

DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

John 5:1-24

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
March 3, 2019**

Introduction

Have you ever been tempted to focus on the wrong thing? The irony of this story is that “the most religious men” missed the miracles of healing performed by the Messiah because they were focused on their own traditions. They lament that a lame man was healed on the Sabbath more than they rejoice over the presence of God in the miraculous. When are we tempted to miss the main event by our fixation on the marginal?

Waiting (5:1-4)

Chapter 5 begins with the words “After these things....” Most likely, this expression means little more than, “The next thing I would like to tell is....” Immediately, our attention is focused on the fact that a “feast of the Jews” caused Jesus to go up to Jerusalem. Repeatedly, John ties his story about Jesus to the various Jewish feasts: Passover (2:13; 6:4; 11:55); Tabernacles (7:2); and Dedication/Hanukkah (10:22). While John most often refers to a specific feast, on this occasion, he leaves the feast unidentified.

While the specific festival remains unnamed, the specific place is quite clear, “a pool by the Sheep Gate”—called Bethesda. Several scholars suggest John is referring to the twin pools beneath St. Anne’s monastery. Surprisingly, these specific pools were as large as a football field and about twenty feet in depth. The five “porches” were on each of the four sides of the two pools and one in the space separating the pools. Most likely, these two pools served as gender-specific places for public baths, one for men and one for women.

Some scholars conclude that John’s use of the present tense “is” (v. 2) serves as clear evidence that he writes before A.D. 70, before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Others have concluded that John is writing later, but using a literary technique to allow his reader to imagine the scene in the present tense.

The pool apparently served as a gathering place for a multitude of sick persons—blind, lame, and paralyzed. The very oldest and best manuscripts, however, omit the latter part of verse 3 and all of verse 4, “waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.” Apparently, a scribe who was copying a manuscript of John’s Gospel wanted to explain to his readers exactly why so many sick people were gathered around the pools that stood near the Sheep Gate. Although most likely not in the original copy of John’s Gospel, the explanation is both a helpful and accurate description of what is likely taking place in the story. Perhaps an intermittent, bubbling spring caused a disturbance in the water that was interpreted as a stirring by an angel.

A Certain Man (5:5-6)

In verse 5, John introduces his readers to the main character of this story, a man who has been afflicted for 38 years. While John does not fully identify the invalid's illness, we learn from verse 7 that he is paralyzed or lame. Perhaps John informs us that this man's condition had lasted for nearly four decades in order to capture the complete hopelessness of the man's situation.

As the healer, Jesus, walks among the multitude of the sick, he approaches our "certain man" and poses a potent question: "Do you wish to get well?" (v. 6). As each one of us has our journey intersect the journey of Jesus, we, too, must examine ourselves to make certain that we, indeed, want to move from brokenness to wholeness, from sin to salvation. Shockingly, many are quite content to remain in their brokenness, as many "an eastern beggar often loses a good living by being cured of his disease." We, too, can become so settled with our own sinful condition that we have not only lost all hope of being made well, but have actually lost all desire to be made well. Perhaps Jesus turns and asks us, too: "Do you wish to be get well?"

Kay Arthur remembers seeing a man sitting at one of the gates surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem: **As I recently came out of the Old City into the noise of the lumbering buses jammed to the doors with Arabs and to the honking of irate, impassioned cab drivers, as I felt the bright sunshine which had been shielded by the walled, crowded, narrow streets of the Old City, a man sitting on the ground caught my attention. He was happily conversing with other beggars until a foreign tourist came by. At that point, all conversation ceased, and a hand was lifted as dark eyes silently pled for alms. The other hand pulled up a pant leg to make sure the already exposed ulcer – bright pink, glazed over with white purulent patches glistening in the sun – was not missed.**

My nurse's heart brought my feet to a halt. I wanted to bend down and shield the open wound from the dust sent flying by the traffic scurrying through the gate. His leg needed tending. It should be washed, medicated, and dressed by someone who cared. Why, unattended it would only eat away until it reached his bone, and then he could lose his leg!

Arrested by his plight, I stopped to gaze at his leg and look into the darkness of his eyes, until my friend gently took me by my elbow and propelled me toward our destination. I was a tourist, and I didn't know about these things. She then proceeded to tell me that this man did not wish to be made well. He made his living from his wound. No need to confront the complexities of responsibility as a citizen of Israel when one could merely sit down in the dust and dirt of Jerusalem and receive pity along with a few shekels.

