

John 5:1–18

Introduction

After the prologue (“In the beginning was the Word...”; 1:1-18) and then the “introduction” where we see the testimony of John the Baptist to Jesus and then the transition from John the Baptist to Jesus (1:19-51), we came to the first major “section” of John’s Gospel (chapters 2-4). This section is marked by an “inclusio” or by the way it’s bookended with the “first” and the “second” signs of Jesus that are recorded in this Gospel (the *only* signs in John that are numbered; 2:11; 4:54). The “first sign” was the changing of water into wine (2:1-11), and the “second sign” was the healing of the royal official’s son (4:43-54). Both signs take place in Galilee and the account of the second sign begins with an explicit reference back to the first sign:

- John 4:46, 54 — So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine... This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

In between these “bookends” in Galilee everything else is concerned with events in Judea and Samaria. There’s the cleansing of the temple (2:12-25), the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-21), the final “signing off” of John the Baptist (3:22-36), and Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman (4:1-42).

This morning, we’ll make the transition into a new “section” of John where Jesus’ conflict with “the Jews” (the Pharisees and religious leaders of the Jews) becomes suddenly very pronounced – even to the point of the Jews seeking to kill Jesus. It’s in the context of this conflict with the Jews that the question of who Jesus is and of His unique relationship to the Father is “fleshed out,” as it were, in all its intricate fullness and beauty. We begin with Jesus returning once again to Jerusalem in Judea.

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

The only feast that’s mentioned in Matthew and Mark is the Feast of Passover when Jesus was crucified (Mat. 26:2, 5, 17-19; 27:15; Mk. 14:1-2, 12, 14, 16). Luke includes one other Passover when Jesus was twelve years old (Lk. 2:41-42; 22:1, 7-8, 11, 13, 15). John, however, mentions three Passover Feasts (1st – 2:13, 23; 4:45; 2nd – 6:4; 3rd – 11:55-56; 12:1, 12, 20; 13:1, 29; 18:28, 39; 19:14), one Feast of Booths/Tabernacles (7:2, 8, 10-11, 14, 37), and one Feast of Dedication (Hannukah; 10:22-23), plus the unnamed “feast of the Jews” here at the beginning of chapter five. There’s a sense in which it seems that John has chosen these feasts as an organizing principle for his Gospel.

On the one hand, we often see from what happens *at* the feasts that Jesus is the fulfillment *of* the feasts. In chapter two, it was at the Passover Feast (which celebrated Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and especially Israel’s protection from the angelic destroyer of the firstborn; Exod. 12:23) that Jesus first spoke of the “destruction” of the temple of His body and of His being raised up again in three days (2:19-22). It’s also in the general context of this “first” Passover Feast that Jesus spoke of God loving the world by giving His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Later on, the theme of the fulfillment of the feasts in Jesus will become even more clear, but we also see Jesus as one who obediently and faithfully observes, or keeps, the feasts. The Law said:

- Exodus 34:23 (cf. Exod. 23:14-17; Deut. 16:16) — Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel.

Jesus is the one who observes and keeps the feasts side by side with every other devout Jewish male in Israel *and also* the one who will one day fulfill the feasts so that they're all ultimately celebrated *in Him*.

“After this [at some unspecified time after Jesus’ healing of the royal official’s son] there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”

II. John 5:2 — Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep [Gate] a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades [see picture on p. 8].

Until the middle of the 1800’s there wasn’t any archeological evidence supporting the existence of this pool. Some scholars concluded from this that the Gospel of John was written “late” (later than the first century) by someone who was more concerned with symbolic theological meanings (*Bethesda / five roofed colonnades*) than with actual historical reality. The assumption of these “scholars” is that when the archeological record doesn’t clearly support the Bible, the Bible must either be wrong or else interested in theology *rather than* history. But as has happened many times, the unbelieving “scholars” were proved wrong. Excavations in the mid-1800s revealed a large pool just to the north of the temple mount. The archeologist in charge argued that this pool was the pool of Bethesda that we read about here in John chapter five. But what about the “five roofed colonnades” (a colonnade is a row of columns supporting a roof)? The excavations revealed that this pool was surrounded only by four roofed colonnades (one on each side). So how could there be a fifth? About one hundred years later, in 1964, further excavations revealed a second pool (or we could say the other half of the pool) which was on a lower level and was separated from the upper level by a roofed colonnade in the middle, resulting in a total of five roofed colonnades.

