

10. The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda

John 5:1-16

The Gospel According to John

John's narrative now takes us back to Jerusalem to another feast but doesn't tell us which feast it was. As we read, remember that John's intention in writing his account is this: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). So, with that goal in mind, John now gives his readers more evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. More than five hundred years previously, Isaiah the prophet had written that, when their God comes to save His people, there would be four categories of healing He would perform. Here's what Isaiah wrote:

⁵Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would heal the blind, the deaf, the lame, and those who are mute, so John presents us here with the healing by Jesus of one who is paralyzed and helpless. Later, he will write about the healing of the blind man at the Pool of Siloam (John 9). Today, we focus on the lame leaping like a deer.

The Pool of Bethesda

¹Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. ²Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" ⁷"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." ⁸Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked (John 5:1-9).

The scene in this chapter takes place at a pool of water near the Sheep Gate, which is generally accepted to be on the north side of the city of Jerusalem, outside the city walls. Jesus was in Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews (Verse 1). The pool was called Bethesda, which means *House of Mercy*. The Pool of Bethesda has been found, excavated, and accepted as the original site. There is still evidence today of the five covered colonnades (v. 2) mentioned by John after all these years.

John described a scene of total misery, i.e., a great number of desperate people just lying around, hoping to be cured. How many people would constitute a great number? More than a hundred, do you think? When one tries to picture the scene, I imagine them all as close to the water's edge as they could get, cramped and huddled together, anxiously waiting for any movement of the water. The New International Version (NIV) takes out verse four, which explains the reason why they

gathered there because it is not in the earlier manuscripts. In the King James Version, verse four says, “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 5:4 KJV). Some would say that the healings were just a fable and that healings did not really take place. This bathing in the water remains a mystery to this day. Were there natural healing properties in this water? Whatever the reason for this gathering, we do know that God does hear the cry of the brokenhearted. In my view, it is entirely possible that God’s mercy moved Him to heal those gathered there before the Messiah came.

From the man’s response to Jesus, it depended on how quick a person could get into the water after ripples of water appeared on the surface (v. 7). Was the angel seen, or was it just the ripples of his presence? It leaves us with many questions. Was this the mercy of God toward this mass of humanity just lying there? Maybe, that’s why it was called Bethesda, the house of mercy. Perhaps, in their desperation, the faith they had that God would heal in this way was the reason they were healed. God answers desperate and faith-filled prayer.

However, it does seem that, after the water was stirred, if only the first one into the water were healed, some would have been at a severe disadvantage. If everything depended on how quick a person could get into the water, the closer a person was to the edge of the pool when the ripples occurred, the better his chance of getting healed. We don’t know how often this rippling of the water happened, but their attention was on watching the water and diving in quickly when the water was stirred or rippled.

There are three categories of sick people mentioned that were lying there: the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed (v. 3). The blind could not see the water stirred. That would be to their disadvantage in knowing when to jump in, especially if they were only waiting for a ripple. Others would jump in before them. The lame and the paralyzed could see what was happening, but they needed help getting into the pool. How frustrating it would have been to have people jumping over them to get into the healing waters! The longer a person was there, the closer they got to the edge of the pool and the nearer to their healing.

One wonders how long some of them stayed there, hoping for their opportunity to be healed. How did they eat or relieve themselves or take care of their physical needs? Surely, they would not want to give up their choice positions beside the pool. Perhaps, some had friends and family help them and bring provisions or help to clean up after the constant crowd of people waiting at the pool. We can also imagine that it was dirty and smelly. It certainly would have been a place of great despair with so many people having extreme needs that brought them to this place. It could also be supposed that many deaths took place at that pool while people waited, as well as bitterness and fighting broke out if some were pushed out of the way before others who were stronger.

Amid the sorrow of this gathering, we see Jesus visiting this mass of desperate humanity. John tells us that the invalid had been in that condition for thirty-eight years (v. 5). No matter how long he had been there or how near to the water's edge he could get, he had no one to help him get into the water before others.

Question 1) This man had been lying there in that condition for a long time. Why did he stay? What do you think his emotional state was after thirty-eight years of being sick? Where do you go when you are hurting emotionally?

I wonder about his emotional state. Thirty-eight years is a long time. How much time had he spent near this pool? Did he come back and forth, making regular pilgrimages to and from his home? In his short conversation with Jesus, he states that he had no one to help him into the pool. How much hope did he have by the time he met Jesus? Had he cried out to God amid his anguish? In what did he place his trust? His focus and hope seem to be in the mercy of God's sending an angel every now and again, hoping that one day *he* would be the one to be healed. One thing we do know: The Father had seen this man and sent Jesus to heal him. In that way, he finally was to experience the healing mercy of God. God cares for the one who has no one to care for him or her. We are not told that the Lord healed any others that were by the pool that day; the invalid man seems to be the only one. The Apostle John tells us:

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" (v. 6).

