

Healing on the Sabbath

John 5.1-15

Phil Purkiss

Just before Christmas Paul spoke about Jesus' trip to Samaria, where he met a Samaritan woman at the well and had a conversation with her, which led her to run back to town and tell everyone 'Come and see a man that told me all that I ever did. We are now moving on the next chapter:

¹After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, *waiting for the moving of the water.* ⁴*For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. [This verse is omitted from many translations as it is not included in most of the original manuscripts]* ⁵Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" ⁷The 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." ⁸Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." ⁹And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed." ¹¹He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" ¹²Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" ¹³But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in that place. ¹⁴Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." ¹⁵The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Now for me there are three important things I want to highlight from this text, in order that we can understand what Jesus is doing here and why, and the implications for us today as his followers in his Kingdom.

Location

The first thing I want to talk about is the location. Jesus has found himself at this place where two pools were, one pool was called Bethesda, which is near The Sheep Gate – this is the gate to the temple area by which the sheep would be brought for slaughter. So this pool is in the shadow of the Temple, which is central to first century Jewish worship.

This pool was originally built by Solomon and refurbished by Nehemiah, and it is said that the pool was originally used to ritually wash the sheep prior to the sacrifice.

Here are some pictures of what archaeologists claim is the pool of Bethesda.

The pool was characterised by five porches, and hundreds of sick, lame, blind and paralysed people would gather here every day. Now the next part of text is not included in all translations as it is not included in most of the early manuscripts, but it states that the people would wait for the moving of the water because an angel would come down and stir the water.

Now this statement could mean one many things: (i) That a literal angel comes down and literally stirs the water; (ii) The pool is associated with healing and the supernatural, and therefore a myth has

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developed; (iii) That this has been added in later manuscripts to either describe the supernatural myth or to sanitised the text. My view is the latter two, and the reasons why will become clearer as we go along.

We are told by archaeologists about this pool is that it was a spring-fed pool, which means that fresh water would flow into the pool, which probably helped the idea that this water had healing properties.

Now the pool of Bethesda shares something in common with the area in the previous chapter, because in the previous chapter Jesus finds himself in Samaria, and as Paul stated this was a place where Jews would avoid like the plague. The Jews hated the Samaritans and therefore this is the last place you would expect to find a Jewish person, let alone someone who is seen as a Rabbi, or teacher of the law. Surprise, surprise! Jesus is in another place where you would not expect to find a Jewish person and especially not a Rabbi.

Now I know what you're thinking, why wouldn't we expect to find Jesus here? Well, we are told by Archaeologists from Yale Divinity School, that these two pools in the area had become shrines, and they weren't Jewish shrines, they were pagan shrines. These were shrines that had been created around 150BC, and it is said that the pool of Bethesda was a shrine to Asclepius, the Greek snake god of healing.

The other pool was the shrine of Fortuna, the god of fortune and luck. A temple to Asclepius would have been located close by, likely underground, and it would have been a primitive hospital where rituals were given (such as mud baths), and narcotics were administered.

This was a pagan shrine!

Now this adds a whole new dimension to the story in John 5, doesn't it?

The pool of Bethesda was not some innocent place where the mildly superstitious sought relief from their ailments. Bethesda was a place of pagan worship—sitting in the shadow of the Jewish temple, no less.

And this is probably why some later manuscripts sanitized the story by adding the line, "From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters, which was most commentators and theologians agree was not a part of John's original manuscript.

Now at these shrines there would be priests of the deity that select some people, and take them through a ritual in the water, which resulted in them getting better – now you could imagine that only certain people got selected because there deity's reputation was at stake.

Jesus risks his reputation and his religious purity by going to this place, and confronts and challenge Asclepius' claim to the title of "great physician." Jesus choose a man that is lame and therefore cannot be healed through the medications of the day, moreover he chooses he a man that Asclepius

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had not help for 38 years, he did not use water from the pool to induce healing—he does not even touch the paralyzed man—leaving no doubt that his power comes from God Almighty, not Asclepius.

This man, who has not walked in walked in 38 years, gets us immediately, and without physio, a crutch or any other aid, walks for probably the first time in his life. Not by the power of a pagan god but by the power of the Almighty.

Jesus declares that this pagan is not God but God Almighty is the true and living God. The thing is that this is not the only place where Jesus challenges the pagan deities: Dionysus, Son of Zues was said to turn water into wine; Demeter, Goddess of Grain was said to provide food to the common people; and then you have Ceasar.