This doesn’t prove that the Bible is inspired, but it does encourage the faith that we already have in the infallibility and the historicity of God’s Word. If our presuppositions (our starting points) are unbelieving, we’ll seek to interpret everything through that unbelieving lens. If our presuppositions (our starting points) are believing, then we will seek to interpret everything through that believing lens. The question is, which presuppositional lens is the true lens through which we rightly understand ourselves and the world in which we live? Is it the unbelieving lens that begins with self and builds on reason and/or experience and/or feelings? Or is it the believing lens that begins with God and objective, authoritative divine revelation?

“Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep place or the Sheep thing (probably the Sheep gate; cf. Neh. 3:1, 32; 12:39) a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.”

III. John 5:3 — In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.

The question is, why are these invalids all gathered together at this pool, which was originally used to collect rainwater and then supply that water to the city of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 7:3; 36:2)? You might notice that in the ESV (and all other “modern” translations) there’s no verse four. That’s because when the verse numbers were first assigned, a verse (and a half) was included that wasn’t originally a part of John’s Gospel and that has since been taken out again (without renumbering all the verses). The words that have been taken out give us apparently the “popular” explanation for why all these sick people were gathered at the pool. They were “waiting,” we’re told, “for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.” Maybe this explains why the pool was named “Bethesda,” which means either “house of mercy” or “house of outpouring.” But what these words state as a fact was just religious superstition. What we really have here is evidence of a Hellenized Judaism in the time of Jesus (Jews heavily influenced by Greek culture).

“The Greeks had created a cult around Asklepius [the god of healing]... During the Hellenistic period, the Greeks built ‘Asklepions’ – or ancient healing centers, all across the Greek Empire. The ill and disabled would congregate at these regional healing centers. They would drink and bathe in the waters of the Asklepiion and then sleep within the temple’s walls. They slept on mats laid out in a section of the inner sanctum of the temple called the “abaton.” The abaton was supposed to be the place of divine dreams, where Asklepius or his serpents might appear to give the sick clues about their healing. In simple terms, the Greeks attributed the healing powers of natural springs to spirits. This belief made its way into the cult of Asklepius. His temples were typically built near sacred springs with shallow pools and baths. Participants would wait by the water, praying, fasting, chanting, etc., until Asklepius or his helpful “serpent spirits” churned the water. This was the best time for a healing miracle – when bubbles or ripples made their way from the spring to the pool.” (Randall Niles; DriveThru History)

I think we can be certain there was no angel stirring up the waters of this Pool of Bethesda, but rather that the waters were occasionally disturbed by some other natural means (possibly by intermittent springs; Carson). There is evidence that at some later point there was actually an Asklepiion (a temple of healing) built at this very site. So even before that temple, popular Jewish superstition had already taken this Greek mythology and clothed it in the garb of biblical religion. Now it was supposedly “an angel of the Lord” who supposedly “went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water” so that supposedly “whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.”

IV. John 5:5–6 — One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?”

Unlike the royal official who travelled from Capernaum to Cana to find Jesus and implore Him to come and heal his son, this man has asked nothing of Jesus and to this point has expected nothing from Jesus. Why, then, does Jesus take the initiative and ask this man if he wants to be healed? Is it because Jesus knows that this is a man of faith? We’re about to see that’s *not* the

case. The only reasons we can assume, given the context, are that first, Jesus felt a compassion for this man and second, Jesus knew He was doing a specific work that God had given Him to do. Notice the emphasis on how long the invalid had been there: thirty-eight years. Not only does this set us up for the miraculous nature of his healing, but it helps us feel how hopeless this man was and how much he had suffered. The text says: “When Jesus *saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time,*” He asked him if he wanted to be healed. Do you see the compassion of Jesus? But what about all the rest of the “multitude” of invalids? Does Jesus not feel compassion for them? Are they somehow less “deserving” of healing than this man? Jesus knew compassion for all human suffering and misery, so there must be more at work here than just compassion; there’s also the sovereign will of God and Jesus commitment to doing that will (cf. Jn. 8:29).

Jesus asks this man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years, “Do you want to be healed?” Isn’t that the whole reason this man is here at the pool of Bethesda? So why ask this question? This isn’t a test to see if he wants to be healed badly enough. Jesus is inviting this man, ultimately, to transfer his hope from the supposed powers of the pool to *Himself*. Jesus gave no credence at all to the pagan superstitions surrounding the pool. The waters of this pool had never, ever healed anyone, and never would. So when Jesus asks the man who’s been waiting beside these waters for thirty-eight years, “Do you want to be healed?” He’s inviting him to hear a real and genuine offer of healing and therefore to ask *who this man is* who offers that healing. But the man is so steeped in his superstition that he doesn’t truly hear Jesus.

