

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John (SB_JN5A_A Man Healed at the Pool of Bethesda)

Introduction

John 5 marks a significant change in John's Gospel. Until John 5, the emphasis has been upon the response of faith following personal conversations with Jesus. In John 5, a shift occurs. Jesus' actions and words are now stirring significant controversy. John 5 could be outlined as follows:

- Healing on the Sabbath – 5:1-15
- Controversy Following the Healing – 5:16-47
 - Regarding the Sabbath – 5:16-17
 - Regarding Jesus' Equality with God – 5:18-47

Healing on the Sabbath – 5:1-15

Sometime after the events in Galilee in chapter 4, Jesus went to Jerusalem to attend one of the Jewish feasts (probably not the Passover, but another Feast, like the Feast of Tabernacles). Jesus may have traveled alone since there is no mention of His disciples. While visiting the pool called Bethesda, one man in particular caught Jesus' eye. Crowds of sick people gathered at this pool hoping to find healing in its recuperative powers. The earliest Greek manuscripts omit verses 3b-4; however, it is possible that many sick people believed this superstition. The Bible nowhere teaches this kind of superstitious belief.

Jesus noticed several things about this man. His physical condition prevented him from reaching the pool first. John points out that this man had this infirmity for 38 years. No doubt for the largest portion of this time, this man's hope rested in a superstitious belief. Jesus also noticed that this man was alone and the man indicated to Jesus that he had no one to place him in the water when it stirred. His condition was totally hopeless and the man had resigned himself to that fate. In addition, there was evidently some specific sin in the man's life – maybe dependence upon superstitious beliefs verses a belief in the true and living God revealed to the Jews through the Old Testament. After all, Jesus did not heal this man because of his faith in Who Jesus is. I say this because the man wasn't even aware of who healed him until later.

Jesus' question in verse 6 seems rather strange – “Do you want to be made well?” However, many people who have been suffering from some ailment (psychological or physical) have become filled with self-pity and their ailment is a means of avoiding responsibility for other shortcomings in their lives. They are not advancing spiritually and they are using the ailment to excuse every shortcoming. It becomes a convenient excuse and one for which they can gain sympathy.

Application: Do you have an ailment or other condition in your life that is beyond your control and that you are using as a convenient excuse for other spiritual failures that are within your control?

The spiritually advancing believer must take responsibility for his/her thought patterns, actions, and application of truth. People who are engaged in the spiritual battle will suffer from exertion and the trials and tribulations of life. Instead of asking the Lord to help him, this man immediately shifts responsibility to others – “I have no one.”

In a sense, we are all like this man spiritually. We are children of Adam and possess a fallen nature. We are totally helpless in spiritual matters. Yet, God requires us to have non-meritorious faith. Like Jesus' command to the man in verse 8, we are expected to work out that

which Jesus has first accomplished in us (Phil 2:12b-13). We are expected to search diligently for the truth (Prov 2:2-5).

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil 2:12b-13)

So that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. (Prov 2:2-5)

Notice Jesus' command in verse 8. This is a good illustration of what many today call "tough love." Not until the man obeyed did he experience the new abilities at his disposal.

- ❑ "Rise" or "Get up" – Jesus expected the man to use his volition to choose to follow Jesus' command. Jesus was in effect saying to the man that he must choose to abandon his helpless life by accepting the power of God available to him. Become responsible for yourself. *Principle:* To refuse to obey God and to refuse to exercise faith is to refuse His power. *Application:* Are you experiencing God's power in your life evidenced by answered prayer, victory over sin patterns, clear spiritual perspective, impersonal or unconditional love toward others, etc?
- ❑ "Take up your bed" – Until this point, someone else had to do everything for the man. Jesus gave him the physical ability. Now, the man was required to be responsible for himself. *Principle:* God has given us a number of spiritual assets at the point of salvation; however, it is our responsibility to learn to employ them in the spiritual battle of life. *Application:* How would you assess your prayer practice and experience?
- ❑ "Walk" – Utilize the capabilities that are now at your disposal – step by step.

It is interesting to notice the sequence of events in verses 8-15:

- ❑ First, Jesus heals the man of his physical ailment and the man responds to Jesus' commands.
- ❑ Second, the man immediately encounters opposition – the "Jews" accuse the man of breaking the Law instead of rejoicing over his healing.
- ❑ Third, the man is questioned regarding the identity of the one who healed him.
- ❑ Fourth, the fact that the man did not know who it was who healed him indicates that faith in Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah was not part of this man's healing experience. The man's response to Jesus' commands simply resulted from His newly provided physical ability.
- ❑ Fifth, Jesus had quietly withdrawn (see 8:59; 10:39; 12:36).
- ❑ Sixth, Jesus searches for the man to bring full circle to the healing experience – the man needed spiritual healing as well.

Principle: The believer is to expect opposition when he/she attempts to live the spiritual life.

