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## Introduction

- Michigan Avenue, the Chicago River, inside–out shirts, and John chapter 4–6.

## The Healing of a Paralytic

- The first pericope of John 5 (verses 1–15) is the healing of the paralytic man at Bethesda.
- *What do you think of this story? Why is it an important story?*
- *Why would John include this story in his narrative? I mean he could have left it out and made chapter 5 just a discourse of Jesus (maybe starting at about verse 31). Why is this story an important backdrop?*

## The Pool of Bethesda

- Let's read the first four verses of the story. Read John 5:1–4:

**1** After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **2** Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. **3** In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. **4** For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.

- Notice, the footnote in verse 1 of the LDS edition of the King James Version of the Bible. The footnote refers to the fact that there is variation in existing Greek manuscripts. Some manuscripts contain "the feast" which would suggest this event happens during *Passover*. However, most scholars believe, the passage should read "a feast" because it is better attested in the manuscript tradition.(1)

- ◆ *Is this an important detail? Is knowing that this happens during one of the feasts important? Does it affect your understanding of the story?*
- ◆ *Suppose it happened during Passover. Does that affect your understanding of the story?*
- ◆ *What about another feast? Suppose it happened during Pentecost (the feast of weeks). Does such a feast fit the narrative and subsequent discourse better?*

- There seems to be considerable debate over the exact place referred to in verse 2. There is considerable variation in the Greek manuscripts. The name of the place might mean something like, "the house of mercy" or something less poetic like, "place of poured water."(2)
- Verse 4 is probably a late addition and not original to the gospel of John. It is omitted from all of the best Greek manuscripts including all manuscripts dated prior to the 4th century.(3)
  - ◆ *Does this late addition change or affect your understanding of the story?*
  - ◆ It doesn't change my understanding of why the man was there. He clearly believed the water had healing power. In addition, it is clear from verse 7 that there were, at least with some frequency, disturbances in that water. I wouldn't be surprised if the people at the pool really did believe that an angel was the cause of the disturbance.
  - ◆ On the other hand, it seems to me the addition changes the contrast between the healing power of Jesus and the healing power of the pool. We know that ritual cleansing played an important role in Judaism at this time. In my view this is the contrast. Jesus, as the living water, can heal both spiritual and physically whereas ritual cleansing cannot. I think connecting the healing power of the pool explicitly to an angel weakens the contrast.

## The Healing

- Read John 5:5–9:

**5** And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. **6** When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? **7** The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. **8** Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. **9** And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath.

- *Are any of the actions or dialogue of Jesus a bit surprising or unusual relative to other healing pericopes in the gospel?*
- *What about the paralytic man? Are any of his actions or dialogue unusual or surprising?*
- *What do we learn about the paralytic man? How would you characterize him based on admittedly very incomplete information?*
- I guess the thing that sticks out to me the most is that Jesus approaches that man and

offers healing. We have so many stories where the person has to show great faith and initiative to get Jesus to heal them, but here the paralytic man shows no initiative (actually is this true?) and never asks to be healed. In fact, the man seems to complain to Jesus. Not that I would probably be any better in his situation; I would probably complain too.

- ◆ *Why? Why would Jesus heal the man when he never asks Jesus to heal him and doesn't express any faith?*
- ◆ *Are there other narratives where Jesus healed without the sick or disabled asking for healing? Are there any others where he doesn't ask about whether they have faith in him?*
- ◆ Certainly, they are not the norm, but there are a few stories where Jesus heals people without someone pleading for healing. In addition, Jesus doesn't ask the sick or disabled about whether they believe or have faith:
  - a. He heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6),
  - b. He heals a crippled (KJV = infirm) woman in a synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10–17),
  - c. and He heals a man with dropsy during a meal with pharisees on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1–6).
- ◆ *The clear commonality is the Sabbath. Why? Why would Jesus heal in this way on the Sabbath?*

## **The Aftermath**

- Read John 5:9–14:

**9** And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath. **10** The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed. **11** He answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk. **12** Then asked they him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk? **13** And he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place. **14** Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.

