jesus was walking by he looked down at this man and saw him. What grace is this that the sovereign of the universe would pay this lame man any attention whatsoever? Jesus had much to do and very little time to do it, but he took the time to see this man.

But also, I think we must consider the sovereign will of God in this matter. There were multitudes of sick and impotent folk around this pool and Jesus passed by others before finding this man. And Jesus stopped here at this man's mat and spoke to him. Why did Jesus find this man? Why did he stop to heal this man? Out of the great multitude that was there, why this man?

It certainly doesn't seem to be this man's winning personality. Jesus asked him if he would like to be made whole and the lame man just started whining.

Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me.

John 5:7

Woe is me. Look at my evil circumstances. Everything is against me. I would but I can't. And all he had to say to Jesus was how impossible were his circumstances. So, Jesus didn't heal this man because of his winsome personality.

Jesus did not heal this man because of his great faith. In fact, the only faith he has is in this story about the troubled waters. The only hope he has is in this angel coming down and stirring the water. And notice what a hopeless hope it is. Even if the angel comes down, he has no way to get in the water and no man to help him. Even if it is true that the troubled waters would heal him, he has no hope of being the first one in.

Jesus, receiving no encouragement from the man says,

Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.
John 5:8

Did he heal this man because of anything in the man? No. All we can say is that he healed this man because he wanted to.

There was a preacher many years ago by the name of Ralph Barnard. And he defined grace this way: "In spite of you." God does something for you in spite of you. It is not that God does something because of you or because of what you have done. And it is not even that God does something for you without considering who you are or what you have done. But he does something for you in spite of who you are and what you have done.

That is a good way to describe grace because we deserved just the opposite. When God considers who we are and what we have done, then we do not deserve his goodness toward us. But grace is when he considers who we are and what we have done and he does good to us anyway. And, without any encouragement or inducement from the man, and knowing the unworthiness of the man, in what can only be described as sovereign will, Jesus told this man to "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." That is sovereign grace. Jesus could have gone to any of the others who were sick and told them to get up and walk. He could have gone to every one of them one by one and healed them all. But on this occasion he healed only one. This is sovereign grace. This is why God told Moses,

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.
Romans 9:15, 16

Of the seven specific miracles that are discussed in the Gospel of John, not one of them was founded on the faith of the recipient of the miracle.

Jesus turned water into wine. In this case, the ones who enjoyed the wine didn't even know that a miracle was performed and certainly they did not receive this wine because they believed. The Nobleman's son was healed without regard to his faith. He was lying in a bed in Capernaum, probably unconscious or delirious with a fever. And he wasn't even healed because of his father's faith. Jesus said, "Go thy way; thy son liveth" and then the man believed and went his way. And now we find this man by the pool of Bethesda and he is healed on the basis of nothing within the man himself.

So, why did Jesus heal this man? And I would suggest perhaps three reasons.

First, Jesus healed him as a simple act of mercy. When Jesus saw him, he was moved with compassion. And Jesus simply wanted to do him good. Now this man was not saved. He was not a believer. He didn't even know who Jesus was. He may or may not have been a chosen one for salvation. But, when Jesus saw him he had mercy on him. This is the character of Jesus. He has mercy. He is certainly merciful to God's elect. But he is also merciful to man just by virtue of being his creature. And Jesus was merciful to this man.

Secondly, Jesus was merciful to this man in order to give the Jews a sign that he was the Messiah. Isaiah 35 describes the coming of the Messiah like this:

Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.

Isaiah 35:4-6

Wherever Jesus went he healed. And this signified that the Messiah had come.

John the Baptist was in prison and he sent two of his disciples to inquire of Jesus if he was the Christ. And Jesus told them,

Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up . . .
Matthew 11:4, 5

And the third reason why Jesus healed this man on this day was to antagonize the unbelieving Jews. Jesus intentionally set up the controversy. And he did so in order to contend with the Jews.

And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the Sabbath.

John 5:9

This was not just a coincidence that this man was healed on the Sabbath. It was an intentional act. And, it set the Jews in motion.

The Reaction of the Jews

Now you would think that any human being would have been overjoyed that this man who had been paralyzed for 38 years was healed. And what a miraculous healing it was. You will notice that the healing was immediate. (v.9)

When you watch movies about the life of Christ, sometimes they try to make it dramatic by drawing out the healing process. And if Christ healed a withered hand you might see the fingers gradually restored to their normal size. If a man is healed of blindness, he might first see blurry images and then finally he would see clearly. But every indication is that Jesus healed immediately.