You Are Known of God

The picture we get is of Jesus' attention focused on this one man among all the others. Christ learned that the man had been there a long time. We do not know if this knowledge came from others around the pool or from a divine revelation from the Father, which Jesus often had. He may have asked the man how long he had been there. All we know is that the Father gave Jesus this knowledge about the man, and He knew that it was now time for this man to receive his healing. Jesus always did what He sensed and "saw" the Father doing (John 5:19). This was a moment that we call a divine appointment. Jesus did not heal Him without first talking to him and asking him a question. In these verses, we see a beautiful example of how Jesus walked in the Spirit as He went about doing what He knew to be the will of His Father.

Several times in the Gospels, we see that Jesus did not always appear to have complete knowledge of every situation, i.e., that there were times when He asked questions to find out information about a person's condition. For instance, when He came by boat across the Sea of Galilee to the region of the Gerasenes, a demonized man ran toward Him. We read that Jesus asked the man his name. The demon spoke through the man, saying; "**My name is Legion**" (Mark 5:9). When He came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, a man whose son was demonized confronted him. Jesus asked him, "**How long has he been like this?**" (Mark 9:21).

When His disciples asked Him about His return to earth and the sign of His coming, He told them that "**No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father**" (Matthew 24:36). I believe that, since He is now seated at the right hand of the Father, He *does* know the hour when He will be coming, but while on earth, Christ did not know. He was one hundred percent God, but also one hundred percent man and limited to time and space by His Father. Jesus had to experience what it was like to be truly human and model to His disciples how to be led of the Spirit. Jesus had to learn things while he was growing up, and He

did not have all knowledge given to Him in all things. During His time on earth, Jesus laid aside many of the aspects of His nature as God. Paul tells us in his letter to the church at Philippi that:

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷**but made himself nothing**, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8 Emphasis mine).

This passage tells us that Jesus made Himself *nothing* in the incarnation. The Greek word, *kenoō*, means “to make empty, to be without content, to abase, to neutralize, to be made ineffectual, and to empty something of its power. The action results in the loss of ability for something to accomplish its purpose.”¹ While Jesus walked on earth, He depended on the Spirit’s leading and empowering, just as you and I have to do. Just a little further in John’s Gospel, Jesus said, “**I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does**” (John 5:19). The Lord looked around at all those lying there, and the Father focused His attention on the one invalid man, thus giving Him supernatural revelation that the Father had seen him, knew all about him and wanted to heal him. Once the Father had shown Christ what He wanted to do, Jesus asked the question:

“Do You Want to Get Well?”

Question 2) Why do you think Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well? Wasn’t that why he was there?

Perhaps, the question was posed to him to impress upon the man his utterly helpless condition. Before the Lord steps in, He will often bring a man to realize his lack of ability to get himself out of his condition or situation. Also, he was to consider that there would be many changes that would come to him as a result of being healed. His healing would change almost every aspect of his life. He would indeed have a new beginning in life. No longer would people extend charity to him. He had to stand on his own feet. The responsibility would be on him to find work and be a regular part of society again if he answered in the affirmative and was healed. This question goes to the heart of many of us, i.e., do we want to be healed? Do we want to be changed? Do we want the power of God to be operative in our lives?

The essential thing in receiving God's power to heal or to change your life is the intense desire for it. Jesus said the same question to the blind man, Bartimaeus. When Bartimaeus learned that Jesus was passing nearby, he screamed out to the Lord, “**Son of David, have mercy on me**” (Mark 10:47), and he staggered toward Jesus in his blindness. When Jesus called Bartimaeus into His presence, before Christ healed him, the Lord asked him, “**What do you want me to do for you?**” (Mark 10:51). The things of God come to us easier if we express our desire to Christ. He hears us in our pain when we cry out to Him for His help. The children of Israel were not delivered from Egypt’s cruel slave masters until they cried out to Him:

¹ Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, Page 1640.

⁷The LORD said, "**I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out** because of their slave drivers, and **I am concerned about their suffering.**"⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:7-8).

