

# THE MAN BY THE POOL

John 5:1-9

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Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath. John 5:8-9

One will often hear conventional wisdom spoken as if it came from the Bible. An example is the saying, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." I would not want to disparage the value of cleanliness, but that expression is not found in Scripture.

A more telling example is the saying, "God helps those who help themselves." Here we have a statement that not only is not found in the Bible, but is contrary to what the Bible actually teaches.

According to the Bible, it is those who are weak and unable to help themselves whom God actually helps. Paul says, "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

This is the reality taught in the third of Jesus' miracles recorded in the Gospel of John. Jesus came to the pool called Bethesda and was greeted by a scene of desperation. John 5:3-5 describes it: Here "lay a multitude of invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years." These poor people were helpless and weak, without power to save themselves, and desperately clinging to the slimmest thread of hope. John presents this miracle to show us that Christ came to rescue those who are lost, to strengthen those who are weak, to lift up those who are spiritually lame and powerless so that they can walk in spiritual life.

## MAN'S SPIRITUAL INABILITY

Chapter 5 marks a new section in John's Gospel. For the first time since 1:19, the apostle breaks from his careful chronology.

Chapters 1-4 record a series of events beginning with John the Baptist's witness of Jesus along the Jordan and concluding with Jesus' healing of the royal official's son in Cana. Now, we are told, "There was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem" (Jn. 5:1). We do not know how much time has elapsed since the prior account, or even which feast it was. We are simply told that Jesus went to Jerusalem and came to the pool which went by the name of Bethesda.

John writes: "Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades" (Jn. 1:2). Liberal scholars long used this verse to argue that the author of John's Gospel must have been someone who lived far later than Christ and his disciples, since no pool of Bethesda was known, nor was there one with five colonnades. In time, however, archaeologists uncovered this very site, now known as the Pool of St. Anne, which turns out to be a pair of twin pools, surrounded on all sides by covered porches and with one in between, which accounts for the five colonnades.<sup>1</sup>

What was important, however, was not the architecture but the human tragedy that unfolded before the eyes of our Lord. There were, John writes, "A multitude of invalids." The Greek word *astheneia* is most commonly translated as *weak*. The New American Standard version has it as "sick," while the King James Version says, "impotent." Other translations are "helpless," "infirm," "powerless," or "feeble." The significance for us is the spiritual parallel to the human race as a whole. Whereas chapter 3 presented man in his pride through the Pharisee Nicodemus, and chapter 4 presented thirsty mankind in the woman by the well, chapter 5 presents man as broken and weak. Just as these invalids were physically helpless and infirm, so is all of mankind spiritually powerless apart from Christ's life-giving ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 241-242.

When we speak of spiritual inability, however, it is important for us to make clear what we mean. It is not true that we are unable to obey God – to trust, serve or worship him – in an absolute sense. Indeed, we were created with these duties specifically in mind, and this potential is central to our very identity. This is what it means when the Bible says that we were created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26). Therefore, our failure to believe and obey God is never excused on the basis of our creation. Instead, the Scriptures teach that man is spiritually impotent because of sin.

Two doctrines that deal with this problem are original sin and total depravity. *Original sin* is not an event but a condition. The Bible teaches that our first parents fell into sin and that as a result the human race was corrupted. One result is that men and women in their fallen state are not able to believe God’s Word. Paul explains, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). What is true of our intellect is true also of our will. Romans 8:7-8 says, “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Note that the Scripture says not merely that sinful men and women *will not* or *do not* understand spiritual things, submit to God, or please God. More than that, the Bible says that in our fallen state we *cannot* do so. This is the state of original sin in which we were all born. Psalm 51:5 says, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (NIV). Original sin means that we are sinners not because we have sinned, but because our first parents made us sinners as our nature was corrupted by their rebellion.

This is the spiritual condition depicted by these people at the pool of Bethesda. Just as they were physically disabled, we are spiritually disabled. But, one might ask, how *much* are we affected by sin? What is the extent of our corruption? The answer is given by the doctrine of *total depravity*. The Bible teaches that sin has corrupted us thoroughly, comprehensively, and totally. This does not mean that there is nothing good about us, or that we are as bad as we might be. We could always be worse! Rather, it affirms the Bible’s teaching that there is no human faculty that is not fatally corrupted by sin.

The Bible's catalogue of natural corruption runs from bottom to top. Isaiah writes, "From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it" (Isa. 1:6). Included are our hands, which "are full of blood" (Isa. 1:15); our feet "run to evil" (Prov. 1:16); our tongue "practices deceit" (Rom. 3:13), our eyes are "haughty" (Prov. 21:4), our ears are closed and dull of hearing when God is speaking (Isa. 6:10), our minds are "futile" and "darkened in understanding" (Eph. 4:18), and our hearts – especially our hearts are corrupt! Jeremiah says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). You will sometimes hear it said of someone who has committed a serious crime that "He has a good heart." But the chief problem of everyone is that the opposite is true. If original sin is the *why* of our spiritual condition, total depravity is the *what* depicted by the scene at this pool: they were "blind, lame, and paralyzed" (Jn. 5:3).