V. John 5:7 — The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.”

Can this man hear himself speaking? Is it really true that God heals only those who can get into the water the fastest? Is it really true that these waters will “automatically” heal “whoever” steps in first? So blinded is he by his superstition that the sick man hears no offer of healing from Jesus and therefore can’t see to ask who Jesus might be – not even to ask His name (vv. 12-13). Instead, what he sees in the compassion of Jesus is the possibility that here is a man who might help him into the pool. What he sees in the compassion of Jesus is the possibility of a man who might share with him in his superstition. So how will Jesus respond to this? If Jesus challenged and tested the royal official who came to Him imploring Him to heal his son, how will He respond to this man who instead of faith is full of superstition?

VI. John 5:8-9a — Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your mat, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his mat and walked.

Do you feel as if there’s almost a holy “impatience,” here? The problem is not the superstition in and of itself. The problem is what this superstition says about God – that God only (and always) heals those who are able to get into the water the fastest; that God has somehow bound Himself to the magical healing powers of the water. So perhaps from a holy indignation against all such unworthy ideas of God, and also from a true compassion for the prolonged suffering of this man, and also from a desire that the eyes of this man might be opened to his *true* need Jesus dispenses with any other questions or conversation and says, “Get up, take up your mat, and walk.” “And

at once the man was healed, and he took up his mat and walked.” After thirty-eight years of futility, *Jesus* speaks a word of command and immediately, the man is healed.

I wonder, though, if this man perceived any rebuke in *Jesus*’ words – the same words that were also so full of compassion. In response to the man’s request it seems that *Jesus* has essentially called out his superstition for what it is. But now, suddenly, there’s a twist in the story.

VII. John 5:9b–10 — Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.”

The fourth clearly commandment forbids any “work” on the Sabbath.

- Exodus 20:9–10 — Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work...

So the question is: What does “work” include? From the context, it’s clear that “work” refers generally to the normal daily labors that are required the other six days of the week. The Sabbath was to be set aside as a day of rest from these labors. But the Pharisees weren’t content with the general principle of this law. Instead, they carefully identified thirty-nine different categories of prohibited work, the first of which was “carrying.” They appealed to passages of Scripture like the one in *Jeremiah*:

- Jeremiah 17:21–22 — Thus says the LORD: Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.

It's on the basis of verses like these that even today one can read on the Orthodox Union website:

“This category [of prohibited work] absolutely forbids all carrying in the street. Even such trivial things as a key or a handkerchief must be left at home. Certainly pocketbooks, purses, wallets and key-chains may not be carried. The only thing one may carry outdoors are things that are actually worn. Carrying in a private home is permitted on the Sabbath. It is only in a public domain that it is forbidden. The spirit of the law, however, forbids the carrying or handling of unnecessary objects, even indoors. The Sanhedrin therefore legislated the categories of... things which may not be handled on the Sabbath. These include such useless things as pebbles and stones. They also include things which may not be used on the Sabbath, such as pencils, candles and money.”

We might think that the “legalism,” here, is obvious, but we also read this on the same website:

“In a sense, by not carrying, we also relinquish our ownership of everything in the world. A main sign of ownership is that one may take something wherever he pleases. On the Sabbath, we give up something of this ownership. Nothing may be removed from the house. When a man leaves his house, he may carry nothing but the clothing on his back. It is G-d, not man, who owns all things.”

And so we see how a legalistic self-righteousness can actually be cloaked in the garb of a “humble devotion” to God. Can you see the power of self-deceit? When “the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed,’” maybe they really did believe that they were being zealous for the glory of God. Maybe their self-righteousness blinded them to their self-righteousness – to the reality that they had created their own laws and called them God’s laws, “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mat. 15:9).

In any case, the man caught carrying his mat on the Sabbath could potentially be in a lot of trouble. He could face disciplinary measures even to the point of putting him out of the synagogue or barring him from the temple (cf. 9:22). That would be a terrible trial to any faithful Israelite, but if this man hasn’t yet been cured of his superstition, then what might he be most afraid of right now? Could he be afraid of getting on God’s “bad side” – of losing what he’s just been given? Could he be afraid of losing the access he’s only just gained to the religious “rituals” of Judaism? To this point we’ve had zero evidence that this man’s superstition has been replaced with a genuine faith (contrast with the blind man in chapter nine). So we go on to read in verse eleven:

VIII. John 5:11 — But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’”

It’s not a stretch to conclude that this man is definitely more concerned with staying on the good side of “the Jews” than with asking who this man is who has just healed him. Notice how he words his response: “*The man who healed me, that man* [demonstrative pronoun] said to me, ‘take up your bed, and walk.’” If he perceived any rebuke or correction in Jesus’ words, and if he’s not receptive to that correction, he may find it an easy thing to shift all the blame to Jesus. He’s already been given what he *most* wanted—physical healing. Maybe that’s all he thinks he needs.

