

19. JESUS, THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, HEALS (5:1-18)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. First read through the whole of John 5 noting your initial observations and thoughts.
2. How would you describe the basic outline of the chapter? What do you think the main point is that John is trying to communicate?

John 5 marks a major shift in the Gospel of John. In the prologue (1:1-18), John introduces Jesus, and through to the end of chapter 4, Jesus presents himself to the Jews as the promised Messiah. But now, John begins to trace the growing rejection of Jesus and the growth of deadly hostility towards Him by those in official circles against. This rejection centres around three signs: the healing of the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda (ch. 5); the opening of the eyes of the man born blind (ch. 9); and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (ch. 11). All of this culminates in his crucifixion.

In this study we consider the first of these signs, the healing of the cripple at the Pool of Bethesda. As we do so there are two realities to consider about this passage. It is a story ...

1. ... Of a man's encounter with Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, and how it changed his life.
2. ... That falls into the pattern of redemptive history as many people's stories do.

Before we dig into the story itself, let us first consider what the pattern of redemptive history is, followed by some other important elements helpful to our understanding of the events.

PATTERN OF REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

Creation | Fall | Redemption | New Creation (Consummation)

It started with creation and everything was good. Us humans were the pinnacle of God's creation, then it was all very good and man was in a perfect relationship with God. But then the fall happened and our sin separates us from Him. However, through His covenant with Abraham and choosing a people for himself, He would ultimately make a way for us to be in right standing with Him by sending His Son Jesus to redeem us – Jesus' first coming. But Jesus will come again, when sin and death will finally be destroyed and He will establish His perfect kingdom on earth, restoring His creation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Read the following verses. What do they teach us about the pattern of redemptive history?
 1. Psalm 139:13-16
 2. Romans 3:23-24
 3. John 3:16
 4. 2 Corinthians 5:17

Every human being is part of God's redemptive story either through accepting His gift of salvation, or by rejecting God's gift of grace and are separated from His grace forever. The story of the man healed at the pool of Bethesda is part of God's redemptive story and in it we also see all four of these elements.

THE ORDER OF CHAPTERS 5 AND 6

When you study the sequence of events in the Gospel of John it may seem that chapter 5 is out of place, that perhaps chapters 5 and 6 have swapped places. The opening words of chapter 6 tell us that "*After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias*". This appears somewhat strange considering chapter 5 is set in Judea and seems to fit more naturally after chapter 4 which ends with Jesus in Cana. The reference in 7:1 of the Jews seeking to kill Jesus in Judea is not what we expect after a narrative set in Galilee but would better fit immediately after chapter 5.

But we must bear in mind that John is not giving a complete history. We should not expect everything to fit into a neat geographical or chronological picture. Ancient biographical writing did not seek to lay out an ordered sequence of events but rather sought to express a particular point – in this case what we read in 20:30-31. Therefore, John chooses the accounts from where and when in Jesus' ministry that best fits his purpose. There is no manuscript evidence for any order other than the traditional one, nor is it easy to see why such a transposition occurs.

There is also a theological case to be made for this order. In chapter 6 Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life, the bread that came down from heaven, the living bread, and makes it clear that people have eternal life only through Him. But for John's readers to understand these statements, His position as the Son of God needs to be established, and this He does in 5:19-47.

HEALING SHRINES

Healing shrines and the worship of healing deities was common in the ancient world (e.g. the hot springs in Hierapolis, the cold springs in Colossae, and the worship of Asclepius). Most of these shrines required those seeking healing to undergo some form of washing ritual at an adjoining fountain or pool.

