

Jesus Heals a Man at the Pool of Bethesda

John 5: 1-15

DIG: What do you think motivated Jesus to go to Bethesda during the Passover? This story focuses on one invalid man. What words would you use to describe his life? Why do you think the Lord chose to help this particular man? After healing him, why was it important for Yeshua to find him and speak to him again? Why were the Jewish leaders so upset? Why did the healed invalid report back to them?

REFLECT: What are some of the challenges of ministering to people with a serious illness? What are the rewards? How can we determine God's love to people who are suffering? Why is it important for believers to minister to hurting people? Do you know someone who is hurting? How can you reach out to that person? How can we become more sensitive to the suffering of others?

After Jesus had ministered in Galilee for some time, He went up to Jerusalem. The City of David stands near the highest point of the backbone of Palestine, namely, the line of hills running north and south between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Because of its elevation, Yerushalayim cannot be approached from any direction without going up.

Some time later, Yeshua went up for one of the Jewish festivals (John 5:1). This is the first of four Passovers mentioned in the ministry of Christ. The first is mentioned in John 2:23. The second mentioned here, in John 5:1, while the third is referred to in John 6:4, and the fourth in John 11:55, 12:1, 13:1, 18:28 and 39, and 19:14. By dating these, we are able to conclude that His public ministry lasted three-and-a-half years.⁴³⁹

Therefore, the Lord was a year-and-a-half into His public ministry. The apostles are not mentioned. During the summer of Christ's first Galilean ministry, when Capernaum was His center of ministry, the talmidim had returned to their homes, families and usual occupations, while Jesus moved about alone. The absence of any reference to the Twelve in this section leads us to the obvious conclusion that they had not been with their Master.

Now there was a pool in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate (Nehemiah 3:1). This is the gate through which the sacrificial animals were brought to the Temple, which were predominantly lambs, hence the name. The Sheep Gate in Aramaic is called Bethesda or house of mercy. It is only in the Lamb that the poor sinner can find mercy, and it is only through His sacrifice on the Cross that this mercy is available for us in Him. Bethesda was originally the name of a pool in the Holy City, on the path of the Beth Zeta Valley, and is

also known as the **Sheep Pool**. It was deep enough to swim in, and yet associated with healing. **The pool** was first dug out during the 8th Century BC and was called the **Upper Pool**. It was **surrounded by five covered** porches or **colonnades (John 5:2)**. It was a double **pool** surrounded by Herodian **colonnades** on all four sides, while **the fifth colonnade** stood on the dividing wall that separated the northern and southern **pools** (see **Nf - The Pool of Bethesda**).⁴⁴⁰ You can see the remains of this **pool** in the Muslim section of **Tziyon** today. It was on the east side of **the City**, northeast of the Temple.

There were two quite different pictures in **Yeshua's** mind that day. On the one side, there were **a great number of disabled people** laying down, **the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed**, waiting for the water to be **stirred (Yochanan 5:3)**. **Their** sufferings and false expectations rose like a cry of the starving for bread. And on the other side, the neighboring Temple, with its priesthood and teachers who, in **their** self-seeking religion of the Oral Law (see **Ei - The Oral Law**), neither understood, heard, or cared about such a cry. Both groups were suffering, and it is difficult to know which would have **stirred Him** the most.⁴⁴¹ The pompous **Jewish leaders** believed that any kind of disability meant that person was involved in some kind of sin and **their** handicap was some sort of cosmic retribution. **They** believed that it was possible to sin in the mother's womb and be punished by physical deformity as a result.

The superstition was that at certain times angels would cause bubbles to rise when they dipped their wings into **the pool and stirred the water**. They also believed that whoever stepped into **the water** first (after it was **stirred**) was healed of **their** disease (**John 5:4 NASB**). This was the kind of belief that was spread all over the world in ancient days. People believed in all kinds of spirits and demons. The air was supposedly thick with them; they were everywhere. Every tree, river, stream, hill and **pool** had its resident spirit.⁴⁴² Today we know that an underground spring actually bubbled up in **the pool**. The angel's involvement was merely a superstition, but that's what the people believed. What a pathetic, cruel scene. House of grace? Hardly! There is no record of anyone actually being healed. However, **one** of them there that day was about to meet **the true Great Healer**.

