



John 5:1-19

Notes by Jonathan Herron

REVIEW OF THE JOURNEY THUS FAR

Jesus' signs show He is the Son of God. In chapters 2 - 4 He encounters four Jewish traditions (jars, Temple, rabbi well) and transforms their meaning, displaying He is the reality to which they all point. The old has gone, the new has come. These signs are performed so that people will believe in Him.

First, Jesus goes to a wedding party, where seven jars for ritual purification become containers for new wine (2:1-11). No longer will old purification rites be needed; the abundant new wine of the Kingdom has come as Isaiah predicted (Isaiah 25:6-8).

Second, Jesus clears the Temple with a whip (2:13 - 25). Jesus is the new Temple; no longer do they need to the building to meet with God, for they can see God in the Person of Christ.

Third, Jesus confounds the rabbi Nicodemus, showing He is their One Teacher (3). They don't need more information; they need to be born again from above. Finally, Jesus goes to a sacred well and displays He is the true and living water (4). He is the source of eternal life to all

living in deserted places. The old jars, Temple, teaching, and sacred wells could not provide true life. This only comes in the Son of God, who is the Logos.¹

HEALING SPIRITUAL PARALYSIS

John 5:1 - 18

John continues his portrait of Jesus through images and symbols. Jesus is also superior to four Jewish feasts (Sabbath, Passover, Tabernacles, and Hanukkah). Jesus' actions and words toward these festivals produce conflict. On the Sabbath, as we will see, Jesus heals a lame man who has been afflicted for thirty-eight years. The leaders are upset, but Jesus claims he is the Lord of the Sabbath and has come to do the work of God, making Himself equal with God.

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. (v.1)

Jesus returns to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, which is the weekly Sabbath rest. The three other festivals observed by all Jews were/are Passover, Sukkot (Tabernacles), and Shavu'ot (Pentecost). The focus here is on the requirement that all Jewish males were required by Torah to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, "*the place Adonai your God shall choose*" (Deuteronomy 16:16).²

In John chapter 5, Jesus heals a lame man and is persecuted because of it. This persecution eventually provides Him with the perfect opportunity to reveal His authority over all

¹ Schreiner, Patrick. *The Visual Word: Illustrated Outlines of the New Testament Books*. Chicago: Moody Publishers. 2022.

² Stern, David H. *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Clarksville, Maryland: Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. 1992.

mankind and to confront the religious authorities with their rebellion against God. By this point a transition has occurred in the Gospel. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the entire book, and chapters 2-4 reveal how people were interested in Jesus and His miracles. Now in chapters 5-7 there will be a shift from curiosity to opposition and from interest to persecution. This shift in attitude toward Jesus corresponds with Jesus' further establishing His authority. Jesus' authority is seen as He reveals Himself to be Master or Lord over sickness and Lord over the Sabbath.

Reports of the miraculous are part and parcel of religious movements. This makes the events of John 5:1-18 very understandable. The ingredients are perfect. The Pool of Bethesda, the setting of this passage, was within the walls of Jerusalem. It periodically rippled because of a subterranean spring, and grew a legend that a descending angel was the culprit and healing was the possible result: *"An angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the waters, so that whoever first came in after the stirring might be healed."*

As a result, hundreds of people came from the countryside to the Pool of Bethesda to be healed. Five porticoes were even built so the the infirm could keep out of the sun as they waited for the stirring of the waters. What a pathetic, wretched sight the crowd around the pool must have been! Nobody here is faking it.

On this occasion, Jesus was alone. Without His disciples Jesus could have traveled incognito. He stood unnoticed, and His tender eyes surveyed those miserable heaps of humanity around the pool. Finally His gaze rested upon one of the worst of the cases, a man who had been confined to his bed for thirty-eight years. He had never been able to reach the pool in time. But a few seconds later, the man's life was changed.³

³ Hughes, R. Kent. *Preaching the Word: John, That You May Believe*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway. 1999.

The first question Jesus asked the paralytic was, “Do you want to be healed?” That is quite a question. The man had been crippled for thirty-eight years, and Jesus had the nerve to ask that question? It sounds like a ridiculous question!

