

“Pool of Bethesda”

John 5:1-18

Baxter T. Exum (#950)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
November 25, 2007



Introduction:

This morning I would like to invite you to turn with me to **John 5**—to the account of a rather interesting miracle that was performed by Jesus Christ. And as we are turning to **John 5**, perhaps we can start thinking about the figure of 38 years. I would invite you to think with me about what happened 38 years ago, but for some reason I have a hard time thinking back that far. 38 years ago, the year was 1969—3 years before I was born! Perhaps some of you can remember some of what happened back in 1969. Led Zeppelin releases their very first album. Richard Nixon is sworn in as the 37th president of the United States. The Beatles give their very last public performance. The program Hee-Haw begins on CBS. Ted Kennedy drives off a bridge on his way home from a party on Chappaquiddick Island. Neil Armstrong takes one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind. Woodstock takes place in New York State. The first ATM is installed in New York. The first message was sent over ARPANET, the forerunner of the internet. Wal-Mart is incorporated. Sesame Street premieres.

But whatever we may or may not remember from 1969, I think we can agree that 38 years is a rather long time. I point this out because in **John 5** Jesus is about to heal a man who has been sick for 38 years. Perhaps we could try to imagine losing our ability to walk on the day that Neil Armstrong steps onto the moon for the very first time. If we can only imagine, then perhaps we can start to understand what life might have been like for the man we are about to meet in **John 5**.

The Bible tells us that this particular man was camped out beside the Pool of Bethesda near the temple in the city of Jerusalem. For many years, critics of the Bible tried to tell us that there was no such place, and that this whole story had to be made up. However, ****PPT**** back in 1956, archaeologists discovered a giant pool, and as they kept on digging, they discovered five giant covered porches. As they pieced it all together, ****PPT**** they found that the pool was divided into two sections—the upper and the lower. They found one long covered porch on each side, one on each end, and one in the middle—for a total of five covered porches—which, by the way, is exactly how the Bible describes it.

And so in just a moment we will look at the opening verses of **John 5**—at what John will later see as a turning point in the ministry of Jesus—because in **verse 16**, John tells us that it was because of this miracle that the Jewish leaders first started persecuting the Lord. All of this happened on the Sabbath Day, the leaders got

upset, and Jesus responded by claiming that God was His Father. That, obviously, did not go over very well, so this is a very important miracle.

This miracle is also significant because it takes place right inside what is known as the "**Sheep Gate.**" We know that there were a number of gates leading into the city of Jerusalem. Some were huge and very ornate and were often used for special ceremonies and processions. Others were quite small and were very practical. Well, the purpose of the sheep gate was rather obvious. It was through this very small and simple gate that the sheep would come to be sacrificed at the temple.

Based on the context, a number of Bible students have assumed that Jesus had come through this gate to celebrate the feast of the Passover. And if that was the case, then how appropriate that would have been! The Lamb of God coming to celebrate the Passover, and He arrives through the Sheep Gate! Whatever the case, though, Jesus gets into the city, and He starts by going directly to the Pool of Bethesda. If you will, please look with me at **John 5:1-18...** ****PPT****

¹ After these things 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 porticoes. ³ 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.] ⁵ A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 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." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." ⁹ Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day. ¹⁰ So the Jews were saying to the man 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, 'Pick up your pallet and walk.'" ¹² They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pick up your pallet and walk'?" ¹³ But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. ¹⁴ Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." ¹⁵ The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶ 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 reason 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.

This morning I would like for us to look at this passage very carefully and then hopefully find some lessons that we can use in our lives today.

I. As we look at the first five verses, one of the first things we notice is that THE MAN WAS IN A COMPLETELY HOPELESS SITUATION. **PPT******

2,000 years ago, if we had been blind, or sick, or lame, we would have been completely on our own. There would not have been any Social Security, no Medicare, no Medicaid. There would have been no safety net. One of the reasons for this was that many people thought that people got sick because they deserved it—there must have been something they had done—the sickness was some kind of divine retribution. And so the thought was, “Who are we to help the lame? After all, they asked for it!”

In **verses 2-3**, John tells us that, “***...a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered,***” were laying all around the Pool of Bethesda. The people would gather under the covered porches for protection from the sun, and wind, and rain, and there were hundreds and perhaps thousands of people who had gathered around. According to **verses 4-5**, all of these people were waiting for an angel to come stir the water, and the belief at the time was that after the water started moving, the first person in the pool would be cured of whatever disease he or she had. And so the people were putting their faith in this tradition, and what a cruel sight this would have been—thousands of sick people sitting around a pool, waiting for some movement in the water.

We can almost imagine some very interesting pranks—things are getting a little too quiet, so some guy in the back yells out, “Hey, the water’s moving!” And hundreds of handicapped people roll off into the pool. We have no idea if that kind of thing really happened, but it would definitely be tempting.