Picture a battleground strewn with wounded bodies, and you see **Bethesda**. Imagine a nursing home overcrowded and understaffed, and you see **the pool**. Call to mind the orphans in Bangladesh or the abandoned in New Delhi, and you will see what people saw when they passed **Bethesda**. As they passed, what did they hear? An endless wave of groans. What did they witness? A field of faceless need. What did they do? Most walked by - but not **Jesus**.

He is alone. **He** is not there to teach the people or draw a crowd. But someone needed **Him** - so **He's** there. Can you see it? **Jesus** walking among the moaning, smelly, suffering. What is **He** thinking? When an infected hand touches **His** ankle, what does **He** do? When a

blind child stumbles in **Messiah's** path, does **He** reach down to catch the child? When a wrinkled hand extends for alms, how does **Yeshua** respond? Whether the watering hole is **Bethesda** or Joe's Bar . . . how does **God** feel when people are hurting?⁴⁴³

As **Christ** approached the man at the pool at **Bethesda**, notice the method **He** used to heal him. The one who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, which was longer than the average life expectancy for a male in the first-century Roman Empire. **He** had literally been an invalid for a lifetime. **First, Jesus seeks the man out Himself: When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been in this condition for a long time (Yochanan 5:5-6a).** The Synoptics also use the description of our **Lord** seeing someone (and explicitly or implicitly taking pity on him or her) as a means of introducing a miracle (**Luke 7:13 and 13:12**).⁴⁴⁴

Second, Jesus does not demand that the man exhibit faith: He asked him: Do you want to get well (John 5:6b ESV)? It was not so foolish a question as it may sound. **The man** had waited for **thirty-eight years** and it might have been that hope had died and left behind a reprobate heart. But **the man's** reply was telling. **He** wanted to be healed, but **he** didn't see how that would happen since **he** had no one to help him.⁴⁴⁵ **"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me" (John 5:7).** **He** had fully bought into the false theology that illness resulted from **God's** judgment for sin (**John 9:2**), and the superstition of **the stirred water** for healing. **The poor man** had more faith in the means of healing than **he** had in **the Lord**. There was initially no evidence of faith on **his** part.

Third, there is no initial revelation of His Messiahship. That comes later in the context of 5:13. **The Great Healer** didn't preach, nor did **He** correct **His** false theology. People who lack hope don't need more knowledge; they need compassion. **Yeshua** gave **the man** what **he** lacked and so desperately needed.⁴⁴⁶

It is worth telling the story if all we do is watch **Him** walk through the hurting crowd. It's worth just to know **He** came. **He** didn't have to, you know. Surely there were more sanitary crowds in **Yerushalayim**. Surely there are more enjoyable activities. After all, this is the Passover feast. It's an exciting time in **the Holy City**. People have come from around the world to meet **God** in the Temple.

Little do they know that **God** is with the sick.

Little do they know that **God** is walking slowly, stepping carefully between the beggars and the **invalid** and the blind.

Little do they know that the strong, young carpenter who surveys the ragged landscape of pain is **God, the Great Rabbi Himself**.⁴⁴⁷

Then Jesus said to him: **Get up! Pick up your mat and walk (John 5:8)**. The cure was both instantaneous and complete. There are those today who claim for themselves the gift of healing. But when the people do not **pick themselves up and walk**, they say that the failure is the responsibility of the poor wretched souls who supposedly had no faith! But it must be pointed out here, that **Yeshua** healed this **man** before **he** had any faith. They simply can't heal like **the miracle-working Rabbi** healed.