However, this is the question Christ asks all of us. I believe it summarizes the greatest problem of our lives. *Do you want to be well?* Few things hamper the gracious work of Christ in our lives more than our response to this question.

For the paralytic, Jesus’ query was an eminently significant question. J.A. Findley tell us that in the Middle East — and in some places today — a man who was healed would lose a good living. So, in fact, there are invalids whose situations are preferable. As the crippled man lay by the Pool of Bethesda, he was surrounded by misery and sorrow. But if the man looked out from those shaded porticoes, he saw men and women out in the sun carrying their burdens and working. He knew that if he were healed, his life would take on larger responsibilities. And so the question Jesus asked was very relevant: *Do you really want to be healed?*

That is a great question concerning the salvation of the soul. Pascal, the French philosopher, put it this way: “Men often mistake the imagination for the heart; and they believe they are converted as soon as they think of being converted.” In other words, the thought of being converted is what many imagine to be conversion. Why does Pascal believe this? Because Christ and what He offers look so delicious from a distance, and yet when we look at it closely, it may appear in an entirely different light. We begin to see that Jesus is an aggressive, requiring Lord.

The man who was healed is no example of faith. This is not a faith healing. Look at verse 7: The sick man answered him, “*Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water*

is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” His response to Jesus’ question was to complain that he had no one to help him. D.A. Carson writes that, “Verse 7 reads less as an apt and subtle response to Jesus’ question than as the crotchety grumblings of an old and not very perceptive man who thinks he is answering a stupid question.”

We learn more unflattering details about this man later in the account. In verse 10, when the Jews ask him why he’s breaking their law by carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he responds by blaming Jesus: *“The man who made me well told me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”*

Later Jesus comes back to him and tells him, *“Do not sin anymore, so that something worse doesn’t happen to you”* (v. 14). He’s implying the man’s condition was the result of his sin he had committed. It’s clear later in John’s Gospel that sickness and disease are not always the result of sin (chapter 9). In fact, they may rarely be the result of it, but they can be sometimes: the person who destroys their liver through drunkenness demonstrates that sin can have physical consequences.

It’s a free healing; the man did not purchase tickets to win the healing or enter a sweepstakes to find the golden ticket. He certainly did not deserve to be healed. It was only because Jesus graciously chose to heal him that he was healed. Here is an angry, old, embittered man who’s broken and helpless. He’s done nothing to deserve the kindness of Jesus. Even when Jesus seeks to help him out, he responds with an ugly comment, complaining about no help. What does Jesus do? He doesn’t say, “Well, if only he had asked Me,” or “He deserves to be alone and miserable,” or “I gave him a chance and he failed.” In His grace, Jesus looks past the man’s failure, the man’s sin, and restores him to physical health. Jesus makes him whole. And

Jesus can do that for you too. He has eyes to see past your hard exterior, past your brokenness, and He can make you whole.

It's also a full healing; the man wasn't partially healed. He was completely and "instantly" healed (v. 9). When Jesus told the lame man to get up and walk, sickness and disease fled. How much physical therapy did this man require after the disease left his body?

I checked with Shane O'Mara, a physical therapist in the Great Lakes Bay Region. According to Shane, "Currently, without the use of an assistive device or artificial limbs, he wouldn't make a full recovery unless he received the healing/ resurrection power of Jesus. Or he would be going forever to maintain the function in which he has remaining. No treatment would even come close to matching His ability to heal."

CONFLICT OVER THE SABBATH

John 5:1 - 19

Unfortunately, the religious leaders couldn't be happy for the man nor celebrate this miracle of God in their midst. Their concern was about breaking the law on the Sabbath:

And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.' They asked him, "Who is this man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk?'"

There was no question about the healing. Rather, all they asked was who was the “sinner” who instructed him to take up his bed? They were hard-hearted people.

This is what the spirit of legalism does. The Jews stopped persecuting the paralytic and started concentrating on Jesus because He had restored a man’s body on the Sabbath. How dare He! These Jews experienced no joy over this amazing miracle.

Donald Grey Barnhouse pointed out the Pharisees’ fundamental motivation:

Why all this viciousness? Why this desire to destroy the meek and lowly Jesus? Why this murderous attempt to do away with God? The answer is here in the Sabbath question.