But as it was, there were hundreds of blind and sick and lame who were basically living by this particular pool. And even when the water moved, those who were truly paralyzed really did not have a chance. They would be stepped on and trampled by the others on their way to the water—not very fair at all, since the most mobile would be the first ones into the water! Maybe we could imagine the entrance to Wal-Mart at 6 a.m. on the day after Thanksgiving—if the water moved—if there had been one little bubble out there in the middle—there would have been thousands of people all trying to be the first ones to jump in. There would have been fighting and elbows and hurt feelings—like a giant game of musical chairs.

The irony is that the word “***Bethesda***” literally means, “***House of Mercy.***” It was not a very merciful place! Probably most of us here this morning can handle being around someone who is sick every once in a while. But imagine what it would be like to actually live in the middle of thousands of sick people. The crying, and the pain, and the smells—it certainly would have been very difficult. Even if we could imagine an overcrowded nursing home—completely understaffed—even then we would only have a tiny fraction of a small picture of what this might have been like.

And then we get to the subject of this morning's Scripture—we are told about a man who was quite ill and apparently had some kind of trouble getting around. We are never told exactly what his problem was, but it was not good. And we find that he had been in this situation for 38 years. Perhaps in the early years he thought he had a chance—maybe he thought he could somehow make it to the water. But over time that hope would have faded—38 years. Again, it is hard for us to imagine being sick for 38 years. Have we ever noticed that Christmas Eve is about 2 weeks long for most children? Christmas Day only seems like a few seconds. Nine minutes seems like the blink of an eye when we hit the snooze button, but if we spend 9 minutes in line at the grocery store with two little children, those 9 minutes can seem like an eternity. Certainly 38 years is a long time, but it would have been so much longer for someone suffering at the Pool of Bethesda!

When we think about it, if we assume that Jesus was about 30 years old here, this man would have started suffering 8 years before the Lord was even born! This man started suffering way back when Jesus was still in heaven—8 years before Jesus was born through Mary. When Jesus was presented at the temple as a little baby, this man was already sitting outside. When Jesus went to the temple at the age of 12, this man had already been there for 20 years! So here he was for 38 years—suffering and desperately looking for a cure for his condition. He was basically in a hopeless situation.

II. As we look to the next few verses, however, we find that JESUS STEPS IN AND HEALS THE MAN RIGHT THERE ON THE SPOT. **PPT******

And Jesus starts the process in **verse 6** by asking what appears to be a rather obvious question, **"Do you wish to get well?"** And on the surface, the question almost seems ridiculous. Maybe we can remember our parents turning around and asking, "Do you want me to stop this car?" That is a question that does not need an answer!

But Jesus asks the question anyway, **"Do you wish to get well?"** The question is basically asking for a yes or a no. I believe Jesus already knew the answer to the question—almost like God asking Adam in the Garden of Eden, **"Adam, where are you?"** The question was not because God had lost Adam—the question was for Adam's benefit. And in the same way, the question Jesus asks here is for the man's benefit. Jesus wants him to think about how hopeless his situation really is.

The question was not a joke. The question was not Jesus' way of saying, "Hey, look, the water's moving!" Jesus was not trying to trick the man, but Jesus was getting the ball rolling. Jesus was starting the conversation. Jesus was showing compassion. Jesus was getting personally involved in this man's life.

When we think about that question, though, we need to remind ourselves that there are many people today who do not want to get well with God. There are many people in this world who are just fine the way they are. There are many people who have no desire to get things right with God. We ask them if they have any spiritual

concerns, and they say, "No thanks—I'm fine." I am sure that if Jesus had seen this kind of attitude in this man, He would have kept on looking for someone else. But as it was, the man did want to get better. He says, **"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."** And so as he was sitting by the pool, he had no way of getting in the water. In other words, he wanted to be healed, but it was impossible. He had tried and failed for 38 years. He has no friends to put him into the pool. He struggles to get around—notice, he says, **"...while I am coming."** In other words, getting from his mat to the pool took enough time so that others were always able to get in first. And then, he is frustrated. He basically gets stepped on—people were basically cutting in line.

But then we come to **verse 8**, and Jesus takes action as He says to a man who can't even drag himself to the pool, **"Get up, pick up your pallet and walk."** We notice that Jesus did not make any backup plans, in case the man was not able to do it. Jesus did not tell him to leave his pallet on the ground, just in case he started to fall—nothing like that. But Jesus told the man to get up, and he got up immediately!

We notice here that the man had some responsibility. Jesus healed the man, but the man actually had to obey the Lord by standing up. The man had to pick up his pallet. The man had to start walking around. The healing came from God, but the man also had to do something. What if the man had said, "I have faith that I am cured, but there is no way I am going to risk standing up"? Jesus did the healing, but at least in this case the man actually had to obey the Lord in order to get the benefits of the miracle.

First of all, then, we have seen the hopeless situation—he had no way of getting better on his own. And then we have also seen the healing. Jesus made sure that he was not addicted to a lifestyle of living off of others, and then He healed the man by telling him to get up and walk.

