

Opening Words

Jesus healed a man who had been lame 38 years. But there was just one problem. He did it on the Sabbath.

OSL 037 Power at the Pool of Bethesda 1

Every day a crippled man was placed beside a pool of water, called the Pool of Bethesda. The pool was located just outside the city walls where many other beggars and sick people would sit. These were the socially expendable people. Among the socially expendable were prostitutes, poor day laborers, tanners (because they stank), peddlers, bandits, sailors, gamblers, interest chargers, donkey drivers, dung collectors, and some merchants. These kinds would live outside the gates at night. Outside the gates – a fitting place for those considered expendable. Many were thought accursed of God. And at this pool were many who were sick.

In the Mediterranean world in which Jesus lived, sickness was often thought to be the rupture of relationships. Healing is the healing of relationships as well as the bodily illness. In our thinking, a disease is biological. In their thinking, an illness is the disruption of a person's social network. People were not concerned with the organic root of a problem as much as the social rupture of the problems. And if people were resigned to beg among the sick, it must be because they had done something wrong against God and were experiencing his judgment.

The pool of Bethesda was just outside one of the north gates of Jerusalem called the Sheep Gate. It was about the size of a football field and about 20 feet deep. There were four porches around it and a porch in the middle of it that divided it into two sections. One pool would catch rainwater. The other pool was used for purification ceremonies.

As the crippled man looked at his surroundings, he could see the city gates used to herd sheep through for the sacrifices in the Temple where God was worshiped. Yes, the Temple of God where the creator of the universe and the God of his people was worshiped. But that worship was conducted on the inside, in the city, in the Temple, away from him.

When he looked in another direction, there stood the Roman fortress of Antonia. That site had once been used by his people as a stronghold to guard against attacks. Now, it housed Roman soldiers and was a constant reminder that though the worship of God continued in the city, just outside others were in control and all was not well with the people of God.

As the man looked nearby, he would see other beggars and others who were infirm. Some stayed close by the water, just in case! From time to time, the water in the pool would stir, and people thought that an angel or a spirit would come into the water and it would bring healing power. If they could get into the water while the spirit was there, they would be healed! So they thought. This type of thinking was common in the ancient world, and there were many places with springs of water, especially among the Greeks, that were thought to contain healing power.

One day, Jesus came to this place where the sick gathered. Here is how John reports this event in the life of our Lord. I'm reading from John 5:1-14.

Sometime later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁴ ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷ “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.”

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

¹¹ But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’ ”

¹² So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”

¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

What festival was it that Jesus attended? Recent investigation has led many to believe that it was the Feast of Purim. Between the years AD 25 and 35 there was only one feast that fell on a Sabbath, and it was the Feast of Purim in AD 28. This was one of the lesser feasts of Israel – the major ones being Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Purim was the feast that commemorated Esther and Mordecai’s victory over Haman in the time of the Persian empire. We read about that in the Book of Esther.

But the point of the story in John is not about the feast. It is about the Sabbath. Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, and as we will see, this caused a big problem. But first, we should note that this man had been handicapped for 38 years! In those days, that was almost a lifetime! What was it like for him, what is it like for any person to be handicapped for life?

When we read the 38 years, we must think beyond this man’s suffering. We must think of a deeper kind of suffering. We must think of the suffering of the people of God who wandered in the wilderness for a period of 38 years after their rebellion against God giving them 40 years in the wilderness. Was this man selected by Jesus for healing because of a lesson he wanted to teach his people? If so, it would be a good lesson for them and for us. It would reinforce the truth that much of our suffering is because of poor decisions we make. But it would also show that Jesus came to heal Israel from her wilderness wandering, and he has come to heal us from the wandering of our lives because of the poor choices we make or because of our rebellion against God.

One day, this lame man was sitting by the pool of Bethesda when he noticed the shadow of someone standing over him. Although the lame man did not know him, it was Jesus, and when the crippled man, turned toward him, Jesus asked him a question. Let's use our imagination a little bit to re-create their conversation.

