

GOSPEL OF JOHN: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

“Healing on the Sabbath”

John 5:1–16

Open your Bibles to John Chapter 5. We are going to look at the first 16 verses. It took us a while to get out of chapter 4, but I think it was worth it.

To see how Jesus moves in the lives of people is exciting. And to think He wants to use us to continue that work is humbling. But remember, we simply sow and water the seeds. He gives the increase.

At this time we are going to turn the page a little. For sure, Jesus is going to work in the life of someone. He is going to heal a man who had been infirm for many years. And it is a very familiar story to many of us, the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda.

For the man, this was a remarkable experience. But that is really only incidental to the point of the passage. The emphasis of this story is found in its conclusion. Let’s read our passage as we always do, but pay special attention to verse 16. John writes:

¹After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. ⁴For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. ⁵Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been *in that condition* a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?**”**

⁷The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.”

⁸Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your bed and walk.**” ⁹And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked.**

And that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, “It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed.”

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¹¹He answered them, “He who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your bed and walk.’ ”

¹²Then they asked him, “Who is the Man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” ¹³But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in *that* place.

¹⁴Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “**See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.**”

¹⁵The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

¹⁶For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath.

Because He healed this man on the Sabbath, the **Jews** are going to persecute Jesus and will eventually kill Him. From this point on Jesus is headed to the Cross.

We have spoken before about who it is talking about when John calls a group of people, “**The Jews.**” He is not talking about Jewish people. He uses it as a technical term for their leaders — especially their religious leaders.

These religionists were the ones who persecuted Jesus. That word “**persecute**” means to *chase or pursue, or to run down with hostility*. And John uses a verb tense that shows it is a continuous action. From this point on there will continually be enmity between Jesus and this group of men. They will be bent on taking Him down.

Why?

Because people were beginning to follow Jesus.

That meant they were no longer following them, “**the Jews.**” In Mark 2:12 it says that people had “**never seen anything like**” what Jesus was doing. The miracles He was performing were authenticating His deity and Messiahship. And because of this He would begin to draw large crowds (Matthew 13:1, Luke 12:1). The religionists didn’t like this for a couple reasons.

Just like when Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers in Jerusalem, He was now coming against them. Because of this, He was bad for business.

It would also cause issue with the Romans, who allowed the Jews to rule themselves as long as there were no problems. They were worried that Jesus was just another rebel rouser from Galilee. So these leaders began looking for a way to take Him down. And it all begins with Jesus doing exactly what He did in chapter 4. Look at verse 1:

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After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

We don't know for sure which feast this was, but it was probably one of the three major feasts in which attendance was required. Jon Courson, in his commentary, believes it was Pentecost; because this was a celebration of the giving of the Law. This makes sense because, as we shall see from this story, we get a clear picture of the impotency of organized religion. That is exactly why people went to the city.

Jerusalem was where the Temple was, where worship took place, and where the Word was taught. There would be large crowds of people — all kinds of people. Look who Jesus seeks out (verses 2-3):

²Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water.

The Lord chose an interesting place to do His next work. It was through the Sheep Gate that the sacrificial animals were brought into the city. So the Lamb of God was right there in the sheep market for all to see. He stands by this pool and its five colonnades, checking things out.

For many years the existence of this pool was doubted by the critics. But in our time it has been excavated and is one of the must-see sights in the Holy Land.

There is also some debate over what Bethesda means — some say it is “*house of mercy*,” others, “*house of grace*.” To me it doesn't matter. This multitude of **sick people** needed an abundance of both. And the only person who could truly afford them what they needed was there that day. But look what they were waiting for (verse 4):

For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had.

Now there is a slight textual problem with the last part of verse 3 and all of verse 4. In some of the earlier Greek manuscripts, copied before 400 AD, this part of the text is missing. Some have suggested that this was a scribal marginal note that explained why people came to the pool. They say that, sometime after 400 AD, it was copied into the text. What we do know is that many people came to the pool hoping they would be healed. We also know from verse 7 that they believed that when the water was stirred up, it did have medicinal benefits.

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Did an angel actually come at a specific time and stir up the water?

These people thought so.

When John said the angel came at a **certain time**, he was speaking of the feasts. The idea is that the people gathered around during the time of the feasts — expecting a miracle to happen. And this would not be unusual in a Biblical sense.

There are many unusual occasions of healing in the Bible. Some were healed by a purified pot of stew (2 Kings 4:38-41). Naman was healed by washing in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5). One person was healed by touching the bones of Elisha (2 Kings 13). Some were healed when the shadow of Peter fell upon them (Acts 5). And still others were healed when Paul's handkerchiefs were laid upon them. God can and still does do things in unexpected ways. But something isn't necessarily from God just because it is unexpected or unusual.

