

Session Six: The Sabbath Cure at the Pool of Bethesda

Opening Prayer

Re-Cap:

- John has been trying to show us who Jesus is, seeing his public ministry as a long “third day” event, an extended original Pentecost.

Who is Jesus so far?

- Bridegroom, giver of abundance, the re-creator of humanity, the giver of a powerful word that must be obeyed in faith.
- He is the fulfillment of the prophecies and rituals of old, he is the new temple.
- He comes in search of faith and he has encountered it to varying degrees.

- He has changed vast quantities of water into wine and he has cured a royal official’s son.

In this session we meet him in sign number three: the cure at the pools of Bethesda.

We will cover this sign in two sessions: this one on the theology of the story itself, and the next one on the lessons from this story.

The story:

the cure of the man at Bethesda, or the pool of five porticoes, or the cure on the sabbath- all the same: John 5:1-18, with dialogue that follows all the way through verse 47, the end of the chapter.

Context

Two contextual things to note:

One: Mere water:

- The stories of the wedding at Cana and the Samaritan woman at the well in prior chapters have now established the inadequacy of mere, earthly water.
- We seek and we need living water, and we often seek it in the wrong places- merely earthly sources of life or healing.
- Jesus will show himself to be real, living water- the real giver of life. Baptism will be real, living, water.

Two: the festivals

- This sign, this cure takes place on a sabbath and will set up the argument about how Jesus is the new sabbath.
- It takes place on an unnamed feast, but most likely it is Pentecost given the time of the year and the reference at the very end of the chapter to Moses who is central to the original Pentecost story.
- John will continue his theme of showing how Jesus shows himself to be the replacement of the old feasts and of the temple.

About the Location then and now:

- This story takes place in Jerusalem, near the northeast corner of the Temple plaza, where there were located the Pools of Bethesda.

- They are near a northeast gate in the Temple walls through which the sheep were brought in for the temple sacrifices: the Sheep Gate.
- The pools were fed by what are called intermittent springs. These are common in that part of the world.
- The Gihon Spring which feeds the pool of Siloam is the same type: it spurts for awhile and then stops, all based on rain fall and rising/falling water levels in the rock pores that feed the springs.
- The intermittent spring stirred up the water in the Pools of Bethesda on an irregular basis.
- The tradition was that the person who got to the water and touched it first when it started moving would be cured.
- It is here that the paralyzed man had been sitting for years, trying to get to the waters that had not brought him life.

Today:

- These pools have been excavated and one can see their old ruins. Access to them is via the courtyard of the Church of Saint Anne which is the traditional location of the birth house of the Blessed Mother.
- Across the street from the entry is the edge of the existing Temple Mount.

The Main Parts of the Story:

Jesus encounters the crippled man:

- Jesus comes to Jerusalem as a pilgrim for the festival, probably Pentecost, and encounters the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda. He has been there for 38 years.
- Jesus takes the initiative by walking to the man and posing the key question: do you want to be well?

The answer of the man betrays a lack of understanding:

- He resorts immediately to the problem of the pool and a lack of a person to get him there, without recognizing the one in front of him has more power than the pool is ever going to have.
- He fails to recognize the living water.

Jesus cures him anyway by telling him to rise, take up his mat, and walk.

- In so doing, he is commanding the man to violate the sabbath rule that forbids carrying objects as a form of work.

Enter the Jews

- The Temple leadership appears again for the first time since the cleansing and the conversation with Nicodemus. They do not understand who Jesus is and they interrogate the cured man.
- The crippled man now cured does not defend Jesus or demonstrate that the cure has had any impact on his lack of understanding.

Jesus finds him later:

- You are well. Do not sin anymore. Jesus has linked the healing of the man with his authority to remove sins, two acts that only God himself can do.

Back to the Authorities:

- The cured man goes to the temple leaders and tells them who cured him.
- The authorities begin to persecute Jesus because they see him as standing in opposition to the faithful understanding of the Old Testament God.

- He is taking on himself an authority that belongs to God alone.

The dialogue that follows:

- the Son is doing the work of the Father. Either he is God, or he is not.
- From here forward, Jesus will be put on an ongoing public trial by the Temple leaders, culminating in his death roughly two years later.

Who is Jesus?

- The initiator
- Living water and living word
- He identifies himself with the God of Israel who “works” on the sabbath by giving life
- He is the new Pentecost, the new Moses, the new Law, the new Sabbath.
- He is the forgiver of sins in communion with his Father

End of Session Six