My wounded beggar could have been healed. The hospital doors were open to him and medicine was available, but he did not wish to get well. As I looked back in curious fascination, I caught one last glimpse of someone less than what he could have been. (*Stories For the Heart*, ed. Alice Gray)

Arise, Take Up (5:7-8)

Quite clearly, Jesus is taking all the initiative, as the man himself has no idea that Jesus is even a possible healer. We will soon discover that, in fact, he does not even know Jesus' identity (v. 13).

Perhaps, unlike other beggars who had assistance, this paralytic had no person to lift him into the water so as to be the “first in” after the stirring of the angel. John paints a pitiful picture. As the man is trying to make his way into the moving water, another desperate individual dashes in front of him, beating him in the race for a redeemed body (v. 7).

Jesus’ command is clear: “Arise, take up your pallet, and walk.” Jesus’ imperative involves a three-fold approach—rise, pick up your mat, and walk. Having already read chapter 1, we know that the voice which commands the man to arise is the same voice that spoke all that is into creation. To pick up his mat would be likened to picking up his stretcher, his sick bed, and moving forward from his illness.

Immediately, the man obeys, though, unlike the other healings by Jesus, no mention is made of any faith on the part of the afflicted. While faith is often a component in the process toward wholeness, Jesus is never limited by man as he works the works of God.

On the Sabbath (5:9-12)

With verse 9, John finally brings us to the meat of the matter—Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. In this particular story, we find the first open hostility toward Jesus recorded in John’s Gospel. In an overreach of Sabbath observance, the Jews had hedged the commandments of God with a multitude of burdensome restrictions. Such restrictions were so fanatical as to restrict one from putting out a lamp on the eve of the Sabbath, for he was committing work in his efforts to extinguish the light. Exceptions were made if the man were either afraid of Gentiles or thieves (Shab 2 : 5). Regarding healing, a man was not even permitted to put vinegar on his teeth to alleviate a toothache. But if he just “so happened” to be eating vinegar in his food on the Sabbath, his healing was a coincidence rather than a direct act of labor on the day of rest (Shab. 14 : 4).

Rather than rejoicing over the healing of the lame man, the “Jews” are more concerned over the possible transgression against Sabbath observance. They missed the moment of the man’s liberation because they were more focused on the law. That such devout and pious men could miss the work of the Messiah by focusing on their “old forms” of religiosity ought to serve as a forewarning to all of us who may be more “at home” with our own formalities than we are with the new freedom found in Christ. Will we, too, miss the Messiah as we focus on man’s mandate?

With verse 11, we learn that our character is something less than noble. Throughout the story, we can summarize his actions as despicable. First, he tries to avoid conflict with the authorities by blaming his healer for the transgression against the law (v. 11). Second, he is so dull that he did not take the time to actually learn the name of the one who had healed him. Finally, once he does learn the identity of his benefactor, he reports Jesus to the authorities (v. 15). As readers of the story, it is hard for us to imagine that the man is not both grateful and indebted to his liberator.

The objection of the authorities over Jesus’ activity on the Sabbath is at the core of his controversies with religious men. Not only do we find such stories in John, but, likewise, we find them in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Matthew 12:1-4). These Sabbath controversies, in fact, lead to the rising desire to kill Jesus in the other Gospels. Like a district attorney trying to cut a deal with a small offender, the Jews seemingly offer grace to the one healed if he will reveal the identity of his healer (v. 12).

Looking at the response of the lame man should cause us all to examine our own response to God's gracious work in our life. Though he had been crippled for nearly four decades, he is ungrateful for the gift of God's healing grace.

How do we respond? Jesus has also walked our way and declared that we can arise and walk—be free from the burden of sin and death. Do we live our lives in joyous response to what God has done for us through Christ? We must be careful that we are not like the character of John 5 who turns his very back on the one who made him whole.

Did Not Know (5:13)

Though no one had ever given him a greater gift, the lame man does not even know the identity of the Lord. John tells us that Jesus “slipped away” into the crowd. The language employed here means that Jesus “became invisible” by turning his head to dodge the forthcoming inquisition concerning the Sabbath healing.

In the Temple (5:14)

During the festival season, Jesus would find himself in and around the temple. Quite clearly, that was where he was headed when he stopped by the pool just north of the temple. John tells us that Jesus “found” the healed man as an indication that this was not happenstance but, rather, a divine appointment between the healer and the healed. In John's Gospel, Jesus frequently “finds” the people he is looking for (1:43; 9:35).

Having already delivered three commands to the man, Jesus now gives his fourth and final: “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you.” When we read this story in comparison with the story of the gracious man cured of blindness in John 9, we see some distinct differences. In John 9, the blind man's malady is in no way related to his sin. When the disciples inquire, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” Jesus responds that neither the man nor his parents had sinned, but the blindness was in order to bring glory to the God who would bring healing (9:3).