Jesus is not afraid to find himself in places, where other religious people would not go, where the poor, the broken, the imprisoned, the people on the margins were, and declare the good news of the kingdom. He was not afraid to declare that your pagan idol is not God – the almighty is! And the same way we are called to go to the people in the margins, and not be afraid to declare, in a variety of different ways, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father.

The Man

The next thing I want to talk briefly about is the man who was healed. Now Jesus has select this man out of all of the other hundreds of sick people that would have been here at this pool, now there are some reasons that I mentioned above that make this person an obvious choice, however I am sure there would have been loads of people that fitted the criteria.

What else do we know about this man? Well, we know that he is Jewish because later on in the text Jesus finds him in the temple, and if you were not Jewish you would only get into the courts of the Gentiles and not into the temple itself.

Now notice what Jesus says to the man when he first finds him, Jesus already knows what is wrong with him and how long he has been sick, and then he asks him ‘Do you want to be made well?’ Now this seems like a stupid question, because this is why the person is here right? Well, it could be that this person is so what reluctant, it is likely that beggars would have congregated in this area, and therefore it is likely that he gets money from being crippled, and Jesus is challenging him that if he really wants to be well then his life and what the way he get income is seriously going to change.

However, I wonder whether Jesus is doing something else, I wonder whether he is really questioning what this person believes and values in life. Remember, we have said before that John claims that the purpose of his writings is that we may believe that Jesus is the Son of God. And here we have a Jewish man at a pagan shrine, there is no mention of faith in this text, and it is obvious that this man is putting his faith in something else other than the Almighty God. The man answers ‘I have no one to carry me into the water’, in other words I can’t be healed because the priests have not selected me – therefore his faith is in this pagan god and the priests of this god to select him.

Notice what Jesus says to him later on when he sees him in the temple ‘See I have healed you, sin no more, unless something worse comes on you’, now remember when we talked about the Jesus the

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Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, and how that sin was unbelief – it is unbelief in God's goodness that causes us to engage in habits and lifestyles that are not good for us or our relationships. This guy's sin is unbelief in the Almighty, and Jesus is warning him from now on not to put his trust in pagan gods and allow these to be the Lord of his life, but challenges him to make the Almighty Lord over his life.

I think one of the questions here for us the readers of this text is to question 'Who is the Lord of our lives?' Who Lord's over us? Who do we trust and believe in? Do we really believe in Jesus or are we daily sitting at a pagan shrine waiting for that god to bless us?

The Jews

The final thing I want to talk about and mention here is the Jews. Jesus sees this lame man and commands him to take up his bed and walk, and so this lame man (at the command of Jesus) who has not walked in 38 years, gets up and picks up his bed and walks.

Now his bed or mat is the thing that has carried him for 38 years and defined his disability, is now being carried by the man. This is amazing because this is what Jesus does when we believe in him, he takes that things that carry us, and gives us the power to carry them.

Now when the Jews see this man that has been cured and they know that it was Jesus that cured him, they are vexed and tell the man that he is breaking the Sabbath by carrying his bed. Imagine that, God liberates you of a lifelong disability, only to have religious people try to lay a burden of guilt on you.

According to the Mishnah (which is and was Jewish Oral Tradition at the time of Jesus) states that there are 39 types of work you cannot do on the Sabbath: sowing; ploughing; reaping; binding sheaves; threshing; winnowing; cleansing crops; grinding; sifting; kneading; baking; shearing wool; washing or beating or dyeing it; spinning; weaving; making two loops; weaving two threads; separating two threads; tying a knot; loosening a knot; sewing two stitches; tearing in order to sew two stitches; hunting a gazelle; slaughtering or flaying or salting it or curing its skin; scrapping it or cutting it up; writing two letters; erasing in order to write two letters; building; pulling down; putting out a fire; lighting a fire; striking with a hammer; and taking something from one place to another.

Isn't it amazing that the traditions had taken something so beautiful as the Sabbath, which was about resting and worship, and made it into an onerous law, that this poor guy who has just been healed is caught out by. They had the letter of the law but never understood the spirit of the law, because if they had of they would have been celebrating with the man the healing power of God. Jesus told them my father is always working, and today is no exception.

The final thing I want to mention is that in all we do, we must always understand the spirit of God's word. God is never restricted by our rules and ways of working but he always reaching out to the poor, broken, the imprisoned – those on the margins. As God's kingdom we must never be more concerned about our religion and rules, than we are about the people around us. Our buildings,

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services, our rites and rituals do not matter even nearly enough as people and God's command for us to love us, and live out that love.