Similar things are happening at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. Although there has been some disagreement over the exact location of the pool, most scholars favour the pools located to the north part of the Temple Mount, near what is now called St Stephen's Gate, where the Sheep Gate mentioned here once stood. Bethesda means "house/place of mercy/outpouring". The site had twin pools surrounded by four porches/porticoes, set at various levels around the pool, and a fifth porch/portico down the middle separating the pools. This site was later used as a healing shrine by the Romans in AD 135. Eusebius notes that the water was reddish in colour – probably due to the geology of the area.⁷⁹

Multitudes of people with different disabilities would sit there in the shade, waiting for the water to be stirred. Tradition held that an angel would stir the waters, and at such time, the first ill person who made

79 Keener, 1993, p275. *Archaeological Study Bible*, p1728.

it into the pool would receive healing. This is mentioned in verse that does not appear in most modern translations, verse 4. John Piper provides a concise explanation for this:

“The answer is that it’s not there in the oldest and best manuscripts. There are thousands of Greek manuscripts or fragments of Greek manuscripts and the way we arrive at our amazingly reliable Greek and Hebrew and English versions is that these texts are compared with each other in painstaking and complex ways so that when some manuscripts have different wording, we can tell almost all the time which is original. And in the few places where we can’t, there is no significant historical or doctrinal issue at stake.

“Here it seems that somewhere along the way, a copyist drew a marginal note of explanation into the actual text. Verse 7 begs for an explanation. It says, “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.’” It seems like only a few were healed (or maybe only one), when the water was “stirred up,” and if you were too slow, you missed out.

“So verse 4 in the King James explains (you can see it in your footnote): It says that the invalids were “waiting 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.” That helps make sense out of verse 7 where the man says he can’t get to the pool in time.

“Of course, this explanation may be exactly right. But since it’s missing from the earliest manuscripts and has other marks of being added later, the more recent versions omit it so that we have a version that is as close to the original as possible. How the pool worked is not essential to the story. The fact that Jesus worked is essential to the story.”

Archaeology has since discovered that the pool of Bethesda, like many similar pools in Israel, is an intermittent spring. At times water is released in surges from hidden reservoirs in the hills causing these springs to rise and fall suddenly.

Undoubtedly healings did occur here. Even today, healings occur in similar places around the world where people go believing they will be healed. But most of these can be explained psychologically or physiologically. When people believe they are going to be healed, and they are in a place where healings supposedly occur, and they do the expected thing, many of them are healed. Thus the pool at Bethesda had established a reputation as a place where people could be healed.

John’s inclusion of the length of time this man had been an invalid – 38 years – is similar to pagan accounts of similar healings – they typically included the length to emphasise the greatness of the healer’s cure. In this case, the man has been a cripple longer than the typical lifespan of the period, and nothing had been able to cure him until this time.⁸⁰ What his illness in particular is, is not stated, but whatever it is, it has caused him to be bed-bound and crippled.

80 Keener, 1993, p275.

WATER MOTIF

Since 1:19 have you noticed the many references to water? It begins in chapter 1 with John baptising people, including Jesus, at Bethany beyond the Jordan. Then in chapter 2 there is the sign of turning water into wine. In chapter 3 in His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus makes reference to being “*born of water and the Spirit*”. In chapter 4 Jesus sits by a well and asks the Samaritan woman for a drink, only to reveal to her that He has greater water to offer – Living Water. Now here in chapter 5, the cripple is hoping for healing from the water in the pools. As we continue through the gospel, we will continue to see accounts relating to water unfold.

What is the significance of all these references to water? In the Ancient Near East, and indeed in most agrarian societies, water is often a symbol for life. Coupled with bread, water is seen as a basic staple for physical life. However, in each case, Jesus is represented as a replacement for water as the giver and sustainer of life – not only in the physical sense, but more importantly in terms of spiritual life. In doing this, John shows the futility of the religious festivals of the day that imply that physical washing in water also results in spiritual cleansing. By using this play on words, John is showing that true spiritual life comes through Christ (i.e. from above), and not the water.

SABBATH LAWS

John mentions in 5:1 that Jesus is in Jerusalem for the “*feast of the Jews*”, but he does not state what feast despite the fact that he often attaches his narrative to different Jewish feasts because the theme of the feast relates to the story. Three feasts have been suggested: Passover, Pentecost, or the Feast of the Tabernacles, with the last one being the more popular option. However, if chapter 5 is in the right order chronologically (see “The Order of Chapters 5 and 6” above), based on the timing of the preceding chapters and events, Pentecost may be more likely as it occurs seven weeks after Passover, whereas the Feast of Tabernacles takes place six months after Passover. However, if one assumes that the events in chapter 5 should follow chapter 6 instead, then the feast would more than likely be the Passover.