I think the main point John is trying to make here is that the pool, at this particular moment, was not necessary. The Great Physician was standing right there in the midst of the people.

What would He do?

He would reach out and touch someone. Look at verses 5-6:

⁵**Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.**

⁶**When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been *in that condition* a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?”**

Why did Jesus single out this one man?

Some (Courson, Wiersbe, others) believe it is because he had been infirm for 38 years. In Deuteronomy 2:14 it says that Israel wandered in the wilderness for that long. So this man is a type of Israel which, as a nation, was spiritually bankrupt and infirm.

Others (Spurgeon) point out that, although Jesus was standing right there, none of these sick people looked to Him. They were looking for a miracle and not the Miracle Giver. They were acting like they were at a Benny Hinn crusade and not in the presence of Jesus. Instead of looking for the **Blessed Hope**, they were looking for the *blessed dope*. They were hoping the pool had some medicinal value and could heal them.

Tradition said the angel would come and provide a healing. And the Jews were all about their traditions. Whatever the reason, Jesus simply looked down and asked the man, “**Do you want to be made well?**”

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You would think that his answer would be, “*Well, yeah. Please, how can I be made well?*”

But it wasn't.

Instead of answering Jesus in the affirmative, he makes excuses. Look at verse 7:

The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.”

Apparently, this man had just about given up. We don't know for how long he had been coming to this pool. But it had to be more than just a few times. Each time he had been beaten into the water by someone. And now he was beaten down, and dog tired. Seemingly, his situation was hopeless.

Not!

This is a powerful lesson for us. We all know people who feel like there is no hope for them. Whether they are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or caught up in one of the many sexual sins that are rampant in our society. They believe that nothing or no one can help them. And they are acting like this man. They are waiting for the waters to be stirred up.

That is when we bring them to Jesus. Jesus is the God of the second chance, the fat chance and the last chance. He is the only One who can make them whole again. John Calvin said this about this man by the pool:

The sick man does what we nearly all do. He limits God's help to his own ideas and does not dare promise himself more than he conceives in his mind.

The fact is, God delights in saving people who have been sick in sin for many years. He healed me of my sin problem when I was 40 years old. He also brought Julia back into the fold at about the same time.

Why did He do that?

Why did He pluck two foolish things from the miry clay?

For His glory. He wanted to use us, *together*, to minister in His name. The Lord's passion is to transform those whom others write off.

One of the things that blew my mind about this account is that nowhere does it say anyone helped any of these people. In fact, this guy tells Jesus that there was **no man** there to help him into the water.

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Where were his relatives and friends?

Why didn't they help him into the water?

We can't be like that, just leaving people out there to fend for themselves. We need to bring them to Jesus. Look what He says to this man who had no hope (verse 8):

Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk."

Much like He did last time, Jesus speaks the Word.

First He says, **"Rise."** He commands (yes, this is an imperative) the man to do the impossible. *But God's commands are always God's enablings.* Because Jesus said to rise, there was power to do it.

What can we take as a matter of application from this?

If God calls us to do something, HE will provide everything we need to do it.

What happened when He called out, **"Lazarus, come forth?"**

Lazarus walked out of the tomb.

Then Jesus tells the man to **"take up his bed."**

So often we fear to do this. We leave our bed right there where it was — just in case. But the Word says to make NO PROVISION for the flesh. We can't keep a video tucked away in the bottom drawer, or a bottle shoved back in the corner of the pantry. When Lazarus came forth, he (with the help of others) shed his grave clothes.

Last of all Jesus told the man to **"walk."**

He didn't say to run or jog. The Christian life is a walk. And no one, other than Jesus, will carry you. Don't get me wrong, we need others to help us along the way. But that first step is ours to take.

The lame man had a choice to make here. He could either believe the words of Jesus, or he could argue that it wouldn't work for him.

What choice did he make?

Look at verse 9a:

And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked.

This picture is perfect. The lame man was not healed because he beat the other people into the water. He wasn't healed because he came every year to the pool, as tradition said. No rule or regulation helped him.

Only Jesus.

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It wasn't some man who delivered him. It was the Son of Man who saved him. Jesus spoke, and the man immediately got up and walked.

You would think there would be joy in Jerusalem that day. You would think others would flock to Jesus. But they didn't.

Why not?

Listen to how John finishes verse 9:

And that day was the Sabbath.

This is where the problems begin.

It wasn't so much that Jesus healed the man that caused an issue. After all, each of these people was there to get healed. The problem was what Jesus told the man to do after he was healed. Look at verse 10:

The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed."

Rather than rejoicing that the man was healed, "**the Jews**," the religionists were upset because he was carrying his bed. Jewish law said that on the Sabbath no man could bear a burden. Notice that I said the "Jewish law." This was a violation of the rabbis' interpretation of the Law.