IX. John 5:12–13 — They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.

Jesus withdrew because he didn’t want the attention this crowd was likely to give Him. But in withdrawing from the crowd He also withdrew from the man He had just healed, leaving him still with no knowledge of who He was – not even of His name. Nevertheless, there’s still zero evidence in the text that this man was at all interested in finding out who Jesus was. I’m reminded of the ten lepers that Jesus healed and how only one of them returned to Jesus to give thanks or praise to God (Lk. 17:11-19). In this case, though, while the man isn’t concerned with finding Jesus, he *is* careful to return to the temple. So we read in verse fourteen:

X. John 5:14 — Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.”

In Matthew chapter nine, Jesus *first* tells the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven,” and *only after that*, to show that He is the one who has authority on earth to forgive sins, does Jesus say to the paralytic, “Rise, pick up your bed and go home” (Mat. 9:1-7). But do you see how, here, everything is reversed? *First*, Jesus heals the paralytic, but *after* having healed him, the man still remains in danger of a fate far worse than being bed-ridden for thirty-eight years. “See, you are well!” Jesus says. “Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” What is this “worse” fate? It’s that final and ultimate sentence of condemnation on the Day of Judgment. As one commentator says: “Jesus’ works of healing do not occur outside the circle of forgiveness of sin. Rather, they are the... proof that in Jesus God reaches out to humankind in its totality, which means, above all, in its estrangement from God” (Ridderbos). Jesus heals people not because they’re worthy or deserving of being healed, but rather as a sign that in Him has come that ultimate mercy and grace of God by which the *guilt* of our sin can be taken away and by which we can be granted that free gift of life eternal. But having been healed physically, this man remains in great danger because he remains in his sin – because so far he’s content to be healed of his sickness without seeing his even greater need for the *forgiveness* of his *sins* and the *taking away* of his *guilt*. And indeed these are the very things that have been available to him all along, even for the past thirty-eight years, even without any temporal healing in this life. His worship at the temple is, therefore, not so different from his previous hope that God might magically heal him by the stirred-up waters of a pool. This is why after *finding* him in the temple (see again the love and the compassion of Jesus!), Jesus exhorted him not to be content with his newfound freedom and health, as truly wonderful as that might be, but rather to sin no more. Jesus isn’t telling him to be perfect, or even to be “good enough,” but rather to repent—to turn from his sin and unworthy views of God to a genuine, humble faith in the God who forgives and saves—so that nothing worse will happen to him. That’s not an unkind threat. It’s a most loving and compassionate warning.

If this man truly turns to God with a genuine, humble faith, won’t he be compelled to ask who this man, Jesus, really is – this man who first healed him and who now warns him to sin no more? Isn’t this the only possible response for this man if he would heed now the mercy that he’s been shown and the warning he’s been given? And yet what do we read in verse fifteen?

XI. John 5:15 — The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

At the very least, this man is more interested in gaining favor with “the Jews” than in heeding the warning of Jesus (cf. 11:46). At worst, it would seem this man has even come to resent the very one who healed him. Had Jesus really rebuked and corrected him even in the very act of healing him? How dare Jesus warn him—who has already suffered all his life and who is even now worshipping in the temple—that a worse fate potentially awaits him? He will not see that ultimate “sickness” of his sin and guilt; he still will not cry out for that ultimate healing that is the *forgiveness* of his sins and the *taking away* of his guilt.

And with that, the man Jesus healed exits the story and we’re left with this sad and tragic and sobering warning. May we never be content with the temporal and physical blessings of this life, but rather truly rejoice ourselves above all else in the forgiveness of our sins and the free gift of eternal life. May we never despair at the temporal and physical pain and trials of this life, but rather rejoice ourselves always in being spared that far worse fate of condemnation on the day of

judgment. Even in the midst of our sicknesses and sufferings, we can know that we are already “healed.” Already, we have the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life. Therefore, we know that we are destined not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:9).

The spiritual blindness of the man who was healed prepares us for the spiritual blindness of “the Jews.”

XII. John 5:16–18 — And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” **This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him**, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

May God protect us all from this blindness – whether the blindness of the man who was healed or the blindness of “the Jews.” May God daily be opening our eyes more and more to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and so to be made always more and more like Him.