In chapter 5, however, there seems to be a clear indication that sin in the lame man's life had led to his infirmity. As we look through scripture, we can certainly conclude that sometimes suffering is related to sin (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 John 5:16). Scripture does not teach that everyone who commits sin will inevitably fall ill or die, nor does it say that all suffering is a result of specific sin. Taking chapter 5 (where sin leads to suffering) and chapter 9 (where suffering is unrelated to sin), we conclude that the relationship of suffering and sin remains something of a mystery. Ultimately, we know that not all who suffer are sinners, because our sinless Lord Jesus was crucified—the worst possible suffering. In all cases, healing by Jesus rolls back the deadly effects of the fall found in Adam.

The natural reading of verse 14 is to hear Jesus' command, “Stop sinning, lest something worse befall you.”

Told the Jews (5:15)

We cannot explain away the man's actions by depicting him as innocently giving credit to the one who had healed him. On the contrary, it is more likely that the man has yet to connect his healing with the commands that came from the Christ. Despite the fact that his own body stood as full evidence, the healed man fails to connect his new state of redemption with the redeemer who had stood before him.

For this Reason (5:16)

The verb employed here is in the imperfect tense, meaning that the Jews were continually persecuting Jesus. Interestingly enough, there is no denial of Jesus' power or ability to do good, only an accusation that he did good on the wrong day—the Sabbath. With a closer look at verse 16, we see that not only was the persecuting continuous, but so were Jesus' acts of goodness on the Sabbath. Notice the careful wording, "He was doing these things on the Sabbath." Certainly, there were other Sabbath incidences that John has not recorded. Perhaps Williams' translation catches the essence of the imperfect tense when he translates, "Because he persisted in doing such things...."

My Father is Working (5:17)

In many ways, verse 17 is actually the climax of the conflict with the Jews. Though we certainly can read the Genesis account (Genesis 2:2-3) as an indication that God "rested," Jesus reminds us that—as creator and sustainer of the cosmos—God is never really idle. Neither in Genesis nor now is God to be understood as inactive. The one who creates also sustains. When the writer of Genesis tells us that God "rests," he is using human language to call his readers to experience the rhythm of God's creation. Jesus is quite emphatic—just as the Father is working, "I Myself am working."

Far from violating Sabbath rest, Jesus is continuing to do good work alongside God. Whatever concerns the Jews might have about Sabbath rest, they are even more overcome by the clear explanation that God is always at work, God the Father and the Son! In another Gospel, Jesus declares the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28).

We must be careful, however, not to claim that we ourselves are, therefore, entitled to "skip the Sabbath." Unlike Jesus, we are not working alongside God, sustaining the cosmos. We are called to rest and recognize the one who creates.

To Kill Him (5:18)

While we might miss the messianic message couched in the language, "I Myself am working," the Jews caught the essence of what Jesus was trying to convey. First, he had called God "his own Father." And second, in doing so he had made himself equal with God (see 10:33). Rightly so, the Jews recognized that Jesus was guilty of claiming to be one with the creator, a fact of which John has already informed us in his first chapter (1:3, "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being..."). Seeing Jesus as a blasphemer, they had no other recourse than to demand his death.

The Father and the Son (5:19-24)

These verses provide us with, perhaps, Jesus' most formal and systematic statement concerning his oneness with the Father. In this section, we learn much about the relationship between the Father and the Son:

- (1) The activity of the Son is entirely defined by the activity of the Father (v. 19).
- (2) While the Father and Son have their distinctions, their actions, wills, and purposes find complete agreement (v. 19).
- (3) The ministry of Jesus is anchored in and empowered by the love of the Father (v. 20).
- (4) The Son will do greater works (giving life and judging) in such a way that his hearers will be astonished (v. 20-21).
- (5) Just as God can raise the dead (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6; 2 Kings 5:7), likewise, Jesus is free to give life to whom he desires (v. 21).
- (6) The Father has relegated judgment to the Son (v. 22).
- (7) Though the Father and Son are different in function, they are equal in honor (v. 23).
- (8) All who truly believe the Father will accept the Christ (v. 23).
- (9) Those who have believed in the Father through the Son have already passed from death into life (v. 24).

Conclusion

We are also sinners needing the Savior to pass our way, inquiring, "Do you wish to be made well?" Unlike the "certain man" of John 5, however, we will acknowledge and praise our redeemer, and in doing so, we shall pass from death into life.