

The Working Word

¹ After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. ³ In 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. ⁵ Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. ⁶ When 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?" 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." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." ⁹ And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰ The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed." ¹¹ He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" ¹² Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" ¹³ But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in *that* place. ¹⁴ Afterward 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." ¹⁵ The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶ For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." ¹⁸ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. (John 5:1–18)

The human heart's ability to find and trust in false hopes is amazing. Every year, six million people visit the French town of Lourdes, to drink or wash or bathe in the spring water from the town, where supposedly a vision of Mary occurred in 1862. People claim healings from the water. Several other chapels make this claim, as well as a number of natural sites of thermal springs, or supposed energies. People are more sure of the healing properties of these places and their water or atmosphere than they are sure of a personal prayer-hearing Creator.

Not only do people place their hope in places, or in objects and talismans, or in false religion, but the way they do so is passive. They spend their lives passively waiting for good luck, for happiness, for good fortune.

This morning we meet someone just like that, a sad soul representative of how so many people choose to live. But once again, we will see the beauty of the Son of God, intervening, revealing, breaking through the emptiness of false religion. He does it very methodically in three ways. He chooses to display a sign, which was a sabbath violation, which showed the Son's identity.

I. The Sign

¹ After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. ³ In 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.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus would have gone up to Jerusalem at least three times a year for one of the feasts: a Passover, Pentecost or Tabernacles. But there were others: the feast of Trumpets, now called Rosh Hashanah, the feast of Dedication in December (Chanukkah). From John 5 to John 10, John writes his Gospel around several incidents that took place at one of these feasts. John 6 is Passover, John 7, the Feast of Tabernacles, John 10, Hanukkah, John 11 is Passover again. John is supplementing material not found in the other Gospels, and structuring it around feasts, when there were a lot of people gathered, a lot of religious rulers around, and therefore, some kind of controversy that would break out.

We are not sure what feast this was, in chapter 2 it was Passover, so this may have been Tabernacles again. The action moves to a place called the Pool of Bethesda, which likely means House of Mercy. These pools have been excavated and you can visit them in Jerusalem. Originally, there were two large pools, a north and a south, surrounded by five porches or colonnades.

Here under the shade of those colonnades was a huge collection of people: sick, blind, lame, deformed. Now it's likely that they either were brought back here every day by relatives or friends, or perhaps that stayed there as long as bodily need would allow them. Possibly food was brought to them, possibly their ablutions were on sight or nearby. But it could not have been a beautiful sight, nor a fragrant smell. A mass of humanity sprawled out, desperate for a miracle. Mostly, a slum of despair. The down-and-outs. The castaways. The rejected. All those who were afflicted.

Now why was this the case? End of verse 3 and verse 4 are disputed verses; some of your Bible might have them as footnotes, they are found in most manuscripts. They represent either what did happen, or at least what was thought to happen. The water would be stirred. These pools were fed by a water system known as Solomon's Pools, but it is possible that there were natural springs that produced an intermittent bubbling.

It's also possible that the legend of the angel disturbing the waters was exactly what happened, though that is not the usual way that God provided healing for people. Why torment people to be ready at any time night or day, and why make it that only the first person in could be healed? Why not make it for all there in that moment, so that a new bunch could take their place tomorrow?

But something must have happened for the place to be so filled with people. Something must have happened in the past for them to keep being there. At the very least, like a lot of faith-healing crusades today, maybe some rumour had got out that someone had been healed and so there was the never-ending hope, like those who play the lottery, that this day will be my day.

But I don't picture a happy camaraderie among all those waiting. If the belief, or the reality was that only the first one in received the healing, can you imagine the competition, the rivalry, the enmity that must have been present? Your healing was dependent on beating everyone else to it. The only way you could be healed is if everyone else wasn't. Picture the pandemonium that probably broke out when the waters moved. The calling out for assistance, the mad rush, people elbowing each other, cursing one another, perhaps even tripping the one ahead of them. Every man for himself.

This was not love your neighbour as yourself. This was me-first – every day of their lives. And picture the resentment that occurred if that one person had been truly healed. No rejoicing with them, no thanking God with them, probably scowls of jealousy and envy, hatred in their hearts for the one who robbed them of their healing.

Imagine spending your whole life just sitting and watching the surface of some waters. A whole life of just waiting, waiting for something to change, something over which you have no control, just waiting and watching. In fact, that sounds like a lot of people. They may not be watching the surface of a pool, but they do spend the better part of their lives just watching circumstances, just waiting for a change, a better deal, a sudden revival in their hearts, a sudden belief in Christ, a sudden problem-free life, a sudden change in their family.