It was not a breaking of God's Law of the Sabbath, but the human interpretation of and adding to the Law. And the rabbis used these misinterpretations and additions to control the people. By the way, this continues to modern times. There are many rules and regulations regarding the Sabbath. David Guzik cites a 1992 news item:

Tenants let three apartments in an Orthodox neighborhood burn to the ground while they went to a rabbi to see whether a phone call to the fire department on the Sabbath would violate Jewish law.

That is why no one was there to help the man get in the water. The people were paralyzed by fear about what they could do on the Sabbath.

I wonder if his friends or family left him there the day before?

Jesus is going to consistently maintain that it is lawful to do good works on the Sabbath. And this will cause Him to be in conflict with the authorities. As I said earlier in our study, from here on Jesus is headed to the Cross. Look at what the man says to the Jewish leaders, and how they respond (verses 11–13):

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¹¹He answered them, “He who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your bed and walk.’ ”

¹²Then they asked him, “Who is the Man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” ¹³But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in *that* place.

We have been talking a lot about divine appointments, or God incidences. I believe the appointment Jesus had here was not with the lame man. In fact, we don't even know if he became a believer or not (more about that in a moment).

His appointment was with the religious leaders. The word John used for **walk** when Jesus healed the man speaks of “*taking a stroll.*” He wanted to make sure the Jews saw him carrying his mat. The Lord wanted to start this confrontation.

Why?

Because He knew that their dead religion was not helping people get closer to the Father. In fact, it was keeping people from Him.

Jesus knows that they have substituted the traditions of men for the Word (Law) of God. He knows that the Sabbath is a means to glorify God.

And why wouldn't He know this?

In all three of the synoptic Gospels Jesus claims to be the **“Lord of the Sabbath”** (Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28 and Luke 6:5).

Jesus is not just a keeper of the Law. He is the Author. And He is our rest.

But let's turn our attention back to the lame man for a moment. Look at verse 14:

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.”

Notice that Jesus returns to finish what He started with this man. He didn't heal his lame legs so that he could head right back to his sin. To the man's credit, he went to the Temple ostensibly to worship and thank God for what happened to him. But once again, we don't see him place his trust in Jesus. Like Nicodemus, I believe he walks away that day healed physically, but not spiritually. That is why Jesus tells him not to sin.

We don't know what caused the man to be infirm for so long. But we do know that some sins do have physical consequences. Alcoholism can affect your liver. Drugs will affect your mind. Sexual immorality can affect your body (STD's, HIV, etc.).

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If the man's issue was caused by something like this, it would be devastating for him to return to his sin. Proverbs 26:11 says this about returning to your sin:

As a dog returns to his own vomit, So a fool repeats his folly.

We don't know what happened to the man in the end. But we do know that he was intimidated by the religious leaders. Look at verse 15:

The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Was the man an ungrateful snitch, or was he just a casualty of his upbringing?

He had probably been threatened by the Jews because of what happened. Breaking the Law was serious stuff, but especially on the Sabbath. Again, I quote from David Guzik's commentary (Dods citing Lightfoot):

Whosoever on the Sabbath bringeth anything in, or taketh anything out from a public place to a private one, if he hath done this inadvertently, he shall sacrifice for his sin; but if willfully, he shall be cut off and be stoned.

Is that why the man was at the Temple, to sacrifice for his inadvertent sin?

Possibly.

It seems that he picked sides, which to me is amazing. For almost 40 years the Jews did nothing for him. In fact, they most likely thought he deserved what he got because of his sin. But he was afraid of them and afraid of being put out of society. Because of this, look what happens (verse 16):

For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath.

We will see the tension between Jesus and the Jews mounting as we move through John's Gospel.

Remarkably, the healing seemed to make no difference at all to the Jews. In fact, it just infuriated them. All they could see was that their religious rule had been broken.

They hate Jesus because His grace does not square with their works.

So it is today with the religious systems of the world. They hold people in bondage to rules and regulations by teaching them that they have to do something to appease God. People don't want to see themselves as crippled by sin and unable to do anything in and of themselves to better their condition. So they sit at the pool and hope that somehow, some way they can be the first to jump in.

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But they are wrong — dead wrong.

And we cannot just sit by and watch them. We can't get all caught up in our traditions, sit back in our bubble, and watch as the people of the world perish. It is not easy to be about the Father's business. But it is necessary.

Next time we are going to resume this quarrel that Jesus is having with the Jews. We are going to see how their religion was exactly what kept them from knowing the truth about Jesus.

Read ahead and see why the Jews hated Him.

Let's pray.

SING THE REVELATION SONG