

Please turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 5.

We are looking this morning at the third sign that Jesus performs in the Gospel of John with the healing of the man at Bethesda.

Read John 5:1-16.

We are introduced this morning to a miracle Jesus performs at Bethesda in Jerusalem.

This miracle, which took place during a Jewish feast, was with a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years (v.5).

Jesus is at the feast in Jerusalem because it was required that all Jewish males attend three major feasts held in that city: The Passover, The feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of Passover or Weeks.

Deuteronomy 16:16 (NASB) "Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed.

John tells us that this occurred “after these things,” that is, after Jesus’ Galilean ministry had ended.

John recorded only one event from that period, the healing of the royal official’s son (4:43–54), but the Synoptic Gospels relate many more events (e.g., Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth [Luke 4:16–31]; His extended preaching tour [Matt. 4:23–24]; and several healings, including a demon-possessed man [Mark 1:21–28], Peter’s mother-in-law [Matt. 8:14–17], a leper [Luke 5:12–16], and a paralytic [Mark 2:1–12]). In fact, Luke 4:14–9:50 is all related to His Galilean ministry, as is Mark 1:14–9:50.

John refers to **a feast of the Jews** six times in his gospel (cf. 2:13; 6:4; 7:2; 10:22; 11:55); this is the only one he failed to identify specifically.¹

John continues in verse two by telling us that there was “in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes.”

This “sheep gate” is mentioned in Nehemiah 3:1 and if John is referring to the same thing as Nehemiah, he has in mind a little opening in the north wall of the city, a little way west of the north-east corner.²

¹John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary : John 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006). 172.

²D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). 241.

It was called “the sheep gate” because through it many sheep were led for the purpose of being sacrificed in the near-by temple-court.³

When you visit St. Anne’s Church in Jerusalem, they will show you the deep excavation that has revealed the ancient Pool of Bethesda. The Hebrew name *Bethesda* has been spelled various ways and given differing meanings. Some say it means “house of mercy” or “house of grace,” but others say it means “place of the two outpourings.” There is historical and archeological evidence that two adjacent pools of water served this area in ancient times.⁴

D.A. Carson says, “A Bordeaux pilgrim visited Jerusalem in AD 333, and described a pair of pools with five arcades (though he called the pools ‘Betsaida’). Sporadic excavations have probed the site for more than a century. It is located near the Church of St Anne, in the north-east quarter of the Old City (near Nehemiah’s ‘Sheep Gate’). There were two pools, lying north and south, surrounded by four covered colonnades in a rough trapezoid, with a fifth colonnade separating the two pools.”⁵

It is here, John says, where “lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered” (v.3).

The end of verse 3 through verse 4 does not appear in many of the early manuscripts and may have been included by a scribe.

John MacArthur says, “Despite its brevity, the omitted section contains more than half a dozen words or phrases foreign to John’s writings—including three not found anywhere else in the New Testament. These facts, along with the absence of any specific mention of angels in the rest of the passage, indicate that the section was not part of John’s original account. In the years after John wrote his gospel, scribes apparently added this material as a marginal note to present the popular explanation for the stirring of the water (v. 7). (The early church father Tertullian referred to the superstition of the angel stirring the water in the late second or early third century.) Later manuscripts incorporated the scribal glosses into the text itself.”⁶

³William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary : Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001). 1:189.

⁴Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996, c1989). Jn 5:1.

⁵D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). 242.

⁶John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary : John 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006). 173.

The stirring of the water reveals that the pool was apparently fed by an intermittent spring (MacArthur).

Jesus comes to this pool and singles out one man who “was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years” (v.5).

John MacArthur says, “John included this figure to emphasize the gravity of the debilitating disease that afflicted the individual. Since his sickness had been witnessed by many people for almost 4 decades, when Jesus cured him everyone knew the genuineness of the healing (cf. v. 9).”⁷

John does not identify the invalid’s illness, but from v. 7 we must think of him as paralysed, lame or exceedingly weak.⁸

Verse 6 says “when Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition.”

The Lord Jesus had complete knowledge of everything. He had never met this man before. Yet He knew that he had been an invalid **a long time** [and] in loving compassion, **He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?”**

Jesus knew that this was the greatest longing of the man’s heart. But He also wanted to draw out from the man an admission of his own helplessness and of his desperate need for healing.⁹

The question that Jesus asked him in verse 6, though seems strange, was asked for the purpose of securing “the man’s full attention; it focused on his need; offered him healing; and communicated to him the depth of Christ’s love and concern. But the man failed to grasp the weight of Jesus’ offer.