All passive, all just waiting, “But something will turn up – the waters will move soon”.

But amidst all the stench, and selfish competition, and passivity, and false hope, was something else: helplessness and despair. Our text tells us that it was filled with people blind and lame. How

would you get to the water once it moved? How would you know it was moving?

That was the state of the man Jesus zeroed in on.

⁵ Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. ⁶ When 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?"

For 38 years, this man has been lame. We are not sure how long he had now made this pool his only hope, but now he spends his life at a pool he is helpless to get into. Jesus focuses on him, because Jesus works with individuals. We never see Jesus doing a crowd healing, calling down blanket healing on a whole village, or on everyone lying under that colonnade.

But Jesus knew about this man's condition. He works with individuals, and He knows the state of each individual. He knows how long you have been this way. He knows your struggles. He knows what you have tried, what you have trusted in, what you have looked to. He knows the failure, the grief, the frustration it has brought you. And He approaches you in mercy.

Did you ever think of what mercy and compassion it was for Jesus to even be at this place? He did not live in Jerusalem. He was merely there to keep the feast, as commanded in the Law. He could have kept the feast, gone to the Temple, performed the various commanded rituals, and headed back to Galilee. Why did Jesus make His way through Jerusalem's crowded and narrow streets to the depressing and dreary place called Bethesda, with its unhappy, miserable souls, wasting their pitiful lives away? Why? Because He loves people. He is merciful. And He will make His way through many obstacles to find one lost sheep.

Now Jesus does an unusual thing. He asks the man this question: "Do you want to be made well?" Now why ask what seems to us to be an obvious question? Isn't the man there all the time? Isn't being healed the great aim of his life?

Maybe. But sometimes, people have become so used to staring at the water, so used to their routine, that they may have forgotten. Waiting and being passive has become normal, and even easier than facing life.

Maybe this man's trust had for so long been placed in a superstition that he needed to be woken up to who was in front of him.

The way he answers is not really a yes or a no, it is just a defence of why he has not been healed yet

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."

The fact is – his answer is irrelevant. Jesus didn't ask, why are you not healed? He asked – do you want to be healed?

I wonder how often we answer a question from the Lord, do you want to be saved, or do you want to grow, with another answer, the reason I am not is because of my family, or my condition, or my children or my boss.

The simple answer is, "Yes, Lord!"

Jesus now gives him a command.

⁸ Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk."

Get up, take your bed, and walk. Jesus doesn't carry him into the water. Jesus doesn't massage his legs so the circulation is better. He commands him. The man's bed was a kind made of straw,

possible to roll up, the bed of the poor.

Now think about why the Lord says it this way.

First, this was a command impossible for the man to obey in himself. The man's problem was that he could not rise up and walk. Christ's confronts human inability. It strips a person of faith in self.

Second, the command was a promise of what he could and would do if he trusted and obeyed Christ. Every command in the Word of God is a promise of what you can do if you will yield to Him, submit to His authority, trust Him, and obey Him. That's because God's commands, when yielded to, contain the grace to do them. What God commands, He enables. What God orders, He pays for. If God is commanding you to do it, and you know and have confessed that you cannot do it – it must mean that He will give you the strength and power to do it if you yield to Him. Picture the man saying, "Lord, you know I cannot walk. Don't insult me" But he must have had some faith to realise that Jesus' command meant there was grace to perform it.

Third, the command insisted upon action. He had to not just believe that his legs were healed, but get up and walk while Jesus was watching. The command made no provision for a relapse – take up your bed. In the original the language is emphatically showing this is a permanent cure: "Pick up your mat and off you go, walking!"

⁹ And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath.

The healing is instantaneous and immediate. Try to imagine the look on his face, his reaction to Jesus, his rush to find his relatives to show them. And picture the stir around the pool: a man healed? But had he gotten into the water? Were the waters even stirred?

But now the trouble begins.

II. The Sabbath Violation

¹⁰ The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed." ¹¹ He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" ¹² Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk?'" ¹³ But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in *that* place.

The Jews, which you remember refers to the Jewish leaders, notice this man carrying his straw bed. It is the Sabbath day. Now, nothing in Scripture forbade carrying a bed on the Sabbath. You were not to carry a burden on the Sabbath, which referred to carrying out your usual work, transporting goods for trade. But the Pharisees had come up with over 39 violations of the Sabbath, and carrying your bed had become one of them.