## RELIGION'S FAILURE

**A**t this scene of despair, John focuses on one particular man: "One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there, he said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?' 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'" (Jn. 5:5-7).

This man was terribly needy and desperate for healing power. He is like so many people today. They are desperately looking for power, and well they should. Some are looking for power to heal the afflictions of their body, but a great many more are seeking power to heal their soul. Our society is a veritable factory of candidates for this pool at Bethesda – those abandoned and rejected, those abused and afflict-ed, the lonely and broken and warped in heart and soul. They are all around us, many of them appearing quite whole. But they are not. They are desperately seeking power. And well they should be.

But, you may reply, this man is looking at the wrong place. His idea of healing from this pool is pure superstition. He believes, as verse 7 tells us, that when the water of this pool is stirred, the first one in will be healed. You may notice that your English translation excludes

verse 4, which is included in the margin. This verse is missing from the earlier manuscripts and is evidently a later addition, no doubt to explain the popular belief about this pool. It says, "An angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had." This is rightly removed from the Bible's text, but it gives us a good sense of what this man believed.

This pool may have had some restorative powers, which would explain the superstition. But the religion of the Bible is not a superstitious mysticism, rather, it is a religion of faith and obedience to a God of grace and might. It is to God we are to look, not to pools or ancient artifacts or images of Mary, all of which is pure idolatry. But there is always a tendency for religious people to turn to techniques, special objects, or formulas that are supposed to convey spiritual power. There are popular books written today that will teach you prayer formulas that "work" in a way that other prayers do not. Some churches even sell "miracle cloths" which supposedly have been anointed so as to give them divine power. All of these are idolatrous perversions of true religion. Biblical Christianity is not a religion of mystical power but of divine grace received through simple faith. All you have to do to have your prayers answered according to God's sovereign will is to be his child through faith in Christ and to speak to him in humble sincerity.

This poor man would thus have better spent his time at the temple beseeching God for mercy than waiting at this pool. Yet, what we know about Jewish religion as it was warped and corrupted in the time of Jesus helps us to understand why this man turned to the superstitious reputation of this pool. This passage represents the religion of the Pharisees and scribes as formal, lifeless, powerless and dead.

This text has received a great deal of allegorical interpretation linking the pool with the futility of the Old Testament Law. In these allegories, the five colonnades stand for the five books of Moses, the 38 years the man had been at the pool line up with Israel's 38 years of wandering in the desert, and the waters stand for the tabernacle system for cleansing. William Barclay summarizes the point: "In the porches the people lay ill. The law could show a man his sin, but

could never mend it; the law could uncover a man's weakness, but could never cure it. The law, like the porches, sheltered the sick soul but could never heal it."<sup>2</sup>

The danger of allegories is that they often read in more than they take out of a text. But, whether or not the porches stand for Moses' five books or the 38 years for the exodus wandering, we do know that John employs standing water as a symbol of the dead Jewish religion in the time of Christ. Thus, Jesus took water from the ceremonial washing jars to make wine, a symbol for spiritual blessing. Empty religion was also in view when Jesus pointed the Samaritan woman to the stagnant well water, and said, "If you knew the gift of God... you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (Jn. 4:10).

John was not condemning the true religion of the Old Testament, which anticipates and relies upon the coming work of Christ. But he does condemn any religion – and certainly the religion of Pharisees and Jewish rulers in Christ's time – which becomes a performance-based, ritualistic tradition devoid of God's power and grace. It was false religion that drove this poor invalid to spend nearly four decades waiting for something of life to give him power. How many others had waited on and on without ever gaining hope or healing? How many today are searching and seeking, going from this fad to that program, from this therapy to that pill, from one experience and excitement to another, all without ever receiving true power or life? Like this man at this pool, unless Jesus comes and enters into our lives, nothing with real and saving power from God can ever be present.

It is important for us to note that religious formalism can be found in any shape and form. Sometimes it takes the form of tradition. Many of us grew up in churches that followed a liturgy of Christian worship, without any true understanding or faith in the reality behind what we were doing. It was all form without substance. But the same can happen among those who reject all tradition in a frenzied pursuit of informality and excitement. Any religious approach – however spiritual it may seem – that does not bring us to personal faith in

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. I (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) p. 180.

