

John 5:1-24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] After this there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.

In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame and paralysed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, 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. 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. 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 the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk? Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.

[1 : 18] 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 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. But Jesus answered them, My father is working until now, and I am working. This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God.

So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, the son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the father doing. For whatever the father does, that the son does likewise.

For the father loves the son, and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the son gives life to whom he will.

For the father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the son, that all may honor the son, just as they honor the father. Whoever does not honor the son does not honor the father who sent him.

[2 : 31] Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

In John 5, Jesus once again goes up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. While at the feast, Jesus encounters an infirm man by the sheep gate near a pool.

While it is admitted in certain translations of the Bible, some translations refer to an angel that would come down, stir the waters, and those who went in could be healed of their illnesses.

So Jesus is coming to a situation where there is this man who's waiting for healing, who has been hoping for healing at this pool with some special powers, and yet has not received the healing that he's hoped for.

No one is able to help him to get into the pool when the water is stirred, and as soon as he tries to get in, someone steps down before him. And Jesus directly instructs him, get up, take up your bed and walk.

[3 : 33] Why might the pool be significant? Well, to this point in the Gospel of John, there have been several mentions of water and cleansing and other themes like that.

In chapter 1, you have John's baptism. In chapter 2, you have the water turned into wine from the waters of purification, the pots. And then in chapter 3, you have new birth of water and the Spirit, and John's baptism again.

In chapter 4, you have Jesus and his disciples baptizing, and then the meeting in the well and the offer of living waters. And now in chapter 5, you have a healing pool. It seems that Jesus is the one who brings new waters, new waters to drink, new waters of cleansing, new waters of healing. The people are gathered near the sheep gate, and they're waiting for this stirring of the waters. And it might be akin to the wind of the Spirit in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2, or the wind at the flood, or the wind at the Red Sea.

And the setting is an evocative one, if you think about it. There are infirm sheep at a pool struggling to get to the water so that they'll be healed and able to enter into the city.

[4 : 40] Moses was the great shepherd of Israel. But Jesus is the one who comes to meet these people at the sheep gate, the sheep that need to be let in, that need to be healed. The man has had an infirmity for 38 years, and this is an important number.

If we go back to Deuteronomy chapter 2 verse 14, we see that Israel wandered for 38 years after their failure to enter into the land. And the lameness of the man may have even entailed some degree of exclusion from the precincts of the temple, as we see in 2 Samuel chapter 5 verse 8. And the healing of the man is a sign of giving that languishing flock of God entrance into the promised land. Jesus is a new Joshua. His name is the same name as Joshua.

And he gives rest to the man who takes up his bed, his instrument of rest, on the Sabbath as a sign, and later enters into the temple. Jesus is, on account of this, accused of breaking the Sabbath, when actually he was fulfilling its meaning.

We need to consider when Jesus is performing these acts on the Sabbath, he's not merely thinking in terms of, oh, here's an exception to the rule. Rather, he's saying, this was the meaning of Sabbath all along, to give rest to man.

[5 : 52] And in this act of healing, I am giving rest to the man, fulfilling the meaning of Sabbath, not undermining it. And so, rather than seeing Jesus' teaching concerning the Sabbath as presenting us with a series of exceptions, the importance of the teaching on the Sabbath is that Jesus is revealing the primary intent of that commandment all the way along.

Jesus' works are like his father's, and he completes the works of his father. He continues and he completes the work of creation. His claims in this chapter, on this front, are startling. He enjoys judgment, the power to raise the dead, life in himself, and divine works.

His resurrection is already underway within his action. He's bringing things into play. He's starting the work of this new creation, fulfilling the Sabbath, and anticipating the great renewal of all things. A question to ask. Within the Gospel of John, we see a number of different signs. This is the third sign. So, we've had the turning of the water into wine, the healing of the nobleman's son, and now this is the third sign.

There are three signs that follow on from this, and I believe that there may be a parallel between the signs 1, 2, and 3, and then 4, 5, and 6.

[7 : 11] What might be the parallel between chapter 5 and chapter 9, and how might reading these two accounts alongside each other help us to understand what's going on?

A second question. The healed man in this chapter is given attention, not merely as a sign of Jesus' power, but as a paradigmatic disciple.

As we read the story of chapter 5 alongside chapter 9, we can see similarities and contrasts. How might these help us to understand the character of the man in chapter 5, and also what John thinks of as discipleship?

What does he see as the fate of disciples, for instance, relative to the Jews?