Verse 7 says, “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.”

Whether or not he believed that an angel stirred the water (cf. the discussion of vv. 3b, 4 above), he did believe that when the water was stirred (maybe by a surge from the source) only the first person

⁷John Jr MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Word Pub., 1997, c1997). Jn 5:5.

⁸D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). 242.

⁹William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995). Jn 5:5.

into the pool would be healed. Since he could not move rapidly enough on his own, and had no one to help him, he never managed to get there first.¹⁰

It's also worth noting that He never imagined that Jesus could miraculously heal him. One reason is because he didn't even know who He was according to verse 13.

But what happens in verse 8 not only heals the man but also brings about Jesus' persecution (v.16).

Jesus says to the man in verse 8, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk."

The "pallet" or "bed" or "mat" whatever your translation is was normally made of straw and was light enough so that it could be carried on the shoulder of a well person.¹¹

In the same way that He spoke the world into being at creation, (Gen. 1:3), Jesus' spoken words had the power to cure (cf. 1:3; 8:58; Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2).¹²

Many times in Scripture do we hear Jesus heal only with "a word."

In John 4:50 Jesus told the royal official whose son was home dying, "Go; your son lives."

In Matthew 8:5-13 Jesus heals the servant of a centurion by saying in verse 13, "'Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.' And the servant was healed that very moment."

Verse 9 says, "Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk."

It doesn't say that the man argued with Jesus or didn't believe His words. It says, "immediately the man became well...and began to walk."

His healing was total and complete.

He didn't leave staggering off in ambiguous health, but leaving with the bodily strength necessary to carry his mat!¹³

¹⁰John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary : John 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006). 174.

¹¹John Jr MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Word Pub., 1997, c1997). Jn 5:8.

¹²John Jr MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Word Pub., 1997, c1997). Jn 5:8.

¹³D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). 244.

Verses 1-9 marks the first part of this section. The second builds upon it as verse 9 concludes by saying, "Now it was the Sabbath on that day."

This second section reveals the controversy that Jesus caused with the Jews by healing this man on the Sabbath.

The narrative continues in verse 10 by the man being stopped and told it was "not permissible for you to carry your pallet" on the Sabbath.

The Old Testament prohibited working on the Sabbath but it did not specify exactly what kind of work was forbidden.

Most likely it was referring to one's customary employment.

Exodus 31:12-14 (NASB) ¹² The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹³ "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. ¹⁴ 'Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people.

Exodus 35:2 (NASB) "For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy day, a sabbath of complete rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

"The Israelites were not to participate in their normal, week-long occupations on the Sabbath day" (MacArthur).

Carrying one's mat would not have been included in this.

Observing the Sabbath regulations was central to the legalistic Judaism of Jesus' day.

Gerald L. Borchert says, "The Sabbath had become a pervading theme in Jewish life...So significant was the Sabbath that a major section of the Mishna was devoted to Sabbath rules. Sabbath obedience became in fact an eschatological issue because it was thought at least minimally that the coming of the Messiah was linked to the perfect keeping of one Sabbath. The actions of Jesus were thus regarded by Sabbath-oriented Jews as being diametrically opposed to the expectations of the rabbis who probably would have categorized Jesus as an antinomian libertarian. He did not seem to be concerned for the precious rules of the rabbis.

Not only in John but also in the Synoptics is Jesus portrayed as seemingly unconcerned for the rabbinic traditions about the Sabbath...The rules of the rabbis were a misunderstanding of God's design for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not the means to God's approval, as the rabbis seem to have suggested. The Sabbath was not merely a rule for humans but *a gift to humans* (cf. Mark 2:27).

It was to be used to honor God and to benefit his people. More importantly, Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath (cf. Mark 2:28). If, therefore, anyone would have a right to act on Sabbath, it was Jesus.”¹⁴

Rabbinic tradition listed “thirty-nine forbidden categories of work—including carrying goods” (MacArthur). Many teachers also forbade minor cures—physicians’ cures not necessary to save a life—on the Sabbath.¹⁵

Instead of rejoicing at the wonderful deliverance of the man, the religious leaders condemned him for carrying his bed and thereby breaking the law.¹⁶

The man answers in verse 11 not by defending Jesus but blaming Him for his violation of the Sabbath.

He says, “He who made me well was the one who said to me, ‘Pick up your pallet and walk.’”