You will notice that the man was immediately made whole. He wasn't immediately partially restored and then he had to go home and work out in order to restore his strength. Rather, he was immediately made whole.

Now the man was told to take up his bed and walk. And Jesus did this for two reasons. First it was to show that he did not need his bed any longer. Whereas the bed was previously needed to lie on, now it is for carrying. And the man is not only able to get up, but he is able to carry his bed. Now I suspect this was not a king-sized bed complete with box springs and mattress. Rather it was more of a mat. And he rolled up his mat and carried it. It was not big deal. But Jesus also told him to carry his bed because he knew this was a violation of the tradition of the Jews.

Now it is true that the Old Testament Scriptures commanded that the Jews should remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. This is one of the Ten Commandments. And it is also true that any servile work was forbidden on this day. A man was to do his work for six days and to honor God with rest and worship on the seventh day. But what did this mean? Did it forbid rolling up a mat and carrying it? And the Jewish rabbis made their interpretations of the this law. And one of their specific interpretations was that a man must not carry his bed on the Sabbath. This was never stated in Scripture, but it was written in the Jewish interpretations. And Jesus challenged that interpretation by healing this man on the Sabbath and telling him to take up his bed and walk.

Now you see the reaction of the Jews in verse 10.

The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, It is the Sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.

Notice the cold, unfeeling legalism of the Jews. Here is a man whose life has been changed, Here is a man who has not walked in 38 years. And, he is now walking and carrying his bed! And the

Jews are about to arrest him for carrying his mat home on the Sabbath day. They don't say congratulations or praise God. But rather, they say, this is not legal.

Now the healed man simply tells them that he was told to carry his bed by the man who healed him. Some see in this a betrayal of Jesus by this healed man as though he is pointing the finger at Jesus. However, I think he was just relating the facts.

The lame man was simply saying, "Here is what happened. I was lying there lame and this man came and told me to rise, pick up my bed, and walk."

So, now the Jews wanted to know who this healer was.

Then asked they him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?
John 5:12

Now the Jews are looking for the bigger game. In modern day language, this is just the user. They want to find the dealer. This healed man was small game. They would rather find the bigger catch.

Unfortunately, the healed man did not know who healed him!

And he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place.

John 5:13

Again, some suggest that this man was ungrateful. He only cared about his healing. He had no care for the healer. But I think verse 13 has another explanation.

. . . for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place.

I am sure there was great commotion when this man got up and walked. Not only was he excited, but others standing around must have also been astonished. There was a multitude in that place and Jesus conveyed himself away. This was the reason that the man did not know who healed him.

Even though Jesus conveyed himself away at the scene of the healing, it is interesting that later Jesus found the man in the temple. It seems that Jesus followed up on the man. The man didn't find Jesus, but Jesus found the man. This would suggest that Jesus had a further interest in the man. And, if Jesus had a further interest in the man, you would think that he had an eternal interest in the man. And so, Jesus found him for a follow up conversation.

You will notice that he found the man in the temple. Now we are not told why the man was in the temple. But it is encouraging that he was found in the temple. Better to be found in church than in a bar somewhere. Perhaps this man was praying in the temple. Perhaps he was there to fulfill his religious duties. But it is encouraging that he was in the temple.

Now look what Jesus told him,

Behold, thou art made whole.
John 5:14

Jesus said, "Look down at your feet. Look at your legs. See how healthy they are? Look at your muscle tone. Remember how withered your muscles were? Remember how you were shriveled up? And now you are whole!" This was to remind the man what he had done for him. This was to encourage the man to serve him. This reminds us of that great principle,

We love him because he first loved us.

Jesus says, "See what I have done for you, now:"

Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.
John 5:14

What worse thing could come upon this man? He had been stricken with lameness for 38 years. He suffered with great affliction for nearly a lifetime, what could be worse? Surely Jesus is speaking of spiritual suffering. "Prove that you are my servant and stop sinning. But if you continue in your sins, a worse thing will come on you."

Jesus is always careful to warn us about the dire consequence of sin. And he warned this man. And I suspect he warned him because he loved him.

The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole.
John 5:15

Some think this man told the Jews out of hatefulness to Jesus. He tattled on Jesus, they say. But, it is more likely that he thought he was doing Jesus a favor by bragging on him. "This is the man who made me whole! It was Jesus."