The Great Physician healed **the invalid**. At this point in **His** ministry, faith was not necessary *before healing* because the purpose of **His** miracles was for the purpose of authenticating **His** messianic claims. Faith would be necessary *after His* official rejection by the Sanhedrin (see **Eh - Jesus is Officially Rejected by the Sanhedrin**). **He** heard **the Lord's** words and **at once he was cured; he picked up his mat and walked to the Temple (Yochanan 5:9a)**. **He** acted, and along with **Christ** - the miracle was done. **He** probably skipped and did some cartwheels also! Here was simple trust, unquestioning obedience to the unseen, unknown, but real **Savior**. For **he** believed **Him**, and therefore trusted in **Him**, that **He** must be right; and so, trusting without questioning, **he** obeyed.⁴⁴⁸

Picture a battleground strewn with wounded bodies, and you see **Bethesda**. Imagine a nursing home overcrowded and understaffed, and you see **the pool**. Call to mind the orphans in Bangladesh or the abandoned in New Delhi, and you will see what people saw when they passed **Bethesda**. As they passed, what did they hear? An endless wave of groans, What did they see? A field of faceless need. What did they do? Most passed by, but not **Yeshua**. **He** is alone. They needed **Him** - so **He's** there walking among the suffering. Little did they know that **God** was walking among them, stepping carefully between the beggars and the blind.⁴⁴⁹

But **the day on which this healing took place was a Sabbath (John 5:9b)**. The Lord continually maintained that it was lawful to heal on **the Sabbath** to do good, and ignored the Oral Law. In fact, **Jesus** heals on **Shabbat** five times in the Gospels (here, **Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 13:10-17 and 14:1-6 and John 9:1-41**). So just as we begin to celebrate **the man's** healing we read: **this took place on Shabbat**, this sentence throws a wet blanket over our excitement. What **He** asked **the man** to do was against the pharisaic interpretation of keeping **the Sabbath**. **The 1,500 Sabbath rules of the Oral Law included one that said you could not carry a burden from a public place to a private place, or from a private place to a public place**. This foreshadows a bizarre twist to the end of the story.

While Yochanan doesn't disturb the logical flow of the story, there is an apparent change of scene. **The healed man** was probably carrying **his mat** to **the Temple** where he had never worshiped before. **And so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the Oral Law forbids you to carry your mat" (John 5:10).** This was the heart of the problem with pharisaic Judaism. **They** obeyed the letter of their **man-made** laws, but ignored the spirit of the **God-inspired** Torah. **The Pharisees** strictly applied the words of **Jeremiah**, "**Do not carry any load on the Sabbath day or bring anything in through the gates of Jerusalem**" (**Jeremiah 17:21 NASB**), but **they** failed to recognize the context. **Jeremiah** complained because **Shabbat** had become business as usual. **Nehemiah** felt the same way when **he** ordered the doors of Jerusalem closed on **Shabbat** so that no load would enter on **the Sabbath day (Nehemiah 13:19).**

ADONAI instituted **Shabbat** to be a gift. A day of rest to refresh us. But more to the point, **He** gave it to us in order to break our routine so that we would remember that **God** is the ultimate source of our sustenance; our work is merely a means of **His** provision. We are to stop work so we will not neglect worship. But **the Pharisees** turned this wonderful gift into a burden. Freedom was gone. Worship was flat. Service was a drudgery and pharisaic Judaism had become a dry husk worth nothing.

The Man who made me well said to me, "**Pick up your mat and walk.**" **He** was not trying to get **Yeshua** into trouble. The actual words of the Oral Law were, "If anyone carries anything from a public place to a private house on the Sabbath intentionally he is punishable by death by stoning." **The invalid** was simply trying to explain that it was not **his** fault that **he** had broken the Oral Law.⁴⁵⁰ **He** was healed from a deformity that, humanly speaking, was irreversible. We might have expected this to be an occasion for joy and thanksgiving. But instead of rejoicing in **God's** grace, **the Pharisees** focused on this new threat to **their** authority. **So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"** **The man who was healed** had no idea who it was, for **Jesus** had slipped away into the crowd that was there (**Yochanan 5:11-13**).