There is a notable contrast between the attitude of this man and that of the blind man in Chapter 9.

The man here will not even assume responsibility for his own deeds, whereas the man who was healed of his blindness is bold enough to stand up against his parents and the Jewish authorities.¹⁷

So the man defends himself by blaming the one who told him to do it.¹⁸

They asked him in verse 12, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Pick up your pallet and walk’?” But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place” (v.13).

¹⁴Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1996). 228.

¹⁵Craig S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993). Jn 5:11.

¹⁶Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996, c1989). Jn 5:1.

¹⁷Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, Helps for translators; UBS handbook series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993], c1980). 148.

¹⁸D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). 245.

William MacDonald says, “The Jews were anxious to find out who dared tell this man to break their Sabbath tradition, and so they asked him to identify the culprit. The Law of Moses decreed that one who broke the Sabbath should be stoned to death. The Jews cared little that a paralytic had been healed.”¹⁹

He further says, “This incident marks one of the great turning points in the public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because He performed this miracle on the Sabbath, He stirred up the anger and hatred of the Jewish leaders. They began to pursue Him and to seek His life.”²⁰

John says in verse 14 “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.’”

This warning by our Lord points out a basic principle: Sickness is not always an immediate result of personal sin.

In John 9:1-3 (NASB) ¹ As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "*It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.*"

Many believe that because Jesus said “do not sin anymore,” that his thirty-eight year illness was due to his personal sin.

So, Jesus finds the cured man *at the temple* (i.e. somewhere in the temple precincts, just south of the Bethesda pools) and explicitly connects the healing (*See, you are well again*) with the urgent need for moral reformation (*Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you*).²¹

What could be worse than thirty-eight years of a debilitating disease? Eternal punishment in hell.

Romans 6:23 (NASB) For the wages of sin is death.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:28 (NASB) Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

What is worse than sickness? Hell!

¹⁹William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995). Jn 5:12.

²⁰William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995). Jn 5:13.

²¹D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991). 245.

If one continues sinning it indicates that one's ultimate destiny.

My brother had a tag on the front of his car that read, "Drive like hell and you'll get there!"

You could re-phrase it to say, "Live like hell and you'll get there."

Verse 15 says the healed man "went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well."

It is astonishing that he would accept this healing after nearly four decades of terrible distress and then walk away from Jesus and show his loyalty to the Jews who hated Him. This has to be one of the great acts of ingratitude and obstinate unbelief in Scripture. He did not intend to praise or worship Jesus for healing him. Since **the Jews** had already manifested open hostility toward Jesus (vv. 10–12), it would have been incredibly naïve to think they would now react positively. He further aided their hostility by identifying Jesus. More likely, the man's actions were a further attempt to defend himself for breaking the Sabbath regulations; he could now answer the authorities' question of verse 12 by naming Jesus.²²

Verse 16 says "For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath."

The Greek tense reads "the Jews were continually persecuting Jesus."

Not only was He guilty (in their minds) of violating the Sabbath Himself, but even worse, He had incited another to do so. So began their open opposition toward Jesus—persecution that would eventually result in His death.²³

There are a couple of principles that can be drawn from this story.

First, healing is not based on whether someone believes or not because this man didn't even know who Jesus was (v.13).

Second, Jesus never submits to man's legalistic rules. He always submits to the Father.

He, who is the Logos—the Word incarnate, never would violate His own Word!

In Matthew 15:1-9 He was confronted by some Pharisees and scribes who accused His disciples of breaking the tradition of the elders. For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread."³ And He

²²John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary : John 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006). 178.

²³John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary : John 1-11* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006). 179.

answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"⁴ "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.'⁵ "But you say, 'Whoever says to *his* father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*,'"⁶ he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And *by this* you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition."⁷ "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:⁸ 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.'⁹ 'But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' "

Scripture always overrides tradition. That's the case here in this healing at Bethesda.

As we have seen this morning, Jesus is the great Physician.

Not only does He heal a man who has been physically "ill for thirty-eight years" (v.5), but He also spiritually heals those who repent of their sin and turn to Him for salvation.

Remember this is the purpose of John's Gospel.

John 20:30-31 (NASB)³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

He completely restored a man to health and was persecuted for it because He did it on the Sabbath.

Which group are you party to?

The one who was healed or the one who didn't believe who Jesus was and looked for opportunities to discredit Him?

My hope is that you will believe in Him today and surrender your life fully to Him.

Let's pray.