

SABBATH HEALING

John 5:1-18

*Then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy.
For waters will break forth in the wilderness
And streams in the Arabah. (Isaiah 35:6).*

I can still remember the first time I ever saw the movie, *The Fiddler on the Roof*. It is a movie that makes you laugh and sing and cry and think. The story takes place in a tiny Russian village at the beginning of the 20th century. It follows a Jewish farmer and his family as they seek to hold to their faith and their traditions in an ever changing world.

At the close of the story, a mandate has come down from the Czar that forces the entire Jewish community to be uprooted from their homes. It is a sad and tearful scene as the people bundle up their belongings. It is at this point that one of the young rabbinical students turns to the old village rabbi and asks, “Rabbi, wouldn’t this be a good time for Messiah to return?” The old rabbi sighs and answers, “I guess we will have to wait for Him somewhere else.” Sitting in the largely Jewish audience, it was all I could do to restrain myself from standing up and declaring, “He has already come!”

That attitude of waiting and expectancy has been a part of the Jewish hope for thousands of years. It was no less a part of their hopes in the days of the ministry of Jesus. Can you imagine what it would have been like in that day?

All their lives, they had heard and read the prophecies of the coming Messiah. He would be the descendant of David and heir to the royal throne. He would bring forth His kingdom of righteousness that, by the very force of its greatness, would overshadow all the other kingdoms of the world. There would be healing in His hand and the afflictions of the sick would be removed. The blind would see and the lame would walk and the power of God would be present for all to see.

And then one day it began to happen, but in a way that had been completely unexpected. Instead of a royal ruler from Jerusalem, there came a carpenter-turned rabbi from Galilee. He did not wear the robes of royalty. No army followed Him. The followers He did have seemed to be made up of a small ragtag band of diverse backgrounds.

At the same time, there was something compelling about Him. He spoke with a clear authority. There were rumors racing through the country of lepers who had been cleaned and of paralyzed who had been given mobility and sick who had been healed. Could it be? Could this be the one whose coming had been promised?

If there were many who asked that question with a longing in their hearts, there was another group that looked at the growing ministry of Jesus with a different sort of concern. It was the religious leaders in Jerusalem. After all, this strange carpenter from Galilee had opened His ministry by creating a near riot in the temple, overturning tables and pushing people about. Of late, he had been up north in Galilee and conflicting reports had likely been heard of that ministry. And then one day, Jesus arrives back in Jerusalem.

There is an interesting contrast to be seen between this passage and the healing which took place in the previous chapter.

John 4	John 5
A powerful man with a sick son	A powerless man who is lame
He requests Jesus to come up and heal his son	He has no one to help him go down into the water
He seeks Jesus out	Jesus sees him and initiates the conversation
This illness seems to have recently come about	He had been lame for 38 years

In both cases, we shall see that the healing is both immediate and dramatic. The focus will be on the power of Jesus as an evidence of His true identity.

SETTING FOR A MIRACLE

The three Synoptic Gospels, made up of Matthew, Mark and Luke, have their focus almost entirely upon the Galilean ministry of Jesus. It is only in John that we read of the various visits by Jesus to Jerusalem.

1. Relocation to Jerusalem: *After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. (John 5:1).*

We are not told which feast took place in this chapter. That alone makes this passage unique because John mentions a total of five other feasts throughout this account and each are carefully identified.

John 2:13	John 5:1	John 6:4	John 7:2	John 10:22	John 12-19
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Passover	Unnamed	Passover	Feast of Booths	Feast of Dedication	Passover
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It has been suggested by some that this unknown feast was another Passover. This is suggested by the fact that some of the Greek texts refer to this as “THE feast of the Jews.”¹

2. By the Pool of Bethesda: *Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes (John 5:2).*

On the northern side of the temple compound, there was a gate that led out of Jerusalem. It was an ancient gate, dating back to the days of Solomon. It was called the Sheep Gate because it was through this gate that the sheep for the sacrificial offerings were herded.