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. (Jn 15:18-21)

For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. (1 Pe 2:20-21)

That no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. (1 Thess 3:3)

Application: Are you experiencing any opposition (e.g. inner struggles, hostility from others) in your life due to your spiritual walk with the Lord? Important: Be sure to distinguish between self-induced problems that cause you pressure and adversity that results from being “actively” engaged in the spiritual conflict. All of us are “passively” engaged in the spiritual conflict in the sense that believer and unbeliever alike suffer by association with a fallen world and society.

Jesus desired that this man know Who healed him. Also, while not specifically stated, the man must have become a believer after He became aware of Who healed him. Jesus desired that this man live in a manner consistent with his new spiritual nature. Jesus warned him of the danger and consequences of becoming involved in the habit of whatever sin in which he had been involved.

Application: We are also made spiritually whole at the moment of our spiritual rebirth in order that we might live in a manner pleasing to God. We are called to be “sanctified” or set apart from sin and set apart for God. Look at the following passages:

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. (Eph 1:4) [*This is a reference to positional sanctification that is made possible through Jesus.*]

Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death [positional], that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life [*experiential*]. (Ro 6:4)

Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him [*positional*], that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin [*experiential*]. (Ro 6:6)

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin [*experiential based upon the positional*], but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. (Ro 6:11-13)

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is your reasonable service [*experiential*]. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Ro 12:1-2)

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. (2 Thess 2:13)

Application: Is there a sin pattern in your life today that is preventing you from working out your salvation (Phil 2:12b) in a manner that honors and glorifies the Lord in your life? Examples: self-centeredness and selfishness; anger; resentment; bitterness; stubborn, defiant behavior patterns; self-pity & depression; jealousy; approbation lust; etc. All of these examples reflect a lack of Christ-centeredness and a lack of eternal perspective toward life.

Controversy Following the Healing – Regarding the Sabbath (5:16-17)

The statement made in verse 16 to the effect that “the Jews persecuted Jesus and sought to kill Him” is the first recorded declaration of open hostility toward Jesus in the Gospel of John.¹ The reason was because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisee’s perception that Jesus violated the Sabbath generated enough hatred to lead Jesus’ enemies to contemplate murder (see Matt 12:14). Jesus’ treatment of the Sabbath with a focus upon one’s true attitude and relationship toward the heavenly Father was one of the primary points of contention between Him and the Pharisees. Every Jew recognized the Sabbath as the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Ex 20:8-11; 31:12-18 cf. Neh 13:15-19; Jer 17:19-27). To do anything on the Sabbath that might be considered a desecration of the Sabbath was tantamount to flaunting one’s disobedience to the entire Law of Moses (Num 15:30-36). Israel took this very seriously since obedience to the laws concerning the Sabbath was the basis for blessing in Israel. However, the problem became the distorted perception of the Law and its purpose by non-spiritual Israel. The gospel writer Matthew does a masterful job under the leadership of the Holy Spirit of tying together Jesus’ teaching on this very issue (Matt 11:28-30) with a practical illustration from Jesus’ life (Matt 12:1-14).

In John 5:17, Jesus effectively equates Himself with the Father. Since God the Father continually works without allowing Himself to stop on the Sabbath, only God could have worked and not broken the Law (or any interpretation of it such as existed in the works of the scribes such as the Targums, the Talmud, and the Midrash).² God’s work of restoration after man’s Fall and His work of sustaining the universe continues.

The Jew’s immediate hostility toward Jesus indicates that they correctly interpreted Jesus’ claim to be equal with God the Father (5:18). Jesus begins a discourse regarding His equality with God the Father that continues to the end of the chapter. We will study this discourse in our next lesson.

¹ Actually, some manuscripts omit the portion of the verse that reads “and sought to kill Him.” This phrase may have been a later scribal insertion based upon a similar statement in verse 18.

² The Mosaic Law found in Scripture was accompanied by a large body of oral tradition, interpretations, and commentaries throughout the centuries that were recorded by various groups of scribes. The *Sopherim* (or scribes) were the Jewish scholars who preserved the Hebrew text between the 5th and 3rd Centuries B.C. The *Zugoth* (or “pairs” of scholars) followed the Sopherim in the 2nd and 1st Centuries B.C. The third group were the *Tannaim* (repeaters or teachers) whose work extended to A.D. 200. The *Masoretes* were scribes who worked from the 6th Century A.D. to the 10th Century A.D. They added the vowel points and punctuation marks to the Hebrew text.

In addition to preserving the text of Hebrew Scripture, these “scribes” were responsible for committing the *Targums* (oral paraphrases that began as early as the 5th Century B.C.) to writing beginning in the 2nd Century A.D. The *Talmud* (instruction or teaching) was another product of these scribes. The *Talmud* represented the opinions and decisions of Jewish teachers from about 300 B.C. to A.D. 500 and consisted of the *Mishnah* (an explanation of traditions and oral law) and the *Gemera* (a commentary on the *Mishnah*). The *Midrash* (textual study) was a formal doctrinal and homiletical exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures collected between 100 B.C. and A.D. 300. The *Midrash* consisted of the *Halakah* (paraphrases of the Torah) and *Haggada* (commentaries on the entire Old Testament).

See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 371, 502-503.