It could not have been long after this that **the healed man** and **his Healer** met again. **Later**, after some time had elapsed, **Jesus** looked for and **found him at the Temple** where **he** had evidently gone to worship **God** and perhaps to make an offering. **And the Savior of sinners said to him: See, you are well again.** The verb is in the perfect tense, indicating that the cure was permanent. **Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you (John 5:14).** While disease is not invariably a consequence of sin, as **Jesus Himself** affirmed (**John 9:3**), it *can be* as we see today with the proliferation of drugs, AIDS other STD's and children born out of wedlock.

Once he found out who Jesus was, the man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was He who had made him well (John 5:15). He was not intimidated. The evidence that he had been saved can be seen in the fact that he had gone to the House of Prayer and Praise. This is a beautiful ending to the whole story. The one who had been healed confessing with his lips the One who had saved him. The man left the Temple and became a public witness to Messiah. **So what did it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? To act justly and to love mercy and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).**

Those Jewish leaders were members of the Sanhedrin (see Lg - [The Great Sanhedrin](#)). They were the very ones who were responsible for making a decision about His claim of messiahship and as we shall see shortly they were in **the second stage of interrogation**. By the time Yeshua was born, pharisaic Judaism believed that the Messiah would not only believe in the Oral Law, but also participate in the making of new Oral Law when He came. Jesus, however, would have nothing to do with **the traditions of men (Mark 7:8)**. And as a result, the Pharisees rejected Him (see Ek - [It is only by Beelzebub the Prince of Demons, that This Fellow Drives Out Demons](#)). This would be a continuing source of conflict until those two opposing beliefs would meet at Golgotha.

John's Gospel progresses through a stream of "witnesses," or people and events that all point to the truth of Yeshua ha-Meshiach's identity. Among these are the many powerful miracles that the Healer performed, like healing this lame man by the pool of Bethesda. This is the third of Jesus' seven miracles in Yochanan's book (John 2:1-11; 4:43-54; 5:1-15; 6:1-15; 6:16-24; 9:1-34; 11:1-44).

What is most striking about this miracle is what Messiah did *not* do. He neither touched the man nor washed him in the pool. He only spoke the words: **Get up! Pick up your mat and walk (Yochanan 5:8)**, and the man was healed. This healing pointed dramatically to a central truth about Jesus as the Son of God: His spoken word is power.

Other parts of John's story demonstrate the power of our Savior's word. For example, at a wedding feast in Cana, Yeshua only had to speak a word of command, and water was turned into wine (see Bq - [Jesus Changes Water into Wine](#)). He healed an official's son through His word (see Cg - [Jesus Heals an Official's Son](#)). And before surrendering to His adversaries in the garden of Gethsemane, He flattened them with the word of truth (see Le - [Jesus Betrayed, Arrested and Deserted](#)). The Prophet of Nazareth possessed such power because of *the rhema*, the spoken word of God.

In the beginning **God** spoke the world into existence. Each day of creation: **And God said . . . (Genesis 1:1-26)**. And at the end of the Great Tribulation, **Messiah** will slay the antichrist as described by Paul in **Second Thessalonians 2:8**, **And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.** Yes, His spoken word is powerful.

Jesus went to places where people were hurting. There was intention in **His** steps. We can claim there are hurting people all around us, but if we are going to live by **Christ's** example, we need to make it part of our lifestyle to visit places where people are obviously hurting: prisons, hospitals, disaster areas, nursing homes - the list is pretty obvious. We may not know how we can help, but we will never find that out or discover how **God** can use us if we avoid the company of suffering people.

*Forgive us, **Father**, for ignoring the needs of others. Help us respond to the suffering around us. Fill us with **Your** love. Give us your compassion for the hurting, your love for the despised, your mercy for the afflicted.*⁴⁵¹