III. Before we close I'd like for us to consider at least TWO LESSONS THAT JESUS TEACHES—in fact, the two lessons seem to be the reason for the healing. **PPT******

First of all, at the end of **verse 9**, ****PPT**** please notice that this takes place on the Sabbath day. In my own mind, I can picture this man running around with his pallet—perhaps even going straight to the temple to give thanks to God, but somewhere along the way he is stopped by the religious leaders of the day and they persecute the man for carrying his pallet on the Sabbath day. This was a very serious charge, because the violation carried with it the penalty of death. So here was a man who was healed, only to be executed for carrying his pallet! The Law of Moses, though, never condemned carrying a pallet. The Law said that it was a sin to work on the Sabbath, but over time the religious leaders had added to the Law. They had added a commentary known as the Mishnah, and the Mishnah gave a list of 39 things that could not be done on the Sabbath, and from what I understand, moving any kind of a load was one of those items.

Of course, the leaders had their way around all of these things. If you were smart enough you could figure out a loophole. Apparently you could not carry something with your hands or on your shoulders, but if you carried it on the back of your hands or on your feet or with your mouth it would be okay. We remember what Jesus said in **Matthew 23:4**, that the scribes and the Pharisees, **"...tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger."** And so instead of being happy that this man was healed after 38 years of not being able to move, the religious leaders were upset that he had violated one of their man-made religious traditions. By the way, this is not a conflict between love and God's law—this was a conflict between doing the will of God versus following man-made religious rules.

The man immediately blamed it on the Lord, but it is very interesting that he does not even know the Lord's name at this point! Down in **verse 15** they finally discover that it was Jesus, and they then began persecuting Jesus for doing these things on the Sabbath. The persecution of Jesus begins here and it does not end until Jesus is murdered on the cross. With this in mind, it is interesting that Jesus performed a total of at least seven miracles on various Sabbath days during His ministry. I had never noticed this until I started preparing for this morning's lesson, but over and over and over again, Jesus heals people on the Sabbath day. And almost every time somebody gets upset—it's almost as if He was giving a challenge on purpose—to try to teach that the religious leaders were mistaken for putting their man-made rules above the will of God.

So here were some very religious people who would deny the Son of God before they would deny their own religious traditions. Unfortunately, there are many people today who are in a similar situation—they will hold on to their denominational doctrine and will turn away any offer to learn about simple New Testament Christianity. So first of all, Jesus teaches a lesson about the value of compassion and following the will of God over man-made religious rules and traditions.

Secondly, though, ****PPT**** we see a lesson in the fact that Jesus goes out and finds this man even after the healing was over. And so we find that Jesus not only wanted this man to have a healthy body, He wanted him to have a healthy soul as well. **Verse 14** says, **"Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.'"** What an interesting verse! It makes us wonder whether his first problem was originally caused by some kind of sin. The first thing that came to my mind was some kind of drunken camel accident—some kind of calamity that he had brought upon himself. But whatever it was that caused the first problem, Jesus tells him not to sin anymore, **"...so that nothing worse happens to you."** And the message is, **"Now that you are well: Stop sinning!"** That is a message that all of us as Christians still need to hear. Even after our sins are washed away at the point of baptism, sometimes we need to hear it again: Stop sinning! Whatever it takes, we are to keep on turning away from the sins of our past.

And Jesus gives the warning so that **"nothing worse"** would happen to the man. It may be hard for us to imagine anything worse than 38 years as a crippled beggar in

the streets of Jerusalem. But apparently Jesus knew that there was something worse, and it would come as the consequence of sin. We remember the rich man and Lazarus. Is there anything worse than being a naked, starving beggar who dies in the street with dogs licking your sores? Yes there is! The only thing worse than that is living as a rich man who ignored the guy in the street. Before he died, the rich man was glad he was not Lazarus. But after he died, the rich man would have lived Lazarus' life a hundred times over if he could only have avoided what happened next. So yes, there is definitely something worse than living as a beggar in the streets of Jerusalem!

Jesus, then, is telling us (even today) that our spiritual health is far more important than our physical health. Don't go back to the old lifestyle. Don't go back to the old way of thinking. Don't go back to what God has brought us out of. Because Jesus says that if we do, something worse will come upon us. As Bryor read for us earlier (from **Galatians 6:7-8**), ***"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."***

And so the main lesson for us this morning comes from the fact that Jesus chased this man down—He found him in the temple, and Jesus gave him a very solemn warning: Even after we are healed, even after our sins are forgiven, we must make a constant effort to keep our lives tuned in to God, so that nothing worse will happen to us in the future.

Conclusion & Invitation:

Today it's almost like we are living around the Pool of Bethesda. We are literally surrounded by people who are hurting. We are surrounded by the spiritually blind and lame. What this world needs more than anything right now is the good news of Jesus Christ, that Jesus came to earth and offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins—He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We respond to that sacrifice by turning away from our sins, by publicly admitting that Jesus is the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we would love to meet with you after the service, but if you are ready to obey the gospel, you can be immersed in water within the hour, and we would invite you to let us know right now as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org