

Signs of Glory

Studies in John's Gospel

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Study 4

The Third Sign (John 5:1-18)

Healing Glory at Bethesda

Jesus had been ministering in Jerusalem, Cana Samaria and Galilee. Some like the Nobleman had responded truly to the signs of Jesus. Others, particularly in Jerusalem had received them superficially and missed the revelation of His glory. We saw that the revelation of the glory of Jesus was the revelation of the Father's glory, a point which Jesus makes again in the story of Bethesda. *But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." (5:17).*

John specifically shows the link between Jesus of Nazareth and the Father. The Jewish leaders of the time were under the illusion that Jesus could have nothing to do with God because the kind of person He was didn't fit with their false image. In the teaching after this miracle Jesus engaged them on this issue. Their rejection of Him meant their rejection of the Father. *But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish--the very works that I do--testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form (5:36, 37).* Everything about the ministry of Jesus was done to reveal and open up communion again with the Father.

After ministry in Galilee Jesus returned to Jerusalem. John often linked the Lord's signs with the feast times of Israel, perhaps with a view to contrasting the life, joy and hope produced by the Father's works with the formal religious observances that the feasts had become (Isaiah 1:13-20). His return would see opposition grow and the many of His so called disciples abandon Him (6:66). Indications by the crowds that they loved and followed Christ were seen to be short lived. The three issues which would surface in this visit to Jerusalem were; The Sabbath, Jesus and His relationship to the Father and the Scriptures, It seems highly significant that Jesus went to the Pool of Bethesda. This was a scene of abject hopelessness and dereliction.

Jesus at the Pool

The Pool was situated in the Northern quarter of Jerusalem, near what was called the 'Sheep Gate'. It is thought this was the gate mentioned in Nehemiah 3:1, when the walls of Jerusalem were being re-built around 450 BC. Some see significance in the fact that it was the gate through which the lambs for sacrifice were brought to the Temple. Recent archaeology has found the pool with its five porticos under which the sick and diseased would find some protection.

Bethesda means, 'House of outpouring'. In the state Jesus found it nothing could have been more inappropriately named. There were many sick there of all different ailments (Vs. 3), including the kind of sickness which was due to sin (Vs. 14). John's language is graphic in describing the sick at the Pool. They were lame blind, sick and withered (dried up and so paralysed). It would have made for a scene of utter despair not to mention the smells and sounds.

Vs. 4 is not included in some of the early manuscripts and is believed to have been inserted as an explanation why the people gathered there. The sick lay there in

desperate hope of two things. That the water would become a healing agent and that someone would help them into it when it did. John doesn't tell us of the success rate under this old system. However, it takes little imagination to realize that it would have been a dog eat dog environment whenever the waters were 'disturbed'.

A certain man who was there, had been thirty eight years in his sickness. (Vs.5). He was only one of many there but Jesus singled him out. Why we do not know. He may or may not have been at the pool for all that time, but the point John is underscoring is that he was in a long term helpless and hopeless bondage, (he had been *in* his sickness for that time, the fruit of his sin had been his living death for thirty eight years).

As we saw, Jesus linked this mans sickness with his past life of sin. This is not a formula to be applied to all sickness as Jesus Himself made clear (9:3). I have included as a helpful appendix, excerpts from G C Bingham's *For Pastors and the People*, p.169 where he deals with the relationship between sin and sickness in summary form.

Pink, in his commentary of John sees a correlation between the thirty eight years Israel spent in the wilderness and the thirty eight years of this man's sickness. Whether that is sustainable John doesn't clarify. But it seems sure that the state of the Jewish faith at Jesus time was indeed in need of sovereign intervention. They were lame, shrivelled and sick, and utterly unable to free themselves from their 'sickness'. Their whole experience was wretched, yet was dressed up as fine. This of course was true of all flesh, not simply the Jews.

When Jesus saw the man (Vs. 6)

One of the results of chronic illness and the inability to find healing can be a slow growing but morbid self pity. This sounds harsh, but never the less is often so. Jesus must understand this man to his roots to be able to heal fully. How often we may seek a tablet for something that requires grace not an analgesic? Where things like anger have caused our depressions and anxieties we may need medication to help us cope with the severe symptoms but the underlying issues must be healed if wholeness is to come. Like the Psalmist, our cry of utter dependence and trust should be, *Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way* (Psalm 139:23, 24).

He said to him, "Do you want to get healed" (Vs 6). Was the man accustomed to his sickness and maybe his self pity? We must be careful about assuming too much psychological analysis of the man. The Lord's question contained a promise, otherwise it was simply a cruel gibe.

Sir there is no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming another steps down before me (Vs. 7). Understandably the sick man thought his only hope was to have Jesus get him into the pool before anybody else beat him to it. The man was still locked into the old way of seeing healing. Whether the pool was supernaturally disturbed or the water bubbled occasionally because of a spring, he saw the water as the healer. Jesus glory was just about to break in upon him.

Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk" (Vs. 7). The words of Jesus herald His powerful word that will even break into the realm of death and deliver (Vs. 25). Humanity is so conditioned in its unbelief to think that everything from God comes with contractual strings. Here, despite the man's future 'thickness' about who had healed him (Vs. 13), and his attempt to avoid difficulties with the authorities (vs.11) Jesus simply healed him without strings.