They wanted rules, they did not want God’s grace. They wanted human merit. They did not want the simplicity of divine pardon. They wanted to do something for themselves.⁴

As believers we know we are saved by grace, but because of the human tendency of wanting to do everything ourselves, we create a list-giving, list-keeping Christianity that is far removed from the grace under which we entered into new life.

The Pharisees demanded to know who had healed the paralytic:

Now the man who had been healed did not know Who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” The man went

⁴ Ibid, 160.

away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath (vs. 13 - 16).

Jesus was not caught unawares by their attack. In fact, He devastated them with His reply in verse 17: *“My Father is working until now, and I am working.”* Jesus was saying that when God created the earth, He rested on the seventh day, but He kept working in order to hold the universe together. God kept working providentially in people’s lives as well. “And,” Jesus said, “I (too) am working.”

Jesus’ statement would have been fully acceptable to the rabbis except for one thing. He said, “My Father.” In those days, *no one* referred to God as their personal Father. The Pharisees’ response to Jesus’ statement was deep, lasting hatred.

This was why the Jews were seeking to kill Him, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God (v. 18).

Jesus’ statement was perceived as blasphemy. So they felt it was their duty to kill Him. They had entirely missed the point about the Sabbath. A key insight about the Sabbath comes from the second chapter of Genesis, which tells us that God created the earth in six days, but on the seventh He rested. Concerning the first six days Scripture tells us, *“And there was evening and there was morning, and it was the first day,”* and so on. But there is no mention of evening and morning on the seventh day. God entered into His Sabbath rest, and He is still in that rest,

even while He is upholding the earth by His power. He works, and He remains in His Sabbath rest.

Later when God gave the Law at Sinai to Moses, He instituted the Sabbath as a reflection of His Sabbath rest. The Sabbath's purpose was to help God's people elevate their lives. They set aside that time to practice the Sabbath mentioned in Genesis. It also foreshadowed the Sabbath rest that awaited them.

The Sabbath was a time of celebration. It was marvelously liberating because a man worked six days, but on the seventh he was free to focus upon God, to celebrate His presence and power. So the Sabbath was a time of joy. But when Christ came, the shadow or reflection was no longer needed.

Jesus is our Sabbath rest. The writer of Hebrews says, "*So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His*" (4:9-10). God has ceased from His works, and so do we. God has rested in what Christ did, and so do we. We have entered the Sabbath rest.⁵

Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

There is no longer any need to observe the Hebrew Testament Sabbath. That need was removed when Christ died on the cross.

⁵ Ibid, 162.

Where does Sunday fit into all of this? The Lord's Day, the first day of the week, has no intrinsic relationship with the Jewish Sabbath. God has set aside the *seventh* day, not the first day, as the day of rest. New Testament history and development of the early church reveals that the Holy Spirit set apart a special day, the *first* day, for God's church. That day was the day of the Resurrection. It was on a Sunday that Jesus first appeared to the disciples. On Sunday He first broke bread with His disciples after the Resurrection. On a Sunday Jesus gave a fuller understanding of the Scriptures to His disciples. On Sunday Jesus commissioned His disciples to the task of world evangelism. On Sunday Jesus breathed on His disciples so that they received the Holy Spirit (John 20).

Further, in the Book of Acts, it was on a Sunday, seven weeks after the Resurrection, that the Holy Spirit descended on the church at Pentecost. On Sunday Paul preached to the believers gathered together for worship, as was their custom (Acts 20:7). Sunday was established by Paul as the day each Corinthian believer was to "*put something (money) aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come*" (1 Corinthians 16:2). And lastly, on a Sunday the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to John on the island of Patmos and gave him the great Revelation. Sunday is a resurrection day! It is the proper day on which Christian believers worship.⁶

⁶ Ibid, 163.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does this passage want us to believe about Jesus?
2. What other Scripture passages show Jesus' authority over all things?
3. Why is it important to note that the healing in this passage is not a faith healing?
4. Do you have patterns of rest in your life? How can rest be an act of submission?
5. How had the Pharisees misunderstood the purpose of the Sabbath?
6. What claim did Jesus make in response to the accusations of the Pharisees?