

JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS
(4) THE HEALING ON THE SABBATH

John 5:1-18
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SCRIPTURE

¹Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days.

²Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches. ³Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches. ⁵One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, “Would you like to get well?”

⁷“I can’t, sir,” the sick man said, “for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.”

⁸Jesus told him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!” ⁹Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking!

But this miracle happened on the Sabbath, ¹⁰so the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, “You can’t work on the Sabbath! The law doesn’t allow you to carry that sleeping mat!” ¹¹But he replied, “The man who healed me told me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” ¹²“Who said such a thing as that?” they demanded. ¹³The man didn’t know, for Jesus had disappeared into the crowd. ¹⁴But afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and told him, “Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you.” ¹⁵Then the man went and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him.

¹⁶So the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules.

¹⁷But Jesus replied, “My Father is always working, and so am I.” ¹⁸So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, he called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God (John 5:1-18(NLT)).

INTRODUCTION

John uses the word “sign” to mean something more than just a miracle that Jesus performed. A sign points to the identity of Jesus, introduces us to the new kind of life Jesus offers, and calls on us to place our trust in Jesus. The third sign in the Book of Signs in the Gospel of John involves the healing of a paraplegic on the Sabbath. The story of this miraculous sign takes place in six scenes. Let’s examine each one in turn and see what

it says about the identity of Jesus or the kind of life he offers us or the nature of the invitation to us to place our faith in Jesus.

1. THE SETTING 5:1-3

The first scene gives us the setting. Jesus was in Jerusalem to attend one of the festivals. John does not tell us which one. Like his counterpart, Luke, John affirms in his Gospel that Jesus was active in the expressions of faith of his day (see Luke 4:16). It was not a grim duty but a delight to worship with his own people.

Then John tells us:

Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches (5:2).

For a long time, people in the modern era had no idea what John was talking about. This was because they could not identify the pool or the porches. John tells us it was called “Bethesda.” At least, that is the popular pronunciation. It could also be pronounced “Bethzatha.”¹ But whether it was Bethesda or Bethzatha, where was it? How come no one knew where it was? Many critics assumed John fabricated this story or that he intended it to be a fable from which to draw a moral lesson – like one of Aesop’s Fables.

Then archaeologists were digging near St Anne’s Monastery in Old Jerusalem and they found two pools surrounded by four porches (covered colonnades) and a fifth porch connecting the two pools. These were located near what had been called the Sheep’s Gate because in ancient times sheep and other animals were brought through this gate for the sacrifices in the Temple.

So this was not an idealized legend or fable. Although John writes after Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, his recollection of the site is accurate. Like the other gospel writers, his was a historically based proclamation of Jesus. He is not making this stuff up.

Somewhere along the line this pool gained the reputation for having healing waters. You may have noted that verse 4 is missing from our text. This is because the oldest copies of the Gospel of John do not have it. It may have been added later by a scribe familiar with the tradition about an angel stirring up the water and the first one in gets healed.

To us this seems like superstition but there were many such sites in the ancient world.

¹The ancient Jewish historian Josephus refers to an area to the northeast of the Temple as “Bethzatha.”

There are even some places like that today. Each one drawing a large gathering of desperate people.

2. THE HEALING 5:5-9a

In the second scene we have Jesus coming up to a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years and asking, “Would you like to get well?” On the face of it, this seems like a ridiculous question to ask. We would expect a resounding “Yes” followed by a sound akin to “duh.”

But the sad truth is not everyone wants to get better. I’m not necessarily talking about physical ailments. Sometimes we get so used to our problems and come to rely upon them as excuses that we really don’t want things to change. As an older therapist once said, “Some people would be very unhappy if you made them happy!”

But if you want the power of Jesus in your life then you need to express an intense desire for it. Jesus asks you, “Do you really want to be changed?” In our heart of hearts if we are content with the way things are then there can be no change.

The man does not really give Jesus an answer. Instead, he offers a complaint, “I can’t, sir, for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.”

Jesus tells him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!” Most astonishingly the man is healed and takes up his sleeping mat and walks. I say astonishingly because this is one of those healing miracles that Jesus performed without any sign of faith on the part of the beneficiary – a reminder that God’s favor toward us is a gift that can never be earned. Alas, it is also a reminder that just because the body has been healed it doesn’t mean that the soul has, too.

3. THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS INTERVIEW THE MAN 5:9B-13

The fourth of the Ten Commandments clearly states we are to remember the Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15). John points out that this healing took place on the Sabbath. No one was to work on the Sabbath. In the third scene, the religious leaders see the man carrying his sleeping mat and say, “You can’t work on the Sabbath! The law doesn’t allow you to carry that sleeping mat!” The man responds that he is only doing what the man who healed him told him to do. When asked who it was who healed him, the man says that he does not know.

The religious leaders of the day, heavily influenced by a group called the Pharisees, had lots of rules about what you could or could not do on the Sabbath. You were not supposed

to work on the Sabbath but in addition to ordinary employment they defined other kinds of work in the most extraordinary ways: carrying a burden, writing letters and healing were some of the things that were forbidden. So they spent endless hours arguing whether a person could lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a terrible sin if he went out with a needle in his garment, whether a woman might wear a wig, or if a man could go out with artificial teeth or an artificial limb, or even if a father could lift his child on the Sabbath Day.

Jesus dismissed all these extra rules. They were not taken from Scripture but from the oral tradition kept by the Pharisees. Jesus and his disciples walked on the Sabbath, picked heads of grain on the Sabbath and Jesus even healed people on the Sabbath, which, as we see here, really angered the Pharisees.

4. JESUS INTERVIEWS THE MAN 5:14

In the fourth scene, Jesus encounters the healed man in the Temple. He makes an unnerving observation to the man, “Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you.”

Warning the man that something worse may happen to him, Jesus might have meant he would suffer a worse physical affliction than the one from which he had just been delivered. But this seems unlikely. As we will see in a few weeks, Jesus rejects the popular idea that every sickness is linked to a specific sin. Rather, I think Jesus is warning him about a moral or spiritual malady which would be worse than the physical lameness from which the man had just been delivered.

Jesus does find him in the Temple. Some suggest that this means that man was truly grateful to God for what had happened to him. But nothing else he does corroborates this. He may have just been walking through one of the outer courts. After all, during the day, many people walk through our parking lot on their way to someplace else, indifferent to the church the parking lot serves.

So, yes, the man could now walk around – even take a short cut through the outer courts of the Temple. But his life had not changed in any real way. His inner self was the same as it always had been.

5. THE MAN REPORTS TO THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS 5:15

In the fifth scene this becomes more apparent. The man whom Jesus heals shows no sign of faith in Jesus or of gratitude for what Jesus has done for him. When confronted by the religious authorities about carrying his sleeping mat on the Sabbath, he deflects blame to the man who healed him, whose name he has not even bothered to learn. And when he

meets Jesus again and learns his name, he rats him out to the authorities. Perhaps the man thinks that if the authorities go after Jesus, they will leave him alone.

The man's behavior may also give us another clue as to why John included this story in his Gospel. At the time of the writing of his Gospel, the Church was under persecution by officials of the Roman Empire. Some people were leaving the Church and betraying their previous sisters and brothers in Christ to the authorities – mimicking the actions of the man healed at the pool of Bethesda. They, like the man, were recipients of the goodness of Jesus, but they had not allowed this goodness to change them from within.

6. THE LEADERS INTERROGATE JESUS (OR IS IT THE OTHER WAY ROUND?) 5:16-18

In the sixth and final scene we see the religious authorities interrogate Jesus – or is it the other way round? If we were to examine the rest of the chapter we would see it feels like a courtroom scene. At first, it looks like Jesus is in the dock. But by the end of the chapter it is clear that the religious authorities are in the dock, and by extension so are we.

But for our purposes today let's consider a key point John is making about who Jesus is. The religious leaders are angry that Jesus broke their Sabbath rules. No one is to work on the Sabbath.

What about God? Can God work on the Sabbath? Ancient rabbis wrestled with this question. Eventually they came to the conclusion that God does indeed have a right to work on the Sabbath. After all, he does hold the universe together and it could prove problematic if there was a day when he was not allowed to show up for work.

In response to their criticism of him, Jesus says, "My Father is always working, and so am I." They were not amused. In the English translation it looks like the religious authorities are angry because Jesus referred to God as his Father. But that is actually secondary. The reason they were livid was because they understood Jesus to say, "Because God has a right to work on the Sabbath, so do I." Jesus appears to usurp prerogatives solely attributed to God. In the minds of the Pharisees this was utter blasphemy. But it is only blasphemy if it is not true – which is John's point precisely.

CONCLUSION

So what does the miraculous sign of the healing of the paraplegic on the Sabbath show us? It shows us a Jesus who is far greater than any prophet. It shows us a life that is far greater than external changes. And it shows us a faith far greater than superstition or man-made religion.