By this gate was a pool. It was one of many that were located around the temple grounds. These pools were commonly used for the rites of ceremonial purification prior to entering the temple grounds. This particular pool was called Bethesda, a Hebrew name meaning “house of mercy.” It was a magnificent structure with five covered porches held up by massive pillars. It still exists today in Jerusalem and it is a regular tourist attraction. Its chief attraction in that day was not its architectural design, but the strange stories that were attributed to it.

3. An Urban Legend: *In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, waiting for the moving of the waters; 4 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 (John 5:3-4).*

How are we to understand this passage? Was this a case of a regularly scheduled miraculous manifestation? Or is there some other explanation?

- This verse is excluded from most of the older manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.²
- The early church father Tertullian (145-220 A.D.) refers to this miraculous

¹ The Chester Beatty Papyri (p66), the Codex Alexandrinus and the Vaticanus do not contain the definite article, yet it is found in the Sinaiticus.

² It is missing from the Chester Beatty Papyri (p66, p75) as well as from the Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus.

manifestation. At the very least, it represents a belief on the part of the people who were gathered around the pool.

Did miracles take place regularly at this pool? I do not know for certain, but I suspect this was not the case. But I do know that on this particular day a miracle did take place.

DIAGNOSIS FOR DELIVERANCE

And a certain man was there, who had been thirty-eight years in his sickness. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" 7 The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." (John 5:5-7).

There was a great crowd of needy people gathered around this pool. There were sick people. Others were blind. Some were lame. There may have been cases of paralysis. There was one particular man who caught the eye of Jesus.

Jesus could have healed all of them with a wave of His hand. He could have said the word and those who were blind would have been looking around in wonderment and those who were crippled would have been square dancing. But He did not. Instead, He focused upon this one man. Why? Was it because he was better than the others? There is no evidence this is the case. The truth is that we do not know why Jesus chose to heal this particular man.

We are like that man. We were once helpless and unable to save ourselves. Then Jesus came on the scene and healed us. I have no idea why He healed me and not the fellow who lives across the street. It is not that I am any more spiritual or more intelligent or more worthy. I am not. The reason Jesus saved me has nothing to do with me. It has to do with His own mercy and grace.

Jesus is going to see in this man something that is true in each one of us. All of us have false rests. We all have false things into which we place our trust. False hopes and false protectors and schemes by which we try to deal with our own restlessness.

Jesus is going to point out this basic truth when we come to verse 21: *For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life TO WHOM HE WISHES.*

We did not receive salvation because we earned it or deserved it. We were not saved because we had more faith or were smarter than someone else. We were saved because

of something outside of ourselves.

As Jesus comes to the pool of Bethesda, he will be faced with those who are trusting a legend and a superstition. He approaches a man to heal him, but before He does, He submits a diagnosis of his real problem.

1. A Diagnosis of Hopelessness: *And a certain man was there, who had been thirty-eight years in his sickness (John 5:5).*

This man had been sick for a very long time. Thirty eight years. I cannot even imagine what it would have been like to have the same illness for such a long time. We are not told what this illness was, but it was apparently of such a nature that it prevented him from moving without assistance.

Thirty eight years. That is long enough for him to be well acquainted and even comfortable with his illness. There can sometimes be a certain comfort to being sick or disabled. There are certain responsibilities you do not have to face. You have something on which to blame your failures. Your disability or illness can become a portable foxhole you carry around with you and into which you can dive.

I say this, not to be mean, but because Jesus Himself addresses the question of whether this man really wanted to be healed.

2. A Diagnosis of Desire: *When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" (John 5:6).*

Notice that this man does not come to Jesus. Jesus goes to the man and engages his attention by asking him a question. Notice that it was a knowing question. Jesus asked the question, already knowing that the man had been there a long time in that same condition.

"Do you wish to get well?"

It sounds like a foolish question. But on further reflection and considering the man's replay, perhaps it is not. He had been here for a very long time. He had become accustomed to his situation. He was perhaps even comfortable in his predicament. He could play the blame game and blame all of his misfortunes upon his illness. He could engage in an ongoing pity party. He could dream of what success might have been if only things were different.

The Lord comes to us and asks us the same question. Are you happy with your life the way it is today or do you wish to be different? Do you want the spiritual

healing that only He can bring?