Jesus asked, "Do you wish to get well?"

And the man could have replied at first, "Do I wish to get well? Do I wish to get well? Of course I do."

Jesus said, "You have been in this condition for so long, for too long – 38 years has it been?"

"Yes, 38 years, but how, how did you know that? Oh, never mind that, I have been sitting by this pool, and I have heard that its water can heal people. But every time the water is stirred up, I am too far away. Another gets in before I can get there."

Jesus could have said, "Yes, I can see how this would favor those who are the least sick. You, though, have been in this condition long enough."

Then, Jesus knelt beside the man, reached out his hand and with power and compassion in his voice said, "Now it is your time. I say to you, rise, get up, take up your bed and walk away from this place."

The man looked at Jesus, stunned at what he was hearing. "Who did this man think he was? Why was he saying such words?" Then, he felt it – heat, power, life surging through his body. He closed his eyes. He rocked his head back and forth as if he would faint and then, he opened his eyes brightly and with energy that he had never experienced, he stood up!

He could not believe what he had just done! He took a few steps, then a few steps more. He reached down to rub his legs. They looked different. They felt different. He could walk. He could run. He could jump. He had been healed and when he turned to ask the man how he had done this, he noticed that the man was back on the road with others around him and they were entering the gates of the city to worship.

"I wonder who he was," the man said to himself, but his thoughts were soon interrupted as others noticed. "You have been healed," they said. "And the water hasn't been stirred up. How has this happened?"

"I don't know. A man came up to me and talked to me. Then, he reached out his hand and told me to get up and take my bed and walk."

"What man? Who? Where is he? Will he do this for me?"

"I, I don't know. He never told me his name. He just told me to get up and take my bed and walk. And that is just what I will do. I will take up my bed and go home. But first, I must go into the temple and give thanks to God." And the man, who had been crippled for 38 years, took up his bed, walked away from the Pool of Bethesda, walked through the Sheep Gate with other pilgrims and headed toward the temple.

But it was the Sabbath on which this miracle had occurred.

As the man approached the Temple, more and more people, zealous for the laws of their God and especially the law of the Sabbath noticed that he was doing what the Law forbade him to do, carry a burden on the Sabbath.

And we read in John 5:10, someone spoke up and said, “Hey, you! Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? You know that the Law of our God says that no one may carry anything on this holy day, and you are carrying your bed!”

And we find in the following verses that the man replied, “Yes, I know, but I have been unable to walk for 38 years. I was lying by the Pool of Bethesda and a man came to me. He told me to take up my bed and walk. I have no need to stay by the pool, so I took up my bedding on which I would sit every day to beg.

“What man told you to do this?”

And the crippled man thought, “You know, I don’t even know his name. I didn’t have time to ask him. He just healed me and walked away!”

“Healed you – today – on the Sabbath? What do you mean he healed you?”

“Sirs, I have been crippled for 38 years. For some time I have been begging by the Pool of Bethesda. I was there this morning when he came to me and asked if I wanted to get well. Then, he said, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk.’ I felt power surging through me. I was healed. And I figured that if he could command my sickness to leave my body, then, I should do what he said when he told me to pick up by bedding and carry it home.”

“But you know this is the Sabbath, and not just any Sabbath. We are celebrating our great festival. It is a special holy day and you are breaking this law.”

The fact that the man had been healed seemed to be lost. Round and round the man and the religious authorities talked and when they realized they were not getting anywhere with him they said, “If you find him again, bring us word about him. We think we know who it is, but we want to be sure. Strange things are happening in our land. And stop carrying your bed. This is the Sabbath, a day of rest, not a day of work.”

And there we must end our program for today. When we resume this event in the life of Jesus on our next broadcast, we will find out what happens next with this man, with the religious authorities, with Jesus, and learn important, unforgettable lessons about Christ.