- *Is there anything unusual or surprising about these verses? Do we learn anything else important about the man who was healed?*

- *What is going on in verse 14? Is Jesus linking the man's former paralyzed state with sin?*
- John 9:1–4 provides an important and strong counter–example: the healing of the blind man where the disciples enquire whether the cause of the man's blindness was his sin or his parent's sin. The message seems clear: we shouldn't associated sickness or disability with sin. Those verses in John 9 are very clear about forbidding a link between sin and physical disability and sickness. *With this backdrop, what is verse 14 about?*
- *I guess I don't really know. What are the possibilities? How do you make sense of this verse?*
- I certainly think there is more than one interpretive possibility. However, let me mention one possibility that occurred to me while I read the chapter. I am not saying it is correct; I just want to raise it as a possibility. The gospel of John contains this dualism between physical and spiritual. John uses physical metaphors to illuminate spiritual truth. Jesus as the living water is introduced at a well. The woman at the well is confused about what Jesus means. Maybe, the same thing is happening here. We, the reader, (along with the questioners in this pericope) are focusing on the physical healing, but that is not the most important miracle. The most important miracle is that Jesus makes him spiritual whole. I see this as a pretty cool narrative construction. We are like the woman at the well, we miss the real importance of the living water. We think the important details are that the man is paralyzed and then healed physically, but I think maybe the other details are more important. The man complains and the man doesn't have any idea who Jesus is. This seems to suggest the man is spiritual paralyzed; Jesus is giving him a chance to be made spiritual whole.

### **Working on the Sabbath**

- Read John 5:15–18:

**15** The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole. **16** And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day. **17** But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. **18** Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.

- *In verse 15 the man now refers to Jesus by name when he talks to the Jewish leadership. Is this an important narrative detail?*
- *What is verse 17 about? What is Jesus implying? What does the phrase, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work," mean?*
- I think a modern translation is helpful here. Let's read the NRSV for verse 17:

**17** But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working."

- *Clearly, from the context we can see it was offensive for Jesus to refer to his Father and Son relationship with God. However, what about the first part? Was it radical to suggest that the Father is still working? Is that particular message also an important part of the overall message of Jesus?*
- I like what George Breasley–Murray said about this verse (emphasis in the original):(4)

The statement "My Father has been working until now" must be set in the context of the Jewish exposition of the Scriptures. The Jews understood Gen 2:2 as implying that God's sabbath following creation continues to the present—his works are *finished*. But that raises a difficulty: how can God be said in the Scriptures to be active, if he keeps the Sabbath? One answer ran: God rested from work on the world, but not from his work on the godless and righteous: "He works with both of them. and shows to the latter something of their recompense, and to the former something of their recompense."

- *Does the preceding quote give us insight into the nature of Jesus' claim in verse 17? Does it help us understand why it was so upsetting?*
- I think it does give us insight into the nature of the claim. Jesus is not just doing work. He is doing God's work. He can work on the Sabbath for the same reason God can. I also think this suggests that this story isn't really or least primarily about too restrictive Sabbath prohibitions. Jesus doesn't heal on the Sabbath to show the Jewish people that the Sabbath laws are too restrictive. He heals on the Sabbath to proclaim who he is and what kind of work he is really doing.
- *John reports that Jesus' questioners thought Jesus made himself equal with God? Do verses 19–21 give us insight into what his questioners meant by "equal with God?"*

**19** Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. **20** For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. **21** For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.

## Endnotes

1. Breasley–Murray, George R., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Word Books, 69.
2. Breasley–Murray, George R., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Word Books, 70.

3. Gaebelien, Frank E. (editor), 1981, *The Expositor's bible Commentary: John–Acts*, Regency Reference Library, 69.
4. Breasley–Murray, George R., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Word Books, 71.