3. A Diagnosis of Despair: *The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me."* (John 5:7).

Notice that the man does not answer the question of Jesus. Instead, he offers excuses. He blames his circumstances and he blames other people. This man had developed tunnel vision. Jesus asks if he wishes to get well and the only thing he can talk about is his lack of ability to get into the pool at the right time. He is focused upon the object of his superstition to the point that he has not recognized the potential represented by Jesus.

At the same time, there is a quality in this man that Jesus wants to develop in us. It is the quality of recognizing our own helplessness. This man had been depending upon the movement of the water to heal him and he recognizes that it has not worked. He is no closer to healing now than he was 38 years ago.

The Lord seeks to bring us to the same place and to recognize that we have nowhere else to turn. He seeks to make us understand that our own efforts have been powerless to save ourselves and that we are helpless in our own power.

THE MIRACLE CURE

Jesus said to him, "Arise, take up your pallet, and walk." 9 And immediately the man became well, and took up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day. (John 5:8-9).

There is something compelling in the simplicity of this miracle. Jesus did not tell the man that he would have to try harder or move his bed closer to the pool. He did not offer to stay with him and given him a helpful shove in the direction of the pool at the right time. Neither did he call for the man to work up to a certain level of religious frenzy. He simply healed him.

I have heard a teaching going around that the reason people are not healed today is because they do not have enough faith. This tactic is particularly common among reputed faith healers who fail to heal. They simply place a guilt trip on the person whom they attempted to heal, saying that the reason was that the individual did not have enough faith.

This man had no faith. He did not even know who Jesus was. If Jesus had waited for this man to believe in Him, he would still be sitting by that pool today.

The point is that, when Jesus wants to heal someone, He is able to do it whether they have faith or not. God works the same way with us. He does not wait until we come to a true appreciation of His person and work before saving us. If He did, then none would ever be saved. Instead, He comes and breathes new life into us and, as a result of that new life, we begin to realize who He is and what He has done on our behalf.

Here is the principle. Regeneration precedes faith. It is on the basis of regeneration that faith comes. A dead man cannot believe. Unbelievers are spiritually dead. It is not until God does a work inside you and makes you alive that you begin to believe in Him. It is not until a man has been made alive that he can even understand and accept the things of the Spirit of God.

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1 Corinthians 2:14).

There was a time when you did not accept the things of the Spirit of God. Then one day, God turned on the lights inside you. As a result, you listened to the message of the gospel and you understood it and you believed it and you were saved.

This man has not yet heard the gospel. He has only just met Jesus and he is given a command -- "*Arise, take up your pallet, and walk.*" I love what happens next. *immediately the man became well, and took up his pallet and began to walk.*

Notice the instant cure and the man's resulting obedience. This healing was not gradual. He did not have to make an appointment and go for therapy. His legs and arms were instantly healed and strengthened. He gets up and he picks up his pallet and he walks away.

I probably would have left my pallet there for a while and made a test drive before trying to carry the extra burden with me. After all, if I had not walked in 38 years, I might want to start off slowly. But this man does not do that. There is no hesitancy in his actions. He simply obeys. In his excitement, he picks up his pallet and sets out on his way. He has only forgotten one thing. It is the Sabbath.

CONDEMNATION FROM THE JEWS

10 Therefore the Jews were saying to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet."

11 But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk.'"

12 They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your pallet, and walk '?" 13 But he who was healed did not know who it was; for

Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. (John 5:10-13).

The formerly lame man was ecstatic. For the first time in nearly forty years, he was free of the effects of his crippling disease. He hardly noticed the burden of the pallet over one shoulder as he strode on his way home. Suddenly he is brought to a halt by a scowling face and then another.

What is the problem? It is the Sabbath and he is carrying an obvious burden. The word “Sabbath” is the Hebrew word for rest. The Lord had commanded Moses to observe the seventh day of each week as a day of rest.

8 Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11).

The Sabbath was to be a day in which all men ceased from their labors and gave themselves to remembrance of the Lord. It was a day of celebration and thanksgiving. It was a day to be enjoyed. It was a day of rest.