Irrespective of what feast this is, it is a Sabbath, and Jewish rules forbid work on any Sabbath. Although God instituted the commandments so that Israel would be different from her neighbours and to show them the true state of their hearts, the Pharisees and Scribes took things to far. They even imposed rules upon physicians that they could not heal anyone on a Sabbath, unless the illness is life-threatening. Jewish law explicitly forbids carrying anything on the Sabbath, even one’s bed mat. In this account, both of these laws are broken by Jesus and the cripple.⁸¹

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. This account starts a chain of confrontations between the Jewish leaders and Jesus over the Sabbath that eventually lead to His crucifixion. But the Old Testament does not say anything specific about carrying one’s bed-mat. Rather Jewish traditions implemented after the exile introduced extra rules that came to be considered law. Read Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-18; and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. What is the focus of the Old Testament commands regarding the Sabbath?

81 Keener, 2003, p641.

A STRANGE QUESTION

So here is a great crowd of people – paralysed, blind, lame, sick – all waiting for the water to be stirred. Out of that crowd Jesus picks one lone man to heal – He does not heal everybody. The value of a story like this, and the reason it is in the gospels, is not only to reveal to us who Jesus is, but also to show us how God sovereignly deals with human helplessness and weakness.

However, as Jesus approaches this man who has been crippled for 38 years, He asks a very strange question, *“Do you want to be healed?”* (v6). But as strange as this question seems, it is not a stupid question – Jesus never asks a single stupid question during His entire ministry – because the reality is, many people do not want to be healed. Instead they are comfortable with their frailties, sometimes using it to elicit charity from others. This question causes the man to answer (at least for himself) the question, *“Do I want to be healed?”*.

But this man does want to be healed. However notice that he does not answer the question directly, but in a sense shifts the blame as to why he is not yet healed: *“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”* (v7). In other words, *“Yes, I want to be healed, but I’m unable to make it into the water and no-one wants to help me. I’ve given up. I have no hope”*.

This brings us to the climax of the account. Instead of merely sympathising with the man expressing hope that he makes it next time, or provide him with a new bed so he is comfortable while he waits, Jesus tells him to get up, take up his bed, and walk. Here Jesus is commanding the man to do three things: First, to do something impossible that he has not been able to do for 38 years, get up. Second, to remove any possibility of a relapse by taking up his bed (we all know the pull of the bed on a winter’s morning). And third, to leave this life behind him by walking away. The cripple responds with simple faith, and like the official in 4:50, he takes Jesus at His word and obeys, and is immediately healed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How would you describe the crippled man’s character and faith?
2. How does Jesus' healing here demonstrate the grace of God?
3. Why do many find it difficult to accept grace when it is offered? Why do they resist the concept that God's gifts are entirely by grace?

A STRONG RESPONSE

John now traces the immediate reaction of others to this event (vv9b-11). The opening words, *“Now that day was a Sabbath”* immediately makes us think that trouble is coming – especially if the Pharisees are going to be involved. Here the man is in trouble over the Sabbath restrictions. So when the Jewish authorities confront the man for carrying his mat on the Sabbath (v10), they immediately go to the law. Never mind the fact that this man who was an invalid for 38 years has been healed. Now the Jewish

leaders have a perfectly legitimate concern for the Law of Moses says that the Jews are to keep the Sabbath and not to conduct any work on that day. One way that this law can be broken on the Sabbath involves carrying any kind of a load. Jeremiah 17 warns against this (esp. v22). Thus there is some justification for their questioning the man.

However, the true motive of their hearts is instantly revealed when the man responds, *“The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk’”*. Here the man shifts the blame to Jesus (v11), almost as if to say, “It isn’t my fault. It’s the guy who told me to do it”. Instead of reacting in joy or awe that someone heals this man, they probe him further to get him to expose the one who told him to break this particular law. However, he does not know who He is because Jesus disappears into the crowd. This reveals them for the hypocrites they are, intent on the letter of the Law, but totally unconcerned about the mercy of God.