Instead of being amazed by the fact that the man is healed, instead of concluding that Messiah might be among them since a man lame for 38 years was now walking, they focus on a Sabbath violation. Day one of a new life of mobility, and before he has taken a few steps, he is being issued a ticket by the Sabbath police for walking with his miraculously cured legs with a bed under his arm.

Now the man's response is downright disappointing. Unlike the shrewd and independent blind man we'll meet in chapter 9, this man seems to be a selfish, self-protective, self-centred individual. First, he simply blames. "I was just following orders! The doctor who cured me said I should be doing this!"

And when they ask him, who is it that told you to do this, it occurs to him that he hadn't even asked his healer for his name. He hadn't even been interested in the identity of the man who just changed his life. And he can't turn around and point at Jesus, because Jesus had quietly withdrawn, lest there

be more commotion in that crowded Pool of Bethesda.

So the man now heads to the Temple, likely to present himself to the priests, to be declared ritually pure.

¹⁴ Afterward 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." ¹⁵

Jesus sees the man, and now gives him spiritual advice. Repent, turn away from your sin, lest something even worse happen. Not all sickness, disease or calamity is caused by sin. But some is. And Jesus knew something about this man's life and past to make a connection valid for him. "You have received mercy. Do not go back into sin and experience worse."

Now we find out what kind of man he really was by how he reacted.

¹⁵ The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Just like an informer under a communist government, he immediately finds the authorities and points out who healed him. Imagine trying to get the man who just performed a miracle on you arrested. Likely he was trying to clear his own name for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, and ingratiate himself with the religious authorities.

And now what was under the surface and brewing in chapters 1 through 4 explodes out in open, organised hostility to Jesus.

III. The Son's Authority

¹⁶ For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath.

Here was violation 1. Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. Healing was something which a physician would do, and according to rabbinic law, a physician's hours were to be six days, from the first day of the week till the end of the sixth, and no more healing on the Sabbath. If a doctor opened his doors on the Sabbath, and received patients on the Sabbath, he would be violating the Sabbath day.

Now surely, when you think about it, Jesus could have waited one day. This man had been lame for 38 years. It was not like he was going anywhere, or wouldn't be there the next day. Why heal on the Sabbath, when you could wait one more day and heal when there would be no objection from anyone?

Well, the answer must be that it was deliberate.

¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.

Jesus says, My Father has been working, even on the Sabbath day, and I work out whatever He works. Now actually, there had been a rabbinic debate as to whether God works on the Sabbath. Some said that God does not work on the Sabbath. Others said that He does, but He

But Jesus is making a dual claim. First, His Father is working on the Sabbath. Only God could heal a man lame for 38 years, and if He is healed, then it is a work of God on the Sabbath. If God were observing the rabbinic Sabbath, He would not supply the power for the healing. Claim# 1, God does not regard the Sabbath as the rabbis do.

Claim # 2, Jesus is uniquely related to God, carrying out His works. The only reason Jesus did this work is because God did this work, and Jesus says "My Father has been working and I have been

working”.

In other words, Jesus is claiming that He is simply carrying out, as Son, what Father is doing. Now the Jews would sometimes refer to God as Our Father in the synagogues. But it was not the practice to refer to God as “my father”.

“His claim meant that God was *his* Father in a special sense. He was claiming that he partook of the same nature as his Father. This involved equality. So the Jews held that he was guilty of blasphemy as well as of Sabbath breaking¹ “

¹⁸ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

Now that is why Jesus chose this day to heal. He chose this day, because His Father chose this day. And as we'll see, in some ways the Father chose this day because the Son chose this day. Jesus wanted to show them what kind of God God really is. He is a God who takes compassion on people, no matter the day of the week. And Jesus wanted to show them exactly who He was. He is Messiah, God's Son.

And all of this confronts us with who Jesus is. And in some ways, it is a lot easier to just go on staring at the water, than to have to look eyes with Jesus and consider who He is, and His claims on you. It is more comfortable to just stick with tradition, or habit, or good luck, or just passivity. You can just stare at the waters and say, “Let's just see what this year will bring.” “Let's just wait, something will turn up.” Or you can make the most fundamental decision of your life: to receive Jesus Christ, to believe savingly on Him.

You say, I can't. Right, just like the man couldn't walk. But the Word commands it. It says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.”

1 Morris, L. (1995). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 275). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.