The Jews had taken the Sabbath and had changed it into something it was never meant to be. In their desire to protect and uphold the law, they built a hedge around the keeping of the Sabbath. They had written chapter upon chapter of legal interpretations concerning what it meant to keep the Sabbath.

- They taught you should not look in a mirror on the Sabbath because you might be tempted to pluck a grey hair and that would be reaping.
- They said you could eat an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath, but you had to kill the chicken for Sabbath-breaking.
- If you had a cask of wine in your house that began to leak, you could not plug up the leak on the Sabbath (drinking it as it poured out was okay).

On the other hand, the Jews had come up with a number of legal loopholes -- ways to get around what they considered to be the restrictions of the Sabbath.

- If a man had a bundle of grain that he wanted to move on the Sabbath, he could

place it on his spoon that was used for eating and then the moving of the grain was allowed.

- One was not permitted to travel further than a prescribed distance on the Sabbath -- a little over half a mile. However, if you placed some possession of yours at intervals along the way, then such travel was considered to be within the confines of your dwelling and it was allowed.

The Jewish leaders saw this man carrying his pallet and he was not utilizing any of the proper legal loopholes. This placed him in violation of the Sabbath.

1. A Sabbath Prohibition: *Therefore the Jews were saying to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." (5:10).*

The Jews were not particularly interested in the fact that a man had been cured or that a miracle had taken place. They were upset because their rules were being broken.

This brings us to a question. What did it really mean to keep the Sabbath? It meant that you did not labor on that day for your personal gain. This is the principle of the Sabbath. It is that you dedicated that day to God.

The Sabbath looked to BOTH the creation of the world as well as to the creation of the nation of Israel.

- In the Ten Commandments as found in Exodus 20, the occasion for the Sabbath is to remember it as a creation ordinance: *For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:11).*
- In the Deuteronomy version of the Ten Commandments, the reason for the Sabbath is that Israel might remember her deliverance from Egypt: *And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:15).*

By contrast, we are called in the New Testament to partake in a meal that remembers, not creation or the Exodus from Egypt, but the finished work of Christ upon the cross. We remember that new rest into which we have entered by partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Interestingly, while the New Testament repeats injunctions concerning all of the other of the ten commandments, there is no repeated injunction to keep the Sabbath. To the contrary, we read instead on several occasions that we are to avoid judging people on the issue of Sabbath-keeping.

This brings us to another question. How are we to keep the Sabbath today? Christians have argued over this for generations. In his epistle to the church at Rome, Paul suggests that the matter of the observance of a certain day is a matter of Christian liberty.

One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:5).

This same principle is further illustrated in his epistle to the Colossians:

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day -- 17 things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17).

The truth is that the Sabbath is merely a shadow. It is a picture and an illustration of something that is real. The Sabbath is a picture of the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ. He has accomplished the work that was necessary by going to the cross and dying in our place. When we come to Christ in faith, we cease from our labors and we rest in what He has done for us.

*There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God.
10 For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. (Hebrews 4:9-10).*

When Jesus died upon the cross, He raised His voice to heaven and cried out, "It is finished!" When we trust in Him as our Lord and Savior, we cry out the same thing. It is finished. The work has been accomplished. Our salvation has been secured. We can now rest.

This same principle was in effect that day in the temple. This man who had been lame was now healed. Prior to his healing, he had been lying down, but he had enjoyed no rest from his affliction. Now that he has been healed, he is carrying his pallet through the city, but he is really resting from his affliction.

In contrast to this man are the Jews. They are carrying no physical burden upon their shoulders, but the weight of their ordinances are a burden to them. Neither is

it enough for them to carry such burdens, They also insist that everyone else must carry exactly the same burden. They see this man walking through the city and they challenge him.

2. An Authoritative Obedience: *But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk.'" (5:11).*

The reasoning of this man is very simple. If the unknown healer can tell him to stand and walk after 38 years of being a cripple, then He can also tell him to carry his pallet with him.

He does not know who Jesus is. He has never before seen Jesus. Since the healing has taken place, Jesus has disappeared into the crowd and left him literally holding his pallet.