Never give up crying out to Him in whatever pain you are experiencing. He does see, and He does hear, and He is concerned about your suffering. Do not be content to suffer without crying out to God for healing. If we are entirely content the way we are, we prevent change from coming our way. Contentment without God is one of the most dangerous things on planet earth. It can ruin a person's soul. God has a way of using situations in our lives to turn our attention toward Him. Sometimes, even sickness can be a gift of God when it awakes a person from spiritual sleep, making him aware of his or her need for Christ. The Lord can turn your suffering to your advantage. The difference will be in how you react to your pain and if you choose to reach out to Christ. How much desire have you put into being made well or changed? Our prayer life, or lack of it, often shows whether or not we desire to know His power in our life. I don't understand why one person is healed of his sickness, and others left without receiving healing. We will only find out the answers to those kinds of questions on the other side of this journey through life. In whatever situation you are, pray and keep on praying. He sees your pain and is concerned about your suffering.

Limited Views on Healing

The man responded to Jesus' question by focusing on the fact that he needed somebody to stay with him and help him into the water when it was stirred. Sometimes, we can limit God by thinking that God's healing will only come in a certain way. The Lord can choose to heal through means that we understand, for example, through doctors and natural remedies that people have discovered. However, God also heals through supernatural means. There are those who think that only a hospital or doctor can help them, and they never think of asking the Lord Jesus for His help by persevering in prayer.

We limit ourselves from receiving what we need because we are focused on only one specific way it will occur. I am not advocating that people shun medical attention when it is required, only that it is also essential to be open to the fact that God heals today, and the Lord may choose to heal you if you would approach Him with believing prayer for your healing. Even if you are going to the doctor for a medical condition, I hope that you are also petitioning God for your healing in whatever form He would deliver it.

This man had the Lord Jesus standing over him, and he was asking for some help into the water! I wonder how many times Jesus has walked by us, and we have not known it! This man was still looking for an angel to stir the water when the Lord Jesus, God Incarnate, was there to minister to him personally!

The man had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, but he was told by Christ to do what was impossible for him: "**Get up! Pick up your mat and walk**" (v. 11). One thing is sure: the man received healing apart from his faith and understanding about Christ. The invalid didn't know who it was that was speaking to him; he simply obeyed. He had been there so long that his faith

was like a tiny flame that had nearly gone out. The pool had become a way of life for him. When he acted on the words Jesus spoke, he received power, and healing flowed through his limbs. When Jesus stepped into his life, it was a sovereign act of grace and mercy in answer to this man's tiny spark of hope.

Christ gave the man a straightforward instruction, i.e., to pick up his mat and walk. We do not know what went on in the man's mind, but he was desperate and willing to obey even the impossible command that Jesus gave him. He did nothing but respond obediently to the gracious word of the Lord Jesus. In one command, Jesus redirected his worldview on healing. This shows us that we cannot put God into a box as to how He heals. The Lord will often surprise us by healing in unusual ways. Christ does not need us to understand His ways to receive His mercy and healing, but He does need our obedience when He speaks. He told the man to do the impossible, i.e., to get up and walk!

Sometimes, Jesus healed with a word of command. For instance, to the man with the withered hand, He said, "**Stretch out your hand**" (Matthew 12:13), and when the hand was stretched out, it was healed. At other times, Jesus healed in ways that were strange to most people, like the time Christ spat on the ground, made mud of the spittle, put it on a person's eyelids, and they were healed instantly (John 9:6). To another, He put His fingers into a man's ears for his healing (Mark 7:33). Another time, He just spoke the word, and a man's son was healed eighteen miles away (John 4:50). We limit God by telling Him how we want to be healed instead of opening our heart and mind to Him and saying, "Your will, Your way, Lord." He can work with a person who will simply obey when He speaks! This man was not healed because of his virtue, but because he followed the simple command given to him. □

Christ's Ministry Motivation

Jesus didn't do miracles and healings for any reason other than to relieve the pain of hurting people and to glorify the Father. Everything He did was in obedience to the will of His Father. He didn't call attention to Himself; Jesus healed the man to relieve him of his situation. The Lord didn't require faith in His identity as the Son of God, for He didn't tell him Who He is. He loves to do miracles and healings so that His Father alone may be glorified. Christ did not seek to draw attention to Himself for selfish reasons. Matthew noticed this attitude of Jesus when he described Jesus' ministry in this way:

Many followed him, and **he healed all their sick,** ¹⁶**warning them not to tell who he was.** ¹⁷This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. ¹⁹**He will not quarrel or cry out;** no one will hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰**A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out** (Matthew 12:15-20 Emphasis mine).

Matthew remembered Christ's asking those healed not to tell others who He was (v. 16) so that He might continue His work of healing without fanfare. The Lord's passion is that His Father is glorified for healing the sick. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Matthew described the inner character of Jesus as one who would not quarrel or cry out (v. 19). He was not argumentative; neither did

He force people to listen to Him. He did not do a lot of shouting in the street and drawing attention to Himself. The descriptive term used is of a man straightening out a bruised or damaged reed bent over by the wind. The picture given is of a candle no longer aflame but having a red, smoldering wick close to being snuffed out.

