

Healing at the Pool (John 5:1-14) – Study Notes.

5 Sometime later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ^[4] ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ 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?” 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.” ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” ¹¹ But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” ¹² So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. ¹⁴ 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.”

The setting (5: 1-3).

Jesus heads to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. These festivals were very important in Judaism. **The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘These are my appointed festivals, the appointed festivals of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies. Leviticus 23: 1-2.** Verse nine tells us that the festival was the Sabbath. This was a weekly festival observed in homes and synagogues. As we will see there are strict guidelines around this festival. It’s also what causes a fair bit of controversy with the Jewish leaders.

The religious leaders of the day had taken the Old Testament and calculated that it contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, one for every day of the year. To be a person of faith you had to obey every single one of them. All 613. Just to make sure we are clear, there were rules about the rules, to absolutely ensure that the main commandments and prohibitions will be kept.

So, on top of the 613 they laid 1500 additional ones to stop you even getting close to breaking the other rules. By the way special thanks to Pastor James White from Mecklenburg Community Church, North Carolina for this information. Now, some of these rules and regulations and those who protected them had lost their way. Jesus points this out as he interacts with the Jewish leaders of his day.

Let’s not be too harsh or judgemental in our assessment of this religious life. For a lot of Jews, they were doing their very best to protect their covenantal relationship with God. They were a minority group within the mighty Roman Empire. They did not want to be assimilated into the colourful spiritual beliefs of the day. They simply wanted to honour God. However, Jesus will go on to deliberately challenge their religious life by breaking the rule about the Sabbath.

Verse two introduces the setting for this healing. People would have viewed this pool as a healing sanctuary. In the early days of John's Gospel this location was heavily criticised as historically inaccurate. Then in the twentieth century the ruins of the pool were discovered. Sometimes it takes archeology a while to catch up with the Bible.



Healing (5: 5- 9a).

We learn in the story that many people viewed the pool as a healing sanctuary. Such places were not uncommon in antiquity and once a site was identified as a sanctuary of healing, the tradition was hard to stop. The people understood that occasionally an angel would descend and stir the water in the pool and the first one to touch the water would be healed. The man that Jesus meets had been ill for thirty-eight years. John indicates that he was a paraplegic having lost the ability to use his legs. It seems that this was likely a regular place for him to spend the day. Here he could beg from people coming to the pool and take his chances at being healed.

Among the many who were looking for healing that day, Jesus selects a man who is a particularly difficult case. He reaches out to someone whose suffering and isolation are beyond measure. He went to lie by the water, hoping. He didn't have anyone who could even help him get into the pool. He was without friends, without family, without support. And he had been that way, day-in, day-out, week after week, month after month, year after year – for thirty-eight years.

Jesus takes the initiative as he often does in the Gospels. Then he asks the man a Question, "do you want to be healed"? This question hints at ways in which a long illness, addiction, grief or dysfunctional habit can over time become so much part of who we are that we actually lose the will or desire to be liberated from it. He came to open up to those who he meets and minister to their areas of desire, longing, motivation and hope. **The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there, John 5: 13.** The activity of Jesus was done with power but also with gentleness and he did not need the recognition.

The question Jesus posed seems a little out of touch, doesn't it? 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?" (John 5:6, NIV.) Do you want to get well? Are you serious? "No, I like it here. I like the way I smell. I like crawling through the streets. I like the way I'm taunted and ridiculed by everyone. I like having to beg for a living.

Actually, it was a fair question. For many people, what has crippled them becomes their way of life. So much so, they don't want to change. I've been up close to this. Some people don't want to get off the streets. They have given up on being set free, set freed from alcoholism and addiction. Is there something in our life that has us lying by the pool, obviously broken, hurting, in need of God's healing touch, but it's not clear that we want to be up and walking around.

So, what did Jesus do? He healed him. On the spot. No questions asked. **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 John5: 8-9).** Jesus gives a vivid sign of the life he brings; delivering a lame man from 38 years of illness and disappointment. Jesus does not heal all of the many blind, lame and paralyzed whom he finds at the pool. This miracle is a sign, not an instantaneous solution to everyone's health problems or an alternative for us to care for the sick or something to always be replicated in similar situations. So, what is the meaning of this sign?

First of all, it's about compassion for the sick. The previous story of the royal official shows Jesus responding to an urgent cry for help. Here, he takes the initiative in helping. Second, compassion like this takes each person and their own situation seriously. Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time. Thirdly, there is a conversation that respects the dignity, freedom and desires of the sick person. Do you want to be made well?

There are two kinds of healings in the Bible. Let's call the first kind "*Faith Resulting*." In other words, they were healed because of their faith. This was the most common. When Jesus would heal people, he would often say that it was their faith that healed them; their faith that made them well. The miracle, the healing, was the result of faith. This one was different. There was nothing about this man that indicated he believed in Jesus, or had any faith at all. In fact, he didn't even know Jesus' name. He didn't even ask to be healed!

Jesus just did it. So, let's call this one "*Faith Creating*." Meaning this seemed to be an act of God not as a result of faith, but in the hopes of causing faith; creating faith. So, did it work? Let's look instead at the next interaction Jesus had with this man. **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."** (John 5:14, NIV.) Now that's significant to think about.

Controversy (5: 9b-18)

First, Jesus found the man in the temple. That's a good thing. He had enough sense to go there to pray, or to give thanks, maybe to show himself to the religious leaders to have the healing confirmed, which would have been custom for the day. So at least some small spark of the spiritual had been ignited in his life. Jesus runs into him, and says, "See, you are well again." In other words, see, you were healed. God did something wonderful in your life. It really

happened. But then notice what Jesus said: **“Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:14, NIV)**

The man had been a paraplegic due to some ongoing pattern of sin in his life. A pattern of sin he was apparently still engaging in. And if he didn't stop it, a life even worse than he had been experiencing would come crashing down on him.

Is Jesus making the link between physical health and sin. The Bible is very clear that when we are sick, or when bad things happen to us, it's not automatically because of sin in our lives, though that was commonly believed in Jesus' day. If you were sick, or if you were blind, or lame, you must have done something to deserve it. You live right, you won't experience pain, suffering, illness or setback. If you don't experience those things, if you get sick, have a setback, experience tragedy - then we better start looking under the carpet for secret sin.

Jesus never taught that. In fact, He went out of His way to teach that it wasn't true. **As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him (John 9:1-3).** Now, having said that, it doesn't mean some illnesses, some ailments, some bad things aren't related to our sins. To our behaviour. To our choices.

So, Jesus tells the man that there is a connection between his illness and sin in his life. That he had been reaping what he had sown. And Jesus warns him to stop living his life of sin. Or something worse would happen. That's not the first time Jesus gave that advice. Take a look at these words recorded by Matthew,

⁴³“When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.” (Matthew 12: 43-35).

The point is clear: you can receive liberation from something, healing from something, even an act of God for something, but if you don't then turn to God, you are an empty house, cleaned up, but without God. Your life has been reformed, but without God. And that is an invitation to being taken over again, and in a way that was even worse than before.

So, we have two questions here that are for all of us. The first is, “Do we want to get well?” But here's the second: “Are we going to own our sin and our need for God?” Or do we want to continue doing life in the same way – the way that got us sick to begin with? Here is the answer. **²⁴“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).**