Christ through the knowledge of God's Word will always lack true power to impart spiritual life to our souls. If this is true of empty Christian religion, how much more is it true of the spirituality pursued by many today: following a New Age guru, reading self-help psychology, venerating Mary and the saints, intoxicating yourself with euphoric music, or endangering your soul at the occultist's shop. Unless Jesus Christ comes into your life as he did upon the scene of this invalid, there is no real power for healing, no light from heaven, and no hope for salvation.

## CHRIST'S POWER FOR SALVATION

**T**he good news for the man by the pool was that Jesus came into his life. Whereas other people had ignored him, and perhaps exploited him, Jesus was completely different.

It is striking that our Lord did not reprove this man for the folly stretching back many years, of waiting and watching for a miracle at this pool. Jesus might well have rebuked him for his practical idolatry, seeking aid from a pool rather than crying out in prayer to God. But Jesus saw and knew his desperation. Out of his boundless mercy he simply asked, "Do you want to be healed?" (Jn. 5:6). This is how Jesus handled the lost and the lame, and it is the kind of mercy this confused and needy world needs from Christians today.

Jesus said two things, both of which are highly significant. First, he asked, "Do you want to be healed?" This is what Jesus offers to a world so well depicted by the scene at this pool. He came to give sight to the blind: "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (Jn. 12:46). He came to lift up the weak and the weary, the hopeless and the lost: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3:17).

Therefore it is Jesus that we need, as we find him in God's Word. Not a superstitious angle. Not a method or a program or therapy. Not religion, but power. We need Jesus. "Do you want to be healed?" he asks, and he has the power to do it.

The second thing Jesus said proved this point: "Jesus said to him, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk.' And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked" (Jn. 5:8-9). This is

power, and it stands for the whole of what Jesus can do, body and soul, to those who look to him in faith. Later on, when the religious leaders accosted him for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus referred to this healing: “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (Jn. 5:21). The word for raising the dead in verse 21 (Greek, *egeirei*) is the same as the word in Jesus’ command in verse 8, “Get up!” This makes the point that it is by the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead that Jesus himself raises us up from sin, despair, and defeat.

Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (1 Cor. 4:20). Jesus came to Matthew at the tax collector’s booth, where the future apostle was sitting in his sin. “Follow me,” he called, “and Matthew got up and followed him” (Mt. 9:9). Jesus later stood before the tomb of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days. “Lazarus, come out!” he cried, and “the man who had died came out” (Jn. 11:43-44). You see the point. It is Christ who calls you out of sin and death with the power of God. This is how sinners are saved and empowered for godliness today, by the Word of Christ (cf. Rom. 10:17). Jesus said to the invalid, “Get up!” and the lame man rose and walked. He has the same power for us, if we will hear and heed his voice in the Word of God.

## POWER FOR NEW LIFE

**T**his man had never been able to do what he now did – he had never risen and taken up his mat – until the power of Christ gave him the strength. What is it that you have not been able to do? Is there some guilt that weighs down your soul? Bring it to Jesus to be washed clean in his blood. Is there some tragedy from your past that somehow cripples you? Look at what Jesus did for this man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. Ask him to heal what is broken in you with his tender love, and to bind up with mercy those wounds that God intends you still to bear. Bring the dark places of your heart into the light of his grace. Let his Word be a source not merely of religious information but of spiritual life for your damaged soul. The Jesus who asked this man by the pool, “Do you want to be healed?” will not turn you away from his grace.

Perhaps there is nothing obviously wrong with you; in fact, perhaps people consider you to be one of those who are strong and vibrant. But instead of moving forward you know you are spiritually flat on your back. Perhaps it is a lack of usefulness. You know you should study your Bible, pray, and witness. You know you should serve. You know you should give sacrificially with your money. But you do not live the useful life you are called to; in this spiritually sick world, you are just lying by the pool with the invalids. Or perhaps it is a failure to relate to others as God calls you to. You are a husband, but you do not love your wife as you are called to do. You are a wife, but you do not submit to and respect your husband. You are a child, but you do not obey your parents and show love to your brothers and sisters. These are the truly important matters of our lives, yet too many Christians simply do not live as God calls them to live, and therefore do not enjoy the peace and joy and love which they might easily possess and God does not have the glory of their lives.

Jesus calls you up from your mat. “Get up, take up your bed,” he says, “and walk” (Jn. 5:8). The time of your spiritual feebleness should end immediately and you should begin living boldly for Christ starting right now. If you are not living as a Christian should, it is not because Jesus lacks power but because you are not responding to his Word with faith. Believe in the Word of Christ, get up, and walk! The Christian testimony of all those who seek to follow God’s Word in obedient faith – even in their weakness and sin – is always the testimony Paul gave in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Why should you not get up and start walking with Christ, beginning right now?