3. A Legalistic Inquiry: *They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your pallet, and walk '?" (5:12).*

Notice the question they ask. They do not ask, "Who healed you?" They do not ask, "Who performed this great miracle of healing an affliction that has been present for 38 years?" They only want to know about their religious regulations. They have completely ignored the reality behind the ritual.

When Jesus had first come upon the scene, He had been heralded by John the Baptist. Now he has a new herald. It is a man walking through Jerusalem carrying a pallet. The man does not even know that he is a herald. He is only doing what he has been told to do. The result is that he is glorifying Jesus.

We have also been called to be a herald. We may not know a lot about what we are heralding. We may not have graduated from Heraldry Seminary. That is okay, as long as we continue to do what we are told to do.

A WARNING AGAINST SIN

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you." (John 5:14).

After the clamor has died down, Jesus seeks out the man in the temple. He has a job for him. Notice that the job is not a prerequisite for the cure. The man is not to obey in order to be cured, but rather he is to obey because he has been cured. He did not earn the cure. He did not deserve the cure. He did not pay for the cure in any way. But as a result of the

cure, he will be expected to live differently.

God deals with us in the same way. We do not earn our salvation. We do not deserve it. We do not pay God back for it. But as a result of being saved, we are expected to live differently.

The words of Jesus come with a warning: *“Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you.”* The implication is that illness sometimes comes because of some specific sin. That does not mean every time you are sick it is because there is a certain sin in your life. But sometimes God deals with us in our sin by making us sick.

There was such an instance at Corinth. It is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:30 where there were people who were sick because of their misuse of the Lord’s Supper. Likewise, James commands those who are sick to call for the elders, to pray, and to confess their sins in order to receive healing (James 5:14-16).

JESUS CONFRONTS HIS CRITICS

The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶ And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”

¹⁸ For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. (John 5:15-18).

Upon learning the identity of his benefactor, the man goes to the Jewish authorities and tells them it is Jesus who has performed this miracle. Notice the way in which the question is asked and the way in which the question is answered. The Jews ask: “Who told you to carry that pallet?” The man answers: “It is Jesus who healed me.”

I am reminded of the college student who approached a well-known theologian with an intentionally obtuse question designed to impress and to intimidate. The theologian replied, “The answer is Jesus.” The student exclaimed, “Jesus? Such an answer has nothing to do with my question!” The theologian calmly replied, “That is because you are asking the wrong question.” The Jews were asking the wrong question and were ignoring the right answer.

1. Jesus and the Sabbath: *He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” (5:17).*

<p>Jesus has been accused of breaking the Sabbath. He says in effect, “My working creates the Sabbath.”</p>

The answer of Jesus is that He treats the Sabbath in the same way that God treats the Sabbath. God does not stop working on the Sabbath. If He did, the world would fly apart each seventh day. God continues to hold the universe together on the Sabbath. Jesus does not stop working on the Sabbath, either.

At the point, you might be thinking, “Wait a minute! Doesn’t the book of Genesis say that God created the world in six days and on the seventh day He rested?” Yes, it does. However, something happened after the creation to interrupt the rest into which God had entered. It was sin. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, it was an interruption of that rest. Thus began a process of divine redemption that would ultimately lead to the cross.

2. Jesus and God: *He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God (5:18).*

The Jews did not miss the implications of the words of Jesus. They understood that He was making Himself equal with God. He was not just calling God His Father. He was calling God His OWN Father. God was His Father in a way that was completely unique.

There are a lot of cults and religious groups around today that claim to base their teachings on the Bible, and yet miss what these Jews did not miss. Those who were antagonistic to Him were aware of His claims. It was because of those claims that they were antagonistic toward Him.

This understanding of the equality of Jesus is one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith. God became man. Why did He do it? It was in order that He might become the Savior of men. God could not die for the sins of men apart from the incarnation for the simple fact that God cannot die. When I was a lot younger, I saw the “God is dead” movement come and go. It eventually died, but God did not die. He hasn’t even been sick.

It was only by becoming a man and taking upon Himself the frailties of human flesh that He could partake of death.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8).