The Lord is sent to fan into flame those who need light amid their darkness, viz. those who are at the end of their rope and have no hope in their brokenness. He will come alongside us and blow onto our lives and give us reason to hope again. Shouldn't this cause us in the Church to behave in the same way? We are to follow John the Baptist's example and get out of the way and give God the glory for all He does. We will be more like Christ when we don't draw attention to self but seek to glorify God. **Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (v. 8).**

The Persecution of Christ

⁹At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." ¹¹But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'" ¹²So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?" ¹³The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. ¹⁴Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you." ¹⁵The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him (John 5:9-16).

The man was instantly healed. There is no evidence that hands were laid on him or that Jesus even reached out a hand for the man to grab and get up. Nothing! The healing came about through words spoken! Imagine the scene. A word of command and it was done! The Scripture says, **"At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked" (v. 9).**

Question 3) What can we learn from the fact that the healed man did not know that it was Jesus who had made him well? (v. 13). What do you think was the reaction of others around the pool when they learned that the man was healed?□

We can imagine that the healing caused quite a commotion among those at the pool. John does not describe the scene, but try to imagine what it was like that day. Don't you think that they were shocked when they saw this man instantly cured and observed him being able to walk again? He must have made quite a commotion once he realized he could walk. I imagine that he was ecstatically happy when he picked up his bedroll and stood for the first time in thirty-eight years! Can you imagine what the crowd thought when they realized he was healed, yet he did not get into the pool? I'm sure they all wanted to know how it happened. □

Unfortunately, he was soon spotted carrying his bedroll by the "religious police," the legalist religious Jews. This reminds us that criticism can often come to us when we believe and trust the words of Jesus. The Lord was aware that His action would draw attention and criticism from the religious rulers, but He was single-minded in obeying the voice of His Father, even if this meant

confrontation with the Pharisees. In so doing, He exposed their hypocrisy and demonstrated the pure heart of the Father to those who are sick. When the religious police found that he wasn't healed by an angel coming down to the pool but by a man and that the healed man did not have any idea as to whom it was that had healed him (v. 13), they were upset.

These religious men had no praise toward God when they heard about the man's healing. There was no sense of wonder or awe at God's mercy and power, just criticism that this healed man was doing something that they had not allowed, i.e., carrying his bed mat on the Sabbath. The legalistic Jews interpreted the carrying of something like a bedroll on the Sabbath as breaking one of the Ten Commandments, i.e., that of working on the seventh day. Of course, in their warped understanding of God's restriction of no commerce on the Sabbath, not only in their eyes was this man breaking the Sabbath by carrying his bedroll, but also Jesus was breaking the Sabbath by healing a person on the Sabbath.

How blinded we can be when we have a religious mindset! They were missing the whole point! The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). They did not perceive the tender act of mercy God had bestowed in healing him. When the man replied that he didn't know who it was that healed him, none of the other people that lay there knew who it was that healed him, either; otherwise, they would have told the man. Scripture tells us that Jesus had "slipped away into the crowd." Christ had been there *incognito*," and as soon as the man was healed, the Lord departed (v. 13). This says a lot about the character of Christ.

This passage of Scripture also reveals to us that it is essential to our Lord to follow up those who have been touched by the Lord's love. Jesus found him at the temple (v. 14). Isn't that so like the Lord? He went to look for him as a good Shepherd searches for his sheep. John tells us that Jesus found him to give him some follow-up instructions concerning his healing.

Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14).

Question 4) Why did Jesus talk to him about sin? Do you think sickness is the result of sin in every instance?

It is clear from Scripture that sickness is not always the result of a person's sin. Later in the Gospel of John, the disciples were confronted with a man that was born blind from birth. They asked Jesus as to the cause of his blindness, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:2-3). Sickness is not always the result of sin. However, it does seem evident from Jesus' follow-up with the invalid that, in his case, his disability was caused by sin and that he should not go back to his habit of sin so that something worse would not happen to him. The Lord is concerned that we avoid the traps of the enemy and that we stay free from sin.

When were you last bruised or smoldering with little fire in your life? What happened? How did Christ come alongside you? Are you still in that place of being hurt? Are you ready to reach out for Christ's healing, even if it means your life will be different?

(Give some time for people to share their needs and to close with a time of prayer at the end.)

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for sending Jesus into the darkness and the pain of our lives. We ask You to come again to us today and heal those of us who have been bruised and left as a smoldering wick. Fan us into flame again and give us newness of life. Amen!

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