But then we read in verse 14 that Jesus finds the man at the temple. He goes to the temple because the Law requires that one who is healed has to make a thanksgiving offering. So Jesus knows where to find him and seeks him out.

Jesus says, *“See you are well again”*. The man has a chance at a new life and Jesus warns him to, *“Stop sinning or something worse will happen to you”*. Ultimately the miracle of his healing was amazing but he also needs to turn from his sins and seek God’s forgiveness. But what is important to notice here is the order of Jesus’ words: *“See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you”* (v14). Note that He does not say, “Sin no more. If you do you will lose your healing”. Nor does He say, “You owe me for healing you”. No, he says, *“See, you are well”*. Jesus never says, *“Sin no more”*, unless he first says, “You are well” or “Your sins are forgiven”. Here Jesus is pointing first to His act of grace, showing that the man did not do anything to earn the healing, but then calls the man to continue to live a life of response to God’s grace by not sinning any more.

What is more, Jesus’ words reveal what was the man’s trouble for the last 38 years. It was because of some sin in his life. Now, we need to remember that it is not always one’s personal sin that makes one sick. There are other accounts in the Bible that indicate sometimes it is the consequences of another person’s sin, or the consequences of living in a fallen world (cp. Job & John 9).

John gives a final word about this incident in Verses 15 to 17 where we read that the man goes away and tells the Jews that it was Jesus who healed him. This then provides their justification for persecuting Him and seeking His death – they cannot overlook what appears to be a violation of the Law. This is the first of three evidences in the Gospel of John that they use to justify His crucifixion.

However, Jesus explains why he breaks the tradition (v17). But more on this next time.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Why are the Pharisees so upset at the man who is healed?

2. How can a person be so intent on rules that they miss what God is doing? Have you ever caught yourself doing that? Has someone in your church been so intent on “how we do things” that they could not see God at work?

FOUR TRUTHS

This sign reveals the authority and deity of Jesus Christ. There are four truths to bear in mind as we end this study:

1. **It is not a fake healing:** It begins with the healing of a lame man. This man, chosen by Jesus, has been lame for 38 years – longer than Jesus’ physical lifespan at this time, estimated at 31 or 32. For this to be fake, the man would have had to plan it six years before Jesus was born.
2. **It is not a faith healing:** Many false prophets and authors promise people that if they just have enough faith, all their illnesses and physical infirmities will be miraculously cured. This account in no way supports their claims. The man who is healed is no example of faith. Look at verse 7 again – it reads more like the grumblings of an old man than someone who has faith in Jesus.
3. **It is a free healing:** This man does not purchase the healing, and he certainly does not deserve to be healed. It is only because Jesus graciously chooses to heal him that he is healed. Yet even when Jesus speaks to him, he responds with a patronising comment and complains that no one will help him. What does Jesus do? He does not say, “If only you asked me” or “Try harder next time”. No! In His grace Jesus looks past the man’s failure and sin, and restores him.
4. **It is a full healing:** The man is not partially healed – he is completely and instantly healed (v9). When Jesus tells this lame man to get up and walk, his sickness and disabilities disappear. How much physiotherapy or days of rest does this man require before his strength returned? None. The words of Jesus bring total and complete restoration.

Sometimes we forget about the power, timing, and graciousness of Jesus. He is Lord over sickness. If he commands it to go, sickness must obey. This is why we pray for physical healing. Now it is not always God’s will to heal His people, but if it is His will, He can and will do it. Often He is doing other things to, in, or for us through the sickness that we are unaware of. Sometimes there is a need for us to wait for the healing – even if it is for 38 years – because that causes us to look all the more at Jesus and trust Him to see us through. But that should not cause us to not pray or to be impatient.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. At the beginning of this study we considered the four elements of Redemptive History – Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation (or Consummation). Identify where each of these elements are evident in this account.
2. If this account is not about the man’s faith, what then is it about? What is Jesus’ main concern with the man and how is this consistent with Jesus’ previous encounters?