And immediately the man became well and took up his bed and began to walk (Vs.9). The suddenness and totality of the man's healing stood in stark contrast with his unending hopelessness of the past thirty eight years. The Kingdom of God that

Jesus was showing was cutting through what seemed prolonged and hopeless bondage and sin. ***Now it was the Sabbath.*** The whole furore that followed was to do with the Sabbath. It was not against the Mosaic law for the man to carry his bed on the Sabbath. They were prohibited to continue their daily job on the Sabbath. So this man had not contravened God's law, only the law of the Leaders. But they were enraged. They did not see the healed man they only saw a problem with what he was doing. Unlike Jesus their focus was so distorted they could not enter into the joy of the Kingdom present.

"He made me do it" was the familiar excuse of the healed man when accused by the Leaders. This man still had a way to go to be free. That would happen in the Temple a little later.

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."(Vs. 14)

Just as the words of Jesus at the Pool had cut through his thirty eight years of sickness, now Jesus would speak words of a different type of healing. We are not told why the two 'healings', spiritual and physical, did not happen simultaneously as they did on other occasions. Jesus reminded the man of his healing and then of his present on-going issue with sin.

The command to stop sinning must have come with the grace of forgiveness that broke the power and pollution of the man's sin. Now he no longer needed to face the ***"worse that may befall"***. He was free for the future, even the future judgement (Vs. 29)

The Sick man Healed – A Sign to be read

- The corruption and ignominy of sin and sickness is not part of the father's Kingdom.
- The nature of sin and sickness is that we find ourselves hopelessly unable to 'get into the pool'. Unless God intervene we stay another 'thirty eight years' by the pool of our suffering.
- Jesus clearly intentionally healed on the Sabbath. The Sabbath rest of God was one of His great covenant blessings. God intended it to be a day of joy, trust and therefore rest. It was His rest, the rest He entered into on the Seventh Day of creation. That 'day' of rest had no end like the other days. Israel was to be a people who rested in communion with their Creator Father. The Leaders had turned it from a grace into a means to get grace and thus polluted it, making it a burden for the people. Jesus was showing them the glory of the true Sabbath (Himself as He rested in the freedom and love of His Father) The battle engaged by this sign would see them seek to destroy Him. It was no mere theological tiff.

Questions for discussion and further reflection

1. In what ways did the glory of Christ come to you in this story?
2. Discuss how we can in times when we feel hopeless, say like the sick man, "There is no one to put me into the pool". Or, "Others are pushing in ahead of me!" What can be behind such cries?
3. Do we live in the Sabbath Rest of God? Discuss what this means for busy people and busy churches.

Appendix

Sickness Sin & God's Healing

MAN AND HIS ILLNESSES

- Man was created without illness, and without any of its causes (Gen. 1:31; cf. Eccl. 3:11; 7:29; Ps. 8:3ff.).
- The fall of man and the curse (Gen. 3; Rom. 1:18–32) brought about *the conditions* for illnesses: (i) death is part of man's penultimate era (see Rom. 8:10; 8:20–25; II Cor. 5:1–5); (ii) man's rebellion, anger, idolatry, sin, etc. set him up for sicknesses (cf. Prov. 14:29–30; Ps. 31:10; 32:2–3; 38:1–8 with Rom. 1:21ff.).
- In one sense sickness can be called 'natural' to man, i.e. not directly the result of sin. See II Kings 13:14, 20–21; II Kings 20:1–11; Philippians 2:25–27; I Timothy 5:23; cf. James 5:13–16.

THE CAUSE OF ILLNESSES

- Sin is the main cause of sickness. We must distinguish between (i) sin being the cause of sickness, and (ii) sickness which is not, of itself, sin. See Isaiah 1:2–6; 24:4–13; Psalm 32:2–3; 38:1–8; 103:3; Matthew 9:1–8. Note that guilt is forgiven (Ps. 32:5; cf. Jer. 33:8, *RSV*).
- God punishes *directly* by sicknesses in some cases. See Miriam, Uzzah, Uzziah, Ananias and Sapphira, Elymas, and those 'not discerning the body' in the Lord's Supper.
- Some sicknesses are linked with Satan and the demonic forces of evil: Acts 10:38; Luke 4:17ff.; Luke 13:10–17. Paul shows in I Corinthians 10:19–21 that demons are linked with idolatry. See Deuteronomy 28:15ff. and 29:16–20, where sicknesses come upon idolaters because of demonic forces linked with idols (cf. Deut. 32:15–18).
- For the most part sicknesses come through the conditions of this age, coupled with man's sin. Guilt is the problem of man. Even so, we must keep in mind the Book of Job, the corrective power and goal of affliction (Ps. 119:67, 71; Heb. 12:5ff.), and God's manifestation of His works (John 9:1ff.).

THE CURE OF ILLNESS

Man cannot cure himself. Matthew 8:16–17 shows that something outside of man must come and help him, e.g. 'He *took* our infirmities and *bore* our diseases'.

- Forgiveness of sins is the basis for healing, i.e. the removal of guilt and pollution by forgiveness and justification: Psalms 32, 103 and Matthew 9:1ff. This forgiveness is based on the Atonement.
- The power of 'Kingdom action', or the proclamation of the Gospel, heals: (i) through forgiveness by the Gospel, (ii) by the power of Christ acting through the church (Acts 3:12, 16; 4:29–30; 14:3; 19:11), and (iii) by defeating the power of evil (Matt. 12:28; cf. 4:23; Acts 8:6–7). These three are closely linked, and with them repentance, faith, forgiveness, justification, etc.
- The church has 'gifts of healing' (I Cor. 12:30) and a ministry of healing (James 5:13–18), and doubtless this is linked with the paragraph above.